

“They Always Make It Right. We Can Do That for Everybody”: Young Adolescents Considering (In)Justice When Reading

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Abstract

This paper draws on Bakhtin’s (1981) notions of discourse and ideological becoming to investigate how adolescents’ experiences with young adult literature and other texts might inform their thinking around issues of social justice. We engaged in a number of activities with the young adolescent participants: thought maps, illustrations of poignant scenes, written accounts of personal experiences, and focus group interviews. Using these activities as our data for this paper, we explain how the young adolescent participants called upon discourses of social justice to engage in the process of ideological becoming. Thus, the paper concludes that texts have the potential to affect students’ ways of thinking and being in profound ways.

INTRODUCTION

I think it’s more interesting when it’s subtle because you have to be able to understand and figure it out. At least for me, when I have to figure it out, that’s more exciting for me than when it’s just given to me. - Jamison

In this comment, Jamison, one of the young adolescents in our study, expressed his desire to read books that explored issues of justice in a subtle way. While he also expressed that he appreciates analyzing social (in)justice when reading texts that explicitly center social justice issues, Jamison articulated that he enjoys actively deconstructing a text to analyze how moments of social injustice occur in the plot. In choosing books for instructional purposes, teachers often do not choose texts with subtle messages. Instead, teachers might choose books where the plot explicitly centers issues of social justice or books that contain a message the teachers want to communicate. We contend that teachers are not intending to ignore the voices of their students when selecting texts about particular social justice issues. As former teachers ourselves, we often selected texts to read based on the system of privilege or oppression we intended to center. At the same time, we argue that reading texts that discuss these issues in various, justice-oriented ways is essential for young adolescents because our participants demonstrated an ability and inclination to consider issues of social justice when engaging with a variety of texts.

To situate this paper in the literature on young adolescents, we draw upon Bishop and Harrison’s (2021) foundational paper for the Association of Middle Level Education to demonstrate how young adolescents should be positioned with an asset-oriented perspective. Bishop and Harrison acknowledged that young adolescents think deeply about their identities; they critically consider “who they are in relation to their race, ethnicity, social class, gender, sexual orientation, religion, and other identities” (p. 3). Just like adults, young adolescents examine their identities as they navigate the world and develop their always-evolving sense of self. To consider how young adolescents develop their identities, we argue that research should acknowledge how many factors influence young adolescents’ beliefs and values—their ways of thinking and being in the world.

Scholars of adolescent literacy have articulated how literacy practices are a fundamental way adolescents make sense of their world and their identities (Blackburn et al., 2015; Choi & Sachs, 2017; Kelly, 2020; Kinloch et al., 2020; Meixner & Scupp, 2020). We agree with Hughes (2014) and Moje (2002) that additional literacy research is needed to center the voices of young adolescents, especially how they make connections between texts and their lived experiences of social (in)justice. Previous research about young adolescents’ literacies has indicated that youth are already inquisitive readers of justice-oriented, critical texts (Hasty et al., 2017), but existing research has not necessarily explored how young adolescents

grapple with issues of social justice while they are reading.

Despite a lack of research about how young adolescents grapple with social justice issues in texts, teachers are conscious of the need for literacy instruction to engage issues of social justice. Professional organizations have foregrounded the need for social justice pedagogy in their policies and position statements. For example, the National Council for Teachers of English (NCTE) aims to:

Support efforts by educators to teach about social injustice and discrimination in all its forms with regard to differences in race, ethnicity, culture, gender, gender expression, age, appearance, ability, national origin, language, spiritual belief, sexual orientation, socioeconomic circumstance, and environment. (2010)

In addition, prior research has demonstrated that justice-oriented literacy instruction is crucial and that teachers should consider selecting texts that *they* think will teach students about specific social justice issues and multiple perspectives (e.g., Mantle-Bromley & Foster, 2005; Wolk, 2009). For example, Wolk provided examples of texts that can spark a sense of social responsibility and called for teachers “to help young adults understand that between those covers is the world—past, present, and future—and the emotion and complexity of the human condition” (p. 672). We align ourselves with these researchers who articulate the need for justice-oriented pedagogy in literacy. At the same time, we provide our findings as an example of what might be made visible when researchers and teachers listen differently (Hughes-Decatur, 2012) to young adolescents about how they make sense of the world.

Here, we present a case study that involves two young adolescents’ responses to discourses of social (in)justice. Furthermore, we consider how these discourses might have contributed to their ideological becoming (Bakhtin, 1981). As such, our case study explores the following research question:

How do young adolescents consider and respond to discourses of social (in)justice in books and other texts?

Theoretical Framework

In this study, we drew upon Bakhtin’s (1981) notions of *discourse* and *ideological becoming* to investigate how students’ experiences with young adult literature and other texts might have informed their thinking and understanding regarding issues of social justice. Bakhtin described discourse as a collection of utterances, speaking to each other, situated in specific contexts. For Bakhtin, navigating competing discourses is a part of the process of ideological becoming. Freedman and Ball (2004) articulated that “ideological becoming refers to how we develop our way of viewing the world” (p. 5). In other words, as we live among various discourses, ideological becoming refers to the process by which we grapple with varying discourses to develop our own worldview. Everyone navigates this process, including young adolescents, because everyone is subject to competing discourses. Some of these discourses might foster justice-oriented thinking, others might reify normative thinking, and others might do both at the same time. Bakhtin’s explanation of authoritative and internally persuasive discourses helped us better understand the process of ideological becoming.

Bakhtin (1981) noted that authoritative discourses involve the “authoritativeness of tradition” and “generally acknowledged truths” (p. 344). Many authoritative discourses are produced and recirculated by religion, government, schools, and other dominant social institutions. Therefore, in this study, we interpreted colorblind, postracial, postfeminist, and meritocratic discourses to be examples of authoritative discourses, as these discourses are “connected with a past that is felt to be hierarchically higher” (p. 342). In other words, authoritative discourses have structured institutions, policies, culture, and interpersonal interactions over time. Internally persuasive discourses are “of decisive significance in the evolution of an individual consciousness” (p. 345). Compared to authoritative discourses, Bakhtin articulated that internally persuasive discourses maintain a different power: These discourses are not external to the individual, but they are the discourses people negotiate within themselves. They might be discourses individuals have produced for themselves that contradict existing authoritative discourses, or they might be authoritative discourses individuals have adopted and adapted as part of their own worldview. According to Bakhtin, both

authoritative and internally persuasive discourses must co-occur for meaning making, and thus ideological becoming, to take place. In our findings, we describe how our participants negotiated authoritative and internally persuasive discourses as they navigated their own ideological becoming.

Few studies have used Bakhtin's (1981) concept of ideological becoming to consider how youth draw on particular discourses to develop their own worldview. Clifton and Fecho (2018) considered ideological becoming to explain how an adolescent developed his own self in the midst of competing discourses. More specifically, they outlined how a transgender teen agentically called upon a variety of discourses to become another version of himself, noting that schools should create space for adolescents to craft versions of themselves. Thomas and Stornaiuolo (2016) discussed how young people who are not represented in texts continue to resist the dominant discourses found in those texts. More specifically, they demonstrated that young adolescents, when invited, drew upon internally persuasive discourses to reimagine and restore the narratives they heard and read. In this process, the young adolescents wrote narratives that reflected their identities and lived experiences. While these studies drew upon the concept of ideological becoming to discuss how adolescents develop themselves and their worldview, our study extended this work by demonstrating how texts can serve an important role in this process.

We recognize that books are not the only ways that students develop their understandings of the world. Although our study initially focused on young adult literature, we sought to honor the voices of the young adolescent participants who drew upon texts other than young adult literature, such as peer presentations, to make sense of social (in)justice. Furthermore, the process of ideological becoming is inherently social. In other words, people affect and are affected by the world around them (Bakhtin, 1981; Freedman & Ball, 2004). At times, the social world may be interactions with others; additionally, the social world might also be interactions with books and other texts. We relied on Freire's (1983) conception of *text* as anything that allows for "a kind of reading through which the self learns and changes" (p. 5).

Therefore, we examined how adolescents use young adult literature and other texts, including their personal experiences, to make sense of the world around them.

Methods

Our study was set in motion when a teacher we knew mentioned that she was interested in how her students were making sense of social justice issues, particularly when reading books in her language arts class. As former teachers ourselves, we were eager to explore this phenomenon with the teacher, so we began conducting this multiple-case study (Stake, 1995) in a public middle school (grades six through eight) in a suburban area of the southeastern US. Of the 1,089 students, 48% were White, 24% Black, and 22% Hispanic, with the remainder representing students of other races/ethnicities. Almost half of the students (approximately 42%) were identified as economically disadvantaged (U.S. Department of Education, 2015).

Of the 31 students in this teacher's seventh-grade language arts class, nine returned the consent and assent forms. During our preliminary analysis of the data from all nine students, we found Jamison's and Eric's (pseudonyms) individual cases to be unique because they discussed multiple issues of social justice. The other participants focused on one specific type of social injustice. Using the multiple-case study approach (Stake, 1995), we selected these two participants as the unique cases to be further explored individually and then comparatively.

While the boys' identities certainly influenced the data we collected from them, we recognize the importance of also acknowledging our own identities and how those influenced both our data collection and analysis. As former teachers and university researchers who were largely removed from the day-to-day happenings in the school, we recognize that we were outsiders in a position of authority, which influenced how much Jamison and Eric shared *and* what they chose to share with us. Additionally, we also recognize our position as White researchers analyzing the data of one Black participant and one White participant. For example, because the participants discussed racial (in)justice as an issue during the focus group, we find it important to foreground our own racial identities and note that our own lived

experiences as White influenced how we interpreted and analyzed these conversations. During our first review of the data process, our own Whiteness presumably prevented us from understanding how race may have affected the dynamics of the conversation between Author 1, Jamison, and Eric. However, because we did not explicitly ask the participants to share their own racialized experiences or how they felt in the focus group, we are unable to name exactly how these racial dynamics influenced the data. Regardless, it is important that we acknowledge that our identities affected Author 1's

conversation with the participants—and, then, our analysis of this conversation.

Data Collection

We collected data with the participants at school during their language arts class. We met with the students outside of the classroom to engage in several activities for data collection. We asked the participants to reflect on previous in-class activities, as well as educational moments they experienced outside of the classroom. We maintained an adaptable data collection process, as each step in the process informed the next.

Table 1

Data Collection Process

Who	Time	Activities and Data Collected
9 students	15 minutes	Initial Surveys
9 students	50 minutes	Social Justice Mapping Scene Sketch and Description
Teacher	90 minutes	Teacher Interview
4 small groups of 2 students each (with one group of 3)	20 minutes each	Focus Groups Author 1 completed focus groups with: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Jamison and Eric 2. Maggie, Jessica, and Liliana Author 2 completed focus groups with: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Talia and Oakleigh 2. Mandy and Andrea

Note: The teacher interview component of this project is not included in the IRB approval, so this interview data is not included; rather, we used the information to better understand the context of the participants' classroom and school

First, we administered a survey with open-ended questions in small groups to gather initial information about books that helped our participants think about social justice (see Appendix). After reading these survey responses together, we noted that we needed more information about the young adolescents' definitions of social justice and how books and other experiences influenced their conceptions. Next, we elicited information through the following activities: mapping students' notions of social justice; illustrating scenes from books that depicted instances of social justice; and writing personal accounts of their own

experiences with social justice. We then used the responses to these activities to create interview protocols for 30-minute focus groups of two to three students (see Appendix). When grouping the students, we sought the teacher's insight in an attempt to ensure that the students felt comfortable talking in their designated group. We audio-recorded these focus groups and transcribed the recordings at the conclusion of the study. Because we spent a limited amount of time with the young adolescents, we see this study as a preliminary exploration into further understanding of how texts might influence

young adolescents' ideological becoming, specifically in terms of social justice.

Data Analysis

At the conclusion of the study, we used thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to analyze Eric's and Jamison's data set. Each data set included open-ended survey responses, a social justice map, a scene sketch and description of a moment of social justice in a text, and the focus group transcript. We engaged in multiple rounds of analysis. During the first round of analysis, Author 1 reviewed Eric's data set, and Author 2 reviewed Jamison's data set. Before coding the data, we each read our own data set to become familiar with the data and note initial interpretations. After this initial review of the data, we began coding our own data sets. We kept Bakhtin's (1981) notion of ideological becoming in mind as we coded the data, looking for moments when the participants seemed to be grappling with internally persuasive and authoritative discourses related to social justice. In this process we created our own sets of codes based on the ideas in the data.

After our first round of coding, we reviewed each other's coded data sets to see if we agreed with each other's coding. Although we used different words to describe the respective data sets that we initially coded, we noticed that our codes for each data set included similar ideas. We then discussed the codes identified in both participants' data sets and the codes that were different between the two participants. During this process we organized the data into themes we recognized across the data. In the subsequent sections, we discuss our findings and the implications they have for teaching and future research.

Findings

Throughout our data analysis, we noticed that both participants were grappling with authoritative discourses alongside those that are internally persuasive. As our participants engaged in this process, they were ultimately engaging in the process of ideological becoming. While the data we collected suggests Jamison

and Eric engaged with a number of issues, we highlight below how they grappled with issues of social class, race, and gender. We conclude our findings by discussing how Jamison and Eric recognized their own agency in the pursuit of social justice.

Social Class

Meritocracy is a myth that pervades thinking around issues of justice. It maintains the false notion that people can achieve any desired degree of success if they work hard enough (Littler, 2017). Because one of the core purposes of education has been social mobility (Labaree, 1997), we consider meritocracy to be an authoritative discourse. Despite its prevalence, both participants discerned the flaws in this ideology as they discussed how some opportunities are limited by prejudice and discrimination.

In discussing *The Outsiders* (Hinton, 1967), both Jamison and Eric confronted meritocracy when describing the ways that some characters' success and acceptance are hindered by others in *The Outsiders* because of their appearance. We recognize that *The Outsiders* is not without criticism; however, this is one of the texts our participants chose to discuss with us. For example, when we asked the participants to illustrate a scene from *The Outsiders* that made them think about issues of social justice, both Jamison and Eric drew an interaction between members of two different gangs—the Socs and the Greasers—at a drive-in movie theater.

In their images, Jamison and Eric illustrated class differences through the relative sizes of different parts of their drawings. Jamison (Figure 1) represented class differences between the Socs and the Greasers by drawing a car next to the Socs and a smaller car next to the Greasers. Eric's drawing (Figure 2) included two stick figures standing apart from two smaller stick figures. In their explanations of these drawings (Figures 3 and 4), both Jamison and Eric noted how the scene depicts one group unfairly judging another group.

Figure 1

Jamison's Sketch

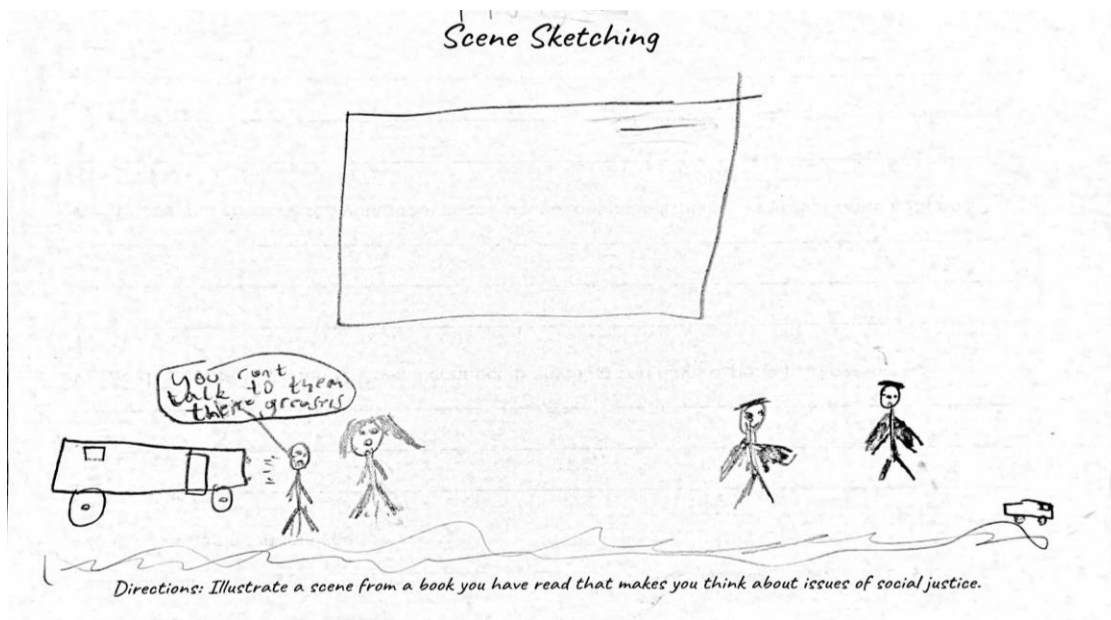


Figure 2

Eric's Sketch

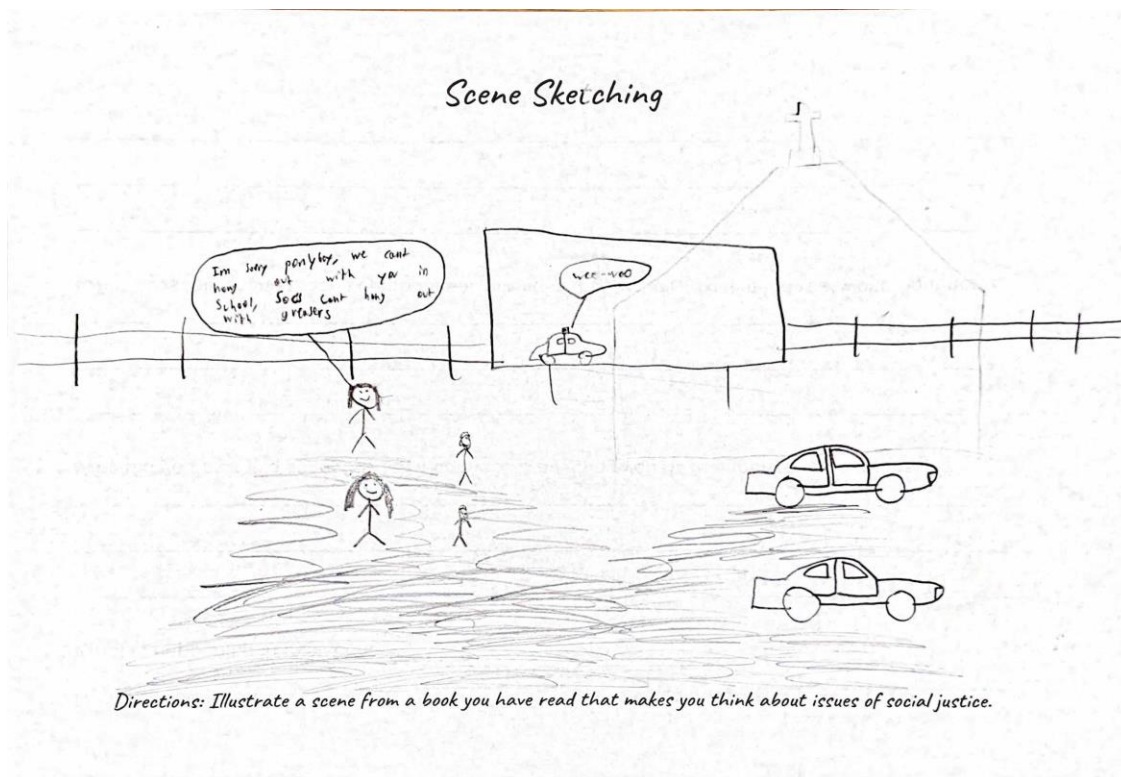


Figure 3

Jamison's Responses to Sketch

What is happening in this scene?

The Soc's wont talk to the greasers in the drive in

Why did you pick this scene? Does it connect to anything you have experienced personally?

because it shows how the greasers were treated

What does this scene teach you about social issues that actually exist in the real world right now?

people will discriminate against you depending on how you look

Figure 4

Eric's Responses to Sketch

What is happening in this scene?

The Soc's werent supprot to hang out with the greasers, because of how they would be judged for hanging out with greasers.

Why did you pick this scene? Does it connect to anything you have experienced personally?

I picked this scene because it shows how society judges people and doesnt condone it hanging out with greasers,

What does this scene teach you about social issues that actually exist in the real world right now?

people will treat you with certain people are Stereotype how you will act.

As Jamison and Eric discussed why some people judge others, they suggested that physical appearance is a signifier of a certain reputation and group association. In the interview, Jamison explained that the wealthier Socs discriminated against the Greasers, “because of what they wear or look like, but in the past, they did something or they had a bad reputation that stuck with them.” Jamison recognized that because of what some people “look like,” they have a reputation that sticks with them. He noted that some people are, in fact, afforded fewer opportunities, making it more difficult to overcome society’s unjust structures. Eric echoed similar notions by acknowledging that Ponyboy, a character in *The Outsiders*, was at a disadvantage regardless of how smart he was:

Well, I know that Ponyboy was very smart for his age, but he had to get homeschooled because sometimes when he had to take different classes with the Socs they wouldn’t treat him very well. He felt discriminated against in classes, even though he was very smart for his age...People interpreted him as dumb or below them like he didn’t deserve to be in the class with them.

Both Eric and Jamison acknowledged the difficulty of overcoming inequitable social structures and escaping stereotypes placed upon people by dominant discourses. In their discussion of *The Outsiders*, they drew upon internally persuasive discourses to challenge the authoritative discourse of meritocracy. In other words, the character of Ponyboy resonated with Eric and Jamison, and they described him as someone who was not able to achieve everything he desired because of structural, economic oppression, a significant force that affects many lives. Rather than dismissing this part of the novel and expecting Ponyboy to overcome these obstacles himself, they acknowledged that forces were working against him. In doing so, in their own words, Eric and Jamison highlighted the very myth of meritocracy.

Race

As noted in the previous section, Jamison and Eric asserted that someone’s physical appearance could dictate how they are treated. At the same time, Jamison and Eric also grappled with authoritative discourses of colorblindness and postraciality as they considered the internally persuasive discourses

about racism and sexism in the film *Hidden Figures* (Gigliotti et al., 2016). When Author 1 asked both participants to explain which concept on their social justice maps contributed most to their understanding of social justice, both Jamison and Eric described how *Hidden Figures* contributed to their understanding of unequal opportunities. Jamison, a Black participant, and Eric, a White participant, both pondered authoritative discourses about race when Author 1 asked them what aspects of the movie *Hidden Figures* were still relevant today.

Eric - I feel like a lot of the stuff doesn’t happen today, but some of the stuff kinda wasn’t covered but still suggested—like how she probably wasn’t paid as much is still relevant today—but I feel like there was a lot of issues about how she couldn’t commute the same way and having to walk a mile to go to the bathroom.

Author 1 - What about them being Black women?

Jamison - I don’t think that’s still relevant today. It could be or not that I know of—it’s not relevant today. I think that problem has been solved—the race part. But the part about women who don’t get equal pay, that’s partly still relevant today.

In the previous interview excerpt, Jamison and Eric seemed to be drawing a discourse of postraciality as they claimed that racism may no longer be a significant issue. However, by using words such as “a lot of the stuff” and “it could be” when talking about the presence of racism today, we suggest that Jamison and Eric maintained the possibility that they do not live in a postracial society. We also recognize that the racial dynamics of the focus group—one White researcher, one White participant, and one Black participant—might have influenced their responses. As such, we may be missing critical insights about how Jamison, as a young Black adolescent, engaged with issues of race in texts. Perhaps Jamison did not feel like this space with two other White people was a space where he could share his understandings and experiences of racism. Regardless, and unfortunately, this conversation proves that postracial discourses still exist as authoritative.

Gender

Another theme that emerged from our data was the discussion of gender where Jamison and Eric both expressed resistance to sexist messages that infiltrate various texts they have encountered. Jamison's and Eric's responses often affirmed one another's perspectives. In one of the more poignant moments of our study, Jamison recalled a moment when a classmate analyzed the dress code by highlighting more girl-specific rules to prove that the school required girls to follow more dress code rules than boys. His classmate's attempt to reveal unjust structures altered Jamison's way of thinking about the dress code—and thus yielded a more equitable, gender-sensitive ideology.

Author 1 - So here at school, what do you think or where do you think you hear the most about social justice? A particular class or a particular spot in the school? Or maybe particular people?

Eric - You hear a lot about it with girls getting dress coded.

Jamison - Yeah, dress code. The rules are stricter for girls than it is for boys. Or, um, it has more rules for girls.

Author 1 - What's an example of that? So what happens when...

Jamison - I don't exactly know because I didn't look over the girls' dress code, but like, I like grazed over it and saw a bunch of more rules than it was for boys. Like just the amount of words that was there for girls than it was for boys.

Author 1 - Oh, so literally in the book, there are more for the girls. Is there a girls' side and a boys' side?

Jamison - It's kinda like mixed but if like you read it like Rachel [a classmate]... She went through the book and highlighted the stuff that was for boys and the stuff that was aimed towards girls. And you could, like, tell that there was way more for girls.

Jamison's classmate presented information about gender discrimination in a way that served as an internally persuasive discourse for him. Certain discourses exist that aim to manage the ways in which girls "should" express their

gender and sexuality. Eric identified the dress code as a force that produces unjust consequences. Jamison further considered this by drawing upon his classmate's presentation of the dress code. Therefore, rather than perceiving the dress code as acceptable, the participants challenged the ways in which it discriminated against the girls in their class. They did not accept the discourse presented to them by the school (i.e., the authority), but their internally persuasive discourses allowed them to come to their own conclusion, to engage in their own ideological becoming.

From there, Eric continued to support Jamison's perspective and underscored gender inequality as a pertinent issue. Eric seemed attuned to gender inequality and discrimination when he discussed his preferences for adventure books:

I don't like the ones where it's just all boys...But I like the ones with an underdog, and normally, that's a girl because she's not considered an adventurer before. And she kinda has to fight to be able to do that.

Eric recognized that gendered norms exist regarding who can be "an adventurer," but his statement indicated that the individual girl as the "underdog" is responsible for attaining gender equality. In addition, he did not mention that it is problematic when the girl has to be the underdog rather than a strong protagonist figure. While Eric showed sophistication in applying his knowledge of gender equality to a text that is not overtly about gender equality, he did not necessarily demonstrate that he understood what gender equality might look like. Nonetheless, both Jamison and Eric displayed an evolving, progressive understanding of justice for girls and women.

An Unexpected Finding: Characteristics of Texts

Eric and Jamison taught us about the qualities in texts that excite their thinking about issues of social justice. In his initial survey responses, Eric indicated that more description in texts, particularly descriptions of characters' emotions, makes it easier for him to connect with the message of the text. This connection then fostered his understanding of issues of social justice. As we consider the data produced by both Jamison and Eric, a number of overlapping findings exist that address how books (and other texts) contribute to young adolescents'

ideological becoming. For one, both Jamison and Eric asserted that the books they are personally interested in are the ones that are most generative in helping them consider issues of justice. Some of the texts that both participants drew upon were *The Outsiders* (1967), *Hidden Figures* (2016), and what they referred to as “adventure books.” While the participants read *The Outsiders* with their teacher, they did not read the adventure books in class. Therefore, the participants negotiated discourses of social justice present in books and other texts as part of their ideological becoming both with *and* independent of their teacher.

Correspondingly, we suggest that young adolescents naturally and independently consider the complexity of issues of social justice. For example, when discussing the genre and style of typical adventure books, both Eric and Jamison asserted that they enjoy reading books that do not explicitly address issues of social justice, but they enjoy books that do so subtly so that they are provided an opportunity to engage with the issues critically rather than having the message communicated straightforwardly. We argue that young adolescents might find subtle messages more internally persuasive as they become invested in decoding the messages. In discussing adventure books and messages of social justice, Jamison stated, “I think it’s more interesting when it’s subtle because you have to be able to understand and figure it out. At least for me, when I have to figure it out, that’s more exciting for me than when it’s just given to me.”

Eric affirmed Jamison’s sentiment by saying, “I think it’s more interesting when it’s not told to me but when it has a story and plot along with it.” Based on the knowledge offered by Eric and Jamison, perhaps young adolescents do not always need books that communicate issues of social justice in explicit ways; they might also appreciate opportunities to engage with issues of social justice when they have the chance to make their own meaning.

Ideological Becoming and Agency

As Jamison and Eric engaged in the process of ideological becoming, various aspects of the data reveal how they exercise agency in relation to issues of justice—or at least consider how they might exercise it. Oftentimes, their agency was connected to a sense of hope. Both participants described how feelings of hope evoked a sense of

agency as they read a variety of texts. When asked how he felt reading about issues of social justice, Jamison said, “It does make me feel some kinda hope knowing that you can do a certain thing because a character did it, especially if it’s realistic fiction and the character did it in a realistic way. Then, it gives you hope that, if they can do it, I can do it, too.” Eric also explained how he recognizes characters exercising agency in adventure novels by noting, “Some of them are pushing back against someone who’s stronger or, like, more powerful and has a greater influence.” Additionally, he indicated that he often has an emotional and hopeful response to reading adventure books: “It kinda makes me feel hope because they always make it right for them and other people and it makes me feel like we can do that for everybody.” The hopeful emotion Jamison and Eric reported feeling while reading justice-oriented texts engendered a sense of agency because the characters helped them believe in their own ability to make a change.

Similarly, Jamison consistently acknowledged that systems of power are always at work by relying upon circulating authoritative discourses. By also acknowledging certain internally persuasive discourses, Jamison understood that he, and other young adolescents, have the agentic potential to challenge and subvert some of these dominant systems and discourses. He drew upon multiple examples during the interview to demonstrate how people who are marginalized by unjust systems of oppression manage to exercise agency and enact change. For example, as mentioned previously, Jamison discussed how the dress code at his school disproportionately discriminated against girls. In the same conversation, he recalled the moment when his classmate analyzed the dress code to prove to others how it disproportionately discriminates against girls. Not only did the classmate’s demonstration alter Jamison’s ideology, but in admiring her efforts, it also offered him an example for how he might exercise his own agency.

Ultimately, Jamison and Eric demonstrated how the current discourses regarding social justice found in texts contributed to their own ideological becoming while simultaneously evoking a sense of agency. Discourses of social justice are always circulating, often prompting an emotional response. As a result, our participants demonstrated how these emotions,

like hope, engender a sense of agency. Like Eric mentioned when discussing social justice in books, “They always make it right. We can do that for everybody.” The characters and their peers helped them believe in their own potential to make a change. Based on our findings, Jamison and Eric displayed just how young adolescents negotiate varying discourses as a means of discovering not only what they believe but also what they can do.

Implications

Based on our research, it is evident that reading, and not just reading books, can help students make sense of issues of social justice. The discourses in the books referenced by our participants served particular purposes in their own ideological becoming: Some of the discourses reinforced students’ notions of social justice while others challenged them. More specifically, these books and other texts assisted students in recognizing systems of power at work while helping students recognize their own agentic potential. Our data suggests that students are always already negotiating these circulating discourses as they engage in their own ideological becoming.

Takeaways for Teachers

Our data indicated that certain issues of social justice seem to be discussed in society and schools more than others. Both of the participants addressed issues of justice that may manifest in more visible ways, namely issues of racial and gender inequality and discrimination. To some extent, the participants noticed social class differences when discussing the appearance and tension between the upper-class and lower-class in *The Outsiders* (Hinton, 1967), but neither participant explicitly mentioned class as an issue of social justice. Our participants did not discuss “less visible” issues of social justice, such as religious oppression or heteronormativity. We suggest that our participants’ notions of social justice issues largely reflected the dominant discourses around social justice at the time. At the time of the data collection, the media was frequently reporting instances when the police murdered Black people and men sexually assaulted women. The media’s discussion of these two issues illustrates the pervasive nature of racial and gender oppression but less about their intersection. In our findings, the adolescent participants demonstrated an awareness of injustice; therefore, we suggest that teachers build on what

their students already know by dedicating time and attention to some of the “less visible” injustices, as well as attending to these with an intersectional approach (Collins & Bilge, 2016; Crenshaw, 1990). To heed these calls, we posit that teachers might intentionally explore issues that involve sexuality, social class, and religion, among others, to heighten students’ already existing awareness of some of these “less seen” issues. In addition, we encourage teachers to intentionally highlight how intersecting systems of oppression operate.

Additionally, teachers must acknowledge that young adolescent students have the potential and ability to consider issues of social justice. From the beginning we offered a quote from Jamison where he asserted how he enjoys reading books that offer a subtle message about issues of social justice. For young adolescents to consider these issues, the books do not need to explicitly discuss systems of privilege and oppression, although they can. Moreover, with regard to the texts, teachers should consider incorporating a variety of genres to address issues of social justice. As our data suggests, there is not one type of book or text that is more effective in contributing to young adolescents’ understandings of social justice than another. Because Eric and Jamison referenced a number of genres and approaches that supported them in their ideological becoming around social justice, teachers might aim to incorporate a variety of texts as part of their instruction and allow students to analyze them for issues of social injustice.

Similarly, teachers can create opportunities for students to be positioned as producers and contributors of knowledge. While certain pedagogical moments call for the teacher to guide students’ thinking around issues of justice, Eric and Jamison demonstrated that young adolescents are already thinking about these issues—independently of adults, by themselves, and with their friends. As such, teachers might consider creating space with adolescent students to engage and explore these issues. This might involve incorporating a variety of texts, but as our data indicated, it might also involve allowing students to learn from one another. Our participants valued what they learned and are learning from their peers about social justice. They drew upon knowledge produced by their peers as an equally valid source when considering issues of social justice. As teachers, we must recognize that our young adolescent

students can read and have conversations about issues of social justice—because many are doing so already.

CONCLUSION

Our study reminds us that, as adults, we should honor the voices of young adolescents by reflecting on our own agendas and ideas about working with adolescent students. To do this, we should aim to be wholly open to the direction provided by the unique and profound insight of young adolescents. Throughout the research process, we often had to acknowledge that our perceptions were different from that of our youth participants. Therefore, when engaging with young adolescents, it is important to withhold from acting on impetuous thoughts; rather, buying some time might allow for better understanding. Ultimately, working with young adolescents is beautifully convoluted work—work that necessitates a humble heart and open mind. Keeping these traits in mind will allow for more equitable engagement with young adolescents. From there, we might learn how to promote a more just world from the very knowledge produced by young adolescents.

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Appendix

Initial Survey Questions

1. What issues or problems exist in the world that you think are the most significant?
2. What books have you read that help you think about these issues?
3. Choose one of the books that you listed above, perhaps your favorite. Write that title here:_____
4. What is it that you like about this book? Please explain why.
5. How does this book make you feel when you read it?
6. Is there anything else you would like for us to know about books that help you think about injustice in the world around you?

Focus Group Interview Protocol

Give students papers (scene sketches and social justice maps) to look at for a couple of minutes first.

1. What comes to mind when you hear someone say “social justice?”
 1. What are examples of issues of social justice?
2. Out of all of your classes, which one do you feel like teaches you the most about issues of social justice?
 1. What is it about that class that helps you think about this?
3. How do you decide what books you want to read?
4. What genre or type of book helps you think most about issues of social justice? What is it about this genre that helps you think about these things?
5. Do books about social justice mostly align with how you view the world, or do these books challenge what you know about injustice in the world? How does the book either align or challenge?
 1. Have you read anything that makes you think differently about injustice in the world?
6. Looking back at your web about social justice: Which of these sources of where you learned about social justice have influenced you the most in how you think about issues of social justice? Why has this source influenced you more than others? Why_____ more than a book?
7. Have you ever read a book that makes you think you can make a change?
 1. How did that book make you feel?
8. What questions do you have about the issue that was presented in the book?
9. Is there anything else you would like to share about books and social justice?