

Below the Surface Level of Social Justice:

Using Quad Text Sets to Plan Equity-Oriented Instruction

Have you seen the social justice warrior memes? If you do a Google search, you may find some like these: “Minorities are strong, independent people, which is why they need me to speak for them.” “There must be some way this victimizes me.” “I support equality for all. But f**k those white people.” The list goes on.

While we believe the work of education is closely tied to issues of equity and justice, we understand that, as these memes show, “social justice” can be perceived to be the latest buzzword or the most recent version of political correctness. These memes present the concept as merely lip service—a trend with little meaning. But we know that true engagement in social justice requires a more profound level of commitment; teachers and students must push below the surface. As teachers and teacher educators, we believe that we need to grapple with the sometimes complicated issues of social justice and learn to become activists and agents. Literature can provide us with a vehicle for these efforts.

Our major motivations include commitments to educational equity and a more just society, and we are not alone. In this age of accountability, social justice is now evaluated by the National Council of Teachers of English when reviewing applications for accreditation of teacher education programs. Standard 7 reads, “Candidates demonstrate knowledge of how theories and research about social justice, diversity, equity, student identities, and schools as institutions can enhance students’ opportunities to learn in English,” and Element 1 asks teacher candidates to “plan and imple-

ment English language arts and literacy instruction that promotes social justice and critical engagement with complex issues related to maintaining a diverse, inclusive, equitable society” (NCTE, 2012). As a result, we have considered how young adult literature can help meet the goal of promoting social justice.

Many teachers have come to understand the value of YA texts as tools to engage their adolescent students. However, these texts have the power to do even more than connect with readers: YA titles have the potential to address vital issues of social justice. In this article, we will show how one of our course assignments, the Quad Text Set, can be designed with the intention of pushing teacher candidates to look past the surface level of equity and justice issues in ELA instruction. While this assignment has been discussed previously in scholarship (Lewis, Walpole, & McKenna, 2014), this particular article aims to highlight how teachers might use the Quad Text Set as a planning framework to build their students’ knowledge of social justice.

Social justice pedagogy is defined by Carlisle, Jackson, and George (2006) as “the conscious and reflective blend of content and process intended to enhance equity across multiple social identity groups, . . . foster critical perspectives, and promote social action” (p. 57). As Keehn (2015) reveals, some of its chief aims include:

Providing students with the tools to think critically about their own social identities and social locations, developing an understanding of various manifestations of privilege and oppression, building an understanding of the historical

roots of structural inequality, and developing individuals' and groups' capacities to take action against injustice. (pp. 374–375)

We believe that planning ELA instruction that uses sets of strategically connected texts (that include high-quality YA titles) has great promise. Such instruction can be used to provide students with exposure to multiple perspectives and the background knowledge required for critical engagement with issues of equity and social justice, potentially inspiring them to become agents of change.

Text Sets in English Language Arts

Using sets of connected texts in English language arts is not a new idea. As Applebee (1974) points out, text pairings and text sets have been part of curricular reform efforts since the early 20th century. More recently, they have been used to encourage robust discussions (see Hartman & Alison, 1996), to foster connections with canonical literature (see Herz & Gallo, 2005; Kaywell, 1997), and to leverage quality young adult literature and multimedia texts to build mature understandings of thematic issues (see Pytash, Batchelor, Kist, & Srsen, 2014). It is this last goal that animates our engagement with this planning framework in our preservice teacher education program. More specifically, with a focus on social justice, we use the Quad Text Set to measure NCTE Standard 7 (NCTE, 2012) for accreditation.

As researchers have argued, teaching for social justice is an important and complex pursuit (Lee, 2011). If teachers are to engage their students in robust conversations around issues of equity and social justice using challenging and complex ideas and texts—while avoiding surface-level conversations that “celebrate diversity” but do little to encourage students to be active change agents—students must have well-developed background knowledge. Recent research demonstrates that students are provided with significantly limited reading opportunities in many secondary ELA classrooms (Swanson et al., 2016). However, studies also show that the reading and comprehension of individual texts can provide students with both the language and background knowledge needed to be successful with subsequent texts (Shanahan, Fisher, & Frey, 2012). We believe, therefore, that these connected text sets offer teacher candidates a

framework for the reading volume their students need in order to practice sophisticated reading skills *as well as* the critical background knowledge required to engage in important conversations around justice and equity. We argue that without relevant background knowledge, our candidates' future students will be unprepared to engage “with complex issues related to maintaining a diverse, inclusive, equitable society” (NCTE, 2012).

The Quad Text Set Assignment

For this assignment, we have adapted the Quad Text Set approach of Lewis, Walpole, and McKenna (2014).

This framework is composed of four separate texts that work together to build the critical background knowledge needed to engage with a complex target text, as well as address issues of equity and social justice. We ask our teacher candidates to build these instructional units using four categories of text: 1) a video clip, piece of artwork, or musical selection to introduce the topic and develop general background knowledge about the text or theme; 2) an informational text that builds more specific contextual or thematic knowledge and highlights issues of justice and equity; 3) a complex canonical or contemporary young adult target text; and 4) a canonical or contemporary young adult text to extend student understanding of equity and social justice issues (Lewis & Walpole, 2016). (For a complete assignment description and rubric, see Appendix A.)

Before the Quad Text Set is assigned, teacher candidates read nine YA novels and apply critical lenses (Appleman, 2014) to these texts in face-to-face discussions, online discussion posts, and two formal papers. The lenses lay the groundwork for social justice

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exploration, as they help uncover missing voices and highlight power relations in texts. In the next sections, we discuss in depth how two students successfully designed their Quad Text Sets.

Quad Text Set Example: Racial Inequality

To understand how these text sets are constructed, we first provide a sample set that one of our teacher candidates, Rachel, designed. Rachel centered her set on

the criminalization of people of color in the United States, focusing specifically on police brutality against African Americans. She chose as her target text the award-winning young adult book *All American Boys* by Jason Reynolds and Brendan Kiely (2015). This dual-narrative novel presents two accounts of an incident of police violence against an African American high school student. One perspective is from Rashad, the victim himself, who is unjustly accused and assaulted in a neighborhood store by a white officer; Rashad's sections are written by Jason Reynolds, an African American author. The

other perspective is from a white classmate, Quinn, who witnessed the police brutality but feels conflicted about providing an eyewitness account because of his close relationship with the police officer and the officer's family. Quinn's sections are written by Brendan Kiely, a white author. One of the most intriguing and realistic aspects of this novel is the nuanced way in which the authors treat all characters: they all have both positive and negative characteristics, making them realistically human rather than stereotypical.

To prepare students to engage with this text, Rachel began by choosing two short video clips from the movie *The Help* (Barnathan, 2011). Although this film is set in the Jim Crow South during the 1960s, the clips clearly demonstrate the physical proxim-

ity of blacks and whites, while also reinforcing the essential separateness of the groups and the inequality that exists between them. This separateness is a key motif in *All American Boys* (Reynolds & Kiely, 2015), which is reinforced by the dual narrative—one chapter written from Rashad's perspective followed by a chapter written from Quinn's perspective. In the movie, black characters work and sometimes live in the same homes as their white employers, yet are not allowed to be a part of that society with its legal, financial, and social privileges. Similarly, Rashad and Quinn go to the same high school and have friends in common, yet still lead lives that are almost entirely segregated by race—a problem that emerges as the town's demographics transition from primarily white to more racially diverse. While the implicit bias of the police officer likely caused his violent assault of Rashad, segregation exacerbates misunderstanding and mistrust and contributes to the unjust act. Unlike *All American Boys*, *The Help*—both the movie and the book (Stockett, 2009) it was adapted from—has been justly criticized for its shortcomings in the authenticity of its voice, in its depiction of the horrors of Jim Crow and the struggles of the civil rights movement, and in echoing the harmful trope of the “white savior” (Dargis, 2011; Solomon, 2011). However, the short video clips Rachel incorporated into her Quad Text Set served her instructional purpose by allowing her to target both the historical roots of segregation as well as the current inequalities that are the thematic focus of *All American Boys*.

To build more specific background knowledge on racial profiling and the injustices still suffered by young African Americans today (for those students who may not know this information directly), Rachel chose the article, “Why is the NYPD after Me?” (Peart, 2011), which details the experiences of a five-time victim of New York's “stop and frisk” program. This text documents a very real manifestation of privilege, power, and oppression and clearly addresses the effects of implicit bias and “structural inequality” (Keehn, 2015) that prove to be essential to understanding Rashad's victimization in the novel. Furthermore, once students have been exposed to the inequality inherent in historic and modern instantiations of segregation through the video and informational texts, they might be better prepared to take action against this injustice due to their more keenly developed critical perspectives

(Carlisle, Jackson, & George, 2006; Keehn, 2015). This is the lesson that Quinn learns in *All American Boys* (Reynolds & Kiely, 2015) as he comes to recognize the privilege that comes with his skin color and the need to stand up and march—for Rashad and for racial justice—in a Black Lives Matter type of protest. His is a first step in healing the separations that he has been a part of, and it provides a model of action for students.

As an extension text, Rachel chose specific chapters of *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Lee, 2006) in order to delve into the historical nature of these injustices and to help students draw comparisons between Tom Robinson and Rashad Butler. Here Rachel encouraged students to explore the nature of the characters' experiences, recognize how institutional racism played a role in the injustices they suffered, and understand the responsibilities that we share to become change agents against that injustice. It is important to note that *To Kill a Mockingbird* could have been used as the target text for this Quad Text Set; it is one of the few texts that is both pervasive in high school English classrooms and also directly addresses racism. Unfortunately, Lee's novel is often the *only* text used to discuss race, which is problematic because it is written by a white author, told from a perspective of a white narrator, and not contemporary; these characteristics can give the illusion that racism is a historical rather than current problem. Instead, Rachel chose to focus this set on *All American Boys* (Reynolds & Kiely, 2015) because of its relevance to a current racial equality issue and its provision of diverse perspectives of both black and white main characters (and authors). Additionally, unlike *To Kill a Mockingbird*—which ends in Scout's deeper understanding but no activism—*All American Boys* ends with a call to action for both the main characters and the novel's readers.

Quad Text Set Example: Gender Inequality

Racism is not the only social justice issue that students might consider in the Quad Text Set assignment. Kelly decided to construct a text about gender inequality and chose the young adult novel *The Disreputable History of Frankie Landau-Banks* (Lockhart, 2009) as her target text. This book details the struggles of an adolescent young woman as she negotiates her way through her rarefied, male-dominated boarding school, aptly named Alabaster Prep. During the course of the novel, Frankie grapples with both the attractions of

a powerful romantic relationship and her exclusion from the activities of the school's influential, male-only secret society: The Loyal Order of Basset Hounds. Although Lockhart's book humorously details how Frankie manipulates the all-male club to do her bidding, it also clearly addresses the dangers that women face in a society that often does not allow them to find or express their voices beyond those ways that are socially sanctioned.

In order to prepare students to understand how women can be repressed, silenced, or stereotyped, Kelly chose two short video texts that introduce students to the harmful impact of gendered expectations for women and girls: the Always #LikeAGirl (2014) and Always #LikeAGirl-Unstoppable (2015) videos. These provocative commercials ask grown men and women to demonstrate, on camera, what it means to run, fight, and throw "like a girl." In the opening of the videos, the adult interviewees invariably pantomime weak, ineffective, or pathetic imitations of those actions—physical demonstrations of the perceived weakness and ineffectiveness of girls. The interviewees then ask the same questions of preadolescent females. Unlike the ineffectual representations of feminine power offered by the older interviewees, the girls take these requests seriously and put a great deal of effort and power into the actions they are requested to perform. The message is clear: as children grow into adolescents and adults, they fall prey to the gendered expectations and stereotypes of a male-dominated society and lose their ability to control their own identity and story. These are stereotypes that Frankie fights against mightily in *The Disreputable History of Frankie Landau-Banks* (Lockhart, 2009), though there are no easy answers; at the end of the novel, it is unclear whether she has succeeded in her crusade to gain power and voice.

To build on this background knowledge and understanding of basic issues of gender and power, Kelly chose a *Time* article (Cheng, 2016) from our recent

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presidential election cycle that provides a historical perspective of Hillary Clinton's robust public speaking style. This article not only offers a critique of those who criticize Clinton's "raised voice" speeches, but also addresses the key problem that Frankie faces in this novel: how she can have her "voice" recognized and respected in an environment that is male-dominated. As Cheng concludes:

An entrenched irony of public expression in American democracy is how individuals who endure systemic oppression (women, the LGBT community, people of color)—who might have the most reason to shout—tend to be the same individuals who are urged to keep their voices down, to stay calm, and to laugh a little (or "smile," as Joe Scarborough and others have advised Clinton). (Cheng, n.p.)

This text helps students understand the tension faced

by oppressed groups, in this case, women; simply "speaking up" is not an adequate answer. Women are burdened with the obligation of expressing themselves in only limited ways in order to be heard and taken seriously. Armed with the knowledge of gendered expectations in the videos and the specific manifestation of those expectations in the *Time* article,

students are better prepared to engage in the key thematic issues of *The Disreputable History of Frankie Landau Banks* (Lockhart, 2009).

For Kelly's extension text, she chose several excerpts from the memoir *Wild* (Strayed, 2012). In this work, the author shares her treacherous and thrilling experiences as she decides to hike the Pacific Crest Trail on her own after feeling as if her life has fallen apart. Kelly chose specific sections from this story that focused on the interactions that Strayed has with the males she encounters on the trail. These targeted excerpts provided students with real-life examples of how gendered expectations impact interpersonal exchanges. However, they also provided students with opportunities to explore the intertextual connections between Frankie and Strayed and to examine their burdens and choices and the impact that those choices have on their ability to tell their stories. In consider-

ation of the characters of Frankie and Strayed, students were invited to "think critically about their own social identities and social locations," and develop "an understanding of various manifestations of privilege and oppression" (Keehn, 2015, pp. 374–375). Within the moral laboratory of these texts (Zbikowski & Collins, 1994), students can then use their deeper understandings to evaluate the characters' fight against oppression, the relative success of those struggles, and the extent to which this analysis can inform their own social activism.

Discussion

While many educators recognize the importance of equity, and the National Council of Teachers of English's Standard 7 (NCTE, 2012) now measures how well teacher preparation programs prepare teacher candidates in the promotion of social justice, it is all too easy to treat these issues at surface levels. Fortunately, we have found that it is possible for teachers to push below the surface to address social justice themes through young adult literature paired with three additional texts in a Quad Text Set. This assignment facilitates strategic, deliberate literacy instruction that builds background knowledge about privilege and oppression. For some secondary students (and some teacher candidates), such context may be completely new—mirroring the experiences of Quinn, who was unaware of the extent of his own white privilege and racial biases. For others, the knowledge in informational and media texts may validate their own experiences, as might have been the case for Rashad and Frankie, who were themselves marginalized and who struggled for justice. In both situations, placing the texts in conversation with one another and making conscious choices about teaching for social justice can create a more in-depth understanding of the literature as well as provide inspiration to act.

The complexity of the YA texts chosen by Rachel and Kelly illustrates another important lesson: there are no easy answers to social justice issues. Action is needed, as Quinn and Rashad show, and victories can be won, as with Frankie. But these actions do not end the struggle or solve all problems completely. In addition, the complicated choices and situations faced by these characters show that there is more than one "right" way to achieve the goal of social justice. A

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Table 1. Sample text sets for issues of social justice and equity

Economic Inequality			
Target Text: <i>The Great Gatsby</i> (Fitzgerald, 1995)	Video Text: “Wealth Inequality in America” (Politizane, 2012)	Informational Text: FDR’s acceptance speech at the 1936 Democratic National Convention (Roosevelt, 1936)	Extension Text: Selected chapters from <i>Disreputable History of Frankie Landau-Banks</i> (Lockhart, 2009)
Target Text: <i>Ready Player One</i> (Cline, 2011)	Video Text: “Dystopian Literature” (Joshualane06, 2011)	Informational Text: “Hunger in America” (Feeding America, 2017)	Extension Text: “A Modest Proposal” (Swift, 2004)
Gender Roles and Heteronormativity			
Target Text: <i>Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe</i> (Sáenz, 2014)	Musical Texts: Songs from <i>Mulan</i> (Coats, 1998): “I’ll Make a Man out of You” (Wilder & Zippel, 1998), “A Girl Worth Fighting For” (Wilder, 1998a), “Honor to Us All” (Wilder, 1998b)	Informational Text: “This Teen Has No Time for Outdated Gender Roles for Moms and Dads” (Pittman, 2016)	Extension Text: Selections from <i>The Outsiders</i> (Hinton, 2012)
Mental Trauma and Mental Health			
Target Text: <i>The Kite Runner</i> (Hosseini, 2003)	Video Texts: Selections from <i>The Hunting Ground</i> (Blavin & Blavin, 2015); “PTSD and the War at Home” (Military.com, 2014)	Informational Texts: “Remembering Afghanistan’s Golden Age” (Bumiller, 2009)	Extension Text: <i>Boy Toy</i> (Lyga, 2009)
Immigration			
Target Texts: <i>American Born Chinese</i> (Yang, 2007) and <i>The Shadow Hero</i> (Yang & Liew, 2014)	Video Text: “Children of Asian Immigrants Reveal Sacrifices Their Parents Made” (Boldly, 2015)	Informational Text: “Chinese Immigration” (Library of Congress, n.d.)	Extension Text: <i>The Joy Luck Club</i> (Tan, 2006)
Colonialism and Native American Rights			
Target Text: <i>The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian</i> (Alexie & Forney, 2007)	Video Text: “In Whose Honor?” (Rosenstein, 1997)	Informational Text: “On the Reservation and Off, Schools See a Changing Tide” (Johnson, 2008)	Extension Texts: Poetry from <i>Baptism of Desire</i> (Erdrich, 1990)
Exceptionalities			
Target Text: <i>Marcelo in the Real World</i> (Stork, 2011)	Video Text: “Couple with Asperger’s Syndrome: ‘We’re even more extraordinary together’” (Wasser & Chiaramonte, 2017).	Informational Texts: “Asperger Syndrome” (Autism Speaks, Inc., 2017)	Extension Text: “The Problem of Autism in Young Adult Fiction” (Rozema, 2014)

key task in building a Quad Text Set, therefore, is to select a rich target text and purposeful informational, multimodal, and extension texts that help students explore and consider social justice issues in multifaceted ways. For more ideas of topics and texts that could be incorporated into a Quad Text Set, please see Table 1.

Though the assignment is grounded in comprehension research, the effects of the social justice Quad

Text Set on secondary students have not yet been researched. Nevertheless, this framework has become an important tool to help our preservice teachers plan ELA instruction that more comprehensively works to address issues of social justice and equity. We shared these two student examples because they illustrate how text sets can be leveraged to build background knowledge and include multiple perspectives when planning instruction around social justice

issues. However, we also freely acknowledge that not all projects are this strong. Although our program assessment data demonstrate that many of our teacher candidates are gaining proficiency in using text sets to meaningfully engage with issues of equity in ELA instruction, some of our candidates are not gaining this proficiency. Over the course of the three semesters we have assigned this project, 51% of candidates completed social justice text sets that met our expectations (3 rubric points), and 38% produced sets that exceeded expectations (5 rubric points). However, 11% of candidates did not meet our expectations for this assignment. (We again invite you to refer to Appendix A for the full assignment description and rubric.)

As is the case for the characters in *All American Boys* (Reynolds & Kiely, 2015) and *The Disreputable History of Frankie Landau-Banks* (Lockhart, 2009) who experience the ongoing nature of social justice work, our efforts persist; we must continue to adjust and adapt our instruction so that we are focused on

preparing all of our teacher candidates to push below the surface. We feel there is great value in designing future research around directly examining the impact of our teacher candidates' work on their secondary students in order to measure if and how the Quad Text Sets foster social justice agency.

None of us wants to be like the shallow, shrill, self-righteous social justice warrior shown in the popular memes discussed in the introduction. Rather, we seek deeper understandings and a truer commitment to social justice by examining multiple perspectives, understanding the workings of power and privilege on personal and societal levels, and inspiring action for justice. Young adult literature in strategically chosen text sets can provide us with the vehicle to do so.

Authors' Note

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Fiction and Nonfiction Used in Text Sets

Alexie, S., & Forney, E. (2007). *The absolutely true diary of a part-time Indian*. New York, NY: Little, Brown.

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Appendix A: Quad Text Set for Social Justice and Equity

Directions

You are to develop a mini-unit that is composed of three specific parts:

1. A planning template where you identify your learning objectives related to social justice and equity, a target canonical text, the background knowledge needed to engage that text, and a list of texts and digital media that can provide that knowledge.
2. An explanation of how the texts will be used in instruction and the strategies, materials, and assessments that will be utilized with each text and how these are aligned with the CCSS¹ and your social justice focus.
3. An instructional calendar or outline of your unit and activities.

This unit should provide an instructional framework for using multimedia texts to build critical background knowledge, should pair YA texts with canonical texts to build background knowledge and differentiate instruction to meet student needs, and should engage students with issues of equity and social justice. All texts should be closely related to the canonical text, should help build student motivation and the background knowledge needed to engage the canonical text and issues of social justice, and be focused on building the key critical, analytical, and writing skills that the Common Core Standards demand.

Rubric

Criteria	Ratings			Points
	Exceeds Expectations	Meets Expectations	Does Not Meet Expectations	
Alignment with CCSS and State Standards	The candidate clearly aligns the text set and instructional activities with the CCSS and state standards: 5 points.	The candidate generally aligns the text set and instructional activities with the CCSS and state standards: 3 points.	The candidate fails to align the text set and instructional activities with the demands of the CCSS or state standards: 1 point.	5
Social Justice and Equity	Candidate's plan creatively promotes social justice, critical engagement with complex issues, and an equitable society: 5 points.	Candidate's plan promotes social justice, critical engagement with complex issues, and an equitable society: 3 points.	Candidate's plan does not promote social justice, critical engagement with complex issues, or an equitable society: 1 point.	5
Instructional Strategies for Reading Texts and Resources and Schedule	Candidate plans creative and sophisticated instruction that utilizes a variety of strategies, materials, and assessments to help students engage with complex texts and allows the candidate to assess the effectiveness of instruction. The sequence of instructional events is clear: 5 points.	Candidate plans instruction that utilizes strategies, materials, and assessments to help students engage with complex texts and allows the candidate to assess the effectiveness of instruction. The sequence of instructional events is generally clear: 3 points.	Candidate plans instruction that does not utilize a variety of strategies, materials, and assessments to help students engage with complex texts or allow the candidate to assess the effectiveness of instruction. The sequence of instructional events is unclear: 1 point.	5
Instruction and Assessment for Composing Texts	Candidate plans creative and sophisticated instruction that utilizes a variety of strategies, materials, and assessments to help students compose a variety of texts and allows the candidate to assess the effectiveness of instruction: 5 points.	Candidate plans instruction that utilizes a variety of strategies, materials, and assessments to help students compose a variety of texts and allows the candidate to assess the effectiveness of instruction: 3 points.	Candidate plans instruction that does not utilize a variety of strategies, materials, and assessments to help students compose a variety of texts or allow the candidate to assess the effectiveness of instruction: 1 point.	5
Consideration of Form, Audience, Context, and Purpose	Candidate evidences a sophisticated understanding of form, audience, context, and purpose, and conventions of English language: 5 points.	Candidate evidences an understanding of form, audience, context, and purpose, and conventions of English language: 3 points.	Candidate does not evidence an understanding of form, audience, context, and purpose, or conventions of English language: 1 point.	5

1. National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers. (2010). Common core state standards for English language arts and literacy in history/social studies, science, and technical subjects. Washington, DC: Author. Retrieved from <http://www.corestandards.org/ela-literacy>.