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It Takes a Group to Design but a Larger Community to Implement: Social Justice Language Education-Oriented Framework in Costa Rica

Se Necesita un grupo para diseñar, pero una comunidad más grande para implementar: marco orientado a la educación en lenguaje de justicia social en Costa Rica

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Abstract

While social justice education (SJE) is increasingly recognized as educationally essential for students' academic and personal success, its full integration into K-12 education continues to face barriers, including resistance to discussing certain SJE topics. Using group interviews with five regional- and two national-level English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL) advisers tasked with leadership and curriculum advocacy in Costa Rica, this study explored their responses to proposed SJE-themed curriculum materials for online and offline education. Findings include concerns around the practical challenges of adding tasks to already-overburdened teachers' workloads, aligning curricula with mandated educational benchmarks, and apprehension about introducing certain SJE topics, especially around sexuality and socioeconomic status. Recommendations include leadership support for focused SJE implementation and increased stakeholder input around developing and navigating real or anticipated SJE resistance in certain social sectors and refining proposed SJE materials to meet educational mandates without adding to teacher workloads.

Keywords: social justice, teaching materials, educational advisers, educational policy.

Resumen

Mientras que la educación para la justicia social (EJS) es cada vez más reconocida como esencial para el éxito académico y personal de los estudiantes, su plena integración en la educación K-12 sigue enfrentando obstáculos, incluida la resistencia a la discusión de ciertos temas de EJS. Utilizando entrevistas grupales con cinco personas consejeras de inglés como lengua extranjera (ELE) a nivel regional y dos a nivel nacional, encargadas de liderar y defender el currículo en Costa Rica, este estudio exploró sus respuestas respecto a materiales curriculares temáticos de EJS propuestos para la educación en línea y presencial. Los hallazgos incluyen preocupaciones sobre los desafíos prácticos de agregar tareas a la ya extenuante carga de trabajo de las personas docentes, la alineación del currículo a las metas educativas establecidas y la aprensión sobre la introducción de ciertos temas de EJS, especialmente en torno a la sexualidad y el estatus socioeconómico. Entre las recomendaciones se incluyen el apoyo de las autoridades para una implementación enfocada en la EJS y la retroalimentación continua de las partes interesadas en torno al desarrollo al igual que la comprensión de la resistencia existente o anticipada a la EJS en ciertos sectores sociales y

la adaptación de los materiales de EJS propuestos para cumplir con los requerimientos educativos sin aumentar la carga de trabajo de las personas docentes.

Palabras clave: justicia social, material didáctico, consejeros de educación, política educacional.

1. Introduction

Social justice education (SJE)—defined as a "conscious and reflexive blend of content and process intended to enhance equity across multiple social identity groups, foster critical perspectives, and promote social action" (Carlisle, Jackson, & George, 2006, p. 57)—is becoming increasingly recognized as a priority and prerequisite for academic and social-emotional successes for all students (Hymel & Katz, 2019). This includes calls for SJE-sensitive professional development and changes to curriculum and materials development for (1) pre-service teachers (Ankomah, 2020; Cirik, 2015; Le Roux & Mdunge, 2012; Lucas & Milligan, 2019; Lynskey, 2015; McCoy, 2012; Storms, 2013), (2) in service teachers (Brochin, 2019; Garran, Kang, & Fraser, 2014; Hymel & Katz, 2019; Jacott, Maldonado, Sainz et al., 2014; Rowan, Bourke, L'Estrange et al., 2021), and (3) school leaders (Huchting & Bickett, 2021; Mullen, 2008).

Classroom offerings specifically addressing social justice issues and diversity—although at times challenging for educators and students alike (Murray, 2011; Ruffin, 2020)—can provide a *brave space* (Arao & Clemens, 2013; Rambiritch, 2024) for all students, teachers and others involved in the education process to engage in discussions that foster anti-racist, anti-bias, and anti-oppressive mindsets, challenge privilege and power, and promote more just, equal, and inclusive environments where all people thrive socially while still learning subject-specific content (Araujo & Strasser, 2003; Hymel & Katz, 2019; Woodley, Hernandez, Parra, & Negash, 2017).

Investing in SJE is necessary for change to occur despite challenges when implementing such curricula (Acosta et al., 2024; Carlisle et al., 2006). These challenges include enduring moments of discomfort, engaging in open discourse, advocating for SJE (Murray, 2011), and practicing self-reflection (Araujo & Strasser, 2003; Knowles & Hadley, 2024). The idea that the two goals of academic achievement and the development of social identity are independent objectives in education is a misconception that must be actively resisted (Rojas-Alfaro & Montenegro Sánchez, 2024). As Murray (2011) notes, a school-wide discourse that seeks to inform social justice would benefit from focusing on "how instructional practice, curricular decisions, materials, and classroom routines connect to children's family, community, and cultural roots" (p. 62). Providing teachers with time to engage in these conversations can help unveil institutional practices that either support or undermine equity and impact children's social identity development and academic success.

Subject-specific teachers can contribute significantly to this goal by incorporating SJE-oriented teaching and materials development (Glas, Catalán, Donner, & Donoso, 2021; McCoy, 2012). Anti-bias, culturally responsive teaching approaches across disciplines are indispensable for teachers and educational leaders who seek social justice in school systems (Acosta et al., 2024; Ladson-Billings, 1994). Particularly in bilingual literacy education for grades 1-6, regardless of student diversity levels, a crucial opportunity exists for embedding social justice goals within young English-language learners' (ELLs) reading instruction (Araujo & Strasser, 2003; Moene, 2022). This study aims at discussing and potentially redesign SJE-oriented teaching materials for such classrooms.

Specifically, it explores how EFL advisers in Costa Rica can perceive SJE curricular materials to support bilingual literacy development in grade 1-6 English-language learners (ELLs). It uses qualitative group interviews to explore responses to proposed storybook-format SJE-themed curriculum materials and suggestions for improvement. This

EFL demographic is important because of their role overseeing EFL teachers, assessing and strategically implementing curricula, and doing educational research.

2.Literature Review

2.1 Social justice education in bilingual education programs

While SJE research in Costa Rica started slowly from the 1990s onward (Locke, 2009; Silva, Slater, Gorosave et al., 2017; Slater, Gorosave, Silva et al., 2017), recognition of SJE as prerequisite for academic and socio-emotional success generally (Hymel & Katz, 2019) now prompts calls for curricula that celebrate SJE-related diversity and foster anti-bias classroom environments (Araujo & Strasser, 2003; Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2021; Hymel & Katz, 2019). This has redoubled significance when culturally and linguistically diverse groups of students are present (Acosta et al., 2024; Woodley et al., 2017). While such environments can increase students' self-esteem and feelings of self-worth, promote the values of tolerance and respect for all, and thus potentially grow closer as a community at large, they also increase the likelihood of academic, especially in early K-12 EFL instruction (Tedick & Wesely, 2015). This again demonstrates the co-implication of academic and identity attainment in education.

Grades 1 to 6 school teachers play a significant role in this task. Derman-Sparks and Edwards (2021) highlight that children have already begun to develop their social identity and discover other groups by age 4. For Araujo and Strasser (2003), "teachers should move themselves and their children from a level of awareness to tolerance for diversity to celebrating diversity" (p. 180). Brochin (2019) adds that "without explicitly connecting more general issues of inequity and social justice to [for example] gender expression and sexuality, bilingual and multicultural education can potentially make the mistake of encouraging teachers to become advocates for some marginalized groups while inadvertently silencing others" (pp. 81-82).

Teachers' diversity commitments must include affirmation, solidarity, critique, and continued exploration and discussion of students' and teachers' values as a regular practice embedded within the curriculum (Araujo & Strasser, 2003; Acosta et al., 2024). This is not some set-aside period of the classroom (otherwise taking time away from other educational activities) but an integrated and continuous activity that occurs *ad hoc* as occasions arise. At root, this simply involves fostering mutual respect among everyone present, but such conversations are especially relevant for confronting existing prejudices in schools. Derman-Sparks and Edwards (2021) suggest that teachers actively attend to children's developing perceptions and feelings about their identities and those of others to "foster their ability to gain accurate knowledge, … develop self-esteem, [and] … counter misinformation, unease, or hurtful ideas about members of various racialized groups" (p. 37). As they note, "Diversity does not cause prejudice, nor does children noticing and talking about differences, as some adults fear" (p. 37; c.f., Crary, 1992). Solidarity and allyship between colleagues, school administrators, and like-minded parents also is critical if social justice education is to move beyond surface-level effects (Brochin, 2019; Murray, 2011; Ryan & Hermann-Wilmarth, 2018).

2.2 Storybooks as teaching resources

While teachers are not necessarily prepared, trained, or know how to approach *teachable moments* that arise spontaneously and unplanned in classrooms, they also do not need to wait for them to happen in order to include them in their everyday planning (Acosta et al., 2024; Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2021). In particular, storybooks—i.e., digital or printed media containing a story or collection of stories intended for children—afford a ready resource for teachers to engage children in meaningful activities around critically confronting prejudice and celebrating diversity. Araujo and Strasser (2003) advise teachers to use a range of materials (including picture books) that reflect "children, adults, and diverse family configurations of various racial and ethnic makeup engaged

in non-stereotypical gender activities … [and] … people doing jobs in and out of home, and engaged in various recreational activities, depicting diversity in family styles" (p. 181).

Derman-Sparks and Edwards (2021) suggest that teachers compose (and assess the quality of) materials that make racial and cultural diversity visible. Introducing children to literature that speaks to diversity in multiple ways at an early age can allow them, for example, to "learn about gender diversity and … dismantle gender-based bullying before it starts" (Brochin, 2019, p. 86). Composing storybooks that facilitate content, promote social justice, and bring students' stories to the core of the curriculum allows teachers to draw from four sources for anti-bias stories: (1) issues that emerge from children's daily lives, (2) events that are currently happening in the world, (3) information that the teacher wants children to have, and (4) history (Derman-Sparks, 1989, in Araujo & Strasser, 2003).

While such storytelling allows issues of diversity to be addressed directly or indirectly (Araujo & Strasser, 2003), Hess (2021) also cautions against using storytelling that "reduces humans to objects to accomplish an agenda" as this can re-inscribe oppression for minoritized groups (p. 81) or majority groups as well. She proposes using counter-stories, such as testimonies, which allow tellers (e.g., teachers) to question dominant understandings while facilitating "minoritized groups [to] retain agency and control of the story" (p. 78). Such storybooks or testimonies become not only a catalyst and "vehicle for the children to explore their ethnic identity" (Araujo & Strasser, 2003, p. 182) but also a voice for teacher connections with their students (regardless of background differences). Again, the fundamental issue here is a presumably unobjectionable expectation of mutual respect around identity for all present. As Derman-Sparks and Edwards (2021) put it, anti-bias teachers should purposefully and enthusiastically "integrate the message into the daily life of their classroom that people of every racialized identity [among others] are valuable and deserve caring and fairness" (p. 38).

2.3 A social justice education-oriented framework

This study is grounded in the idea that SJE in school curricula helps educate all students, but its advocacy requires stakeholders not to be afraid of seemingly *difficult conversations* (Le Roux & Mdunge, 2012) that arise as *teachable moments* (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2021) inside and outside of the classroom. Such situations have their most substantial classroom effects where teachers—supported by a school network of advisers, colleagues, parents, and administrators—can immediately intervene for the well-being and education of students (both on- and offline), especially those from marginalized groups (Hymel & Katz, 2019; Montenegro Sánchez & Rojas-Alfaro, 2025).

Toward this end, understanding the responses of EFL instructional stakeholders' (including the regional and national advisers in this study) to the use of SJE-themed materials becomes crucial because they serve as gatekeepers for reaching teachers and students who eventually will benefit from these teaching materials and teacher development opportunities that foster bilingual literacy skill development and SJE mindsets. Accordingly, this study's emphasis on curricular integration of SJE-related issues around difference and identity has a particular urgency in a post-pandemic time, when many students are being further marginalized (by limited access to online participation and digital knowledge). By committing to SJE, education takes a step forward when it unveils critical social justice issues that deserve (and require) discussion in school settings at all levels.

Such discussions go beyond traditional social justice models in bilingual literacy education and teacher education programs, where the benchmarks of tolerance and cultural acceptance of others (Araujo & Strasser, 2003; Knowles & Hadley, 2024) can ignore, overlook, or bracket out students' intersectional identities (Brochin, 2019). To note this is not a denigration of the values of tolerance and cultural acceptance but a recognition that more is still re-

quired given that tolerance and acceptance alone have not yet adequately secured social justice generally.

3. Methodology

This qualitative case study, part of a larger investigation on bilingual literacy development in rural Costa Rican schools, explored the research question: How do English-as-foreign-language (EFL) advisers in Costa Rica perceive implementing SJE curricular materials to support bilingual literacy development in grade 1-6 English-language learners (ELLs)?

The case study approach was instrumental in addressing this question as it allows for the exploration and description of a specific unit or bounded system (Smith, 1978). In this study, the researchers focused on the perceptions of seven EFL advisers as a representative case (Yin, 2009), examining their perspectives in relation to proposed SJE curricular materials. This case served as a representation of advisers tasked to support teachers working with primary school ELLs in online and offline settings within the public school system in rural Costa Rica.

The SJE curricular materials were developed by the researchers during a pilot project partially funded by a U.S. Embassy in Costa Rica grant. These materials were given to the EFL advisers for them to review and offer their observations during group interviews. Implementing these materials with school teachers and students was beyond the scope of the study due to pandemic restrictions, which suggested further discussions with stakeholders; however, EFL advisers' group interviews provided valuable insights for a case study.

3.1 SJE curricular materials

A key focus of the grant call was to leverage technology and online education, particularly under the impacts from COVID-19 in Costa Rica (Montenegro Sánchez, 2021), which increased or created prohibitive barriers to educational access, especially among demographics already at risk or newly facing exclusion (Glas et al., 2021; Henry, 2010)Laurie A</author></authors><secondary-authors><author>Pullen, Darren Lee</author><author>Gitsaki, Christina</author><author>Baguley, Margaret</author></secondary-authors></contributors><titles><title>Unpacking social inequalities: How a lack of technology integration may impede the development of multiliteracies among middle school students in the United States</title><secondary-title>Technoliteracy, discourse, and social practice: Frameworks and applications in the digital age: Frameworks and applications in the digital age</secondary-title></titles><pages>55-79</pages><dates><year>2010</year></dates><pub-location>Hershey, PA</pub-location><publisher>IGI Global</publisher><isbn>1605668435</isbn><urls></urls></record></Cite></EndNote>. Along with national Ministry of Education objectives, the materials developed incorporated the social justice themes described in previous sections. In particular, storybooks portrayed situations possibly relatable to Costa Rican children's lives from during the pandemic (see Table 1).

Table 1

Themes and Sample Digital Storybook Titles

Theme	Storybook Title
Domestic violence	Mommy's Bruises
Remote work	Arturo Stays Home
Air quality	When the Earth Got its Breath Back
Heroism	Doc and Nurse Crowley
Overconsumption	Where did All the Toilet Paper Go?
Discrimination	Yuki and Friends
Vulnerable individuals	Caring in a Crisis

.1. Participants and settings

Snowball sampling (LeCompte, Tesch, y Preissle, 2003) was used to identify five regional and two national EFL advisers (six women, one man) with an average eighteen years of pertinent knowledge and teaching/leadership experience around this study's focus. EFL advisers are responsible for overseeing primary school EFL teachers in their respective regional and national domains. Duties include assessing and strategically implementing curricula, developing professional development programs, conducting research to identify areas for improvement, and supporting teachers' practices by providing guidelines and teaching materials. This study's regional advisers specifically represent marginalized and under-resourced schools in rural areas (see Table 2).

Table 2

Participant identifiers, work experience, and school regions served

Identifiers	Work Experience (Years)	School Region Served (by general geographic location)
Participant 1	24	Central
Participant 2	24	National
Participant 3	21	Central
Participant 4	18	Atlantic
Participant 5	18	National
Participant 6	17	Pacific
Participant 7	16	Pacific

Participants were recruited individually via email and WhatsApp, with invitations to join a WhatsApp group to coordinate and share meeting details ahead of group interview sessions. The SJE curricular materials—including a Handbook for grade 1-6 teacher professional development, storybooks, and sample lesson plans supporting SJE, understanding by design (UbD), translanguaging, and using WhatsApp for digital education delivery—were provided to participants for review in advance of the group interviews.

3.3 Data collection

In November 2020 and February/April 2022, the researchers separately conducted three two-hour group interviews (Creswell & Poth, 2018;), first with the five participating regional advisers and then

with the two national advisers. Verbal and email consent was obtained from all participants to take part in the study, which included video-recording the online sessions conducted on Zoom. Group interviews were conducted in Spanish and English, recorded, transcribed verbatim, and translated as needed by the research. The researchers also collected notes during the meetings to help address participants' comments, questions, and concerns. Interview transcripts were shared with participants for member-checking (Creswell & Poth, 2018) and stored in a password-protected folder on OneDrive.

In order to conduct group interviews, the researchers met with the participants via Zoom. After introductions and an extensive explanation about the purpose of the meeting, the group was given a virtual tour of all the materials under discussion. Since the participants had previously been given time to review the materials at home, the interview started with the following questions: What are your initial thoughts about the materials shared? Did you like them? What did you like, what didn't you like?

After the participants' initial comments, the researchers continued with more specific questions such as: Do you see it possible to use these materials to support EFL classes in Costa Rica? What possible challenges could arise based on your experience when applying them? What kind of professional development do you think teachers might need to use these materials appropriately? As explained before, the intention of the group interview was to understand the advisers' thoughts, concerns, perceptions, and even advice for improvement.

3.4 Data analysis

Interpretive case study was applied to "develop conceptual categories that would either support, challenge, or illustrate prior theoretical assumptions based on the rich and descriptive data gathered" (Merriam, 1998, p. 38). The researchers individually and collaboratively revisited the field notes and group interview transcriptions multiple times for coding and convened Zoom meetings to discuss their analyses and ensure inter-rater agreement. In cases where coding differed, they conferenced to understand one another's perspectives and made necessary adjustments to the coding to reach a consensus. Specific codes were merged or expanded to enhance clarity whenever the researchers encountered overlapping themes.

While the researchers initially intended to implement member-checking (Carspecken, 1996) through a follow-up group interview with the participants for data triangulation, limited further access prevented this option from being pursued. Instead, they relied on data triangulation through the multiple available sources, which allowed the researchers to maintain consistency between the participants' perspectives and their own interpretations.

4. Findings

The following paragraphs present the findings from three group interviews conducted with participants and facilitated by two researchers, encompassing initial and follow-up meetings. Findings are divided into two sections, reflecting the flow of ideas as they were openly shared and critically discussed among the participants.

4.1 Theme 1: Meeting educational mandates and goals

Initially, participants emphasized how the materials could address the needs of EFL teachers in online and hybrid classrooms, for example, Participant 4 recognized the utility of the materials for online teachers:

> I appreciate the effort you are making to bring this material to the classrooms, and it is an effort for which I am truly grateful because amidst so much that teachers are experiencing, often their very environment cuts off their creativity. The more materials we can provide them with, the more we would be easing their lives, especially in their work during these times, which the pandemic has made very difficult (Participant 4, group interview, November 6, 2020).

However, participants also stressed the urgent need for these materials to be suitable to address students' literacy skill development in light of increasing government accountability requirements and teacher's reporting workloads.

> Right now, teachers are much more focused on completing reports and other administrative work that is significant because of the number of students in each group. They need to focus on reviewing work guides and conducting summative assessments of students in English. They are also required to submit a final report to their schools (Participant 1, group interview, November 6, 2020).

They also emphasized that most primary school EFL teachers have been independently navigating online and hybrid teaching, often without sufficient professional development, guidelines, or support. This situation detracts from the already limited time for lesson planning and opportunities to create or adapt materials for online and hybrid classrooms. Speaking from her adviser experience, Participant 3 further illustrated this challenge.

> As part of my duties as an adviser, I conduct research. Recently, I conducted a survey asking teachers if they would like to be provided with opportunities to develop and share contextualized teaching materials within their school districts, but it turns out that their acceptance was negative. They explicitly said, "Look, we don't have time." The complaint about time is always there (Participant 3, group interview, November 6, 2020).

Advisers concurred that teachers would appreciate and use new materials if they directly addressed assessment strategies and aligned with school curricular units. Specifically, Participant 2 emphasized the importance of involving EFL teachers in discussions about materials development and the necessity of these resources being consistent with curricular objectives.

> I think that this type of initiative demands teachers' professional development. We need to make teachers participate. As you suggested in our first meeting, you said, "Teachers will be the writers. Teachers will be developers." I think that's great because, as I said at that time, it creates ownership (Participant 2, group interview, April 1, 2022).

Participant 2 further emphasized the importance of conversations with EFL teachers about materials development beyond mere professional development.

> I wouldn't say training, but it would be nice to have a conversation with teachers about this to create awareness from this perspective. This is a major issue if we are going to use these resources. How are these resources aligned with the elements of our curriculum? (Participant 2, group interview, April 1, 2022).

Participant 5 highlighted the disparities in educational resources and access between rural and urban areas, underscoring the need for professional development tailored to the unique challenges and contexts of EFL teachers in various regions of Costa Rica and how access to information can be particularly limited in rural areas:

> There can be communication between different populations who live in two different settings and have different struggles. Or even within San Jose [an urban city in Costa Rica], we have places that have a lot of difficulties in terms of all that you have been describing. And people who live in other geographic areas where those struggles don't exist (Participant 5, group interview, February 18, 2022).

Participants stressed that materials be tailor-made to minimize the need for significant adaptations or modifications before use. Participant 7 explained that teachers' time for engaging with materials development has become increasingly limited; "What is the time frame you have for us to

distribute this material? How much time is estimated for this project?" (Participant 7, group interview, November 6, 2020). Participant 6 added:

> We have received a memorandum stating that we are not authorized to schedule meetings, workshops, or any activity of this sort with teachers after November 19. Teachers will have to invest their time grading student assignments and tests. Additionally, they will have to submit a final report. Teachers are working on that right now, so I believe it is not a good time for us to provide them with new material (Participant 6, group interview, November 6, 2020).

4.2 Theme 2: Inclusion of social justice issues in the school curriculum

The participants affirmed support for SJE, with Participant 5 noting that it is already a core value in Costa Rican national education. Participant 2 elaborated that existing curricula aim to develop a new form of citizenship through three learning dimensions: to know, to do, and learn to live and be in the world:

[SJE] brings this idea of equal participation, and it's part of the educational policy of this country, aiming to bring equality and social justice into the classroom and beyond, for everybody and for future citizenship (Participant 2, group interview, February 18, 2022).

Both recognized this as beginning from early childhood education, with Participant 2 characterizing social justice as *a big umbrella* appropriate for early childhood development (Participant 2, group interview, February 18, 2022).

However, participants also anticipated reactions from some teachers, students, and parents about bringing certain topics rarely discussed so openly into the EFL classroom. Specifically, participants argued that showcasing social justice issues related to difference (e.g., socioeconomic status) and identity (e.g., sexual orientation) could pose challenges to teachers (and other advisers, like themselves) and lead to disagreements with parents.

> When I was going through the materials, I noticed they touch on some sensitive topics that might stir the pot – conflict might not be the right word, since it's more about the feelings it might bring up. And there's stuff about a homosexual couple that I'm totally okay with (Participant 4, group interview, November 6, 2020).

Participant 1 interjected during Participant 4's comment to suggest *controversy* rather than *conflict* might be a more accurate way to describe a *difference in perception* (rather than a *difficult situation*) between teachers and parents on social justice issues addressed in storybooks. Then Participant 7 added her impression in agreement with Participant 4 about possibly introducing social justice issues in teaching materials.

> There's a lot of sensitive content in the material which might just stir up a lot of controversy — controversy that's going to land on us as advisers as well as the teachers. I'm with Participant 4 on this one. But you know, these issues are different for every family. In my family, we accept them as normal. But then, you've got families that are okay with it and some that just aren't (Participant 7, group interview, November 6, 2020).

Participants offered rationales for not using storybooks addressing differences and identity with children. For example, Participant 4 had no problem talking about gay marriage or gay couples, but objected to a contrast with a heterosexual couple experiencing domestic violence:

> There's a reading that portrays a heterosexual couple as problematic and violent, right? The reading presents an issue of domestic violence, I believe is in the storybook *Mommy's Bruises*. And it also features another family, right? A lesbian family. So, the abused lady and her daughter leave their home. Then the reading presents an idyllic family, right? Two ladies, a lesbian couple, in a household where everything is love and peace

(Participant 4, group interview, November 6, 2020).

Participant 4 also objected to a storyline portraying "people with money" as greedy or hoarders of essential items during COVID-19 and "far from reality" (Participant 4, group interview, November 6, 2020):

> I think [the storybook *Where Did All the Toilet Paper Go?*] casts wealthy people in a negative light by labeling them as hoarders. During the COVID-19 pandemic, this proved to be far from reality. It wasn't just wealthy people who were hoarding, but everyone in the resulting panic. This was especially evident in the United States, as seen in the news. It seems to me that the reading might cast wealthy people in a negative light, at times suggesting they were hoarders or selfish. Maybe it was the reading itself, but it certainly left me with a particular feeling. I get that there are cultural aspects in these stories that are important, and I grasp the intended purpose behind the reading — obviously, it's about social justice, about being aware that we can't just go and buy everything. Yet, that was the initial impression the reading gave me (Participant 4, group interview, November 6, 2020).

Participant 3 argued against openly addressing certain social justice issues developmentally "inappropriate for children's current understanding" (Participant 3, group interview, November 6, 2020). Participant 7 emphasized certain communities culturally, especially in the countryside, hold strong religious beliefs that make addressing these issues difficult for teachers.

> I've come across a community here in the region, about 15 kilometers from the city, where families don't even consider dancing as a form of entertainment because their religion forbids it. So, you can imagine the stir that presenting stories like these to school children might cause. From that perspective, I agree with avoiding certain sensitive topics, especially because we're dealing with children. We must be careful with how public institutions manage these subjects, as other programs, such as Sexuality and Affection, have sparked too much controversy in schools. Now, just imagine dealing with an even wider range of topics like these (Participant 7, group interview, November 6, 2020).

Participant 3 and Participant 7 agreed that addressing these issues with adolescents might be more suitable, since "these topics are usually taught jointly in Science and Biology classes [in high school]" (Participant 3, group interview, November 6, 2020). Participant 1 countered that children in primary schools are *bombarded* with information on such topics from *Sexuality and Affectivity*, a program that aims from grade 1 to address aspects of sexuality fully, equipping young people with the skills to recognize and assert their sexual and reproductive rights, and guiding them to make informed decisions for a satisfying and responsible sexual life (Valverde Cerros et al., 2017)—meaning that even young students *do* have some understanding on these subjects.

For Participant 7, another concern was how well- or poorly equipped teachers are prepared with the required expertise and professional development to discuss such matters; "There is a lot of sensitive content that perhaps is not up to an English teacher to address and that rather can cause a lot of controversy" (Participant 7, group interview, November 6, 2020). Participant 5 said: "After reading *Arturo Stays Home*, yeah, I found myself wondering, "Are we ready to talk about this? Are we prepared to depict this kind of family openly in a story?" (Participant 5, group interview, February 18, 2022).

Supporting Participant 7's opinion, Participant 3 suggested revising such materials in light of participants' feedback (as well as input from government authorities who oversee educational policies) (Participant 3, group interview, November 6, 2020). While Participant 4 agreed with this incorporation of feedback, she added, "Culturally speaking, I may have been shocked, but I believe that addressing

these issues in the classroom is also an EFL teacher's responsibility. I believe in it. It is everyone's commitment" (Participant 4, group interview, November 6, 2020).

Participant 2 and Participant 5 agreed a transformation around how EFL teachers introduce and discuss social justice and injustice with students is crucial; actively addressing these issues is "the only way to fight and create a change of mind... since kids are young; they are beginning their lives" (Participant 2, group interview, February 18, 2022).

> We need to start this process at an early age, and as I mentioned before, it's already implicitly included in our curriculum. However, if we could develop materials that make it more explicit and connect with what's already there, that would be excellent (Participant 5, group interview, February 18, 2022).

Participant 2 emphasized the importance of considering multiple and diverse identities within the school curriculum:

> We have a fundamental principle in our curriculum: learn to live and be in the world. I believe that understanding the rights and needs of others, fostering an awareness of different perspectives, is essential for our society, especially in the face of the inequalities present in Costa Rica (Participant 2, group interview, February 18, 2022).

5. Discussion

The findings echo other research on teachers' challenges and opportunities in online and hybrid learning environments. For example, a lack of time greatly impacts teachers' practices, including lesson planning, materials, and teacher development (Gandolfi, Ferdig, & Kratcoski, 2021; Glas et al., 2021; Montenegro Sánchez & Rojas-Alfaro, 2025). Compulsory and increasing accountability measures mandated by educational authorities can also have school teachers paying more attention to administrative work than their online or hybrid teaching practices. Affording more manageable time for teachers is essential.

The digital divide presents another challenge, for teachers and students alike (Gandolfi et al., 2021; Henry, 2010; Iivari, Sharma, & Ventä-Olkkonen, 2020), whether limitations on access, a lack of familiarity with available online tools, and learning strategies for success online. Readily available and low-cost digital tools not conventionally used in education but well-known in the community, like WhatsApp and others, afford opportunities to support teaching and foster in-classroom innovation (Montenegro Sánchez, 2021; Montenegro Sánchez, 2022; Glas et al., 2021). Such tools require localized adaptations to ensure that all students are reached.

Beyond time availability and the digital divide, another challenge is teachers' learning curves and professional development when adopting or adapting new materials (print or digital) (Acosta et al., 2024; Rojas-Alfaro & Montenegro Sánchez, 2024). This is not just a technical problem, as this study discloses issues around teachers' dispositions and motivation toward implementing certain new materials. For time and practical reasons, all materials must align (or be perceived as aligning) with curricular mandates. Any mismatch (whether content-related, thematic, or potentially by opening disagreements around difference and identity social justice issues) introduces the further risks of (1) exacerbating teacher workloads and motivations, (2) decreasing use or refusal of such materials if they do not meet accountability metrics, and (3) hindering long-term professional development in teachers (including developing an online teaching repertoire) as they rationally allocate their limited time to more short-term issues.

Nonetheless, these practical *logistical* concerns may mask *sociological* resistance to SJE itself (either directly or as an anticipation of *controversies* arising from attempts to address them) (Knowles & Hadley, 2024; Rojas-Alfaro & Montenegro Sánchez, 2024). While the advisers themselves enthusiastically expressed support for SJE, they also overtly expressed resistance to its concrete implementation

and imagining or anticipating resistance from some teachers, students, or parents, especially in religious countryside settings. More generally, there was only mixed support on whether the conflicts, controversies, or difficult situations possibly arising from SJE curricula in grade 1-6 ELL storybooks were even appropriate to place on teachers.

On this point, it is imperative to remember: while some of these imaginable difficult situations arise from people already holding socially unjust opinions about difference and identity, the silences around these issues are already creating difficult situations for students in classrooms who do not align with any normative values presented in existing educational materials. While EFL advisers can express concerns about the depictions of wealthy people as inaccurate or slanted way (despite that some wealthy people *did* act as depicted in the storybook), what justifies prioritizing this concern if common discourse is not also questioned for the ways that it presents less wealthy people in inaccurate or slanted ways? Equally, if EFL advisers are unsure if *we* are ready for a discussion about homosexuality, then this sidelines any discourse that LGBTQIA+ students, parents, and educational stakeholders might have about slanted and inaccurate representations of them by religious conservatives. Or again, why is a framework of *concerns* used to characterize acknowledging the *existence* of LGBTQIA+ people as a *controversy* or a conflict Gay people are not a *controversy or do they represent a conflict in society*; denigration of their humanity is. When these *concerns*—which are certainly not unfamiliar—become an excuse for avoiding seemingly difficult conversations, this elides the fact that some students (LGBTQIA+, poor, marginalized) are experiencing difficult *non-conversations* and silence about their existence every day. Avoiding *imaginable* conflicts that guarantee the perpetuation of currently harmful conflicts must not be allowed to be called social justice.

A challenge (and an opportunity) for all educational stakeholders involves the foreseeable *mixed feelings* (anticipated by this study's participants) around the teaching of social justice issues of difference and identity. It is not proposed that teachers alone can accomplish this task—they are already too overburdened with responsibilities—and are in solidarity with calls that teachers and local advisers should work together to fight oppression (Acosta et al., 2024; Knowles & Hadley, 2024; Le Roux & Mdunge, 2012). This necessarily requires adequate support from administrations as well, to foster anti-bias classroom environments toward social justice in education generally (Araujo & Strasser, 2003; Brochin, 2019; Ladson-Billings, 1994).

Contrary to concerns about the ability of students to handle these *conflicts* or *difficult situations*, this study discloses that social justice issues around difference and identity are not brand-new to students and teachers in the classroom. In Costa Rica, issues around diversity, ableism, sexual orientation, gender disparity, and identity are informally present in classroom conversations already and formally offered in the school curricula via the *Affectivity and Sexuality* program for grades 1 to 6 (Valverde Cerros et al., 2017). While resistance from certain quarters of the school community can be expected, the inclusion of specific social justice issues around difference and identity (e.g., sexual orientation, gender disparity, socioeconomic struggles) demonstrates a potential for raising awareness about those critical issues and laying a groundwork for ameliorating their effects as they directly and indirectly affect teachers, children, and their communities. Again, the argument for doing so is not only moral but also that the academic success of *all* students economically benefits society generally (Tedick & Wesely, 2015). It creates a more educated and, therefore, productive and wealthier workforce and less demand for expenditures on social safety nets.

Using the proposed grade 1-6 SJE materials would also help supportive EFL advisers and teachers already in solidarity with social justice commitments to challenge socially unjust patterns and foster the continued exploration of students' and teachers' values, ultimately with social justice for everyone (Araujo & Strasser, 2003). It is agreed with Araujo and Strasser (2003), who suggest that resistance to

social justice goals (and the perception that somehow the *oppressed* are going to replace the dominant culture) can be ameliorated through discomfort appreciation, open discussion, and self-reflection. As such, the participants' counterarguments against SJE in school curricula are illuminating and reveal a potential willingness to adopt such materials provided that the approach addresses not only practical time-constraint issues (both online and offline) but also offers support buffers (from administrations) to shield them against likely backlash. For teachers more directly uncomfortable with such social justice aims, administrative support structures and conversations in the classroom can afford a measure of on-the-job professional development.

Finally, incorporating this research into the limited literature on social justice research in Costa Rican education marks an important first step. While future research might focus on student, parent, and local school administrator perceptions and reactions to SJE curricular content, leadership from top-level curricular advisers is indispensable. Although the proposed curriculum is intended to be adaptable, the advisers' concerns about teacher workloads and aligning curricula with educational mandates seems to have overshadowed that capacity in this proposal. Nevertheless, if participants can express uncertainty whether *we* are ready for a particular conversation, what might they design instead? If a juxtaposition of (heterosexual) domestic violence and (lesbian) domestic bliss is unsettling, how might one craft a socially just local narrative addressing domestic violence and lesbian parenting—both of which are already realities in the lives of some students in classrooms? The adaptability of the curricular material expressly includes and anticipates the necessity of local adaptation; in that way, one can wonder what locally adaptive storybooks could be articulated by stakeholders in rural, conservative areas around poverty, homosexuality, and even dancing. Again, future research is needed to explore this but requires decision-making leadership to move forward rather than fall by the wayside under a banner of *not yet*.

6. Recommendations

Two immediate ways to address some of the practical/logistical concerns expressed by participants include (1) providing ready-to-use SJE materials or (2) flexible, customizable templates useable in any online and hybrid learning context. Both solutions have advantages and limitations. Ready-to-use materials are convenient but afford little to no customization; as such, their content will offer a poor fit with the total student demographics classroom to classroom and require additional in-classroom discussion to navigate the gaps they miss. Alternatively, customizable templates can be tailored to meet classroom demographics but require time to build content (or will become an additional task for time-burdened teachers to complete). This would require prioritizing SJE so that reallocating available resources (or personnel) to tailor the materials appropriately is not opposed. In either case, any solution adopted must fit with teachers' overburdened time constraints and the imperative to reach all students, not just those who historically have been reached (Henry, 2010)discourse, and social practice: Frameworks and applications in the digital age: Frameworks and applications in the digital age</secondary-title></titles><pages>55-79</pages><dates><year>2010</year></dates><pub-location>Hershey, PA</pub-location><publisher>IGI Global</publisher><isbn>1605668435</isbn><urls></urls></record></Cite></EndNote> and those who can be conveniently reached, online or offline, during or after a pandemic.

Addressing perceived and actual resistance to SJE will typically be seen as risking conflict or difficult situations such that conflict-averse persons and institutions can prefer to allow on-going social injustices against marginalized and minoritized peoples to continue. As such, further direct research is necessary to better understand the roots of such resistance, e.g., the on-going normalization of the *great replacement theory* (Cosentino, 2020; Linders, 2020) or religious/political opposition to perceived *liberal agendas* (Carrus, Panno, & Leone, 2018; Levett-Olson, 2010).

At root, SJE seeks to secure a presumably unobjectionable call for mutual respect among all people (e.g., personal dignity, support for families and individuals, and the Costa Rican social justice principle *to live and be in the world* with others). When the benefits of social justice education are understood as *being for everyone*, this already begins to mitigate the potential for *conflicts* with those who perceive such efforts as threats to their own differences and identities.

6.2 Limitations

Like all qualitative research, this study's generalizability is limited by the particularity of its time, place, and participants. In particular, the COVID-19's impacts on educational delivery, especially digitally/remotely, may leave out or introduce themes characteristic of education in general. (For instance, can so-called sensitive topics be introduced more easily in remote educational contexts?). Additionally, the context of bilingual education (or even Spanish/English education particularly) in Costa Rica may have culturally specific elements that limit the study's applicability to other online or offline bilingual education contexts.

Most importantly, the study did not directly involve other key educational stakeholders, such as teachers, students, parents, and school administrators, whose insights would provide an even more holistic understanding of the challenges and potentials of SJE in education. This limited focus of stakeholder, however, is a necessary first step to broader qualitative research around these issues. This is because regional- and national-level advisers occupy key leadership positions with respect to this action and are tasked with approving or advocating any curricula that downstream stakeholders would encounter. Future research should aim to include these perspectives for a more comprehensive view of the subject.

6. Conclusion

This study highlights the burgeoning enthusiasms and resistances among key educational stakeholders for implementing curriculum to support social justice education's vital goals of fostering equity, critical perspectives, anti-bias mindsets, and mutual respect for all people in Costa Rica's educational system.

Key points of resistance include (1) hesitancy about addressing certain social justice topics, particularly those pertaining to gender, sexuality, and socioeconomics, (2) concerns about increases to already overburdened teacher workloads, (3) meeting governmental mandates about content and standards, and (4) claims to have already integrated specifically local/national SJE in curricula. These issues underscore the need for a careful and thoughtful approach and leadership around further advocating the integration of SJE into Costa Rican education. In particular, while the use of digital storybooks was acknowledged as an innovative channel for promoting bilingual literacy and social justice awareness, they also highlight critical access problems due to a worsening digital divide and the necessity to make resources accessible to all students, regardless of their socioeconomic background.

While this effort will necessarily involve system-wide collaborative effort—from educators and curriculum designers and parents, students, and policymakers from the wider community—successful integration of SJE especially hinges on leadership able to find or adapt forms of curricula that are comprehensive, meet government educational goals and content mandates, and resist the social reproduction of prevailing inequities and prejudices in culture more widely. Finding what narratives will *work* to support SJE goals, even in places where resistance is anticipated, is the critical lynch-pin for success. Future research is needed toward this end, as Costa Rican education navigates these challenges and draws on lessons learned to become a beacon for other nations and make the social justice goals of mutual respect and quality education for all students a reality.

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