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REPORT

Social justice professional development: Using teacher voices to understand need and impact

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Abstract

As social justice pedagogies gain traction within language education, both novice and experienced teachers participate in professional development experiences to inform their understanding of and teaching for social justice. This descriptive report documents the perceptions of postsecondary language teachers as they engaged in a social justice curriculum development project, which included a variety of opportunities for professional development. Using illustrative data from questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, group work sessions, and consultation meetings, this report identifies insights into professional development tools, resources, and experiences around social justice education that teachers found most impactful and those that are most needed for their continued learning. Implications for individual teachers, language program administrators, and language teacher educators seeking to advance the teaching of social justice in language classrooms are discussed.

Keywords*: social justice, teacher professional development, postsecondary teachers, in-service teachers*

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Introduction

More than twenty years ago, Reagan and Osborn (2002) argued that "teaching is much more than the conveyance of material to be memorized and regurgitated. It is…an art and science of engaging students intellectually and emotionally in their understanding of the world" (p. 84). Language teachers have taken up this work, embracing critical pedagogies as a means of fostering language proficiency, integrating cultural content into instruction, and encouraging student interrogation of how language and culture manifest, maintain, and challenge social inequities and biases. The "global social unrest that stems from historical racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic inequality and inequity has elevated the need for language educators to challenge the traditional understandings of and practices in the language classroom" (Peña-Pincheira & De Costa, 2021, p. 1), and consequently, the number of books, chapters, presentations, and workshops dealing with social justice has surged, most notably since summer 2020.

As language educators at the University of Minnesota, located in Minneapolis at the epicenter of the worldwide racial justice reckoning sparked by George Floyd's murder, we began reconsidering how the work we do in our classrooms and with our teaching colleagues can contribute to social justice. Taking the classroom as a space of action, we wondered what resources would support teachers in bridging language, content, and social justice in language instruction. What grew out of these reflections was a three-year, grant-funded project titled Social Justice in Language Education: Strengthening Career Competencies, Intercultural Understanding, and Language Proficiency through Specialized Materials (Social SCILS).[1]

Project Background

The goal of the Social SCILS project is to support language educators in designing and implementing instruction that integrates social justice in language education. Nieto (2010) defined social justice as "a philosophy, an approach, and actions that embody treating all people with fairness, respect, dignity, and generosity" (p. 46), thus it necessarily impacts both instructional content and classroom practices. To this end, the project seeks to advance the work of teachers as they "come to greater understanding of or make progress towards equity in society" (Randolph & Johnson, 2017, p. 101). The Social SCILS project aims to provide several open educational resources, including unit and lesson planning templates, curricular units on social justice themes in nine languages (Arabic, Chinese, Dutch, French, German, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish, and Turkish), a bibliography of practical and scholarly resources, and a searchable repository of target language texts.

Three pedagogical frameworks undergirded the development of the planning templates and curricular units: multiliteracies pedagogy (Kalantzis et al., 2016; New London Group, 1996), Hackman's (2005) model of social justice education, and the Social Justice standards (Learning for Justice, 2022). As applied to language education (Kern, 2000; Paesani et al., 2016; Paesani & Menke, 2023), multiliteracies pedagogy prepares students for full participation in public, community, academic, and workplace life by emphasizing linguistic and cultural diversity, multimodal communication, and the use of language and conventions in meaning design. The five components of social justice pedagogy—content mastery, critical thinking and analysis, tools for action and social change, personal reflection, and multicultural group dynamics—work together to not only build students' knowledge base but also their ability to think critically about their own words and actions as well as the world around them. Together, these pedagogies increase teacher and student agency as they interrogate the role of language in maintaining and challenging societal inequities and grow their knowledge of social injustices across cultures (Kalantzis et al., 2016; Reagan & Osborn, 2002).

Project Participants

Twelve experienced, postsecondary language teachers familiar with multiliteracies pedagogy were hired to design curricular units in the nine languages. Of these curriculum developers, eight were also participants in a larger research project around teacher learning. In this report, we share insights from our work with the subset of curriculum developers in French, German, and Spanish who developed units in the first cohort. Work with the second cohort is ongoing. As outlined in Table 1, these curriculum developers were first language speakers of English; each had more than 10 years of university teaching experience and coordinated a multi-section course in their respective language. All had previous experience with social justice pedagogy prior to the onset of the project, albeit to different degrees, having taken part in workshops and trainings on social justice pedagogy in addition to engaging in informal discussions with colleagues on the topic. Three of the four curriculum developers had also collaborated on the creation of social justice teaching materials, read scholarly works about social justice, and attended related conference presentations. Fiona had more experience in that she had previously designed a complete unit on social justice themes and published a corresponding article. For the others, this would be their first time creating such a unit.

Table 1. *Curriculum Developer Demographics*

Name	Languages Taught	Languages Primary	Primary Culture(s)	Years of Teaching Experience	Years of Coordination Experience
Fiona	Spanish	English	US American	13	5
Haley	French	English	US American	11	1.5
Kim	German	English	US American	30+	16
Samantha	German	English	US American	30+	20

The authors of this paper are part of the leadership team for the Social SCILS project and worked closely with curriculum developers as language-specific coordinators. Our identities necessarily impact our work as language teachers, language teacher educators, and project leaders. We recognize that our own social justice work is ongoing and that we still have much to learn.

Project Timeline

To support the creation of the curricular units, curriculum developers and the project leadership team engaged in a collaborative, iterative learning and planning process as outlined in Figure 1. This collaborative work began with two workshops: one on social justice in language education led by two leaders in the field and a second in which project leaders introduced curricular templates that embedded core concepts of the critical pedagogies. After these initial professional development experiences, French, German, and Spanish curriculum developers collaborated with language-specific coordinators and one another to put into practice what they had learned during summer 2021. Curriculum developers received feedback from social justice and multiliteracies consultants, piloted their unit, and revised it in 2022.

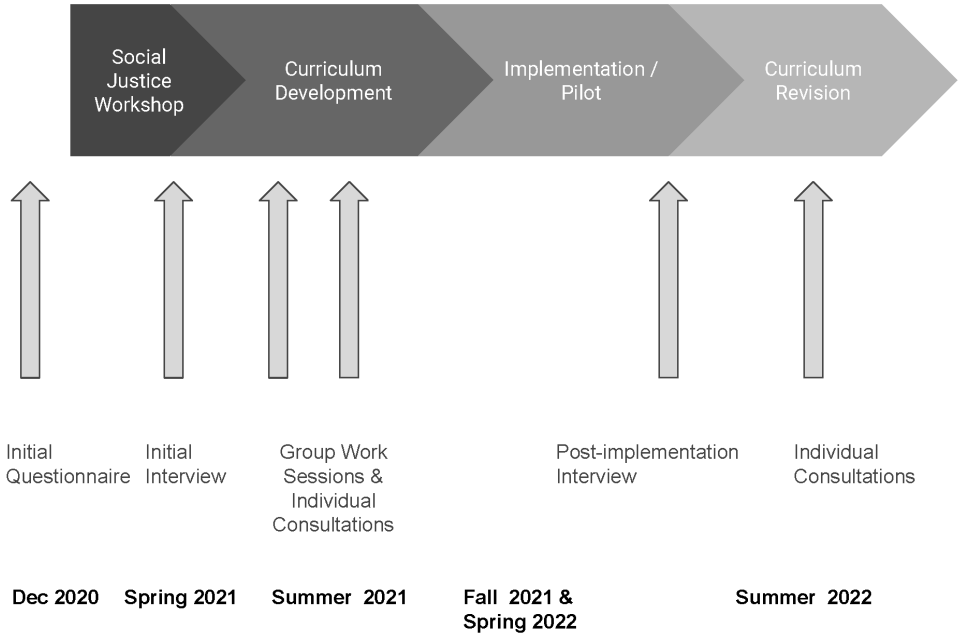

Figure 1. Cohort 1 Project Timeline.

As we collaborated with curriculum developers on the design of their units, we began to wonder what professional development experiences they perceived as most impactful and what additional professional needs they had. This descriptive report shares insights gleaned from our close collaboration with the

curriculum developers over the course of the year-long curriculum development process. We begin with a brief review of relevant literature, then present insights we gained from working with the curriculum developers, and conclude with implications for future professional development offerings.

Review of Relevant Literature

For many teachers, teaching for social justice is a new educational imperative; social justice and anti-racism concepts were not central components of their language teaching methodology courses, if they were incorporated at all (Hines-Gaither & Accilien, 2023). Emerging scholarship on language teachers' beliefs about, cognition around, and applications of critical and social justice pedagogies point to complex, multidimensional understandings that are intertwined with their teaching and learning contexts (Goodspeed et al., in press; Kong, 2022; Leiva et al., 2021; Reagan et al., 2016; Wassell et al., 2019). Language teachers understand social justice education to involve attending to students' diverse identities; diverse, marginalized perspectives; deep, critical engagement with course content; and social responsibility (Goodspeed et al., in press; Baggett, 2022; Kong, 2022; Leiva et al., 2021; Reagan et al., 2016), yet a lack of critical consciousness, uncertainty as to how to incorporate students' diverse identities into instruction, and beliefs that topics such as racism do not belong in language courses inhibit teacher enactment of critical pedagogies (Anya, 2021; Baggett, 2020; Dion, 2020).

Within this growing research base, only two studies directly connect teacher conceptualizations to specific professional development experiences. Reagan et al. (2016) documented how participation in a 14-month urban teacher residency program consisting of both classroom learning and field experiences complexified pre-service ESL and special education teachers' beliefs about and understandings of social justice. More specifically, after the residency program, the pre-service teacher participants recognized tensions in the educational system and how specific practices advantaged some and disadvantaged others. In another study of pre-service EFL teachers in Chile, Leiva et al. (2021) identified a service-learning project and classroom teaching experience as contributing to participants' social justice understandings. In both studies, concrete, hands-on experiences with marginalized communities transformed pre-service teachers' beliefs about and understandings of teaching for social justice; unfortunately, in-service teachers are often unable to participate in experiential programs, which raises the issue of how they learn to plan for and implement critical pedagogies, such as social justice education.

Work with in-service teachers around another critical pedagogy, multiliteracies, has indicated that teachers' previous experiences influence how they understand the pedagogy and plan for multiliteracies instruction (Menke, 2018; Menke & Paesani, 2021). Such findings have led scholars to argue that coherent, sustained experiences that not only connect instructional practices with theoretical concepts but also emphasize their dialogic relationship (i.e., praxis) are necessary for teachers to fully conceptualize and implement new, critical pedagogies (e.g., Allen & Negueruela-Azarola, 2010; Paesani & Menke, 2019). Surveys of teachers, however, have revealed their preference for professional development that emphasizes concrete, instructional practices or activities as opposed to that which prioritizes conceptual development (Hashemi, 2020; Paesani & Menke, 2019), creating a mismatch between what teachers perceive as impacting their practice and what scholars argue is needed.

Throughout this project, we paid special attention to participants' professional development and noted four key insights about the needs of experienced instructors; although we frame these insights within learning about social justice education, most will apply to professional learning in general. The quotes we use to illustrate the insights come from questionnaires, interviews, group work sessions, and individual consultations with language-specific coordinators.

Insight #1: Evolving Needs Require Sustained Professional Development

Curriculum developers' comments reinforced the need for a coherent and sustained approach to language teacher professional development—coherent in that professional development experiences must be

connected by common themes or approaches, and sustained in that these experiences must take place over time. This insight aligns with previous research (e.g., Allen & Negueruela-Azarola, 2010) that argues that such an approach is essential to allow teachers time to learn and apply new teaching approaches and related concepts.

This was evident from the different needs participants reported at different points of the project. Early in the project, curriculum developers focused on their need to fully understand the pedagogical frameworks, to access and find impactful target language texts for use in their units, and to learn the relevant target language vocabulary to discuss selected social justice themes. Early comments expressed incomplete understanding of the projects' frameworks; Kim discussed this in her initial interview:

> I want to look over those [social justice] principles again… I guess it kind of comes down to this feeling of - Am I just gonna do what I always do? Or am I going to really engage with this framework? [...] It comes back to this thing, too…of wanting to understand the framework and the pedagogy, feel like I'm doing it justice, that I'm implementing it the right way. (Initial Interview)

Later, she counterbalanced her statement of insecurity with the need to connect project frameworks to her lived reality:

> But at the same time, always in the back of my head also having this idea of but how do you make it palatable or fit in your own context? And do you maybe not follow every step outlined in the book? Because I sense that maybe that won't fly. (Initial Interview)

Kim's comments reveal tensions between wanting to adhere to principles of the pedagogy on the one hand and the need to make it her own and adapt it to the local context on the other.

Other participants, such as Haley, were more concerned about personal work they needed to do:

> I think that this project will help push me to make concrete changes and applications in the classroom from my personal study of social justice. Learning about social justice work is very important from someone with my white background and privilege but even more important (and more difficult!) is putting into practice actual curricular changes. (Initial Questionnaire)

Curriculum developers also sought to identify ways to include social justice themes every day in smaller ways. For example, in her initial questionnaire, Samantha commented that she needed "good ideas on how to infuse social justice into everyday topics so that it is always there," a sentiment that was echoed by all participants. In these comments from the onset of the project, curriculum developers grappled with the frameworks and the concept of social justice more broadly, both at the pedagogical and personal levels.

After creating and piloting their units, participants had a more nuanced set of needs, reflecting their evolving understandings of project frameworks and potential implementation challenges. They expressed a need to know how to balance language development with discussion of content, how to move from content mastery to critical analysis, and how to handle critical moments. For example, Samantha discussed her struggles leading discussions that sufficiently targeted critical analysis:

> I think that too often my lessons stay at the content mastery level [...] and we don't get into critical analysis as much. And so it would be helpful sometimes to have some ideas so that you could easily spiral this up if you did that. That sort of thing would be helpful like you've got a good groundwork here but rather than adding more information, do this with what you have. (Post-Implementation Interview)

Similarly, Fiona wondered how to handle critical moments in the future:

> I have to imagine that there would be moments like you describe—tense—and it might be good to have a refresher on what to do 'cause I think we did that in one of our social justice workshops and…, it's a little blurry for me. So yeah, those critical moments, I don't know that I would have the tools, right now, to handle them. (Post-Implementation Interview)

Thus, curriculum developers' comments at the end of the project reflect a common need for support on how to dig deeper into critical analysis and how to facilitate contentious discussions. Throughout the project, participants moved from discovering the details of social justice pedagogies toward reflection on how those details might be enacted in materials and classroom practice. As they used templates to plan for and implement instruction, participants connected specific instructional activities to core components of the pedagogies; they made theory-practice connections, and their understanding of pedagogical concepts and how to enact them deepened, which led to new professional development needs. Sustained professional development can respond to teachers' evolving needs as their understanding deepens. Furthermore, participants' comments reflect a need for both theory (understanding the pedagogy) and application and how they move between the two in their thinking and learning, supporting previous calls for praxis-oriented professional development (e.g., Paesani & Menke, 2019).

Insight #2: One Size Does Not Fit All

A second insight is that a one-size-fits-all model of professional development does not account for teachers' differing needs and past experiences. Rather, a multifaceted approach to professional development, one that includes varied resources and experiences and allows teachers to select and use them in meaningful ways, is ideal, as argued by Darling-Hammond et al. (2017) and Swanson and Mason (2018). For example, all participants found the model unit useful, particularly the sample lesson plans and summative assessment. Fiona discussed the impact models have in her planning process:

> It's an iterative process for me, so I kind of get into the details, and then have to go back to the big picture. [...] And for whatever reason, the way my brain works, I prefer to have examples first. And then going back to the big picture of "Okay, now, you know, what would I change about the way I go about this? Or what would I want to add?" (Initial Interview)

It is noteworthy that although all participants used the model unit, they did so in different ways; some used it to gather ideas for what to do or how to organize instruction while others took it as a negative example due to the complexity or nature of the activities.

Participants' responses to the workshops also differed; although most found them helpful, this wasn't the case for all. As Fiona commented:

> I don't love going to workshops, or spending a lot of time on things where I don't have something to show for it. So I think that going back to impacting students in the end, I'm always kind of wanting to do that—creating positive experiences for them, so that they don't feel like it's busy work. So the more we can create meaningful modules or meaningful activities for them to do that really connect to their lives, or may be interesting to them, relevant to them, [...] I like focusing my energy on getting to that point, which kind of speaks to the tangible in the end. (Initial Interview)

Similar to what has been documented for teachers learning about other pedagogies (e.g., Paesani & Menke, 2019), Fiona preferred experiences in which there was a tangible product or result. These differences in opinion among curriculum developer participants make clear that what works for one teacher does not always work for another.

Curriculum developers also emphasized the impact of participating in a variety of experiences. As Kim reflected on preparing to engage in curriculum development, she commented:

> Samantha, Helena and I have on our schedule to read the Hackman article. And I feel like a lot of the materials that we used in the workshop in December [...] I feel like I need to work through some of those things in getting myself in the space to embark on the project. I don't feel like I'm ready to start. But I am really looking forward to the idea of having a template. I think that'll help. I feel like I need to have more background, to know what the official framework is. The support I'm looking forward to is then in June, knowing that there are other people working on similar projects and that I have a chance to check in with them. (Initial Interview)

Here, Kim names three different experiences—a workshop, professional reading, and collaboration—as important to her learning, voicing teachers' need for multiple, varied opportunities to engage with new ideas, particularly when learning opportunities build on one another as part of a sustained experience.

Insight #3: Resources Must Be Flexible

The previous examples also illustrate the third insight: flexibility. Although the social justice lesson-planning templates created by the leadership team were considered helpful by most, not everyone shared this sentiment. Some curriculum developers, like Fiona, found the templates effective in supporting faithful implementation of the frameworks:

> And I think you find gaps as you develop, you're like, "Oh, I actually didn't address this." and those templates are really helpful because you see the gaps more clearly as you flush it out. Like "Oh, I didn't do any of this knowledge process this whole week, whoops, let's look at that." (Individual Consultation #1)

However, other curriculum developers found them constraining. Samantha saw the advantages that the templates could offer, but they did not work as well for her as they did for others; she commented:

> I find that template difficult to work with because the way I work, I just move word by word sometimes. But I keep going until it fits in my mind. And it's like this is logical from this and this is logical from this. [...] But then if I have to check all those boxes for everything that I do as a teacher, I find that many grids overwhelming. That's my problem […] And I do understand the point of it really makes you look through and say, "have I done all these processes?" I get that advantage but for me, I'm just not there. (Individual Consultation #4)

Flexibility is crucial when supporting teachers as they create curricular materials. A closer look at participants' negative reactions to the instructional templates shows that they found these tools restrictive, limiting their creativity, and encouraging a prescriptive view of the critical pedagogies. Curriculum developers in their post-implementation interviews also emphasized the need for flexibility in order to respond to their context and students; the opportunity to experiment, revise, and align instructional units to their specific teaching context was central to increasing teacher agency and buy-in of the critical approaches. Their feedback led us to revise the templates to increase flexibility.[2]

Insight #4: Community Advances Understanding and Application

The fourth and final insight is that the cohort model of professional development embedded in this project provided opportunities for community-based learning. Previous research has emphasized the importance of community building in professional development (e.g., Brandl, 2000; Hashemi, 2020; Kong, 2022), thus this is another essential component of any professional development model. In particular, connections with the project leadership team and other curriculum developers were key to supporting teachers as they created social justice curricular units. As Fiona explained, consultations allowed her to "think through things in new ways" and "to create something more cohesive" (Individual Consultation #1); they provided an opportunity to talk through ideas, get feedback, ask questions, and more.

Indeed, the element most frequently identified by participants as impactful was the opportunity to collaborate with others. Kim discussed her desire for collaboration early in the project:

> I want to feel connected to the larger project throughout the summer and throughout the whole project. I don't want to feel like I'm out there on my own creating this thing. And then I'm kind of swimming with it by myself. (Initial Interview)

Additionally, for some participants there was a sense that personal work around issues of social justice and racism was essential and that it needed to be done in tandem with curricular work and in collaboration with others. Haley, for example, had participated in a college-level anti-racism learning community, and

reflected on its impact:

> I feel like prior to [...] our first discussion about it, what felt like the most formative space for me in my understanding of social justice was where I was really actively involved in some professional development community [...] where I was the most active in sort of reformulating my own understanding of social justice and social justice movements. (Post-Implementation Interview)

These quotes illustrate that working and discussing with others is essential for both personal and professional development. Participants highlighted different communities that impacted their work; some were local communities, within their department or the discipline, and others were with individuals in other disciplines or teaching contexts. Each community offered a distinct, valuable perspective on teaching for social justice, and engagement with multiple communities was particularly impactful. For example, curriculum developers noted that gathering new ideas at conferences is invigorating, but a local community with whom they could discuss the new ideas and collaborate made those new ideas more likely to become a reality.

Conclusion

Teachers and scholars alike have long lamented the research-practice divide; through this project we begin to bridge this gap, linking what teachers want and need to the professional learning opportunities we offer. Their collective words emphasize the need for experiences that connect pedagogical concepts and principles with classroom practice, foster collaboration, and take varied forms. These insights reinforce implications and calls made in previous research, namely the need for sustained professional development grounded in praxis (e.g., Allen & Negueruela, 2010; Paesani & Menke, 2023). As with language learners, individual teachers have unique needs and preferred learning styles; consequently, professional development must be available in a variety of formats. Multiple, varied opportunities to interact with social justice principles were pivotal to this project's participants enacting them in planning. Although experiences impacted individual participants differently, opportunities to connect the principles learned with classroom practice in a collaborative manner was relevant for all. As the field continues to embrace critical pedagogies and incorporate social justice into instruction, designing and offering professional development opportunities to meet the diverse needs of teachers will be key, considering those who are new to the profession, learning to teach in a new context, embracing new goals and pedagogies, or resisting new paradigms.

Throughout this project, participants emphasized the important role of collaboration in their professional learning about social justice. Being part of a grant-funded project, they had a built-in community, which is not the case for all teachers, so future offerings should consider how to create and sustain connections among participants to facilitate their learning and implementation of social justice pedagogies. Among the ways this imperative might be accomplished are virtual professional learning communities around specific social justice issues, social media such as Instagram (see Carpenter et al., 2020), or a podcast series in which teachers share how they implement critical pedagogies in their classrooms.

Social justice work is about breaking down hierarchies, which involves learning and thinking critically about the experiences of others, self-reflection, and taking action. To do this, we as teacher educators must listen to teacher voices, seek to understand their unique and varied needs, and reduce inequities in access to resources and professional learning. By developing open educational resources that respond to documented teacher needs and offering spaces for collaboration, our goal is to do just that. Through collaboration, we can advance our individual and collective teaching practice and further equity in society for "no one can do everything, but everyone can do something" (Randolph & Johnson, 2017, p. 117).

Notes

1. This project began in 2020 with funding from the International Research and Studies Program (2020-2023); it was then expanded through the Language Resource Centers Program. Both are part of the U.S.

Department of Education Title VI grant program.

2. The project leadership revised the planning templates based on the feedback of the first group of curriculum developers. The revised templates still embed the primary components of the critical pedagogies, but they allow teachers to implement pedagogical stages in a more flexible way (see Paesani et al. (2023) for more information on the templates).

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