



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute  
2021 Volume II: Developing Anti-Racist Curriculum and Pedagogy

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## **Revisiting Social Justice Research in the High School English Classroom**

Curriculum Unit 21.02.03  
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### **Background and Inspiration**

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This unit grew out of a desire to make research in my English classroom more actionable. Every year sophomore students at our local urban magnet high school participate in a year long Social Justice Project of their choice. At the beginning of this year, when I asked my students to define social justice I received a variety of honest answers. One sophomore identified social justice as a negative term, a concept people claim to achieve in posturing but fail in action. Some students struggled to identify the impact of social justice in their communities, stating that the issues such as racism and gun violence were real, but they were unfamiliar with any leaders in their communities who were actively seeking to change things for the better.

While performing research on social justice issues, I noticed that students felt the compulsory need to use formal procedures to verify knowledge. When one student leaned deeply into conducting interviews with rappers in the community to learn about representation in the industry, he at first mentioned that he didn't feel as though he was completing "real research". In fact, as his classmates dug through databases constantly reframing their search terms to stretch for new information, they looked at him questionably and doubted the validity of his project. Individuals in the class also felt tension from learning objectives that required students to research multiple perspectives. To achieve this objective, students researching topics such as police brutality were asked to research a perspective that dehumanized and challenged their and their community's lived experiences.

While the objectives of the original social justice research unit were well intentioned, they fell short in delivering on the most important aspects of social justice: the need for specific and localized action and a disruption of a colorblind ideology in research methods. The following unit seeks to identify and disrupt dominant narratives in social justice education and research. More importantly, the unit seeks to provide counter practices that make the ideals of social justice actionable by incorporating the methods of researchers from Latinx and Indigenous communities and tools for holding space for education through community discussion.

## **Rationale: Rethinking Social Justice Research in High School ELA**

Rethinking Social Justice Research in the High School ELA Classroom curricular unit focuses on a year long, student centered social justice research project in English II. The research based unit is framed using the concept of Community Cultural Wealth which highlights "an array of knowledges, skills, abilities and contacts possessed and used by Communities of Color to survive and resist racism and other forms of oppression" (Yosso, 50). Students engage in evaluation and critique of traditional ELA research methods and hold these methods in comparison to anti-racist and decolonial research methods to determine the scope and methodologies of their own research projects. By engaging in a variety of research methods to derive knowledge from academic and communal sources, students gain insight into Community Culture Wealth as well as generate their own contributions to the study and record of social justice issues in New Haven.

The unit begins with students generating inquiries into social justice issues present in their school and local community. Students are asked to consider their personal experiences, community members' experiences, local history, and current events to identify a cause or issue that they wish to study. The unit progresses to provide space for students to reflect on the value of personal experiences and community members' experiences in the classroom through personal narrative, storytelling, poetry, and oral history. The project scaffolds community connection further by discussing and engaging in collaboration and consultation with community leaders and experts in the social justice topics from the city. Students work through their insights by creating podcast, documentary, and seminar styled projects. Students work collaboratively in topic themed groups to discuss, design, and produce public facing projects with the purpose of returning their gained knowledge to their communities. By the end of the unit students will have gained knowledge that can be used to propose strategies for change in their communities or contribute to the organizations with which they collaborated. The unit will culminate in a Social Justice Symposium and online website where students will share their research with the school community and New Haven community.

## **Rationale: Social Justice Symposium Research Curriculum at HSC**

High School in the Community (HSC) is a small, magnet high school located in New Haven, Connecticut. Of 237 students enrolled at HSC, 87% are students of color and 75% of students come from low-income families. High School in the Community is ranked below the Connecticut state and national average in both math and English standardized testing. As a small school in a large city, HSC faces similar challenges as New Haven in the educational achievement gap and wealth gap present in the small state of Connecticut. High School in the Community's magnet theme is leadership, social justice, public policy and service, HSC takes pride in being a "small school for students who want to do big things". Through project based curriculum and mastery based grading policies, HSC strives to empower students to step up and make a positive impact on society while pursuing their individual educational goals.

In English II, sophomore students study a year-long enduring theme of social justice. The Social Justice Symposium asks students to select and then research a social justice issue that concerns them, synthesizing their work into a proposal for making a positive change. At the culminating event, sophomore students invite community members to discuss the real life actions that, based on their research, students recommend to address the problem. At its core the Social Justice Symposium is meant to encourage students to inquire into and challenge the conditions that create social injustice in the local and national community and share solutions with school and community leaders. The implementation of the Revisioning Social Justice Research unit works to ensure that the ideals of social justice are researched and upheld. Social justice works to deconstruct and repair the conditions of those who are most impacted by injustice and must be approached

with an anti-racist framework.

### **Rationale: Embracing Anti-Racist Research Methods**

The instruction of traditional academic methods of research in secondary English curriculum seeks to introduce students to the basics of obtaining knowledge, information, and data. Research operates within the supposed context of “objectivity” that is taught often without a close critique or acknowledgment of implicit biases. Students are taught research methods such as the “C.R.A.P. Test” to evaluate credibility, reliability, authority, and purpose without being taught to question why the use of such techniques is practiced. Instruction on research methods also places emphasis on academic and peer reviewed knowledge, often without acknowledgement of sources of communal knowledge or research methods. In addition, ELA educators may also be complicit in advancing the need for understanding of opposing viewpoints or ideologies. Enforcing a dichotomous perspective on topics, such as Black Lives Matter, reinforces a white supremacist narrative that favors traditional and outdated research methods more heavily than the lives and experiences of students. When requiring students to research opposing viewpoints for the sole purpose of research procedure, without considering a student's lived experience or systemic factors, educators adhere to implicit racial hierarchies perpetuated in academia.

Focusing on the use of academic research methods and acknowledging academic institutions and educational organizations as the only sources of knowledge are innately forms of gate-keeping what constitutes knowledge. Western academic research methods were derived using models that upheld white supremacist values and continue to inform academic practices. The legacy of this is most apparent in the continuing promotion of the fallacy of colorblindness and objectivity. As researchers Crenshaw, Harris, HoSang, and Lipsitz note, “Behind the colorblind facade of the existing disciplines is the historical role that knowledge production has played in creating and fortifying racial projects ranging from slavery and segregation to imperialism and genocide. Historically situated against the backdrop, colorblindness thus becomes a series of moves and investments that conceal the fingerprints of the university in constructing the very conditions that colorblind frameworks refuse to name ” (5). Traditional academic methods of research in secondary English curriculum carry racist implications because they rely upon the basics of colorblindness.

Recognition of racial hierarchies in academia and knowledge production is necessary when teaching young people to inquire into the social injustices present in their lives. It is not enough to simply point at injustice without critically dissecting the systemic roots of the issues that are present in their lives. As researcher and educator Milton Reynolds states in his theory of Conceptual Impoverishment, “[individuals are predisposed to] patter[s] of learned outcomes that distorts the way people understand and make meaning of the world they inhabit. Denied access to specific information, students formulate belief systems that fail to account for the significant role race plays in structuring opportunities and outcomes” (354). Educators that do not recognize the racialized history of academic research lead students to engage blindly in systemic practices that perpetuate racial hierarchies. Educators also fail to account for histories of numerous systemic injustices that directly impact student lived experiences. Failure to view systemic injustice makes efforts to engage in social justice action seem well intentioned but ultimately ineffective.

When upholding traditional research methods instead of Community Cultural Wealth and Indigenous research methods, educators create an environment that blindly upholds the biases of white supremacy and undervalues the experiences and knowledge community contributes to the understanding of social justice topics. As an anti-racist English Language Arts educator it is necessary for me to confront the way in which ELA has operated without questioning the traditional frameworks of research and the sources curriculum

values. It is my goal to highlight research methods that are collective, community based, and acknowledge the value each experience contributes to the understanding of social justice issues.

## Part I: Orienting Social Justice in English Language Arts

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### Essential Questions

What is Social Justice?

What is the connection between Social Justice and Critical Race Theory?

Who are our community leaders in social justice?

How can we further enact/continue the work of social justice leaders?

### Content: Performative Social Justice Education

The popularity of social justice thematic studies within high school curriculum has increased as a way to reflect and connect the classroom with issues of injustice and civil unrest present in modern day society and history. English and History teachers have found the theme of social justice a way to engage students civically, make connections between curriculum and current events, and foster opportunities for students to develop empathy. The premise of teaching social justice can have good intentions, but social justice taught within the confines of the colorblind classroom cannot claim to work towards such initiatives. As lawyer, researcher, and founding Critical Race Theorist, Kimberle Crenshaw states, “[There is] profound contradiction between abstract American ideals of equality divorced from social reality and the messier story of how racial power is constituted and reproduced through colorblind tropes and stealth performances” (Crenshaw et al, xi). Educators design social justice curriculum that promotes equality and fairness without critiquing the racial historical roots of said injustices and present legacies.

While a performative approach to social justice education addresses diversity in hopes of overcoming difference, the approach fails to grapple with the implications of institutional racial injustice. As researchers Williamson, Rhodes, and Michael Dunson point out, “Tension between a belief in assimilation and the ability of individuals to climb the meritocratic ladder and the belief in a respect for cultural and linguistic differences and a flattening of the racial, ethnic, and linguistic hierarchy has existed since the start of the common school system” (195). In this context, educators believed that cultural and linguistic integrity and maintenance form the basis of social justice and that collective rather than individual advancement was the proper marker for gauging success (197). Teachers who teach social justice without acknowledgment of racial historical frameworks are susceptible to perpetuating dominant roles and structures. White teachers teaching social justice issues without confronting the role of whiteness perpetuate a colorblind perspective by working towards a sense of equality that does not reckon with the educational, economic, and political structures that have led to present states of inequality to begin with. Teachers who do not confront their own biases and privileges may also fall into gatekeeping roles, imagining themselves as keepers of knowledge who are exposing and awakening students to “real world issues”. In doing so, educators fail to recognize young peoples’ lives and experiences. Teachers may further perpetuate the harm of social injustice by not recognizing the role race has played in many of America’s social issues, issues their young people are

currently independently reckoning with themselves, often without language or knowledge to fully articulate the way their experiences have been impacted by systemic oppression or cultural erasure from the classroom. Through teaching with the practice of exposure alone, teachers may also leave students feeling disillusioned and hopeless about the limitations or possibilities of social change and their ability to survive within a system, let alone see their role as an agent for change.

### **Content: Social Justice is Critical Race Theory**

To work towards ensuring social justice is addressed in the classroom with the intention of following through on its ideals, teachers can embrace more critical social justice frameworks. CRT places race at the center of analyses and discussions; challenges meritocracy, objectivity, neutrality, and ahistoricism; emphasizes experiential knowledge (particularly of People of Color); and supports interdisciplinarity (Viesca, Torres, Barnat, Piazza, 100). CRT's defined, yet open tenets operate like the initiatives of social justice but create clear and actionable processes that work towards exposing and uprooting injustice in a way that a colorblind approach to social justice falls short in clarifying. Social justice educators working with CRT understand the core idea that race is a social construct, and that racism is a product of individual bias or prejudice, but also something that is embedded in legal systems and policies (Sawchuk, 1). Working under the tenets of CRT, educators take open stances that challenge the majoritarian stories that minimize race, position difference as deficit, and endorse meritocracy as appropriate.

CRT researchers and educators can redefine social justice in the context of CRT and create a framework of methodologies that can be used to implement CRT into the classroom. Social justice researchers emphasize pedagogy oriented toward social justice challenges traditional notions of schooling by viewing the teacher as an agent of social change who prepares students to critique dominant social structures and the myths that maintain them (Viesca, Torres, Barnatt, Piazza, 98). This indicates the teacher's role as an active participant and learner, and decentralizes the concept of the educator as the center of knowledge. Reimagining of social justice education promotes teaching that moves beyond knowledge transfer and embraces education as an important vehicle in the development of critically thoughtful and compassionate democratic citizens capable of examining and disrupting current inequities (Viesca, Torres, Barnatt, Piazza, 99). Upholding the belief that competent social justice educators affirm students' cultural differences as assets, a teacher's goal is to design instruction that builds on students' experiential knowledge, and challenges societal inequities through leadership, advocacy, and organizing. Simple awareness of marginalization and social justice issues does not begin to scratch the surface, as teachers must enact a sense of responsibility for transcending current norms of power and privilege based on racialized hierarchies of gender, class, ability, language, and systems of oppression and marginalization (Viesca, Torres, Barnatt, Piazza, 99).

### **Activity Orienting Social Justice**

Activity: Identifying Social Justice, CRT, and organizations in the community in this activity students are asked to write down their own understanding of "Social Justice". Encourage students who are unfamiliar with the term to define each word separately. Students who are familiar with the term may write connotations and associations they have with the term. Have each student write a word or phrase from their individual reflection on a piece of communal chart paper titled Social Justice. After each student adds to the chart, ask the class to create a collective definition for Social Justice under the term.

Next, have students perform a search for Critical Race Theory using a public database. Results may bring up current attacks on CRT and researchers and activists who are currently pushing back on these attacks. Work with students to establish a classroom definition of CRT and write the definition on a second piece of chart

paper. Have students write associated terms and examples they found in their search. Discuss with the class ways in which the items they identified on the CRT chart might intersect, connect, or lead to another social injustice.

Individually reflect on the listed items and ask students to select 1-2 items they have the closest connection or interest in. Students will then be asked to gather in groups based on a common item they selected. With their group, students will use the internet to search for local organizations that are working to address this issue. Students will be asked to create a chart paper and include the title of their item, 1 or more organizations that are working towards addressing this issue, and 2-3 ways in which the organization, collective, or group have acted to address the issue.

All charts should be hung in your collective space, referenced throughout the unit, and added to as students learn more about Social Justice, CRT, and local organizations.

## **Part II: Disrupting Dominant Research by Empowering Community Knowledge**

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### **Essential Questions**

Who are sources of knowledge in our community?

What do researchers neglect when performing dominant research approaches?

How do anti-racist research practices give insight into new knowledge?

### **Content: Dominant Secondary Education Research Methods**

The instruction of traditional academic methods of research in secondary English curriculum seeks to introduce students to the basics of obtaining, synthesizing, and implementing knowledge, information, and data. Current practice primarily centers around the ability to access and navigate peer reviewed databases and analyze credible authority. Students are taught technology research methods such as the “C.R.A.P. Test” to evaluate credibility, reliability, authority, and purpose (Beestrum & Orenic, 31). These skills are helpful to ascertaining the relevance and value of a source to one’s research. However, with heavy emphasis on published and academic sources, teachers lead students into a dominant belief that other sources of knowledge are not credible or worthy. In addition, “research is also regarded as being the domain of experts who have advanced educational qualifications and have access to highly specialized language and skills. Communities carrying out what they may regard as a very humble little project are reluctant to name it as such research in case it provokes the scorn and outrage of ‘real’ researchers...” (Sefa, 137). Questions such as what makes a source credible or what qualifications an author must hold to claim authority on a subject are not always addressed and further the notion that community research is invalid.

Research also operates within the supposed context of objectivity. This is commonly practiced when identifying bias with the ultimate goal of reaching a neutral or non-defiant position on a topic. Knowledge production becomes hierarchical with formal knowledge sanctioned by academic researchers as most valuable and viewed as ‘objective’ whereas other sources are viewed as biased and invalid. It is commonly noted,

“Most research methodologies assume that the researcher is an outsider able to observe without being implicated in the scene. This is related to positivism and the notions of objectivity and neutrality” (Sefa, 137). Academic research implies that only those who are unbiased and unaffiliated with a subject may truly reach the notion of objectivity can carry true authority. The concept fails to acknowledge the colorblind history of academia and furthermore places emphasis on the technical approach. In doing so, “formal education bears a large part of the responsibility for our present [environmental, economic, and public health] crisis because it produces morally sterile technicians who have more know-how than know-why” (Boggs, 148). This is further perpetuated in a traditional secondary education model that relies heavily on a top down approach to knowledge acquisition. As researcher Grace Lee Boggs notes, “The factory-type school is based on the profoundly antidemocratic belief that only experts are capable of creating knowledge, which teachers then deliver in the form of information and students give back tests” (142). The traditional school system disenfranchises students from engaging in research that is real, meaningful, and actionable as it intentionally upholds a hierarchy that directly undermines student insight, creativity, and research.

Historically, western academic research methods were derived using models that upheld white supremacist values. And these traditions of formal research “have been trained and socialized into ways of thinking, of defining and of making sense of known and unknown” (Sefa, 124). The legacy of these traditions is most apparent in the continuing promotion of the fallacy of colorblindness and a neutrality of objectivity. Traditional academic methods of research in secondary English curriculum are implicitly racist because they rely upon the basics of a colorblind viewpoint as well as practices that historically originated in white supremacy. When upholding traditional research methods, educators create an environment that blindly upholds the biases of white supremacy and undervalues the experiences and knowledge community contributes to the understanding of social justice topics.

## **Content: Anti-Racist Research Models and Methods**

### **Anti-Racist Research**

Anti-racist research seeks to provide counter methodologies of research that have been part of knowledge acquisition practices in traditional and local communities that are distinct from the university. In anti-racist research, researchers play an active role in situating themselves in relation to topics of study and are invited to pull upon their own experiences and culture to inform their understanding. As Sefa states, “Anti-racist research is not about becoming located or situated in another’s lived experiences but is rather an opportunity for the researcher to critically engage his or her own experience as part of the knowledge search” (Sefa, 4). Instead of the researcher playing a detached role, those seeking to obtain new insights must first acknowledge their relationship and standpoint of inquiry. Anti-racist research according to Sefa also requires “recognition of the contributions of the subjects of study to shaping theory, practice, and knowledge” (Sefa, 6). In doing so, subjects of study take ownership of their history and contributions to knowledge production. Local subjects are seeking to have a real and legitimate voice in the interpretation and interpretive process of social research. They are not simply the sources of raw data. They want to be able to create, tell, analyze, and interpret their own stories and experiences, and not simply have researchers assume the ethnographic, interpretive, and discursive authority (Sefa, 7).

### **Community Cultural Wealth**

Anti-racist research empowers underrepresented communities that have been historically mistreated, misrepresented, and at times erased by academic research by identifying and highlighting the sources of knowledge and power within these communities. Modeled after the work of Paulo Friere’s pedagogy of

teaching problem posing approach, where students and educators share in the co-creation of knowledge production, Tara Yosso along with parents of chicano students developed the framework of community cultural wealth to identify sources of knowledge and power within in their socioeconomically disadvantaged community (Yosso, 50). Working together, Yosso and families adapted Friere’s methodology of 1) Naming and identifying a problem, 2) Analyzing causes of problem, 3) Finding solutions to the problem, and 4) Reflecting on the process to develop their framework. The premise follows the concept of economic capital (income, wages, salary) that equates to wealth (accumulated assets, resources) but acknowledges that communities have sources of capital beyond that of economic power.

Community Cultural Wealth comprises six main subjections in which communities find power and mobility.

- Aspirational capital is the ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future even when facing barriers.
- Linguistic capital is the intellectual and social skills learned through communication experiences in more than one language or style.
- Navigational capital is the skill of maneuvering through social institutions.
- Social capital includes the networks of people and community resources.
- Familial capital is the cultural knowledges nurtured among familia (kin) that carry a sense of community history, memory, and cultural intuition.
- Resistant capital is the knowledges and skills cultivated through behavior that challenges equality.

Community cultural wealth identifies sources of knowledge and skill sets that are derived directly from insider knowledge. When applied to the practice of anti-racist research, community cultural wealth identifies ways in which subjects of study are able to identify and wield power that is unique to their individual community. Understanding the strength of knowledge within the community allows for community members to control their narrative and have an understanding of self-knowledge when confronted by dominant narratives or understandings.

### **Indigenous Practices**

In disrupting traditional methods of research, it is necessary to acknowledge the methods of knowing, documenting, and observing the world that were historically invalidated and dehumanized by western academics. The legacy of the development of academic research in fields such as social sciences is in many ways directly tied to the impact of colonization on Indigenous peoples globally. In *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, scholar, professor, and leader in Indigenous education, Linda Tuhiwai Smith details the first encounters of Europeans with Maori people as “ones in which Indigenous people were observed as research objects” (81). Early documentation range from travel journals that document the otherness of Indigenous life to researchers whose “interest was of a more ‘scientific’ nature could be regarded as far more dangerous in that they had theories to prove, evidence and data to gather and specific languages by which they could classify and describe the Indigenous world” (82). Accounts of such studies include measuring skulls to prove inferior intelligence, ‘discovering’ and extracting precious ‘artifacts’, and dismantling houses to ship to Europe (83). Even researchers who engaged in developing relationships with the Indigenous communities that facilitated research were still situated as an observer. They implicitly imposed perspective in their accounts, were unable to fully understand Indigenous knowledge that existed within a much wider cultural framework, and took part in a colonial system that urged to civilize and assimilate Indigenous people. Though the legacies of those who reached ‘scientific developments’ live on the names of informants and the rest of their knowledge often continue to remain unacknowledged and erased in dominant historical narratives (85).



Despite the dominant narrative of academic research, Indigenous communities have methods of documentation, preservation, and research that embrace the relationship of researcher to community in effort to reclaim the narrative and to empower community. According to Tuhiwai Smith, Indigenous communities act as part of the self-determination agenda. She states, Self-determination in a research agenda becomes something more than a political goal. It becomes a goal of social justice which is expressed through and across a wide range of psychological, social, cultural and economic terrains. It necessarily involves the processes of transformation, of decolonization, of healing and of mobilization as peoples" (116). Indigenous research includes the practice of deliberately naming the world according to an Indigenous worldview, by bridging to the center and privileging Indigenous values, attitudes and practices rather than disguising them within Westernized labels (125). Practices also include community action projects and work performed within spaces gained within institutions by Indigenous research centers, which intersect and inform each other. While practices of preserving culture have endured long before a recent movement in the 1960s and that continues to today focus on the reclamation of Indigenous identity through research.

In contrast to Eurocentric practices, Indigenous research methods draw upon connection to communal identity. Community action research is a collaborative approach to inquiry or investigation that provides people with the means to make systemic action to resolve specific problems. Working within this context people can reflect on their own lives, have questions and priorities of their own, have skills and sensitivities which can enhance (or undermine) any community-based projects (227). In many projects the process is far more important than the outcome. Processes are expected to be respectful, to enable people, to heal and to educate: lead one small step toward self-determination (228). Examples of Community Action Projects (143) include: Claiming, Testimonials, Storytelling, Connection, Envisioning, and more that emphasizes present and past communal connections.

Insider researchers need to build particular sorts of research-based support systems and relationships with their communities. They need to be skilled at defining clear research goals and 'lines of relating' which are specific to the project and somewhat different from their own family networks. This can be problematic as they may arrive at an issue believing they fully understand nuances if they lived it they know it, and believe the outcome should validate their experience. Tuhiwai Smith warns that researchers who assume that their own experience is all that is required is dangerous and may lead to unsettling one's beliefs, values, relationships and the knowledge of different histories (139). This is an important concept to explore with youth as they learn to connect with as well as expand their understanding of their personal and communal identities and the social justice issues they face.

### **Activities to Interrogate the Dominant Research and Empower Community Knowledge**

Activity: Critical review of the C.R.A.P. Test

In this activity, students will each be given a copy of the C.R.A.P. Test (Beestrum & Orenic, 2008). As a class we will go over each section of the test, taking pause to use a color marker to annotate. First annotations should take note of key terms and questions. We will discuss each section of the test to highlight main points and address areas of confusion. Before our second read through, I will ask students to consider what assumptions the test is making and what type of knowledge the test does not account for. We will then read through each section, using our second marker to identify areas where the test is confining, limiting, or shuts out certain voices and sources of knowledge. At the end we will brainstorm a list of types of research sources the test would be helpful for and a list of sources that could also be helpful to our research but is not represented in the C.R.A.P. Test.

Activity: Interview a source from your communal cultural wealth

Community Cultural Wealth includes the sources of power and knowledge that each individual has access to through proximity to their family, culture, community, and beyond. In this activity, students will first view the six main subjections: Aspirational capital, Linguistic capital, Navigational capital, Social capital, Familial capital, and Resistant capital. Students will read through examples of each capital, circling the examples that are most present in their lives. Students will be asked to consider an individual who they note as someone who is part of their community cultural wealth. Students will develop interview questions for this individual in relationship to the social justice topic that they are wishing to research. Before conducting and sharing interviews, students will notify their interviewees about the purpose and audience of the interview. Students will record, either by device or in writing, a 3 minute or longer interview. Interviews will first be shared in small groups with classmates with similar topics allowing for groups to make connections or discuss different perspectives. With consent, interviews may be added to our class website.

Activity: Write a Personal Narrative

Indigenous researchers acknowledge and place priority on the testimonials and storytelling that is imbedded into their culture and community. In this activity, students will be asked to write a personal narrative that tells a story or reflects on a moment in which they experienced or witnessed the social injustice they are researching. Students will be asked to record their narrative through writing but may incorporate other methods of documentation such as photography, art, or video. The objective of the activity is to have students acknowledge their own experiences as sources of knowledge and possible research material. It is important that students are aware that they will be sharing their work with the class, but can make omissions if needed. Work will be shared during a quiet gallery walk where students will leave sticky note comments. Narratives will also be read and shared in small groups related by topic. Personal narratives may also be shared on our collective website.

## **Part III: Engaging Community Through Dialogue**

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### **Essential Questions**

How can I use language to engage the community in discussion of social justice issues?

How can we use language to enact and initiate social justice?

How can I use the Courageous Conversation compass to engage different perspectives?

As a white teacher navigating conversations addressing the historical and contemporary impact of race and social justice in a classroom of primarily Black and brown students, I need to not only be aware of the frameworks I teach but also convey and create space for racially conscious learning. Before engaging students in conversations about race, that students may inevitably respond to in a diverse spectrum of reactions, I must first ensure that my class and I, myself are prepared to engage in conversation. Racial equity leaders and educators turn to protocol and structures to facilitate conversation.

Glenn Singleton's Courageous Conversations protocol acknowledges the ways in which individuals arrive to

participate in racially centered conversations and provides support for navigating individual and group responses. Singleton's framework includes the use of user-friendly tools, such as the Courageous Conversation Compass. The compass depicts four quadrants indicating four ways in which one may enter into conversation: intellectually, relationally, emotionally, and morally (Singleton, 29). Isolating the ways one may enter into a conversation before engaging in the content asks participants to first acknowledge their own response patterns as well as serves as a reminder to the different ways in which individuals may respond when confronted with the racial injustices that underlie a colorblind curriculum and perspective.

Singleton also outlines six main conditions for engaging in racially positive conversation that begin with the need to establish a racial context that is personal, local, and immediate; isolate race while acknowledging the broader scope of diversity and variety of factors and conditions that contribute to a racialized problem; develop understanding of race as a social/political construction of knowledge; and engage multiple racial perspectives to surface critical understanding. The conditions evolve to include monitoring the parameters of the conversation by being explicit and intentional about the number of participants, prompts for discussion, and time allotted for listening, speaking, and reflecting; establishing agreement around a contemporary working definition of race, one that is clearly differentiated from ethnicity and nationality; and examining the presence and role of Whiteness and its impact on the conversation and problem being addressed. (Singleton, pg 28)

Singleton's framework responds to the need to uproot colorblind pedagogy in curriculum, builds upon the work of Critical Race Theory, and answers the call for an accurate portrayal of history. The work of racial equity leaders such as Singleton also allows classroom educators to first acknowledge the social and emotional response of students before engaging in racially charged conversations and curriculum. By practicing protocol, a classroom can progress in normalizing conversations that seek to uproot dominant cultural narratives and practices.

Milton Reynolds similarly acknowledges the role racial conversations can play in impacting the emotions and well being of a group. Reynolds states, "racial stressors such as engaging openly about issues of difference often result in defensive behaviors... Teachers' primary role as arbiter of classroom norms necessitates they develop the ability to navigate such conversations" (Reynolds, 366). Milton offers methodologies for navigating racially charged conversations such as emphasizing deep listening, inquiry over advocacy, building upon each other's thoughts, and providing structure to speaking roles. Milton also urges for expanding understanding of content by building on the shared knowledge of the group and democratizing voice, so that no one voice or perspective dominates the exchange. In addition to the need for structured listening and speaking opportunities, also help participants learn to hold dissonance that might otherwise be mitigated by speaking over, misdirecting the conversation, or challenging those surfacing alternative viewpoints.

While Singleton's and Reynold's work seek to better provide frameworks for entering into racially charged dialogues and conversations, both also provide a way for researchers to improve their outreach in the communities where they are conducting their learning. Using their framework, researchers can better understand how they may enter into a topic and may bring their personal understandings and emotions into their work. Researchers may also use social and emotional knowledge to better communicate their findings to a larger audience by understanding the ways in which individuals in an audience may respond to social justice or CRT based research topics.

### ***Activities to Engage Community Through Dialogue***

### **Activity: Understanding and engaging audience through the Courageous Conversation Compass**

The Courageous Conversation Compass is a tool created for individuals in the community to assess how they respond and enter into a racially charged conversation. The tool can also be used to identify how other individuals may enter into a conversation. As students look to articulate racially charged social justice concepts in an effort to engage and educate an audience, students may also use the tool to identify how to use language to make an impact and to bring audience members into the conversation.

This activity first calls for students to become familiar with the compass. As a class, read and annotate each part of the compass handout. Hold discussion about what each part of the compass means. Practice using the compass. Select a mentor speech text or video. First, have students practice holding a conversation using the compass to identify how they are personally feeling or thinking when entering into conversation about the speech. Have students discuss how a person may address the speech using each quadrant of the compass.

Next, notify students that we will try to get inside the head of the speech writer. Read the speech transcript in chunks allowing for students to pause and consider the perspective the writer is embodying. Annotate the transcript using different color markers to indicate which phrases appeal to each quadrant of the compass. After reading the speech, have students review their annotations and using the Methods of Speech Organizer, have students record phrases into each quadrant. Have students analyze each phrase and explain why the phrase was placed into the selected quadrant. Discuss how each quadrant can appeal to individuals in an audience and the importance of considering different perspectives in engaging an audience.

The activity leads to students developing their own written speech on their chosen social justice topic. Have students practice writing their own speeches incorporating appeals related to the Courageous Conversation Compass. Students will write to appeal to an audience's beliefs, emotions, intellect, and agency. Remind students to review the annotated speech, compass, and organizer for help. Students will practice reading their speeches in small groups while classmates work to identify the quadrant in which the writer was making an appeal. Speeches may be incorporated into their culminating project or shared on the collective website.

### ***Ongoing and Culminating Activities Towards Social Justice***

#### **Activity (On-going): Student Organized Website**

As a means to actively collect student on-going knowledge, production, and collaboration, the class will work on developing a student organized website. Each small group with the similar social justice theme will be given the opportunity to create a page dedicated to their continuous learning process. The page will contain each groups' goals for their projects, interviews with community members, recommended community organizations, personal narratives, speeches, art, photography and other pieces that provide an account of the learning process but can be shared with a larger community and may serve a purpose for future classes or community organizations.

#### **Activity (Culminating): Social Justice Symposium**

To celebrate, honor, and educate members in the community, the unit will culminate in a Social Justice Symposium. The symposium brings the school and local community together and gives each student an opportunity to share their research and further educate their community about new perspectives, understandings, and knowledge associated with their social justice topic. Students will present with their fellow classmates who also focused on similar topics. Each will individually contribute to the presentation but

will collectively engage in discussion after the panel's presentation.

Students will play a part in formally inviting family members and community organizations that they collaborated with through the project to honor their contributions and to demonstrate how their knowledge impacted the outcomes of the project. Audience members will be invited to share in conversation and discussion at the end of each panel's presentation.

Students will have the ability to present incorporating academic research, community cultural wealth, and Indigenous practices in varying modes such as TedTalk, video documentary, art showcase, performance art, and so forth.

## Conclusion

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For decades educators have concerned themselves with the initiatives of working towards so called social justice. With ideals of civic engagement and increased empathy, no wonder so many curriculums have attempted to inspire students to “make the world a better place”. And yet, without a critical reflection on the role of race, the centering of the local community, and specific tangible action, social justice became another commodified iteration of colorblind ideology.

If educators wish to produce real change in their practice and with their students we should seek to listen to the words of James Baldwin. In “A Talk to Teachers”, Baldwin acknowledges this paradox of public education that seeks to create conscious thinkers while producing citizens complicit in cultural norms no matter the detriment. Baldwin states:

The purpose of education, finally, is to create in a person the ability to look at the world for himself, to make his own decisions... To ask questions of the universe, and then learn to live with those questions, is the way he achieves his own identity... [But] What societies really, ideally, want is a citizenry which will simply obey the rules of society... The obligation of anyone who thinks of himself as responsible is to examine society and try to change it and to fight it—at no matter what risk. This is the only hope society has. This is the only way societies change.

Baldwin identifies the pressure educators face to inhabit performative social justice work, which allows them to remain within the comfort of school and societal norms - a pressure that prevents the transformative movement of social justice that is critical of racial power structures, inclusive of diverse communities, and actionable in its pursuit of knowledge and change. Educators who keep Baldwin's voice close provide for their young people the ability to transform themselves and their communities through education and follow through on the ideals of social justice.

## Resources

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### Suggested Student Reading and Viewing List

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## **Materials for Classroom Use**

Notebook

Large Chart Paper

Internet Access, i.e. phones, chromebooks

Handout of C.R.A.P. Test (Beestrum)

Community Cultural Wealth Chart (Yosso),

Courageous Conversation Compass (Singleton)

4 different colored markers

Mentor Speech Transcripts

Methods of Speech Organizer

Google Sites

Recording Device (as accessible)

Camera (as accessible)

Art Supplies (as accessible)

Web Applications (as accessible)

## **Appendix on Implementing District Standards**

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As a research unit within an English classroom context, the Inquiry and Research, Speaking and Listening, Writing, and Reading Standards are imbedded into the content as well as lessons of this curriculum. By engaging in this unit of study, students will learn to use traditional research skills as well as assess their skills and broaden them by using anti-racist research methods. Students will engage in critical reading and analysis of nonfiction and historical and contemporary writing to inspire their own work. Throughout students will sharpen their speaking and listening skills by engaging in conversations with leaders and members of their community as well as by presenting their final findings during the Social Justice Symposium. Below is a summary of standards and skills students will focus on throughout the unit.

### **Inquiry and Research**

- Conduct research that shows differing perspectives of a topic
- Assess the credibility and accuracy of each source.

- Select relevant information that advances my line of inquiry
- Develop and pursue questions to demonstrate and expand understanding of a subject

### **Speaking and Listening**

- Prepare for a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners (CCR.SL1)
- Participate in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners (CCR.SL1)
- Present information, findings, and supporting evidence appropriately for task, purpose, and audience (CCR.SL4)

### **Writing**

- Develop informative or explanatory writing to examine and convey complex ideas and information (CCR.W2)
- Use language appropriate for audience and purpose (CCR.L3)

### **Reading**

- Comprehend complex literary and informational texts by determining what the text says explicitly and what is implied (CCR.R1)
- Analyze the text to determine how author's choices relate to each other to shape the meaning of the work as a whole (CCR.R4-6)

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