MYTHS AND REALITIES ABOUT TEACHING FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE IN THE ELEMENTARY WL CLASSROOM:

A CONVERSATION BETWEEN TWO EDUCATORS

PW: FT:

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Concepts such as *social justice*, *diversity*, *equity*, *inclusion*, *anti-racism*, and anti-bias have become a more and more common part of our discourse in education in recent years, with a notable increase in use since the murder of George Floyd and the subsequent activism and national dialogue in its wake.

Although many elementary world language teachers have been incorporating these concepts in our teaching since well before these terrible and motivating events, others of us might feel unequipped or prevented from doing so due to some pervasive myths that persist about teaching for social justice in world language classrooms or with elementary-aged learners.

In this article, two language educators: an elementary world languages educator and a university world languages teacher educator, explore the research and the practice that debunk these common myths. This information can help all of us begin to find a path to teaching for social justice with young world language students.

MYTH #1

As a teacher of a world language, I already teach for social justice.

PW:

The foundations of this myth lie in the real fact that much of what we do has the potential to address important components of social justice education. Social justice education has specific standards (see the Learning for Justice – formerly Teaching Tolerance – *Social Justice Standards* [SJS; 2017]) that overlap significantly with some *World-Readiness Standards for Learning Languages* (WRS; National Standards Collaborative Board, 2015).

For instance, when we compare cultures and languages (WRS Comparisons Standard), we address the SJS Diversity Standard 7, which states: "Students will develop language and knowledge to accurately and respectfully describe how people (including themselves) are both similar to and different from each other and others in their identity groups." This connection can give teachers a valuable starting point for further development in the curriculum. Another example of overlap can be observed in the study of the products, practices, and perspectives of cultures (WRS Cultures Standard), which connects with the SJS Identity Standard 5: "Students will recognize traits of the dominant culture, their home culture and other cultures, and understand how they negotiate their own identity in multiple spaces."

These similarities might lead a teacher to mistakenly believe that, in addressing the WRS, they are also sufficiently addressing the SJS and teaching effectively for social justice. However, the SJS indicate that learners at all levels should be familiar with the history and vocabulary of social justice work, and that they should understand the obligation to speak up and seek justice in their communities and schools. The SJS require specific language and content goals that are not automatically treated in the broader categories of Communication, Cultures, Connections, Comparisons, and Communities suggested by the WRS. The two sets of standards should be considered in tandem in order to truly teach for social justice, and we advocate for language teachers to access the SJS online (***tinyurl.com/scxtpw7n***) to see how they might be integrated more clearly and systematically throughout their curriculum.

Finally, many researchers across educational contexts have found that, even with good intentions and a commitment to social justice goals, teachers do not consistently interrupt inequities or encourage peace-building dialogues in the classroom (Bickmore & Parker, 2014; Brown, Bloome, Morris, Power-Carter, & Willis, 2017). Additionally, researchers have found that the use of multicultural classroom materials must be accompanied by explicit planning and curriculum building to effectively teach about cultural diversity, social justice, race, and other related topics; however, the presence of the materials alone is not sufficient (Glazier & Seo, 2005; Brown et al., 2017). We encourage language teachers to explore the work done by elementary literacy educators and to collaborate with the literacy experts in their schools for help on how to guide students in reading and responding to stories about other peoples and cultures.

In conclusion, we must be sure to consistently and systematically plan to teach for social justice since we cannot assume that it is automatically built into what we do as language educators. One good resource for exploring our own comfort and efforts in doing so is the *Let's Talk* guide (2020) on the Learning for Justice website (***learningforjustice.org***), which includes questions and prompts that encourage us to examine our comfort levels on different topics relating to equity and justice, and to challenge ourselves to self-educate and self-assess regularly.

FT:

As an educator with expertise in decolonial and Anti-Bias Anti-Racist (ABAR) approaches, I feel that language teachers need to consistently engage in discussions about the historical roots of contemporary social justice issues, that is, the reasons behind the causes of today's systemic, structural, and institutional inequity. Social justice should be a lens or approach and not an isolated unit or topic. One of the identifiers explored in my classes from first to fourth grades is the family structure or, as I like to call it, the love circle.

For example, when I teach my third and fourth graders how to identify and describe families and personal relationships, we talk about the importance of representation, and I do a quick survey to ask them what families they see portrayed in books and media in general. The answers have a common denominator: a family with a mom and a dad, kids and sometimes pets. I ask them to think about who is missing in those portrayals, and most of the answers point to the absence of LGBTQ+ families.

We talk about the *Día de la Diversidad Familiar* and watch videos on that topic, all while learning family and relationship vocabulary. We then discuss circles of love that include everyone who loves and cares for them, as well as different family structures. In doing this, I am digging into a content unit created with a cross-curricular lens, not a thematic unit about social justice.

I believe both WRS and SJS can be great starting points, and they must be paired with a consideration of the power dynamics and privilege systems at work in our social environments. We must consistently teach intercultural skills with equity, decolonial, and anti-bias lenses. One way to do this is to avoid a deficit lens on other groups—for example, "We need to fight for social justice in other communities because they are struggling and need our help!"

We also can work toward this through consistent reflection on our own positionality, experiences, and perspectives related to minoritized groups. For example, we discussed the importance of learning about celebrations other than Christmas. I had a little one in third grade ask, "But profesora, what if they do not know about Christmas?" and I asked the whole class then, in December, "What decorations do you see at Starbucks, Comcast

Center, City Hall, Love Park, etc." They responded, "Christmas." One of my students also noticed that even though her family was atheist she knew everything about Christmas because of the exposure. I think this was a pretty good preface for the video talks we had in Spanish about Eid, Ramadan, Kwanzaa, Hanukkah, Winter Solstice, Lunar New Year, and Día de Reyes.

As teachers, we must constantly make an effort to understand and appreciate target cultures beyond the stereotyping of peoples and cultures. For instance, I have created a comprehensible unit about one person from a marginalized community in which students analyze social justice issues based on the lived experiences and multiple, intersectional identities of that person. This investigation of individual experiences offers a strong alternative to memorizing, presenting, or working on biography bundles of multiple people where there is no ongoing dialogue or deep critical thinking about privilege or identity.

I also avoid commodified resources that tokenize the sacred animal of the llama, like inaccurate and stereotyped classroom llama decorations or worksheets with llama word games. Instead, I teach the Andean cosmovisions of indigenous communities when it comes to llamas. I am from the norte grande of Chile and I grew up on unceded Diaguita lands. Llamas were all around me growing up, at our local market, at our local park, and in the wild in the mountains.

At school I learned of the importance of the llamas for the *pueblos originarios* of the north of Chile such as the Diaguita, the Aymara, and the Likan-Antai. In fourth grade I do a unit in which we compare the celebration of *Día de Muertos* in Mexico to the celebration of *Día de Muertos* in a small town in the north of Chile by an Aymara community.

Following this comparison unit, I introduce the llama as a sacred animal to my students. I teach about the divine origin of these animals through *The Floreo of Llamas* (*Wariño*), an ancestral ceremony of the indigenous peoples of the Andes and part of their intangible cultural heritage. I show my students a video of a llama getting into a taxi with their family in Peru. We also discuss cultural appropriation and the importance of rescuing indigenous narratives when it comes to their sacred relationship with Pachama (mother earth) and all that it contains.

MYTH #2

Elementary-aged kids are too young to talk about social justice.

FT:

This myth is particularly problematic and damaging. Research from institutions such as the University of Toronto (Craig, 2017) and the Mayo Clinic (Mayo Clinic Staff, 2021) has shown that children can develop racial and gender biases from the ages of 3 to 5. We are all socialized and conditioned through epistemologies that support the colonial ideal of whiteness and binary gender identity.

Furthermore, as Louise Derman-Sparks and Julie Olsen Edwards (2019) point out in their four core goals for anti-bias education, children learn prejudice from prejudice. Education must be actively and intentionally anti-bias to counter the dominant biases of the society in which our students are brought up and educated. Facilitators of learning must work on their open biases and specialize in ABAR training in order to apply this approach to their praxis.

Since social justice must be a lens and not an isolated topic, everything in the WL class should be taught with that lens. I must clarify that I am strongly opposed to social justice being considered a topic or a theme. I feel that having a compartmentalized vision of what is supposed to be a lens and a perspective is deeply connected to privilege. We teach most effectively when we adopt a humanized and human-centered vision of language that is firmly attached to its speakers and their cultures. This vision allows us to develop the belief that language serves as a bridge to discussions of equity and liberation.

For example, in my class, children are provided with the right vocabulary to describe people's skin tone, and they are encouraged to discuss and talk about race from the first years in my program and they are all novice learners. This way, when a story like *Me Llamo Celia* is read to them, it is not hard for them to understand that some of Celia Cruz's struggles happened due to inequities that people who share her skin tone experience.

This discussion thus addresses at least two of the SJS: Diversity Standard #10: "Students will examine diversity in social, cultural, political, and historical contexts rather than in ways that are superficial or oversimplified." It also addresses Justice Standard #13: "Students will analyze the harmful impact of bias and injustice on the world, historically and today."

Students are also provided with gender-neutral terms to describe people in the earlier years of my program and are taught about the rich variety of non-binary Spanish in the Novice Mid and High levels. Gender is discussed as a spectrum and all identities are included and celebrated. Resources on non-binary and gender-neutral language may be found in the Resources section at the end of this article.

To be an ABAR educator is intentional, and it is a choice worth making.

PW:

This myth suggests that there is a specific age when social justice topics are appropriate to address in the world language classroom. The underlying belief is that social justice is too difficult, complex, or abstract to talk about with elementary school-aged students.

However, as Françoise mentions, research has shown that young learners regularly engage with and comment on difference, race, poverty, and fairness. Multiple researchers have found that young learners think deeply about being citizens in the world and what that means (Larkins, 2014; Park, 2011). Although this research has not been conducted in language classrooms, the young people being studied share a developmental

level and background with many of our elementary learners.

Furthermore, young learners who are racial minorities have been shown to benefit from curricula that focus on topics related to social justice like peacebuilding (Parker, 2016). Topics related to social justice are already in the elementary curriculum, too–if you look at the social studies standards and English language arts standards in your state, you can easily identify ways that identity, diversity, justice, and action are central to the work.

Some helpful frameworks also focus on these levels. The SJS include level-appropriate outcomes and scenarios that extend from kindergarten through 12th grade. Using a similar framework, Bree Picower (2012) identified six elements of social justice curriculum design for elementary students, including: self-love and knowledge; respect for others; issues of social injustice; social movements and social change; awareness raising; and social action.

On the website Using Their Words (***usingtheirwords.org***), Picower includes summaries of many different social justice instructional units designed for the elementary level including a classroom book audit, a mapping project about the surrounding community, investigations of the challenges of migration, and more. These can all be adapted to the world language classroom through the principles of backward design (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005) and by incorporating level-appropriate language objectives.

Finally, as we all know, learners are socialized into school norms and expectations in elementary school, expectations that they then carry through to their later years of schooling. If elementary world language teachers do not engage their students with themes and actions related to social justice, the presentation of those topics at the middle and high school levels will likely face unproductive resistance.

Ultimately, the research and experience of elementary teachers has shown that social justice topics can and should be taught to young learners. Resources exist to support all elementary language teachers in this important endeavor.

MYTH #3

Teaching for social justice can only happen once students reach a high level of language proficiency.

FT:

I feel that this myth is deeply rooted in the lack of knowledge about what children can understand and do with that knowledge during their early childhood and elementary years. In their work for the National Association for the Education of Young Children, Louise Derman-Sparks and Julie Olsen Edwards (2019) pointed out that children have innate, budding capacities for empathy and fairness, as well as cognitive skills for thinking critically about what is happening around them.

In her book *Start Here, Start Now*, Liz Kleinrock states that, "Exposure to different people, cultures, and histories is important, but without ongoing dialogue and critical thinking, it does not equate to creating inclusive practices, advocating for equity and justice, and loving and respecting people of color." (Kleinrock, 2021, p. 93).

Young children clearly can discuss these topics in depth, they just need the right scaffolds and bridges of connections between languages to do so. The idea is to be intentional and strategic when it comes to planning, always keeping in mind that comprehension is the goal. As Julie Speno from Mundo de Pepita (***mundodepepita.com***) has mentioned many times, it all depends on the proficiency level of our students.

Before we plan, we need to be very aware of what our students can do with the language at their level. I created a Woke Wall which is basically a word wall

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with essential language related to social justice. I provide my students with chunks of language so they can express opinions about social justice topics. Lately, most of my classes are presented on a SMART Board using Google Slides that are heavy on visual scaffolds such as videos, infographics, and key vocabulary. I also do rituals and routines completely in Spanish from the beginning of the program, and I have a daily agenda during which my students get to regularly practice the essential language appropriate to their proficiency level.

That said, I am not opposed to the use of English as a bridge to connect the language repertoires of my students when needed. I have been able to widen my perspectives, see my English-speaking students as emerging bilinguals/multilinguals too, and see language acquisition beyond the binary thanks to the work of José Medina, Jonathan Rosa and Nelson Flores. Listening to these three linguists has helped me move beyond the perspective of separation between my students' heritage languages and the target language being learned.

By using my students' mother tongue to leverage the acquisition of the new language, as an addition to their repertoire, they have reached a comfortable level of comprehension without the fear of making mistakes or not being perfect. This perspective allows me to honor my students' identities and to incorporate Spanish, not as a world language, but as an asset to their repertoire that can be mobilized in a comfortable way for the purposes of communication.

There needs to be an understanding that languages can be epistemological and ontological sliding doors to different ways of perceiving the world, and that our language is indeed part of our identity. The linguistic aspect of the language is used as a means to discuss a deeper topic which is representation, diversity, and inclusion.

PW:

We must think here about what social justice education means. As the *Social Justice Standards* (2017) tell us, teaching for social justice is about recognizing students' identities, consciously identifying diversity, examining unfairness and justice, and taking action. Social justice is a project to undertake every single day in the language classroom. It is a principle that guides and infuses the entire curriculum. Social justice education is not a moment, it's a movement.

Issues related to equity and justice pervade all decisions we make as teachers. There is no neutral in a vocabulary list, an accent, or a cultural resource—at any level. Additionally, unplanned moments happen with regularity in any classroom. For instance, if a student makes a comment that reflects negative stereotypes about the target culture, you have a decision to make as a teacher—to ignore it, or to address it.

Avoiding topics does not make them disappear, and a refusal to address topics like discrimination in the classroom when the moment comes up also sends a very clear message to even the youngest students. As Liz Kleinrock (2017) says in her TED Talk about how to teach kids about taboo topics, "Silence speaks volumes" at the elementary level.

It is not easy to address issues like discrimination (including racism, sexism, ableism, and homophobia) in an elementary classroom, and world language teachers who try to focus on staying in the target language might struggle with addressing them effectively without using English. However, as with many other forms of planning and preparation, we can also plan and prepare for these moments. Abundant resources exist about talking with young children about discrimination, and young children can and should be encouraged to give voice to their own experiences.

Françoise's examples offer some key ideas about considering English usage in the classroom, and I'll add that increasing the diversity of the examples and images in the class can go a long way toward creating an environment that naturally helps students understand diverse communities, multiple perspectives, and the harm that can come from bias and discrimination. When we bring minoritized and intersectional individuals and groups (BIPOC, LGBTQ+, disabled, neurodiverse) to the center of our examples and our classroom environment, we make teaching for social justice part of the fabric of what we do, regardless of our language objectives or the proficiency level of our students.

CONCLUSION

PW:

Teaching for social justice is not an easy enterprise in any context. Many world language teachers fear a backlash from parents, colleagues, or community members when they choose to teach with themes related to social justice, as I found in a study of colleagues. Although we wish we could term this a myth, it is true that some teachers in some contexts face resistance.

We believe that the challenge of resistance can be met by building community among colleagues across the disciplines and communicating clearly with parents

and children about the goals of social justice education. The national dialogue on social justice and related concepts in the United States can offer curricular and instructional opportunities that might not have been possible just a few years ago.

For context, I have almost 20 years of experience in education; this is my 11th year in an independent Quaker school teaching Spanish at the elementary level. I also have an MEd in Early Childhood and Elementary Education, so you could say that I am privileged in the sense that a lot of what I teach is aligned with my school's mission and I know how to scaffold themes and conversations for young audiences. That said, everybody can apply an equity and ABAR lens to their educational praxis.

Things that have worked for me include:

- **Education:** Build community with the families of students by sharing monthly newsletters with key information about the cultural content about which you are teaching.
- **Reach:** Find allies among colleagues and collaborate on cross-curricular units.
- **Extend:** Work on awareness campaigns and cultural projects that involve the entire school community.

Finally, work on refining your lens, being compassionate about your journey, and walking the talk.

We hope that you are inspired to incorporate more social justice teaching in the classroom, and to make your way beyond the myths that might have been preventing you from considering this an option.

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RESOURCES

Learning for Justice (formerly Teaching Tolerance) – ***learningforjustice.org***

- *Social Justice Standards* (2017) – ***tinyurl.com/scxtpw7n***
- *Critical Practices for Anti-Bias Education* (2019) – ***tinyurl.com/c37s4u8***
- *Let's Talk: Facilitating Critical Conversations with Students* (2020) – ***tinyurl.com/4k2993pc***

Mundo de Pepita – ***mundodepepita.com***

Non-binary and trans-affirming language resources:

- Call me Latine (Spanish) – ***callmelatine.com***
- Toward trans-affirming language pedagogies (French) – ***krisknisely.com***
- ***Nonbinary.wiki*** – for languages other than French and Spanish, use the search function

Using their Words – ***usingtheirwords.org***

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