

Teachers for Social Justice

By Way of a (Proud) Introduction

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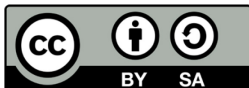
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Abstract: This editorial sets the scene for the special issue “Teachers for Social Justice: Centring Pre-Service Teachers’ Perspectives in Critical English Language Education”. True to the title of the special issue, it centres the voices of the eight pre-service teachers who contributed their valuable research to the collection by introducing their main arguments and findings, establishing connections between the individual contributions, and contextualising them in the wider landscape of Social Justice (Language) Teacher Education and teacher professionalisation.

Keywords: Social Justice Teacher Education; English Language Education; pre-service teachers; teacher professionalisation

In one’s academic and educational journey, there are always some moments that feel particularly important, worth all the long hours of work and dedication, usually accompanied by a great sense of pride and hopefulness. During our critical education journey, we have been fortunate to experience many of these moments together with our students. One of these was on the morning of 22nd March 2024, while preparing for the Second Student-Teacher Conference “Teachers for Social Justice”, and with that for a day on which the lucky number thirteen of our students would present their research projects related to the topic of Social Justice Education.¹ These students had for the most part worked on the connection between Social Justice Education and English Language Teaching in one of Eleni Louloudi’s seminars entitled “Critical Literacy in English Language Teaching”, they had been inspired by the first Conference “Teachers for Social Justice” (2022), or they had discovered related topics as part of their journey to their final degree theses under our supervision.

At some point towards the end of the conference, we gave each other a solemn nod: Impressed by the sheer academic quality, but also by the conviction and commitment of our students to promoting social justice in research and teaching, it was becoming clear that this was, in fact, not only a moment of feeling proud of what had been achieved but also a moment of significant hopefulness towards the new generation of teachers ready to enter the English classrooms, (a bit better) prepared to embrace criticality.

Such an endeavour could not but take a more academic format – a special journal issue dedicated to our students’ perspectives on critical language teacher education – not only because these projects are extremely relevant to

¹ We are very grateful to David Gerlach, who honored us with delivering the keynote for this conference.

the scientific community and (still significant) gap of critical studies in the German ELT context (König, 2023), but also because they represent a core idea of criticality: centring students' voices. Hence, this publication project aims to give an idea of in what way pre-service teachers can become advocates of social change in teacher education and beyond. More specifically, the contributions in this special issue of the Bielefeld journal *PraxisForschung-Lehrer*innenbildung* are all written by teacher-researchers that have embarked on this critical education journey in various moments during their professionalisation: from very early in their BAs to later on in their MAs; they all, however, have one common goal: to better understand, analyse and reshape the discourse dedicated to questions of social justice and teacher education.

The articles derive both from empirical and conceptual research in the field of Social Justice Education. Therefore, we arranged them in two main parts: The empirical contributions by (in alphabetical order) Luisa Hopfendorf, Magdalena Klaes, Michael Koppel, Leila Pimentel Lechthoff, and Torben Schulte focus on the ways both in-service and pre-service teachers position themselves towards Social Justice Education. Jannik Handke, Vanessa Krjutschkow, and Svenja Schillings show at the example of various analogue and digital materials, how English language lessons can relate to social justice topics.

Even by this very short introduction, it becomes clear that the common denominator for our work on critical language education is an understanding of criticality as profoundly connected to social justice. In line with Fraser, we understand social justice as “parity of participation” (Fraser, 1998, 2001), which refers to the three dimensions of “redistribution, recognition and representation” (Fraser, 2009). In addition to equal access to social recognition and to resources that make participation possible in the first place, this refers in particular to an “equal voice in public deliberation and decision-making” (Kerner, 2010, p. 44). This equity of voice can only be achieved if, supported through an active and continuous empowerment, minoritised groups not only participate in the discourse, but reshape it accordingly. This requires (especially) the more privileged actors to use their privilege towards the liberation of the oppressed, to use Freire's (1993/1970) famous terminology. In this sense, social justice, and parity of participation, can only be striven for when connected to societal transformation (Luke, 2019). This addresses a central concern of *Social Justice Education*, namely

“creating a society where everyone has fair access to the resources and opportunities to develop their full capacities, and everyone is welcome to participate democratically with others to mutually shape social policies and institutions that govern civic life.” (Bell, 2023, n.p.)

To achieve this goal, learners must be equipped to recognise and deconstruct key mechanisms of marginalisation and oppression and find ways to replace them with more socially just practices. Due to this objective, *Social Justice Education* is closely linked to approaches that go back to Paulo Freire’s critical pedagogy, where “reflection and action [...] upon the[] world in order to transform it” (Freire, 1993/1970, p. 52) are placed at the centre of a dialogical pedagogical interaction that aims to identify and disrupt the causes and roots of social inequality. These approaches are continued, for example, in the current strand of *critical literacy*, which emphasises the ability to engage in the use

“of the technologies of print and other media of communication to analyze, critique, and transform the norms, rule systems, and practices governing the social fields of institutions and everyday life” (Luke, 2014, p. 21).

As Blume & Gerlach (in press) show, such an educational policy has only recently started to gain traction in the German discourse on English Language Teaching (cf. also König, 2023). Besides the contributions to David Gerlach’s (2020) seminal collection on *Kritische Fremdsprachendidaktik*, recent work has focused on opening up the formerly-tabooed PARSNIP topics – politics, alcohol, religion, sexuality, narcotics, -isms, and pornography – for English Language Teaching (Ludwig & Summer, 2023), with mental health (Ludwig et al., 2024) and gender (König, 2018; König et al., 2016; Louloudi & Schildhauer, 2023) providing further crucial fields for Social Justice Education. This trend is continued by some contributions in the special issue at hand:

Jannik Handke explores critical deconstructions of racism in the example of high school sports. In doing so, he centres literature, and in particular the novel *Friday Night Lights* (Bissinger, 1990), as the main medium around which critical reflection questions are built, thereby highlighting the essential role of literary materials in creating mirrors, windows and sliding doors in the ELT classroom (after Bishop, 1990). Furthermore, his teaching unit emphasises the importance of centring students’ voices and paying attention to their own experiences with the respective socio-political topic.

Svenja Schillings introduces queer critical literacies (after Govender & Andrews, 2022) as a fundamental framework to help “challenge the cis- and heteronormative gaze in ELT” (abstract). In doing so, she puts gender at the core of an intersectional approach to English education, underlining that criticality should foster an understanding of social categories (as well as privilege and disadvantage) as entangled and interconnected. In her teaching unit, she also highlights the important role of a multimodal approach in helping students understand intersectionality as profoundly connected to all the life worlds they inhabit.

Finally, in the same manner, *Vanessa Krjutschkow* focuses on the development of a critical lesson unit that combines the literary classic *The Catcher in the Rye* (Salinger, 2014/1951) with the exceedingly popular narrative adventure game *Life is Strange* (Dontnod, 2015). Vanessa not only emphasises the importance of deconstructing canonical literature but underlines the fact that doing so through materials with which students can better identify is key to building critical competences.

Jannik’s, Svenja’s and Vanessa’s contributions focus on the exploration of critical literacies as a fundamental conceptual source for the ELT classroom that has not yet been adopted in the German *Bildungspolitik* widely, or systematically and systemically. However, Social Justice Education in itself is not necessarily new to the field. In fact, social justice-related questions have a far longer tradition in the German ELT discourse. In particular, they are at the core of the debate on inclusive ELT, which was fuelled by the UN Resolution on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (ratified by Germany in 2008): True to the title of KÜchler & Roters’ (2014) seminal contribution, many voices in this discourse argue for “Embracing Everyone” and providing English Language Teaching for all learners, across all (special) needs they may have (see Gerlach & Schmidt, 2021, and Schildhauer & Zehne, 2022, for comprehensive summaries), which means that social justice questions often arise in relation to the “challenge” (Schildhauer et al., 2024) of providing English instruction under conditions of what Krause & Kuhl (2018) term “maximal heterogeneity” (p. 11; our translation).

Recently, this discourse has moved further from its original focus on a narrow understanding of inclusive practice focused on “special educational needs” (still exemplified by the recent volume of Schick & Rohde, 2022) to considering linguistic diversity regarding first/family languages as a crucial field (e.g., Elsner & Lohe, 2021). Here, the influence of international discourses concerned with plurilingualism and translanguaging – which are mostly based

on critical roots, too (e.g. Pennycook, 2006, 2021) – provides essential incentives for raising awareness and developing revised classroom discourse practices in the light of linguistic justice (e.g. García et al., 2017; García & Wei, 2014; Lau & Van Viegen, 2020; Louloudi, 2024; Panagiotopoulou et al., 2020; Seltzer, 2023; Shepard-Carey & Tian, 2023). Two contributions in the present special issue take up this thread and spin it further, providing new empirical insights from various contexts:

Luisa Hopfendorf explores in-service teachers' perspectives of translanguaging pedagogies. Using qualitative expert interviews as her primary methodology, she investigates how English teachers from Germany and Finland understand and reflect on translanguaging as a relevant concept for their ELT classrooms. Taking into consideration the situatedness of each field of study, she draws on similarities and differences that emerge from these international contexts, concluding that “systemic structures that perpetuate monolingual ideologies” (p. 35) are still a major factor of influence in the way these teachers think of following a translanguaging pedagogy. Among the systemic changes needed, Luisa mentions teacher education that could empower “teachers to reflect on their stances and teaching practices” (p. 36).

In a similar vein, *Leila Pimentel Lechthoff* conducted interviews with three teachers at a comprehensive school in Germany whose classrooms hosted recently immigrated students. Her qualitative content analysis uncovers that the teachers are aware of the needs of the recently immigrated students to varying extents, but that they have to navigate these needs in a system that is detrimental to socially just teaching practices. For this reason (and some others), the teachers perpetuate a double-monolingual policy: They follow an immersion-oriented approach to teaching English that allows – if any – only German as an auxiliary tool in the classroom, putting the recently immigrated students at a doubled disadvantage and very effectively depriving them of their voice in Fraser's terminology. Amongst others, Leila also calls for changes in teacher education as a necessary measure to move to a more socially just teaching environment for recently immigrated students.

Thereby, Leila and Luisa touch upon the crucial question of what kind of teacher education is needed to become a critical foreign language teacher (Gerlach & Lüke, 2024), who, amongst others, possesses a Critical Classroom Discourse Competence that allows teachers to be willing and knowledgeable enough to reflect on their own socio-cultural positioning (Gerlach & Fashing-Varner, 2020) in order to discover and transform practices in their own

English teaching that are not conducive to fostering social justice (Schildhauer, 2023). What is needed, therefore, is a Social Justice Teacher Education that

“goes beyond a celebration of diversity to attempt to prepare teachers who are willing and able to work within and outside of their classrooms to change the inequities that exist in both schooling and the wider society” (Zeichner, 2011, p. 10).

Elsewhere (Louloudi & Schildhauer, 2024), we argue that besides developing a critical professional vision (Schildhauer, 2024), Social Justice Teacher Education must enable student-teachers to exercise criticality, student-centredness, and discomfort in their teaching. It has to enable future teachers to situate their teaching on the cross-sections of the various digital cultures in which their learners encounter and negotiate social justice topics and to base their classroom discourse on translanguaging practices that allow for the authentic negotiation of these subjectively relevant and sensitive topics.

In order to pursue this ambitious trajectory, we have to understand more thoroughly the various perspectives and positionings of pre- as well as in-service teachers in relation to Social Justice Education. In this special issue, three authors provide valuable contributions to that endeavour:

First, *Michael Koppel* investigates pre-service teachers' perspectives on global citizenship education (GCE). After giving an overview of how GCE has been developing in ELT in the recent years, he focuses on teacher education as the main influence of how (future) teachers think of integrating GCE into their English classroom. His results show a clear negotiation of theoretical GCE strands: even though pre-service teachers find the concept highly relevant for their future classrooms, they still criticise its potentially problematic connection to (the German understanding of) interculturality, as well as its broadness and lack of systemic embeddedness.

Torben Schulte emphasises the importance of looking into in-service teachers' perspectives on gender and the ways they think of its inclusion in their ELT classrooms. Through expert interviews and a qualitative content analysis research design, he first explores how the participating teachers understand gender – namely “ranging from biological essentialism to more socially constructed viewpoints” (p. 166) – and then delves into the connections they made with regard to its implementation in the classroom. Here, a wide span of perceptions arises as well, “with the participants either actively supplementing male-dominant teaching materials with female perspectives, trusting

the textbook without further reflection, or either accepting or being unaware of gender biases” (p. 170). A great emphasis is also put on the lack of support and reflection on a teacher education-level.

Both Michael’s and Torben’s contributions highlight how crucial it is that certain topics and goals are relevant to language teachers in the first place for transformation to take place in their classrooms. This argument implicitly relates to the concept of Language Teacher Identity (LTI) that has recently gained traction in the discourse on (critical) language teacher education. LTI refers to “the ways in which teachers view themselves, how they think about themselves and their profession, and how they position themselves within the institutional frame in which they work” (Gerlach, 2023, p. 145; our translation). Working on LTI in teacher education is profoundly important as it is believed to have a considerable impact on how teachers teach (Gerlach, 2023, p. 149), i.e. eventually reflexively transform what they gained in teacher education into their own teaching practice (Bergmann et al., 2021). In line with this reasoning,

Magdalena Klaes investigates racial criticism as connected to Language Teacher Identity. In particular, she reflects on the results of her qualitative research based on focus-group interviews with pre-service teachers about their attitudes towards problematic classroom materials, to find out that they “positioned themselves as strong advocates of taking racial critical approaches into account when planning and giving (future) lessons as well as designing and using teaching materials” (p. 109). In that, the participants strongly emphasise the role of teacher education in fostering such a perspective, and ultimately, also helping form a critical stance (and LTI) towards education in general. Consequently, Magdalena closes her contribution by advocating for a six-point program for teacher education, which includes the active work on LTI as a central component.

Magdalena’s contribution, thus, exemplifies what is true for all articles in this special issue: All of them dedicate themselves to raising the painful topics that *must* be part of the agenda of Social Justice (Teacher) Education in English Language Teaching in the years to come. At the same time, they exemplify that critical language education should

“seek to connect the local conditions of language to broader social formations, drawing connections between classrooms, conversations, textbooks, tests, or translations and issues of gender, class, sexuality, race, ethnicity, culture, identity, politics, ideology or discourse” (Pennycook, 2008, p. 169).

In this extensive and discomfoting attempt to disrupt and restructure a well-established system, we argue that teacher education plays, in fact, the most profound role.

In the spirit of the title of this special issue – centring pre-service teachers’ perspectives in Critical English language education – we close this introduction to leave the stage to our wonderful students, whose fantastic work fills us with much optimism in dark times. It has been an absolute pleasure to mentor them, learn alongside them and have, truly, one of the most uncomplicated, professional, and eye-opening editorial experiences in our academic journeys.

From the bottom of our hearts, we would like to thank them for sharing their work, but also all the moments of discomfort, fear, anger, frustration, and hope that brought us here today. We would also like to extend our gratitude to Lotta König for supporting us in this endeavour by shared spirit and deed and to Gurco Sevim Cakmak, whose keen-eyed support in proofreading and style sheeting has been greatly appreciated by all of us. Last but not least, we are very grateful that Lilian Streblow as representative of the PFLB editorial board supported our somewhat unconventional project so whole-heartedly and that Sylvia Schütze used her super-human editorial skills in the final stages of this project once more.

Leni & Peter

Bielefeld, Halloween 2024

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