Instagramming for Justice: The Potentials and Pitfalls of Culturally Relevant Professional Learning on Instagram

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Abstract
Social media offers potential for educator professional learning, but platforms’ for-profit nature complicates this practice, especially for professional learning around justice-oriented pedagogies. This exploratory study investigated 551 publicly available Instagram posts shared by 11 purposefully sampled, justice-oriented education influencers over an 8-week period as the COVID-19 pandemic and renewed activism for racial justice unfolded in the United States. Qualitative analysis of post content indicated these influencers offered pandemic-related support, while also illustrating, enacting, and engaging culturally relevant and sustaining pedagogies. However, promotional content was abundantly layered within posts and a cohesive message of how to enact culturally sustaining pedagogies was largely absent. Reflecting some of the paradoxes of learning via social media, our findings suggest there is some opportunity for justice-oriented professional learning from social media, however education influencers’ content is limited by platforms’ opaque algorithms and for-profit business models, which govern what influencers post and what followers see.

Keywords Culturally relevant pedagogy · Influencer · Instagram · Professional development · Social media · Social networking

Introduction
Recent TechTrends articles have framed social media as enabling self-directed learning (Haworth, 2016) that offers a source of educator professional growth (Tucker, 2019), particularly at moments of societal disruption (Greenhalgh & Koehler, 2017). Herein, we build upon and complicate this framing of social media by examining educator Instagram in the Spring 2020 context, when teachers struggled to transition to remote teaching due to COVID-19 and meet renewed calls for racial justice in the United States (U.S.).

Evidence suggests that many educators lack the preparation and in-person mentorship needed to implement culturally relevant practice (Vass, 2017), or pedagogies that take a critical lens to what is taught and how it is taught, centering students’ lived experiences and identities to support learning (Ladson-Billings, 1995a). In this study, we consider the possibility that social media may offer a novel source of educator professional learning (PL) that is justice-oriented; i.e., PL that aims to counter and critique institutional structures of oppression, preparing teachers to enact culturally relevant, anti-bias, or anti-racist pedagogies (see Derman-Sparks et al., 2020; Escayg, 2019; Kleinrock, 2021; Ladson-Billings, 1995a).

Despite much research into justice-oriented teacher PL (e.g., Fernández, 2019; Green et al., 2020; Kohli et al., 2018), such PL within online mediums or social media has gone largely unexamined. This study therefore seeks to explore the potential of social media to host teacher professional learning around pedagogies that center justice, equity, and cultural relevance.
A second priority in this research is to examine the complicated reality that social media operate on harmful logics of platform capitalism (Srnicek, 2016), where inequity is not only reflected but promoted through platforms’ very designs (Benjamin, 2019). On social media, misinformation, conspiracy, and harmful messaging proliferates, commercial content is wide-spread, self-promotion is rampant, and content exhibiting historically privileged identities is prioritized (Broussard, 2018; McGrew et al., 2017; Staudt Willet, 2019). Rodriguez et al. (2020) explain this phenomenon: “Platforms encode anti-Blackness in their algorithms because racial platform capitalism encourages the circulation of ideas and resources that support the social ideology of White supremacy, which upholds racial capitalism” (p. 503). Consequently, social platforms can be learning spaces that “miseducate” participants (see Greenhalgh et al., 2021). In light of racial platform capitalism’s harms, it is unclear if teachers should use social media for PL, and if the content housed within has any value for learning related to justice-oriented pedagogies and practices.

In this study, we examine content shared by popular justice-oriented education influencers—individuals who have achieved micro-celebrity status that they use to promote education practices, philosophies, products, and services (Carpenter et al., 2022; Marcelo & Marcelo, 2021; Shelton et al., 2020). The study builds on Shelton et al. (2020), which showed that some Instagram education influencers, the majority of whom presented systematically excluded identities, advanced justice-oriented professional learning for educator followers. To further investigate this finding, in the present study, we draw on a purposeful sample of expressly justice-oriented education influencers, looking specifically for culturally relevant messaging directed towards other educators in their posts. These influencers may not be typical of the growing number of online education celebrities, but they are illustrative of a unique subset of educators who may be influencing for good, albeit doing so under the governance of problematic platform norms. We grounded the study in a framework centered on culturally relevant and sustaining pedagogies (Ladson-Billings, 1995a; Paris, 2012) and racial platform capitalism (Benjamin, 2019; Srnicek, 2016), asking: What professional learning do justice-oriented education influencers who presented systematically excluded identities offer on Instagram and how does their messaging align with culturally relevant and sustaining pedagogies?

Literature Review

Research into justice-oriented teacher professional learning (PL) has suggested that such learning is particularly nuanced and has become increasingly challenging in recent years, because, as Dover et al. (2018) put it, “we are teaching in times that are not easily fixed” (p. 230). For example, in his critical observations of a social justice workshop for high school teachers, Grinage (2020) exposed superficial multiculturalism within the PL curriculum. That is, White teacher participants “sang and danced for diversity” (p. 7) as opposed to critically engaging with authentic social justice classroom issues. In addition to PL curriculum barriers, researchers have identified barriers to implementation following justice-oriented PL. Such issues include a lack of support from school leadership (Lac & Diamond, 2019), racist institutional policies (Dover et al., 2018), or teachers’ “pedagogical insecurities” (Szefler et al., 2020, p. 780).

Consequently, scholars have considered particular design features of effective justice-oriented PL (e.g., Fernández, 2019; Green et al., 2020; Kohli et al., 2018), some of which are relevant to the context of justice-oriented learning on Instagram. First, researchers have shown that justice-oriented PL designed on smaller scales enables difficult conversations that can be focused on the local context (Green et al., 2020; Martinez, 2017). In contrast, education influencers amass large followings, such that participant accountability and targeted scaffolding may be limited. Nonetheless, influencers may have an appeal given their proximity to the classroom and the perceived intimacy they create (Hou, 2018).

Researchers have also illustrated the importance of sustained engagement in justice-oriented PL (Fernández, 2019; Martinez, 2017; Navarro, 2018), such as multi-year public pedagogy groups (e.g., Kohli et al., 2018). However, such groups often require a substantial commitment to an externally mandated schedule, whereas PL via Instagram features low barriers to entry, varied levels of potential involvement, and possibilities for anonymity, which may support continued engagement (Carpenter et al., 2022).

Other evidence suggests that effective justice-oriented PL should involve shared leadership that centers discussion, collaboration, and the voices of Educators of Color (Fernández, 2019; Fowler, 2019; Martinez, 2017). Kohli et al. (2015) called for facilitators and participants to act together to “provoke cooperative dialogue, build unity, provide shared leadership… in political analysis of their role as educators in the reproduction or resistance of inequality” (p. 11). The expertise, selection process, and preparation of facilitators and moderators matter (Kennedy, 2016), including in social media contexts (Hillman et al., 2021). Facilitators of Color may disrupt the Whiteness frequently centered in teacher education (Navarro et al., 2019). However, on education social media, content is commonly “directed by a small group of super users” (Kimmons et al., 2021, p. 125), and it is unclear if these individuals deserve leadership roles in the profession (Thomson & Riddle, 2019). Certain Instagram influencers are promoted by the platform algorithms, thus gaining increased visibility (Banjo, 2021), regardless of their qualifications. Teacher followers do
wield some power—who they follow or unfollow, and what they like, amplify, and comment on can shape influencers’ future posting behaviors (van Driel & Dumitrica, 2020); however, if a dialogic element is missing for followers, there is a danger that Instagram PL becomes superficial.

Social media is one way for educators who are eager to implement justice-oriented pedagogies to find support (Seglem & Garcia, 2015). Such learning can be teacher-centered, teacher-initiated, easy to access, and free of direct cost (Nochumson, 2020). For example, Carpenter et al. (2021) found that the tweets teachers shared via the #remotelearning and #remotelearning hashtags in Spring 2020 featured various forms of knowledge sharing, social sharing, and information broadcasting. However, justice-oriented education content on social media is sometimes of questionable quality (Hu et al., 2019), perhaps due to a lack of vetting (Shelton et al., 2020). Also, the often personalized nature of teacher social media use may limit its potential to contribute to systemic change. The quantity of social media content can prove overwhelming with self-promotional, commercial, or inauthentic posts cluttering content feeds (Carpenter et al., 2020; Greenhow et al., 2021; Krutka & Greenhalgh, 2021; Staudt Willet, 2019). In sum, professional learning via social media should be approached cautiously given its pitfalls and perils.

The present study focuses on one aspect of educator social media: the content shared by education influencers (Carpenter et al., 2022). Influencers’ popularity, and in turn their power, may lie in part in the reality that “Institutional experts haven’t adapted to today’s media ecosystem, [so] other commentators are filling the gap” (DiResta, 2021). In one of the only studies of Instagram education influencers to date, Shelton et al. (2020) observed the paradox that while promotional material was rampant, education influencers also shared useful pedagogical practices. Content from 18 education influencers offered emotional support, professional motivation, classroom and lesson planning support, along with promotions. A subset of influencers—predominantly Educators of Color—posted about social justice and justice-oriented pedagogies. For some time, education Influencers of Color have been prominent voices on social media to address inequity and bias in P-12 (Collins, 2019), but this work has received little attention from researchers. This study therefore sought to explore justice-oriented education influencers’ messaging to understand related opportunities and challenges.

**Theoretical Framework**

This study was grounded in the theories of racial platform capitalism and culturally relevant and sustaining pedagogies (CRP/CSP).

**Racial Platform Capitalism**

Social media platforms are for-profit entities that operate under capitalist principles (Krutka et al., 2019; Šrnicek, 2016). When a teacher opens Instagram, they are not simply shown all posts from the accounts they follow; rather platform algorithms “manage and massage” content, determining which posts each user sees (Vaidhyanathan, 2018, p. 144). Algorithm parameters are unknown and changing, and can reinforce biases present within society at large (Noble, 2018) while serving the platform’s for-profit goals. In turn, content that elicits reactions and presents extreme viewpoints can be made highly visible, content that upholds White supremacy can be more widely circulated, and teachers’ social networks can easily become echo chambers (Benjamin, 2019; Broussard, 2018). Platforms like Instagram operate under racial platform capitalism, circulating content that supports White supremacy (Benjamin, 2019; Rodríguez et al., 2020). Users also play a role in this system, as individuals with discriminatory biases (either implicit or explicit) can negatively shape social media spaces. For example, Influencers of Color assume unique risks of being subjected to trolling and other forms of cyberviolence (Nagle, 2018; Noble, 2018). Additionally, influencers who bring for-profit motives to the platform may pose conflicts of interest when presenting justice-oriented work. As Grinage (2020) illustrated in the context of in-person PL, facilitators with for-profit motives may offer justice-oriented PL that centers paths of least resistance, an illusion of criticality, and “happy talk” (Grinage, 2020, p. 18).

**Culturally Relevant and Sustaining Pedagogies**

Culturally relevant pedagogy emerged from Ladson-Billings’s (1995a, 2014) research with successful teachers of Black children to addresses the debt of racist educational policies, although the theories have been applied to cultures and identities broadly defined, including for example, dis/ability (Waitoller & King Thorius, 2016). Paris and Alim (2014) extended Ladson-Billings’s framing to encompass culturally sustaining pedagogies, which frame the purpose of teaching around how to “explore, honor, extend, and, at times, problematize [students’] heritage and community practices” (Paris & Alim, 2014, p. 86). In this study, we utilize Ladson-Billings’s three culturally relevant pedagogy domains: academic success, cultural competence, and critical consciousness, noting that cultural sustainment could be present across domains. The domains are described below with the understanding that CRP/CSP has typically been concerned with pedagogies to support student learning. We, however, used the framework to understand support of teacher learning both about and through CRP/CSP.
Academic Success

Culturally relevant and sustaining teachers promote students’ academic success by positioning student culture, language, and identity as learning resources (Ladson-Billings, 1995a). Teachers should draw on the knowledge in students’ homes and communities, what Moll and Gonzalez (1994) called *funds of knowledge*. An example of CRP/CSP pedagogy centered on academic success is Muhammad’s (2020) literacy curriculum, in which teachers must “cultivate the minds and hearts” (p. 9) within students, thus drawing out the genius within each student.

Cultural Competence

Culturally relevant and sustaining teachers demonstrate the “ability to help students appreciate and celebrate their cultures of origin while gaining fluency in at least one other culture” (Ladson-Billings, 2014, p. 75). Teachers and students must understand that culture is pluralistic; an individual may enact their cultural identity in intersectional ways, spanning different identity components. Cultural competence requires building authentic relationships of solidarity with people of different communities, identities, and cultures. Culturally relevant teachers use students’ cultural strengths as a “bridge to school learning” (Ladson-Billings, 1995a, p. 161), while avoiding essentializing culture and instead embracing how cultures evolve and differ (Paris, 2012).

Critical Consciousness

Culturally relevant and sustaining teachers support students to “develop a broader sociopolitical consciousness that allows them to critique the cultural norms, values, mores, and institutions that produce and maintain social inequities” (Ladson-Billings, 1995a, p. 162). This notion is rooted in critical pedagogy (Freire, 1996) and traditions of African American teaching. To promote critical consciousness in students, teachers must develop awareness of how social and institutional inequities operate and persist, and not be afraid to point out the “political underpinnings of the students’ community and social world” (Ladson-Billings, 1995b, p. 477). Thus, CRP/CSP requires teachers to become change agents who engage in “explicit resistances” (Paris, 2012, pp. 95) to promote justice and democracy through schooling.

Method

To better understand the Instagram education context and its potentials and pitfalls for justice-oriented educator professional learning, we qualitatively analyzed publicly available Instagram posts of justice-oriented education influencers.

Data Sources

Data included Instagram posts published between March 15—May 15, 2020, marking the early days of the U.S. COVID-19 pandemic. Data comprised all Instagram posts (N = 551) made by 11 education influencers over the time period. To construct the sample, we identified education influencers with over ten thousand followers who expressed a social justice orientation. We prioritized including influencers who presented historically marginalized identities in terms of race (e.g., Asian American, Black), ethnicity (e.g., Latinx), and gender and sexuality (e.g., non-cisgender), as a response to the historical centering of Whiteness in social media and scholarly research (Ray, 2018; Waxman, 2019). An initial list of potential accounts was identified from *Learning for Justice*’s article about social justice education influencers (Collins, 2019), a popular anti-bias, anti-racist educator collective list, and our experiences as followers of Instagram education content. We then identified additional influencer accounts by searching accounts with whom influencers interacted. We then purposefully selected a final sample that represented different identities, professional roles, and U.S. geographical regions (Table 1). Posts were manually collected, with screenshots of both the post image and text caption stored digitally for subsequent analysis.

Analysis

We analyzed posts qualitatively to identify patterns, while describing post content in rich detail (Tracy, 2019). To strengthen trustworthiness and credibility, we employed investigator triangulation by having at least two researchers involved in all qualitative data analysis (Elliott et al., 1999). Coding began with inductive analysis by having at least two researchers open-coded all data (Miles et al., 2014), wrote researcher memos, and engaged in data conversations to expand, consolidate, and synthesize coding decisions. We concluded that influencers’ messaging overlapped with the themes observed in Shelton et al., (2020; Established Education Influencer Behavior themes), but also aligned to Ladson-Billings’ (2014) three CRP/CSP domains.

We then began a second round of deductive coding, applying our theoretical framework to identify instances of influencers supporting teacher learning both about and through CRP/CSP. Two authors coded all data, identifying evidence aligning to the three CRP/CSP domains, the Established Education Influencer Behaviors (Shelton et al.,

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1 We set 10,000 followers as a threshold because Instagram grants additional functionalities to such users. While 10,000 followers may be relatively small compared to influencers in some fields (Boyd, 2021), within the education niche, this was a sizable number.
2020), and Pandemic Responses. Finally, a third round of coding was conducted with the addition of a third coder, to confirm our decisions and enhance trustworthiness (Tracy, 2019). The codes were finalized into the three themes, which contained six codes and 19 subcodes (Table 2). For the Established Education Influencer Behaviors, we eventually included just one of the four original codes from Shelton et al. (2020): Promotion, because evidence of this code was prolific and the other three previous codes aligned with the new codes developed for the Pandemic Response theme. Any individual post could be assigned multiple codes and/or sub-codes.

**Ethical Considerations and Positionality**

Given our previous research into teachers’ social media use, we were intrigued by the potential for education influencers to offer a space for much-needed justice-oriented professional learning (Shelton et al., 2020), yet we were also aware of the limitations of platforms built around a capitalist agenda. Our goal in studying this population of education influencers was, in part, to surface that tension and illustrate the ways justice-oriented learning may still be occurring on Instagram. Milner’s (2007) framework for researcher racial and cultural positionality guided this inquiry. Acknowledging that “Researchers’ personal values and understandings hold ethical meanings for how subjects are represented” (Pope & Patterson, 2019, p. 83), we took careful stock of the power differentials (Parson, 2019) between ourselves and those we observed. As four White scholars, we brought power and bias to this work, along with our own personal history of grappling with White supremacist ideology, our commitments to teach towards justice, and our status as researchers who controlled the framing, scope, and outlet for this research. We also considered the education influencers, whose status as influencers and expertise in justice-oriented pedagogies carried power, while understanding that some influencers lacked power due to the historically marginalized identities they presented.

With this in mind, we considered aspects of beneficence, non-malfeasance, respect for autonomy, and justice in the study design. We were careful to continually question ourselves and one another, and referred to research by Scholars of Color to interpret the data. In an effort to respect influencer anonymity and data authenticity (Bruckman, 2002), we elected to disguise all quoted data shared in this manuscript (e.g., removing influencers’ names, not including post images, and redacting references to geographical locations, particular products they market, or other identifiers).

**Findings**

Figure 1 summarizes the themes observed across influencers’ posts, which often overlapped within a single post. Influencers spoke directly to teacher-followers, with messages appearing to aim to teach and support educators at a moment of crisis. Influencer K explained, “Teachers are literally using the Gram and other platforms to train themselves.” These influencers cast themselves as facilitators of teachers’ professional learning.

**Established Education Influencer Behaviors**

Justice-oriented influencers’ messaging was similar in some ways to what we previously observed across influencers who were not expressly justice-oriented (Shelton et al., 2020). For example, promotional content was prolific. As Fig. 2 shows, promotional messaging included self and corporate promotions, with self-promotion being the most common.
| Code/Subcode | Definition | Quote | Examples of Common Content Observed |
|--------------|------------|-------|------------------------------------|
| 1. Promotion | Sharing of content that promoted oneself, such as the influencer’s own products, services, and self (i.e. their image) | @[redacted username] and I created this free resource for educators and parents navigating what’s going on right now with younger students. Facts about the virus and a few tips about how to stay safe should help calm some nerves. Kids don’t get as anxious if they know what’s happening. We hope this is helpful. Find the link in stories for the eBook and 3 activities (Influencer C) | Advertising one’s TpT resources or Patreon subscription; Stylized selfies |
| 1b | Sharing of content that promoted corporate enterprises or fellow influencers | Loving these masks from @[redacted username]! So gorgeous they almost make me want to go outside After following folks like @[redacted username] and @ [redacted username] for a bit, I’m thinking more about my responsibility as a consumer & I’m trying to be more intentional supporting local companies instead of fast fashion companies. When I learned that masks were required, I started searching for businesses run by people of the global majority and was sooooo excited to see that @[redacted username] is making gorgeous handmade Korean designs & donating some of the profits to local healthcare workers We’re all going to need a few in masks, so drop the names of BIPOC who are making masks so we can support! (Influencer E) | Advertising for companies like Kleenex, Cricut, Michael’s Craft Stores; Advertising teacher-led conferences and workshops; Shouting out fellow influencers |
| 2. Support General Pandemic Response | Humor | [Image reads: New trigger words for me are “username” & “password”] Who else is done with this yet!!!! So many platforms & messages coming from all different directions, all the logging in. I AM SO DONE (Influencer K) | Jokes about pandemic weight gain, #TeacherProblems, technology frustrations |
| 2b | Suggesting and demonstrating safety protocols | Please wear face masks y’all. Doesn’t need to be some fancy, smancy thing. A scarf, an old T-shirt, anything that covers your nose & mouth. You can have COVID-19 & have zero symptoms. Protects yourself + others (Influencer H) | Advocating for using hand sanitizer, wearing masks, social distancing |
| 2c | Emotional support and self-care | Whatever it is you’re doing, give it your best & when you can’t anymore, rest!! It’s important not to put too much on your plate during these times. You are not alone (Influencer G) | Empathizing with the challenges of remote teaching and isolation; Words of encouragement and hope; Asking what followers need |
| Code/Subcode | Definition                                                                 | Quote                                                                                                                                                                                                 | Examples of Common Content Observed                                                                 |
|-------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 2d          | Sharing pandemic news or facts                                              | [Photo of news article] 
So powerful: Couple Eddie + Blanche, hand-in-hand, shared a final hug, as their battle with COVID-19 neared its close 
Both passed earlier this week, just two days apart (Influencer I) | Sharing statistics and news stories                                                                                                                                                    |
| 3. Facilitate Educators' Pandemic Response | 3a Sharing of learning materials and teaching approaches for educators, students, and/or parents that provide particular support amidst the pandemic (that were previously unnecessary) | [Photo advertising virtual lessons that include “read aloud, mini-lesson, and writing workshop ideas”] 
Starting next week our ELA materials will be shared on the [redacted] Facebook page @ 2:00 PST w/ a replay available after & then we'll be LIVE on the [redacted] page at 2:30 PST! Thanks to [@redacted] for organizing this. Super-exciting! (Influencer D) | “Self-care for families” worksheet, Social emotional learning resources, Remote learning schedules and organizational approaches, Discussion of how to teach remotely equitably |
|             | 3b Educator emotional support, empathizing with challenges                  | [Sponsored] In my memoir, I am sure distance teaching will rate as one of the hardest things I’ve ever done. It has been incredibly difficult to be away from my students, and also it has been incredibly hard to immediately learn a whole new way to teach (keep reading to find out how [@redacted] & [@redacted] are helping teachers out with this). Many of you are experiencing the same feelings. I get so overwhelmed; it can be hard to see any bright spots. But there are things that are true even with our current situation: 1. I work with an amazing team of educators! 2. Educators don’t give up! 3. Endless screen time helps you realize how important F2F contact is! To support teachers all over the nation, [@redacted] is the founding partner of the [@redacted] Distance Learning Projects repository, which will help teachers find resources to help our students! The link in my bio has more info! (Influencer B) | Sharing words of encouragement, Sharing influencers’ feelings in solidarity |
| 3c          | Documenting educators' pandemic response                                    | California schools have officially closed for the year. We knew it was coming & that it is necessary, but I’m still heartbroken. Going through my phone and looking at old photos, I miss F2F teaching (Influencer G) | Stories of influencers’ pandemic experiences                                                                                                                       |
Table 2 (continued)

| Code/ Subcode | Definition | Quote | Examples of Common Content Observed |
|---------------|------------|-------|------------------------------------|
| 4. Facilitate Academic Success | Messaging aims to facilitate academic success of students of historically marginalized identities on the basis of race, class, language, gender, sexuality, dis/ability, by: | | |
| 4a | Sharing resources for parents, teachers, students (worksheets, video lessons, lesson plans) that are intended to foster academic competence through high student engagement | Free & Easy-Prep Learning @ Home! I put together these lists on Thursday night when thinking over “what next” after hearing we will be home teaching & learning for most likely 2 weeks. Thinking about equity, I went for things that kids can do @ home, with paper & a pencil, or pen (maybe crayons). A few tech items on the list, but not too many. I tried to consider, what if there is no wi-fi, what if there is no printer? [Link redacted] | Videotaped lessons; Descriptions of lessons the influencer implemented that day; Sharing discussion prompts; Links to their TpT resources |
| 4b | Advocating for implementation of educational approaches that support diverse learners | Be THE teacher who gives GRACE. Be THE teacher who shows COMPASSION. Be THE teacher that SEES, because we ALL hope to be SEEN. Be THE teacher that makes students want to be in your class. Go read [redacted Instagram account]'s post about Being this Teacher | Advocating for humanizing pedagogies; Emphasis on relationships; Celebrating culture in the classroom; Giving students and parents “grace” |
| 4c | Critiquing educational approaches that harm diverse learners | In this new version of learning, why are people thinking the brick & mortar classroom is an even exchange for distance learning when obviously it isn’t. Why are folks so focused on retention, compliance, and grades? Maybe that is who they were as teachers before & it is just showing now more profoundly | Critiques of learning loss, grading, racist school policies, white-centered curriculum, racialized microaggressions in schools |

5. Develop Cultural Competence
Messaging shines a light on experiences and perspectives of educators and students of diverse backgrounds relating to race, culture, language, gender, and dis/ability by:

| 5a | Sharing of influencers’ lived experiences (providing followers a “window” into a different culture or identity) | Ramadan Mubarak! It’s time to empty your stomach & feed your soul. Fasting puts things into perspective real quick and not eating or having a sip from sunrise to sunset is a real test. Plus during COVID, it is an even stranger test. But I am thankful that I do have food to eat at 7:37 pm. Yes, I’m very aware of the exact time! #fastin #hungry Stay Home and Keep Healthy, | Instagram live and Vlog series about Black educators' stories; Sharing personal stories about experiences with injustice to educate; Sharing photos that provide a window into the influencers’ home culture |
| Code/Subcode | Definition | Quote | Examples of Common Content Observed |
|-------------|------------|-------|------------------------------------|
| 5b          | Celebrating influencers’ culture or identity | Just in the last couple years have I begun to embrace my unique identity & story as part of the diverse Asian diaspora. I spent my childhood being presented with a single story (Thank you, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie! Don’t forget to cite your sources!) about the Asian American experience, and never saw myself in it. I wanted to like the things I thought an Asian American girl was supposed to like, and acted to fit others’ expectations, but going down that path meant disappointing myself, & others. I hope those days are mostly behind me, but there’s a lifelong process of growing into who I am, rather than who others want me to be. I will try to be authentically and unapologetically me, to disrupt that single story. (Influencer E) | Advocating for body positivity; Celebrating Black hair; Advertising t-shirts that celebrate racial and cultural identities |
| 5c          | Showcasing children’s and adult literature with diverse characters, authors, and stories, and themes of social justice | ![Photo of various book covers] Here are a few titles to celebrate many different kinds of mothers on this mothers’ day! Find the full list at: [link redacted] What other books would you add? (Influencer B) | Sharing book lists; Selfies with books held up; Videotaped read alouds |
| 6a          | Documenting influencers’ own activism and approaches for enacting social justice | ![Photo of takeout breakfast food] Shout out to [@redacted] in Springfield for donating free meals to our community’s most vulnerable. We are here delivering it to many appreciative folks. Help us to connect other willing restaurants and volunteers to deliver meals to community members in need! Know a restaurant that can spare a few meals? Let me know! (Influencer I) | #IRunWithMaud; Photos at protests |
| 6b          | Calling followers to take action in the fight for racial and environmental justice | My first experiences of racism and discrimination often came from peers when I was just a child. Play-dates, the playground, school, at Girl Scouts… My parents had to prepare me to be discriminated against due to my race at 5 years old, so you too can work to stop your child from being a perpetrator at that age. Don’t tell me about “kids being kids,” or not wanting to shatter their view of the world. Kids shatter Black kids and children of color’s worlds and self-esteem all the time. Step up and teach them not to. (Influencer A) | Urging followers to vote; Asking what more can you do than #RunWithMaud |
| Code/Subcode | Definition | Quote | Examples of Common Content Observed |
|--------------|------------|-------|-----------------------------------|
| 6c           | Critiquing inequitable approaches to schooling and the teaching profession | “If I don’t wear my P.E. uniform, Mom, the teacher takes points off.” STOP taking off points! Taking off points is not - An assessment - Data-driven - Holistic - or Standards-based It is, however, - classist - dated - and wrong - Respectfully, One Frustrated Parent (Influencer D) | Calling out inequitable internet access, harms of testing culture, individualized learning via platforms, White Savior Complex |
| 6d           | Teaching about inequity, systemic racism, and its history | Reading John Metta: To paraphrase Orwell, white people have prejudices related to people of color because whiteness is normalized in American culture, and people of color acting “differently” serves to entrench the “obvious correctness” of white cultural norms Why is eating with a fork normal instead of using chopsticks? Why is wearing a suit to a business meeting normal instead of a loose, colorful robe? Why is a nun in a black gown and habit accepted as normal, but a woman in a burka or hijab not? Why do we teach how we teach? These questions all have the same answer: the U.S. is a society built by Western Europeans for Western Europeans. This culture is so taken for granted that most white people never even think about it, because what they do fits the norm (Influencer A) | Sharing facts and stories about racial disparities in health, policing, rent, debt inequity |

**Table 2 (continued)**
As is typical of Instagram, a common example of self-promotion was selfies, or photos featuring a close-up of the influencer presenting a highly stylized appearance. Selfies abounded across this sample, but their frequency varied by influencer; for instance, 51% of Influencer C’s posts were selfies, while just 5% of Influencer G’s posts were. Another common form of self-promotion involved promoting one’s own business endeavors, like webinars, podcasts, online conferences, t-shirt businesses, Teachers-PayTeachers stores, and Patreon subscriptions. Influencers also promoted corporate entities such as book publishers, craft supply vendors, educational technologies, and foods. Promotional content was commonly combined with other themes. For example, Influencer A layered promotional content upon a post focused on inspiring critical consciousness:

White friends, what do you do with your privilege? Commit to being anti-racist and teach your kiddos too. Challenge people to change. Don’t forget to challenge policies, too. Don’t just watch Black, indigenous, people of color do the work while you sit silently from a comfortable place in the stands. You must join in the work too. I partnered with [redacted - social justice-oriented Instagram account] to create anti-racist posters. They are free in my TpT store!

Overall, promotional content varied in how pronounced or abundant it was. For example, 57% of Influencer I’s
posts were promotional in nature, while just 14% of Influencer K’s posts were promotional.

**Pandemic-specific Education Influencer Behaviors**

The second theme illustrated influencers’ response to the pandemic (Fig. 3). General messaging included humor and emotional support, along with pandemic news and education around safety protocols. For instance, Influencer J posted a selfie with a caption promoting safety protocols, “…. Stay inside. Wash those hands. Don’t be racist. And check out [redacted—transgender and non-binary influencer account]’s tips for social distancing.” Educator-specific pandemic support was also offered, such as sharing digital learning materials, educator emotional support, and documenting educators’ pandemic reactions. Influencers posted printable remote learning schedules, videos of lessons, and advice for parents. They also discussed culturally relevant approaches to teaching amid the crisis. Influencer F shared during their school closure about the importance of teachers working with parents:

For the next few weeks, I will need to support parents in guiding my students’ academic learning at home. I know parents understand how to love and lead their kids. They teach them things all the time... way before I met their kids this August. But now I have to help manage parents’ ‘big people’ anxiety. I work with littles for a reason! Making sure my parents feel capable and successful will be an important component to this next phase.

Facing a crisis, these influencers appeared to provide just-in-time support to their followers in terms of both emotional and educational content. In particular, many posts appeared to facilitate learning that promoted CRP/CSP, serving as a potential resource to teachers and families navigating emergency remote learning.

**Professional Learning for CRP/CSP**

Lastly, influencers appeared to provide professional learning opportunities around CRP/CSP (Fig. 4).

**Facilitating Academic Success**

Some posts aimed to facilitate academic success, by sharing classroom resources, advocating for particular pedagogies, and critiquing harmful educational approaches. Influencers shared resources to support students’ diverse needs, such as a morning meeting strategy that celebrated students’ home cultures. Influencers also advocated for particular pedagogies, such as how to hold virtual online video conferences that protect and respect student identities, how to make video lessons accessible by adding captions, and how to build family-teacher relationships. Multiple posts advocated for teachers to give students, parents, and co-workers “grace,” or to treat them with compassion. Finally, influencers critiqued harmful educational approaches, such as standardized testing, discriminatory grading practices, and overemphasis on student compliance. For example, Influencer E posted an image that stated, “No kid will remember a worksheet they did while in forced isolation during a pandemic.”

**Developing Cultural Competence**

Posts also offered PL around developing cultural competence, within both teachers and students. Posts shared and celebrated the lived experiences and identities of individuals historically marginalized on the basis of race, culture, language, gender, and dis/ability. Influencers themselves unapologetically presented their humanity to followers. For example, a Black influencer shared a post about embracing her “quarantine curls” and the hair products she used to make them “pop” (Influencer C), while similarly, a non-binary influencer posted about celebrating their own curly hair:
Passing (being seen/coded as male) was incredibly important to me… so I cut my hair short, getting rid of my curls. All of a sudden, it was “sir” this and “Mr.” that. My brain made an unconscious link that curls = feminine, so I haven’t grown them out since. Now they’re growing back, and while my initial feeling was discomfort, I realized I really MISS my curls. They’re springy, fun, and require zero maintenance, and I loved this style. (Influencer J)

Such posts provided personal, and highly contextualized stories of influencers’ lived experiences. Influencers’ willingness to share their personal and often vulnerable slices of life illustrated the plurality of culture and unique cultural identities (Paris & Alim, 2014), while also creating a sense of relationship between the influencer and follower. This sense of relationship may be powerful for Teachers of Color seeking professional solidarity as well as for teachers trying to understand people whose cultures are different from their own.

Posts showcased approaches to developing students’ cultural competence. For instance, it was common to post about children’s literature with diverse characters, authors, and stories, such as the literature selections from #DiverseReads with recommended discussion prompts or activity ideas. Influencer K shared a picture of a children’s book about happiness with a Black child dancing on the cover with the caption,

This book reminds us to find the happy right now. There is a saying in Islamic scriptures, “WITH hardship comes ease.” It might be hard to find moments of happiness right now amidst the confusion and anxiety, but you can always find a little piece of happiness somewhere… I plan to record videos of myself reading books to send to my students to help.

In sum, influencers consistently celebrated the identities and lived experiences of historically marginalized identities and communities. These posts provided a window into varied cultures, perspectives, and identities, thus, becoming a space to potentially cultivate cultural competence within followers of varying identities.

Inspirational Critical Consciousness

Finally, influencers’ CRP/CSP messaging in the domain of critical consciousness was prolific. One approach involved influencers documenting their own activist pursuits. In the wake of news stories regarding Ahmaud Arbury’s murder, several influencers quickly drew attention to his story, expressed their anger and sadness, and demanded justice. Other examples include initiating online fundraisers for COVID relief and Black Lives Matter protests, with one influencer documenting an extensive effort to provide fresh water and meals to local senior citizens amid the pandemic. Three of the influencers posted about giving local and national news interviews, where they shared educators’ perspectives on issues of racial justice and COVID-19. Through illustrations of their own activism as well as calls for teachers to join such work, these influencers modeled activism inspired by their own critical consciousness.

Another aspect of critical consciousness was specific to the education context. Influencers used Instagram to advocate for equitable internet access, less worksheets and more socio-emotional learning, and for an end to “testing culture.” They also called for critiquing of curriculum. One influencer...
asked followers to re-examine their science lessons, considering the voices present, and how they fail to serve students. Similarly, Influencer D offered a personal critique of her Black son’s school experience, explaining that while learning at home, “Thomas is escaping racist school policies, a White-centered curriculum, unnecessary police contact, teacher’s low expectations, peer microaggressions and other forms of marginalization.” Many of the ideas and critiques within the sample’s posts in the early days of the pandemic ended up being trending topics in the popular press months later.

Discussion

This study illustrates that in moments of crisis and beyond, social media may provide a space for learning about culturally relevant and sustaining approaches to education. Past research has focused on justice-oriented teacher PL that is local, small scale, and in-person (e.g., Fernández, 2019; Green et al., 2020; Kohli et al., 2018). But this study suggests that influencer content may offer a novel, although imperfect, entry point for teachers seeking to learn about and engage with CRP/CSP. These findings are important in light of Sawyer et al. (2020)’s recent finding that preservice teachers are more likely to consult online sources for teaching ideas than their education professors or mentor teachers; PL on social media will likely extend beyond the pandemic and is becoming a common practice among early career teachers.

We find that justice-oriented education influencers’ messaging could not only support teachers in learning to use students’ culture to lead to academic success and to develop students’ critical consciousness, but may also potentially enhance teachers’ cultural competence and critical consciousness. Influencers offer potentially culturally relevant PL experiences by showcasing their humanity, critical stances, and activism. For the straight, White, Christian teachers who are the majority in the U.S. teacher workforce, seeing everyday slices of life from Black, Muslim, or transgender education influencers offers a window to understanding the humanity of people who are different from themselves. Such understanding is necessary for teachers to leverage their students’ cultural identities. Moreover, for teachers of historically marginalized identities, justice-oriented influencers may present a powerful source of solidarity in the struggle for professional and educational justice (Kohli et al., 2018).

That said, it is unclear how justice-oriented messaging might be taken up by teachers. Sharing images of activism may not be enough to develop and inspire meaningful social critique and action in others. Summarizing Freire and Vittoria (2007), Shih (2018) reminds us that “practice without theory” is “reduced to naive action” (p. 231), and the goal of developing a critical consciousness, while necessary for action and activism, is not to merely develop what Noddings (2013) calls “wild-eyed revolutionaries” but instead thoughtful, dialogic, informed change agents. Discussion should be at the heart of justice-oriented PL (Kohli et al., 2015), but dialogue is arguably not a strength of the Instagram medium, which has more of a focus on images. Moreover, PL to inspire critical consciousness benefits from critical reflection (Durden & Truscott, 2013), and it is unclear to what extent Instagram can facilitate such reflection. Indeed, Heath and Segal (2021) insist that unless White supremacy and other forms of oppression are “explicitly discussed and examined” these unjust hierarchies often remain “invisible, especially to those who wield the power” (p. 170).

Additionally, the issue of self or corporate promotion on Instagram is a concern, as combining anti-racism and culturally relevant pedagogy with capitalist promotional content may cause some followers to conflate justice-oriented pedagogy with something that can simply be bought or consumed. While traditional justice-oriented PL is not free of promotion or conflicts of interest (Grinage, 2020), Instagram presents a distinct form of promotion. Influencer cultures are associated with promotion, profit, and sometimes unclear commercial relationships, in ways that can make it difficult to assess influencers’ intentions, credibility, and ethics (Carpenter et al., 2022; Danesh & Duthler, 2019). Moreover, influencers are subject to Instagram’s algorithm, which at the time of this writing was reported to prioritize posts that included faces, bold colors, giveaways, and video (Barnhart, 2021). Posting promotional content may be less of a choice and more of a necessary action for Instagram influencers to have their content displayed widely. Meanwhile, social media algorithms have historically prioritized extreme, conspiratorial, and racist content as well (Benjamin, 2019), due to for-profit motives driving platform decision making (Srnicek, 2016).

Also, influencers must hold back some of their content behind paywalls or in TeachersPayTeachers.com stores if they are to make money from their labor, leaving out followers who decide not to pay. The result may be an incomplete vision of justice-oriented pedagogy, which Sleeter (2012) and Vass (2017) have argued “can itself be more problematic than constructive” (Vass, p. 460). Content that influencers shared, like multicultural children’s book recommendations, could be seen by some followers as easy ways to bring justice-oriented education to their classroom. In the context of this type of sharing, it is important to keep in mind Alim and Paris’s (2017) caution against “pedagogical quick fixes or ‘best practices’ that teachers can drop into the same old tired curriculum that deadens the souls of vast numbers of children of color in U.S. schools” (p. 12).
Still, given the struggles for new and early career teachers to implement culturally relevant pedagogy due to factors such as mentors’ resistance (Vass, 2017) and the overwhelming dominance of Whiteness in schools (Castagno, 2014), having immediate access to justice-oriented influencers could help sustain teachers seeking to do justice-oriented work. It has been suggested that U.S. Teachers of Color pay an “invisible tax” (King, 2016, para. 5) for the unre-munerated justice-oriented work they often shoulder, and influencers could argue that they are simply seeking compensation for the valuable work they are doing. Teachers-followers benefit from influencers’ work in that they are offered classroom examples and advice on demand. Developing culturally relevant and sustaining schools will require “changing an interconnected range of schooling practices,” (Vass, 2017, p. 460), and influencers might function as part of this interconnected range of practices, offering a supplement or jumping-off point to more embedded, extended, and contextually-grounded professional learning that is tailored to teachers’ environment and needs. However, while the content shared by education influencers may provide entry points into meaningful justice-oriented professional learning journeys, for other users, the same content could displace or replace more beneficial or profound learning activities.

Implications

Instead of casting education influencers as potential replacements for more traditional, formal educator PL, social media may be better used as an introduction to justice-oriented pedagogy and a source of political consciousness development for teachers. However, teachers must make wise use of social media, given its many problematic elements (Damicco & Krutka, 2018; Nagle, 2018). One approach could be to facilitate small, localized learning communities, where teachers think critically about influencer messaging in order to find individuals who will advance their learning, and avoid influencers who could harm their development. The work of teaching for justice should not be done alone (e.g., Kohli et al., 2018), so teacher learning communities might be an effective way to examine influencers’ sometimes uncomfortable, race-visible content to learn from and problematize troubling and uncomfortable messaging (Hambacher & Ginn, 2021).

Teachers must also grapple with how the for-profit nature of social media platforms arguably conflicts with understandings of teachers’ work as a public good (Krutka et al., 2019). They might explore the role platform algorithms play in what influencers post and what followers see, such as the prioritizing of giveaways and tagging other popular accounts. Teachers may follow education influencers for different purposes: for example, to engage in contemplative listening, to find professional role models, to strategically find voices not available in their local school, to consume attractive teacher lifestyle brands, and more. While motivations will differ, there is likely value in teachers reflecting on and understanding why they are following and to what extent their time spent on social media helps meet their professional goals (see Krutka et al., 2017). Finally, both influencers and followers need to be conscious of the ways that social media’s flexibility and openness can require labor of users. This labor can go unseen or be framed as something other than labor (e.g., as an individual’s obligation to lifelong learning and self-development) in what becomes a never-ending pursuit of betterment, or as an aim for possible increased productivity (Collis et al., 1997).

Limitations and Future Research

Limitations to these findings are that our data represent a snapshot in time of a sample of justice-oriented education influencers’ posts amidst a particular moment of disruption. Our study is delimited by a focus on U.S. education influencers on the Instagram platform who posted content in English. While not generalizable, findings might highlight, illustrate, or suggest explanations for the education influencer phenomena. Further, this study was observational in nature and was limited to analysis of what was present in influencers’ posts, not what was missing or absent. For example, messages centering cultural sustainment were rare, especially in the domain of facilitating academic success. We did not come across posts that described an academic approach that also aimed to sustain non-dominant cultures in the way more formalized programs such as Paris’ (2012) Hip Hop ed or Muhammad’s (2020) literacy curricula have done. Additionally, influencers’ intentions and thought processes were not observed; thus, further research employing interviews may help to understand influencers more completely. Also, we do not know how influencers’ messaging is interpreted or taken up by teachers, if at all. Future research orienting around how exactly teachers use social media for justice-oriented PL will inform our understanding of the extent to which this is an effective approach, particularly if/how teachers engage in reflection and action, independently and/or collectively, and locally or in the online space.

Conclusion

The fight for educational equity and justice is ongoing, and social media will be one of the battlegrounds in this struggle (Love, 2019). The spring of 2020 presented a unique opportunity to begin a hard re-set (Ladson-Billings, 2021) in education, wherein teachers could reimagine their practice to respond to students’ cultures and to sustain diverse communities and identities. The justice-oriented education
Instagram phenomenon may be a far cry from a hard re-set, which will necessitate broad and systemic changes, but it could nonetheless play some role in the struggle for educational equity. This study suggests that justice-oriented education influencers’ posts illustrate, enact, and engage CRP/CSP, therefore serving as a resource for teachers to enter into and/or to sustain justice-oriented learning and work. However, promotional content permeated influencers’ posts and a cohesive (rather than piecemeal) message of how to enact CRP/CSP seemed largely absent. Arguably, Instagram’s image-based platform may present limited opportunities for sustained dialog, and also operates under harmful racial capitalist logics that are not aligned with justice-oriented philosophies. It remains unclear how much users can overcome the effects of these logics by exercising critical agency in their social media behavior. This study suggests that Instagram appears to offer some potential as a site of educators’ justice-oriented PL, but participants should proceed with caution, reflecting critically on the messages they consume on social media, with their professional goals and community needs in mind.

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