

Teaching for Social Justice in Middle Grades Mathematics: Lessons from a Field Instructor/Preservice Teacher Partnership

Kelsey L. Benson, *University of Georgia*
Ashley Conlon, *Northbrook Middle School*

Abstract

This Practitioner Perspective discusses the implementation of social justice lessons in middle grades mathematics by a preservice teacher enrolled in a social justice-oriented teacher education program during her practicum placements in 7th and 8th grade classrooms in a rural county in the southeastern United States. We begin with an overview of relevant literature on the importance of teaching for social justice in mathematics, particularly with/for young adolescents. Next we describe the social justice Math lessons Ashley designed and taught. We conclude with implications for both teachers and teacher education programs undertaking justice-oriented work in divisive and hostile political contexts.

Introduction

Since 2021, there has been a wave of conservative backlash against the teaching of critical race theory (CRT) in U.S. schools. CRT is an academic and legal framework first developed over 40 years ago by legal scholars like Kimberlé Crenshaw and Derrick Bell to “understand the centrality of racism—meaning that racism is permanent and understanding it is fundamental to understanding how all structures are organized in the U.S.” (Love, 2019a, p. 136). CRT rejects the philosophy of ‘colorblindness’ and tropes about a post-racial America, instead raising structural questions about the persistence of stark racial disparities despite decades of civil rights reforms (Fortin, 2021). In recent years, however, CRT has been weaponized by a well-resourced, highly mobilized coalition of media sources as a “catchall term to apply broadly to classroom discussions about race and racism, gender identity, sexuality, and sexism” (American Civil Liberties Union, 2022). Legislatures across 33 U.S. states have introduced over 100 classroom censorship bills banning the teaching of ‘divisive concepts’ that cause students ‘discomfort’ or offer instruction aimed at ‘indoctrination’, in addition to banning books by BIPOC and LGBTQ+ authors (American Civil Liberties Union, 2022, March 10). This same time period has seen an explosion in anti-trans legislation across the country. Over half of U.S. states have introduced laws hostile to trans people, mostly centered around participation in sports competitions and the ability of doctors to provide gender-affirming care, particularly to youth (Mawn, 2023). The wave of legal challenges to the rights of trans people is

reminiscent of the bathroom bills that swept across the nation around 2016, and again teachers find themselves at the forefront of conservative backlash. According to National Public Radio (NPR) reporting, of the more than 126 anti-trans bills that were introduced in 2022, 63% centered on schooling, many banning transwomen from competing in sports (Nakajima & Hanzhang, 2022).

This paper and the work it describes are thus situated in a hostile political context, particularly for teachers and teacher education programs located in more conservative parts of the southeastern US: for instance, the “Don’t Say Gay” bill passed in Florida in March 2022 which prohibits teachers from discussing issues of sexual orientation or gender identity (Diaz, 2022). As another example, on July 22, 2022, neighboring Georgia passed HB 1084, the Protect Students First Act. Colloquially known as the ‘divisive concepts’ bill, the stated purpose of this piece of legislation is to regulate teaching that individuals or one racial group may be considered responsible for or participate in systemic racism, consciously or unconsciously (Dennis, 2023). The bill specifically bans teachers from discussing nine different concepts in their classrooms, including the idea that the US is “fundamentally or systemically racist” (Spells & Youd, 2022) and the practice of teachers making students feel demeaned or guilty because of their race or ethnicity. However, the language contained in the bill concerning what specifically constitutes a ‘divisive’ concept is vaguely defined, at best, leaving teachers and teacher educators in Georgia understandably mired in a state of confusion and self-doubt. The brewing storm of

uncertainty came to a head in spring 2023, when a 5th-grade teacher at an elementary school in Cobb County became the first Georgia teacher fired for violating the divisive concepts bill after she read the story *My Shadow is Purple* to her class. This book, which the teacher purchased at her school's annual book fair, tells a tale of mutual respect and self-exploration through a character who refuses traditional gender binaries by choosing not a pink (for girls) or a blue (for boys) shadow, but a purple one. To add to a general state of confusion about the vague wording of the 'divisive concepts' bill, this book is not about race at all, but about acceptance of the infinite spectrum of gendered forms of self-expression. The elementary teacher's firing has thus added fuel to the fire of an already bewildering and fearful political context in education, as teachers, preservice teachers, and teacher education programs struggle to figure out where the boundaries between acceptable and outlawed content lay. In fact, many teachers have simply chosen to self-censor instructional materials and classroom discussions out of a legitimate, tangible fear of retaliation (Jones & Kurtz, 2023).

This paper addresses the complexity of teaching for social justice in hostile political climates by chronicling the experiences of a preservice teacher (Ashley) and her university field supervisor (Kelsey) who worked together in a middle grades education program at a large public university in the southeast during the 2022-23 school year. This program, which has been extensively described elsewhere as a justice-oriented teacher education program (Hughes et al., 2016; Ranschaert & Murphy, 2020), has a stated goal to cultivate and sustain a more equitable world by: (1) embodying and modeling social justice-oriented curriculum design and related experiences that position youth and educators to build positive, supportive, humanizing relationships with and among youth, families, and communities; (2) advocating with and for youth to embrace their power and possibility to create a more equitable world; and (3) engaging individually and collectively around practices, structures, and systems using critical reflection and analysis to inspire critical action. This is difficult work, nested as it is in a Primarily White Institution (PWI) in the deep south—a community that we refer to here as Sunnydale (a pseudonym).

Those with the most power within this community have proven time and again to be

reticent to confront legacies of slavery and segregation: for instance, the abuse of eminent domain laws in the 1960s to forcibly relocate entire communities of color from their homes to make way for development projects (Queen, 2022); or the attempted clandestine removal in 2015 of human remains of former slaves found during an expansion project to a historic building (Donovan, 2019). In stark contrast, the middle grades teacher education program framing the context of this collaboration represents one of many "subcultures of resistance" (hooks, 2003, p. 48), locations of resistance to inequitable structures where *inside* those same structures where equity-minded peoples can create homes for each other. For example, teacher educators work with preservice teachers throughout the program to identify and unpack how their cultural and historical locations impact the way(s) they perceive and engage with the world, and examine systems of power and oppression that privilege some and marginalize others.

Though guided by lofty objectives, the pedagogical orientations in this particular teacher education program are far from a panacea for preservice teachers who sometimes encounter tensions between the expectations of professors and field instructors encouraging and explicitly teaching them to enact justice-oriented teaching and curriculum, and the realities of understanding that they are a temporary guest in their mentor teacher's classroom, as well as a guest in schools where some administrators are skeptical of teaching that could incite community backlash (Ranschaert, 2023). In the next section, we describe the conflicts arising from this "outsider-in" (Childers et al., 2013, p. 510) positionality as we—two cisgender, heterosexual White women—straddled conflicting personal and professional commitments to designing and delivering justice-oriented content in a middle grades mathematics classroom alongside the political realities of classroom teaching during a hostile political climate.

Why Social Justice in Math?

In addition to being Ashley's instructor for two of her teacher education courses, Kelsey was also Ashley's field instructor during her last year in the teacher education program. We therefore had substantial time to get to know one another and grow in community, a foundation that helped us tremendously in the shared vulnerable

space of equity-based field instructor coaching (Jacobs & West Burns, 2021). Harrison (2015) notes that, in supporting preservice teachers to do justice-oriented work in schools, it is imperative for instructors to “model ways to create learning environments that are compassionate, safe, and open” (p. 10). Through conversations in shared classroom spaces, we had time to learn about one another’s backgrounds, values, and pedagogical influences, all of which laid the groundwork for a trusting coaching relationship. This relationship helped Kelsey to notice early on that Ashley was clearly devoted to justice-oriented teaching. For example, Ashley makes concerted efforts to sustain a working proficiency in Spanish, as this is important to facilitate her communication with students and families in the communities where she grew up and desired to return to as a certified middle grades classroom teacher. Even more, Ashley presented a strong desire to incorporate social justice topics into the curriculum she designed in her primary content area: Math.

Broadly defined, social justice education in the middle grades is “an intentional space to engage young adolescents (YAs) in learning and unlearning about topics such as identity, diversity, equity, power, privilege, justice, and social action” (DeMink-Carthew & Gonell, 2022, p. 5). This inclusive pedagogical approach “supports practices aimed at creating equitable classrooms, particularly for underserved learners” (Shockley & Ellis, 2023, p. 4), which include (but are not limited to) centering students’ perspectives, making culturally sustaining choices, and providing access to multicultural resources. In the math curriculum in particular, teaching for social justice “consists of using mathematical thinking to help students become aware of the social injustices that occur within society at large and in their own lives while also increasing their mathematical understanding” (Harrison, 2015, p. 2). Gutstein (2006) articulates teaching math for social justice as having two specific sets of pedagogical goals: one focused on social justice and the second on math. In response to dominant teacher-centered, sterile pedagogical approaches that are mostly devoid of context, he argues for a *critical literacy* in math “for the purpose of transforming society, in its entirety, from the bottom up toward equity and justice, for all students whether from dominant or oppressed groups” (p. 11). For instance, the “drill-and-kill” approach gives students problems to solve with a

revolving door of numbers isolated and independent from any application to the lived experiences of students or to the real problems facing their communities. Though many teachers try to approach the curriculum in this way in efforts to remain politically neutral, Gutstein and Peterson (2013) argue that teaching a trivial, abstract math curriculum is an inherently political act that does a disservice to students in three primary ways:

First, the not-so-subtle message is that math is basically irrelevant except for achieving success in future math classes, becoming a scientist or mathematician, or making commercial transactions. Second, students learn that math is not connected to social reality in any substantive way. Thus students approach math in the abstract and are never encouraged to seriously consider the social and ethical consequences of how math is sometimes used in society. Third, if students are not taught how math can be applied in their lives, they are robbed of an important tool to help them fully participate in society. (p. 10)

In stark contrast, writing curricula for math in social justice contexts that are relevant to students’ interests and lived experiences in their communities increases student engagement with the content and also helps them learn the importance of math (Gutstein & Peterson, 2013). Living in an unjust world, today’s students must “be prepared to use mathematics to defend their rights” (Tate, 2013, p. 40); therefore we can no longer limit our teaching to merely having students complete rote memorization drills to learn how to add, subtract, multiply, and divide. Students also need to understand how math is used in social decision-making, to advance or block certain agendas in public issues such as welfare, unemployment, and climate change (Gutstein & Peterson; Tate).

Though teaching for social justice is critical in all stages of the education system—from birth through adulthood—it is particularly so for young adolescents because of the important identity and moral developments that happen in the middle years (DeMink-Carthew & Gonell, 2022). Students in the middle grades—ages 10 to 15—are often still developing their understandings of social justice issues like equity and identity, in addition to deepening their critical thinking skills, making early adolescence a hugely influential time to engage in social

justice learning (DeMink-Carthew & Gonell). We want to be careful, however, to avoid monolithically applying developmental categories across groups of young adolescents, as age is merely one identity category that shapes the experiences of students who do not necessarily proceed linearly through identical stages of adolescence. As Bishop & Harrison (2021) write, “While age represents an important shared identity across middle schoolers, other social identities such as race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, gender, disability, and religion equally contribute to who young adolescents are and to their experiences in and out of school” (p. 11). Instead, we follow Brinegar et al.’s (2019) call for “converging developmentalism and cultural responsiveness [that] promotes a nuanced understanding of the experiences of all students” (p. 8). That is, while we acknowledge that early adolescence can be a critical time when students are developing critical thinking skills that make them uniquely situated to be receptive to social justice math teaching, we also acknowledge that taking an essentializing, homogenizing view of young adolescents based solely on age “serves only to ‘Other’ students who society already marginalizes for the color of their skin, religious beliefs, parental income, sexual orientation, or gender identity” (Brinegar et al., p. 338). Therefore we endeavored to follow scholars like Ellerbrock & Vomvoridi-Ivanovic (2019), whose conceptual framework for responsive middle level math teaching (RMLMT) responds to the changing developmental characteristics, needs, and interests of young adolescents alongside foundations for culturally responsive math teaching. Such approaches allow teachers to utilize assets-based approaches to get to know their students “in ways that see them, know them, accept them, and sustain them so that they may positively transform their own lives and the lives of others” (Brinegar et al., pp. 338-339). Teaching an asset-orientation to students, families, schools, and communities is also a guiding principle of the Middle Grades Education program where Ashley and Kelsey receive(d) their training, skills intentionally imparted on preservice teachers through targeted reframing activities designed to combat deficit discourses.

¹ Pseudonym.

Ashley was therefore well prepared to understand the goals of and plan the curriculum for social justice math. In the next section, we describe the lessons she designed and taught in her practicum placement in 7th and 8th grade classrooms in a rural county in a small town in the southeastern US.

Implementation

Preservice teachers in the Middle Grades Education program are placed for an entire year in classrooms with mentor teachers in partnering districts in and around Sunnydale. Ashley was placed in Apple Tree County¹, located in a rural town, Crest Valley², about 45 miles from a major southeastern metropolitan area. Her mentor teacher’s instructional day was split between teaching 7th and 8th grade math, affording fantastic opportunities for Ashley to familiarize herself with the content in both grade levels. She began the school year with the students in her year-long practicum placement by distributing Google Forms surveys during the first week of school to get to know her students and the issues about which they cared in their local community, loosely adapted from an assigned reading in one of her middle grades cohort courses: Chapter 2 of Cushman and Rogers’ 2008 book, *Fires in the Middle School Bathroom: Advice for Teachers from Middle Schoolers*. From this information, she discerned that many students were passionate about key environmental issues in their community. Crest Valley is a rapidly expanding town, with new construction projects pockmarked across Apple Tree county. Students thus expressed concerns about trees being cut down to make room for new neighborhoods and shopping centers. There is also a large landfill located about a mile from the school where Ashley completed her practicum placements, close enough that Ashley and her students could see (and smell) it from their classroom window on clear and windy days. Because of this context, students were perhaps more attuned than they would otherwise be—in a different community more divorced from the impacts of waste disposal—to the effects of pollution.

Based on this feedback, and having been encouraged by Kelsey during various field instructor coaching conversations to try to include more real-world, justice oriented

² Pseudonym.

applications of the content in her curricular planning, Ashley therefore decided on a theme of environmental justice. An overview of the lessons she ultimately designed for her formal

observations in placement throughout the course of the 2022-2023 school year are outlined in Table 1.

Table 1

Ashley’s Environmental Justice Lessons

	Lesson 1: 7th grade	Lesson 2: 8th grade	Lesson 3: 7th grade
Topic	Local rules and regulations governing tree and bush planting in new construction developments.	Reducing plastic waste through eco-bricking for storage and reuse of single-use plastic bottles and bags.	Food deserts—areas where fresh, healthy foods are not easily accessible—in the local community.
Standard	Solve word problems leading to inequalities of the form $px + q > r$, where p , q and r are specific rational numbers.	Solve real-world and mathematical problems involving volume of cylinders, cones, and spheres.	Given the formulas for the area and circumference of a circle, use them to solve problems; give an informal derivation of the relationship between the circumference and area of a circle.
How did Ashley apply real-world environmental justice issues to this standard?	Apple Tree County law states that new neighborhoods must have at least 5 shrubs planted at their entrance, and that new parking lots must have one tree planted per 10 parking spaces. Students wrote and graphed inequalities to correspond to different new construction scenarios.	Eco-bricking is a way to cut down on the volume of single-use plastic waste in landfills by storing bags inside bottles. Students calculated the volume of space saved when eco-bricking, given that a single plastic soda bottle can hold 24 single-use plastic bags.	Using a scale map of Apple Tree county, students calculated the radius of circles to plot the number of grocery stores within a given walking and driving distance from their homes, as well as identifying whether or not those stores stocked fresh produce.

As the table shows, Ashley’s lessons served dual purposes: (1) introducing students to important environmental justice issues—legislation around tree and bush planting, eco-bricking, and food deserts—with direct impacts in/on the local community in Crest Valley, and (2) meaningful practice with core math concepts: inequalities, volume of cylinders, cones, and spheres, and radius of circles. Conceptualizing math through the frame of local justice issues “gave students a reason to do the math” (Harrison, 2015, p. 5), which accounts for the incredible levels of engagement and participation that Kelsey witnessed during field instructor observations of these lessons. If readers would like to see Ashley’s instructional plans in more detail, as well as the instructional materials she used to facilitate each lesson (PowerPoint presentations,

handouts, formative assessment questions, etc.), they are housed in the following shared drive:

[Ashley’s Environmental Justice Resources](#)

We share these freely with other middle grades educators, with the caveat that the first and most important aspect of teaching math for social justice is getting to know one’s students and their communities (Gutstein & Peterson, 2013). It may be inadvisable to directly *adopt* the lessons provided here, or resources in other texts on teaching math for social justice like Conway et al.’s 2022 book, *Middle School Mathematics Lessons to Explore, Understand, and Respond to Social Injustice*. Rather, we encourage fellow educators interested in beginning or continuing to teach math for social justice to use these and

similar resources to find ways to *adapt* justice-oriented content to the needs and interests of your own students and community.

Critical Reflection

Through this partnership, we witnessed several emerging themes around social justice teaching with young adolescents that have been recorded elsewhere. For instance, that the intentional inclusion of justice-oriented topics in the math curriculum leads to high levels of student engagement (Gutstein & Peterson, 2013; Harrison, 2015). In addition, that this type of vulnerable coaching relationship between preservice teachers and their university field instructors is difficult, bordering on impossible, unless teacher educators first model the types of pedagogical orientations that they expect from preservice teachers. As Williams (2019) writes, preservice teachers “will not be able to support young adolescents as critical thinkers if they do not learn to be critical thinkers themselves” (p. 290). It was important that Kelsey, alongside other graduate students and faculty members in the Middle Grades Education program, model and deliver the kind of teaching approaches and strategies that helped Ashley’s cohort of preservice teachers understand diversity; engage in critical conversations; and connect theory to practice while working with young adolescents.

There is, however, a rather large elephant in the room regarding this unit for environmental justice: it explicitly does not address issues of race, gender, sexuality, and a myriad of other equity issues that directly impact students in Crest Valley (though the lesson on food desserts introduced issues of social class inequity). This initial approach was an intentional decision, one that speaks specifically to the conflicting reality of justice work at the intersections of “our everyday material reality of living and working as researchers who must interact with participants, schools, grant agencies, etc.” (Childers et al., 2013, p. 512). The possibilities of social justice math teaching envisioned in conversations between Ashley and Kelsey felt incompatible with our positionalities as, respectively: (1) unlicensed and therefore highly vulnerable preservice teacher, and (2) graduate student researcher operating within the “white heteropatriarchal” (Ahmed, 2017, p. 91) norms of academic capitalism as it is practiced in the contemporary university system. Furthermore, given our cultural context in a politically conservative southeastern state that specifically

outlaws the teaching of ‘divisive concepts’, Kelsey felt that asking Ashley to delve into more ‘controversial’ topics would be unethical. Therefore, early on in her placement, Kelsey specifically counseled Ashley not to delve into issues of race and gender. Would teaching about race and gender result in the kind of community backlash that Ranschaert (2023) describes, one that might result in Ashley’s inability to ever obtain her teaching certificate in a conservative community like Sunnydale?

The problem with teaching for social justice in hostile political contexts, such as our own, is that a critical element of teaching for social justice in math is facilitating students’ abilities to “know their own histories to develop positive cultural and social identities” (Gutstein, 2006, p. 92). Only then can students see themselves as subjects capable of making change and thereby fulfill the ultimate goal of any social justice math curriculum: to empower them to take actions against injustice themselves (Gutstein). By declining to explicitly address issues of race and gender, we felt complicit with a system that “fails to ‘center’ [Black students] in the process of knowledge acquisition and to build on their cultural and community experience” (Tate, 2019, p. 35). In the pursuit of justice-oriented teaching, Love (2019b) differentiates between allies and co-conspirators: the former as being performative or self-glorifying and the latter being genuinely willing to put their privilege on the line in order for Black lives to matter. She writes, “If folx with privilege are not using their privilege to demand justice and advocate for dark folx and all their identities, then they are complicit in White rage or male rage and thus are condoning injustice, violence, and the educational survival complex” (Love, 2019a, p. 121). As previously stated, like the vast majority of the teaching workforce, we (the authors) are both cisgender, heteronormative White women. We thereby have privileges that we knew could—and should—put on the line in order to explicitly address other social justice topics in math.

Furthermore, while strengthening relationships with students over the course of an entire year together, Ashley realized that her students were eager to have time in shared classroom spaces to discuss issues of race together. Therefore, during her student teaching semester in spring 2023, Ashley decided to broach the topic of race in her curricular planning. The table below contains an overview of Ashley’s lesson on dot plots and the U.S. Census

Table 2

Lesson 4: 7th grade

Topic	The shifting definition of different racial categories in the U.S. over time as defined by the Census
Standard	Describe the impact that inserting or deleting a data point has on the mean and the median of a data set. Create data displays using a dot plot or box plot to examine this impact.
How did Ashley apply real-world environmental justice issues to this standard?	Ashley began the lesson by presenting students with the current racial categories as defined by the most recent Census (2020). Students compared these categories to those listed on the 1790 U.S. Census, as well as discussing where different U.S. citizens of North African and Middle Eastern ascent would identify (despite linguistic, religious, and ethnic diversity, they are all technically counted as White). She then provided students demographic information on the racial makeup of both teachers and students in Apple Tree county, which they charted on a dot plot. The lesson concluded with a class discussion on the implications of overrepresentation of White teachers, and underrepresentation of teachers of color compared to the student population in Apple Tree.

Ashley reported that students were able to ask questions about race and racism in this setting that they had previously felt were taboo, questions that surprised her despite knowing students well by that point in the school year. For example, several questions were simply about clarifying language that they “were allowed” to use around race. Clearly Ashley’s students had internalized the implicit messaging that race was not a subject that they “were allowed” to talk about in school. Though Kelsey was, admittedly, nervous about the potential for telephone calls from angry parents subsequent to this lesson, no such community backlash ensued. Ashley reported that her students “felt safe and supported”: that the lesson went beautifully and “students felt heard and really engaged in the lesson.”

Discussion

When reflecting on this partnership, we continue to have mixed feelings about our efforts to implement social justice topics in Ashley’s math planning. This was part of what pushed us to co-author the current manuscript on this partnership. Because although this was a powerful lesson, it was still only a single lesson over the course of an entire school year. Reflecting in hindsight, it has been helpful to understand our experiences in terms of Okun’s (2021) articulation of White supremacy culture (WSC), the dominant culture in the US which is

...inextricably linked to all the other oppressions—capitalism, sexism, class and gender oppression, ableism, ageism, Christian hegemony—these and more are all interconnected and intersected and stirred together in a toxic brew that is reflected in our devastation of the air and water and land and living beings we have and are destroying and disregarding in the name of profit and power. This brew is a cancer, a disease, an addiction, an affliction and it infects everything with and without our awareness.

The ways we navigate WSC, however, are not the same, varying considerably based on our race, class, gender, sexuality, and religion (Okun, 2021). One of the characteristics of White supremacy culture is a right to comfort, defined as “the internalization that I or we have a right to comfort, which means we cannot tolerate conflict, particularly open conflict.” With this framework in mind, was Kelsey’s reticence to have Ashley engage more freely and openly with a variety of different social justice topics throughout the school year simply a retreat to the comfort of Whiteness, an unwillingness to address ‘uncomfortable’ topics? Did this reticence arise out of a legitimate fear for the material intersections of doing equity work nested in inequitable systems? Certainly the specter of educators who have been fired for their efforts at social justice teaching—such as the aforementioned elementary teacher in Georgia, or Eric Gutstein himself in Chicago—loom large in the decision-making of an

educator with ethical responsibilities to protect students. Or, as Love (2019a/b) contends, do White people need to be more willing to put some of their privilege on the line in order for students of color to survive and thrive?

Like most things in life, there is probably an element of both/and in answering the questions posed here. Though we, the authors, have no grand conclusions to draw from this partnership, we can, in closing, attest to a few burgeoning understandings. First, as cisgender heterosexual White women, we would be remiss without also speaking to the importance of looking inward to examine and interrogate our biases and assumptions when teaching for social justice. Particularly for White educators, whose primary social identity risks going unnoticed since it is the default in U.S. society, it is imperative to “question [our] Whiteness, White supremacy, White emotions of guilt and shame, the craving for admiration, or the structures that maintain White power” (Love, 2019a, p. 117). This is a critical element of answering DeMink-Carthew et al.’s (2023) call for educators engaged specifically in racial justice work to “critically reflect on and disrupt [white supremacy culture]” (p. 34). They note three primary obstacles to middle grades educators conducting justice work in public schools: (1) a lack of antiracist policies in schools, (2) resistance from colleagues, and (3) self-doubt. This collaboration certainly echoed the last of these three, as we frequently oscillated between self-doubt that we were doing too much, potentially putting Ashley’s teaching certificate at risk, and doing too little, capitulating to conservative rhetoric and fearmongering and thereby allowing the perspectives of marginalized peoples to be silenced in Ashley’s classroom spaces. And although her mentor teacher in Apple Tree county was incredibly supportive of the partnership and all of Ashley’s planning, we can also bear witness to the lack of antiracist policies and procedures at Crest Valley Middle School. Second, through this partnership, we learned the importance of answering Okun (2021) and DeMink-Carthew et al.’s calls for justice-oriented individuals working in public schools to try to find fellow co-conspirators. Indeed, the relationship we built through this collaboration provided much needed moments of support and affirmation in neoliberal spaces of contemporary U.S. schools. Finally, that planning and implementing curricula for social justice in math is critical, particularly for young adolescents. Even in

divisive and hostile political contexts, as Ashley’s lessons on environmental justice and subsequently on the cultural constructedness of race demonstrate, there is typically always a place to start.

References

- Ahmed, S. (2017). *Living a feminist life*. Duke University Press.
- American Civil Liberties Union (2022, March 10). Defending our right to learn. *ACLU*. <https://www.aclu.org/news/free-speech/defending-our-right-to-learn>.
- Bishop, P., & Harrison, L. (2021). *The successful middle school: This we believe*. Association for Middle Level Education.
- Brinegar, K., Harrison, L., & Hurd, E. (2019). *Equity and cultural responsiveness in the middle grades*. Information Age Publishing.
- Childers, S.M., Rhee, J., & Daza, S.L. (2013). Promiscuous (use of) feminist methodologies: The dirty theory and messy practice of educational research beyond gender. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 26(5), 507-523.
- Conway, B.M., Id-Deen, L., Raygoza, M.C., Ruiz, A., Thaley, J.W., & Thanheiser, E. (2022). *Middle school Mathematics lessons to explore, understand, and respond to social injustice*. National Council of Teachers of Mathematics.
- Cushman, K., & Rogers, L. (2008). *Fires in the middle school bathroom: Advice for teachers from middle schoolers*. New Press.
- DeMink-Carthew, J., & Gonell, E. (2022). Lessons learned from teaching social justice education in sixth grade. *Middle School Journal*, November, 5-16.
- DeMink-Carthew, J., Smith, K.W., Burgess, W.K., Leonard, S.Y., Yoon, B., Andrews, P.G., Nagle, J., & Bishop, P. (2023).

- Navigating common challenges: Guidance for educators in racial justice work. *Middle School Journal*, 54(4), 25–36.
- Dennis, A. (2023, July 10). Unifying metro Atlanta school districts to navigate the divisive concepts law. *Saporta Report*. <https://saportareport.com/unifying-metro-atlanta-school-districts-to-navigate-the-divisive-concepts-law/thought-leadership/securing-atlantas-future/learn4life/>
- Diaz, J. (2022, March 28). Florida's governor signs controversial law opponents dubbed 'Don't Say Gay'. *NPR*. <https://www.npr.org/2022/03/28/1089221657/dont-say-gay-florida-desantis>
- Donovan, S. (2019, April 1). Documentary 'Below Baldwin' digs deeper into UGA, Athens' history with slavery. *The Red & Black*. https://www.redandblack.com/uganews/documentary-below-baldwin-digs-deeper-into-uga-athens-history-with-slavery/article_492588ca-5431-11e9-b55f-5f83963291bb.html
- Ellerbrock, C.R., & Vomvoridi-Ivanovic, E. (2019). A framework for responsive middle level mathematics teaching. *Equity and cultural responsiveness in the middle grades* (Brinegar, K., Harrison, L., & Hurd, E., Eds.). Information Age Publishers.
- Fortin, J. (2021, November 8). Critical race theory: A brief history. *New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/article/what-is-critical-race-theory.html>.
- Gutstein, E. (2006). *Reading and writing the world with mathematics: Toward a pedagogy for social justice*. Routledge.
- Gutstein, E., & Peterson, B. (2013). *Rethinking mathematics: Teaching social justice by the numbers* (2nd ed.). Rethinking Schools.
- Harrison, L. (2015). Teaching social justice through mathematics: A self-study of bridging theory to practice. *Middle Grades Review*, 1(1). <https://scholarworks.uvm.edu/mgreview/vol1/iss1/5>
- hooks, b. (2003). *Teaching community: A pedagogy of hope*. Routledge.
- Hughes, H., Moulton, M., & Andrews, G. (2016). Learning through crisis and paradox in justice-oriented teacher education. *Middle Grades Review*, 1(3). Article 4.
- Jacobs, J., & West Burns, R. (2021). *(Re)designing programs: A vision for equity-centered, clinically based teacher preparation*. Information Age Publishers.
- Jones, S., & Kurtz, M. (2023, July 13). Opinion: Politics, not policy, spurred Cobb's ouster of teacher. *Atlanta Journal Constitution*. <https://www.ajc.com/education/get-schooled-blog/opinion-politics-not-policy-spurred-cobbs-ouster-of-teacher/RT2ROQERAZHBLNKUCTLJNZC25I/>
- Love, B. (2019a). *We want to do more than survive: Abolitionist teaching and the pursuit of educational freedom*. Beacon Press.
- Love, B. (2019b). *Ally vs. co-conspirator: What it means to be an abolitionist teacher*. Lecture presented at We Want to Do More Than Survive. C-SPAN. <https://www.c-span.org/video/?c4844082/user-clip-ally-vs-conspirator-means-abolitionistteacher>
- Mawn, A. (2023, July 15). Athens transgender activists reflect on legislation restricting gender-affirming care. *The Red & Black*. https://www.redandblack.com/athensnews/athens-transgender-activists-reflect-on-legislation-restricting-gender-affirming-care/article_1a5df9ea-22b9-11ee-a9ee-27432fe17b52.html?mc_cid=e78a2a2f5d&mc_eid=297a720d64
- Nakajima, K., & Hanzhang, J. (2022, November 28). Bills targeting trans youth are growing more common– and radically reshaping lives. *NPR*. <https://www.npr.org/2022/11/28/1138396067/transgender-youth-bills-transports>

Okun, T. (n.d.). Characteristics of white supremacy culture. *White Supremacy Culture*.
<https://www.whitesupremacyculture.info/characteristics.html>

Ranschaert, R. (2023). When shutting the door won't do: Teaching with the specter of community backlash and the implications for teacher education. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 74(4), 371-382.

Ranschaert, R., & Murphy, A. (2020). Developing preservice teachers' critical consciousness and understanding of community contexts. *School-University Partnerships*, 13(3), 85-101.

Shockley, E.T., & Ellis, V.M. (2023). The perspectives and pedagogies of middle school social justice educators. *Middle School Journal*, 54(1), 3-13.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00940771.2022.2142004>

Spells, A., & Youd, C. (2022, March 11). Georgia state Senate passes bill targeting 'divisive concepts' in schools. *CNN*.
<https://www.cnn.com/2022/03/11/politics/georgia-state-senate-divisive-concept-school-bill/index.html>

Tate, W.F. (2013). Race, retrenchment, and the reform of school mathematics. In *Rethinking mathematics: Teaching social justice by the numbers* (2nd ed.) (Gutstein, E. & Peterson, B., Eds.), Rethinking Schools.

Williams, T. (2019). Preparing culturally responsive middle level educators to engage in critical conversations. In *Equity and cultural responsiveness in the middle grades* (Brinegar, K., Harrison, L., & Hurd, E., Eds.). Information Age Publishers

