

Article

Challenges and Possibilities of Social Justice Language Education in a Difficult Context in the Global South

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Abstract: This article describes the challenges and possibilities of implementing social justice language education in a difficult context in the Global South. Six Argentinian English language university teachers and tutors developed and implemented a social justice project during 2017–2018 in a nongovernmental organisation (NGO) in Argentina. The project aimed at challenging the ‘conditions of possibility’ of underserved children aged 8–12 who attended the NGO for school support and extra-curricular activities. Data comprise reflection logs written by the university teachers and tutors during project implementation and a survey applied after project completion. Qualitative data analysis reveals two specific difficulties involved in enacting social justice language education locally, namely a disconnection between theory and practice and difficulty in grasping local conditions and developing sensitivity to the context. The analysis also led to the identification of two areas with potential to impact positively on social justice language education: an experientially grounded project and teachers’ self-perception as moral agents. Implications for social justice teacher education are discussed.

Keywords: language teacher education; social justice; difficult context



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1. Introduction

We live in turbulent times that seem to anticipate dark futures. Many children and youth, their families, and their communities face unprecedented challenges of various kinds, for instance material (poverty, preventable diseases, malnutrition, child work, adolescent pregnancy, unemployment, illiteracy), socio-political (drugs, violence, forced migration, racism, human rights abuse), and planetary (environmental depredation, climate change). These challenges represent the conditions of social injustice in many parts of the world, grouped under the acronym VUCA, which refers to the volatility, unpredictability, complexity, and ambiguity that characterise modern societies (Truant et al., 2017; Van Berkel & Manickam, 2020; Waller et al., 2019). In the Global South, these conditions are particularly exacerbated. Such contexts are known in the literature as ‘difficult’ (Gluz & Rodríguez Moyano, 2018; Kuchah & Shamin, 2018), characterised by precarity and vulnerability. The COVID-19 pandemic revealed this precariousness undisputedly (Butler, 2020; Faulstich Orellana et al., 2022; Papastephanou et al., 2020). The value of life is different in these regions: some lives are more precarious than others due to pervasive inequalities of all kinds; some lives are grievable, and others are not (Butler, 2020).

Against this backdrop, social justice education is a usual pedagogical response vis-à-vis this VUCA world. It is oriented around four principles, namely equality, equity, diversity, and inclusion (Lamb et al., 2019; Okan, 2019). The pandemic, through awareness

of ‘the sacrifice of some (vulnerable/lower class) people to ensure the safety of (privileged) others’ (Papastephanou et al., 2020, p. 4), challenged this understanding of education for justice given the subhuman and insensitive responses to life conditions in some places then. For this reason, ‘haunted by the deaths of hundreds of thousands of precarious lives’, Papastephanou et al. (2020, p. 4) have questioned the possibility of any viable pedagogical response ‘that would further possibilities for justice in this world’.

This article aims to contribute to the discussion about which viable pedagogical practices can lead toward a re-defined purpose of education honouring equality, equity, diversity, and inclusion. The research question is what challenges and possibilities arise in the implementation of a social justice language education project in a difficult context in the Global South? The project aimed at challenging the ‘conditions of possibility’ of underserved children aged 8–12 who attended a local nongovernmental organisation for school support and extra-curricular activities. Six Argentinian university teachers and tutors reflected in writing about the challenges they faced during implementation as well as the potentialities they envisioned for this kind of teaching in the setting.

2. Conceptual Framework and Brief Literature Review: A Social Justice Perspective for a ‘Difficult’ Context

This conceptual framework articulates the notion of ‘difficult or challenging circumstances’ with social justice education conceptualizations. Depending on the context, the concept ‘difficult circumstances’ is understood differently. For instance, OliFlores (2023) sees it through the lens of war and considers it refers to any teaching that takes place in areas affected by armed conflict. Kuchah and Shamin (2018) propose a broader definition that considers any and all issues affecting teachers in low- and middle-income countries, such as physical environments, material conditions, and socio-political factors. Teachers and students operate under extreme conditions in these countries, usually located in the Global South, and such conditions are, in general, poorly understood elsewhere (Copland & Garton, 2018) and poorly represented in the literature (Kuchah & Shamin, 2018). For example, in Argentina, where the study reported here is set, ‘difficult circumstances’ comprise a wide variety of conditions: poorly qualified teachers, low teacher salaries, student and teacher absenteeism, teacher strikes, poverty, poor school infrastructure, under-resourced classrooms, inadequate housing, large families, unemployment, illiteracy, geographical segregation, and more (Gluz & Rodríguez Moyano, 2018). These circumstances lead to school exclusion and severely limit the possibilities of self-realisation of children and youth in these settings (Gluz & Rodríguez Moyano, 2018).

Another concept that is relevant for this Argentinian context is the term ‘vulnerable’ (United Nations, 2021). It refers to students who live in homes with a combination of the following measurement variables: unsatisfied basic needs (UBNs), an adverse educational home climate (AEHC) and background contexts of social vulnerability (BCSV). UBN measurements as defined by the UN comprise a variety of poverty indicators, such as type of housing and type of housing construction, number of people per square metre, running water availability, sanitation services availability, school attendance of people under 18, and economic capacity. The AEHC involves the average schooling years and level of studies reached by the total number of people aged 25 or more living in the home. Finally, the BCSV comprises illiteracy, malnutrition, poverty, death of children, and ethnicity.

Concerning the principles of social justice in education, this study is grounded in Tikly and Barrett’s (2011) dimensions, namely inclusion, relevance, and democracy. Inclusion comprises access and redistribution, for instance access to education, infrastructure, resources, materials, and learning opportunities. Relevance refers to recognition, which means acknowledging disadvantaged and minority groups; honouring their diverse

backgrounds and specific situations; welcoming local knowledge, situated practices, and different modes of thinking, learning and being; and providing meaningful, relevant and culturally and linguistically responsive learning experiences. Finally, democracy refers to participation, i.e., the involvement of minority groups in decisions regarding their education, for instance through participatory diagnosis, community engagement in local NGOs, and curriculum design whenever possible. In teacher education, democracy refers for instance to student teachers' participation in context-responsive curriculum development, materials design, and course design.

The question of access deserves a special mention because what matters is not only that students have access to adequate infrastructure, resources and learning opportunities, but also that they access dominant knowledge usually labelled as mainstream so that they are not marginalised because they lack this knowledge (Janks, 2019; Luke, 2018). Importantly too, an education that only cares about equity of access can only be considered 'socially just' (Moje, 2007), and this is different from social justice education. To enact social justice education, teachers have to address and problematize the material effects of social injustice in the lives of their students, the communities they inhabit, and their worlds (De Costa, 2018) and re-shape their teaching in response to the local 'difficult circumstances'. The ultimate aim is to help students prepare "for difficult and unprecedented everyday challenges and problems, and to enable them to voice and build new cultural and political, social and environmental futures" (Luke, 2018, p. ix). To achieve this goal, the focus has to be on the development of the self, lifelong learning, community bonding, and democratic values so that students can engage in their own self-transformation and, in so doing, begin the transformation of their social milieu. When learners realise that this transformation is in their own hands, they acquire a sense of empowerment. The possibilities for transformation are the basis of social justice education as distinct from socially just education (Moje, 2007). Following Banegas and Sanchez (2024), this vision of social justice education becomes a philosophy of education.

According to Tikly and Barrett's (2011), Ayers et al. (2009), and Luckett and Shay (2020), this social justice agenda is 'an enterprise geared to helping every human being reach the full measure of his or her humanity, inviting people on a journey to become more thoughtful and more capable, more powerful and courageous' (Ayers et al., 2009, p. 725). Tensions arise because teachers' conceptualizations and grounded praxis of social justice education tend to be vague and unclear (McDonald & Zeichner, 2009), sustained on competing frameworks (Cochran-Smith et al., 2009), and full of challenges and contradictions (Struthers Ahmed, 2020). Particularly in English language teaching, specific difficulties are related to teachers' insufficient professional knowledge (Barahona & Ibaceta-Quijanes, 2022) and the lack of suitable teaching materials (Porto, 2022a).

Social justice language education in Latin America has echoed the specificities and difficulties of the local circumstances (e.g., López-Gopar et al., 2021; Romero, 2023), where the conditions of access are particularly critical (Riquelme et al., 2018), even though access is usually taken care of in legislation and education policies (Gluz et al., 2018). Furthermore, the region has other idiosyncrasies related to the needs of indigenous populations (Tavella & Fernández, 2023), teachers and students in community settings and informal learning contexts (Guelman et al., 2018, 2020; Suárez et al., 2015) as well as in rural contexts (Álvarez-Álvarez & García-Prieto, 2022; Andrade et al., 2022; Amado & Borzone, 2012; Meyers & Darwin, 2022; Vigo-Arazola & Beach, 2022).

Empirical English language teaching (ELT) experiences in Latin America comprise Ortega (2019), who illustrates how students' linguistic repertoires were acknowledged in Colombia; Tavella and Fernández (2023), who show how an ELT curriculum was developed with native Mapuche communities in Argentina using intercultural literature; and

Porto et al. (2022), who illustrate the role of creative-arts-based pedagogies and outdoor learning experiences in the same setting to cater for the principle of relevance. In Brazil, Rodrigues and Duboc (2022) focus on the importance of including culturally sensitive and socially relevant topics in ELT and López-Gopar and Sughrua (2023) tackle the issue of combining socially relevant content with language integration in a Mexican context. In a Colombian setting Garzón-Díaz (2021) uses a translanguaging approach to enable learners' multilingual resources for communication and expression. Likewise, Duque Salazar et al. (2024) foreground the significance of translanguaging in marginalised rural communities in the region. Finally, in language teacher education, Diaz Maggioli (2022) explores how social justice principles can be fostered in teacher education programmes in the region, and Banegas et al. (2024) examine teachers' and student-teachers' conceptualisations of social justice in ELT as well as their implementation of a social justice pedagogy in state secondary schools in Argentina using collaborative action research.

3. Materials and Methods

The project, financed by the Ministry of Education, was designed as an exploratory case study (Cohen et al., 2018; Yin, 2018). It was piloted in 2016 and implemented during 2017–2018. At the university, all participants were middle class females and living in urban locations. Specifically, there were five language undergraduates, aged 20–26, enrolled in an English language teaching programme; two English language teachers in charge of two undergraduate courses (didactics and language), in their mid-forties and early-fifties, respectively; and seven tutors, English language teachers in their late forties who had graduated from the same university and had been invited to take part in the project. At the NGO, the participants were the academic coordinator, a university female professor of Sciences of Education aged 65, and 40 children attending the NGO for school support, meals, and recreation. The children and their families were considered vulnerable (United Nations, 2021) according to the NGO records.

The team (student teachers, teachers, and tutors from the university) designed a project with a social justice foundation. It consisted of a series of 10 workshops for the children delivered monthly in the NGO premises on Saturdays. Breakfast was served by the team using the funding obtained. Each workshop addressed a socially relevant theme, such as identity, child rights, difference and otherness, beauty, responsible pet ownership, and world peace. Each theme was introduced using a storybook in English, for instance, *The Ugly Duckling* (Hans Christian Andersen), *Where's My Baby?* (Julie Ashworth and John Clark), *Can You Say Peace?* (Karen Katz), *The Mixed-up Chameleon* (Eric Carle), and *My Love for Cats* (Porto et al., 2022). Pedagogical tasks were based on multiliteracies, multimodality, and translanguaging and encouraged children to use all their available resources, linguistic and otherwise, to comprehend English and the themes and to make their own meanings. The children read the stories collaboratively with the university team, heard the stories being read to them, danced, sang, used puppets, played, acted, drew, painted, and created crafts. English, Spanish, and other available languages (Italian, Guarani) were used, welcomed, and encouraged in all workshops. There was a final action stage in which the children got involved with the local community. For example, as a corollary to the workshop on identity, they created masks showing varied social identifications and drawings of themselves and their families in order to raise awareness about diversity and identity rights among their families and the neighbourhood. On the topic of peace, they designed posters representing peace around the globe, showing how 'peace' is said in a variety of languages, to foster it as a democratic value. On the theme of difference and otherness, they created dough art and monsters (out of reusable objects and

materials such as wool, toilet and kitchen rolls, yoghurt containers, lids, old newspapers, and magazines) to show that ‘it’s ok to be different’.

The project was designed after a careful diagnosis and needs analysis, which was flexible (revised every six months), participatory, situational, and community-grounded. It was based on available NGO reports, an interview with the NGO coordinator, an ethnographic exploration of the premises, informal conversations with children’s mothers, and regular meetings with the whole team (NGO coordinator, student teachers, university teachers, graduate tutors).

The NGO was in charge of gathering parents’ informed consent allowing their children to participate in the workshops and giving permission to photograph and film them and use their artefacts and productions derived from the project, as well as images of them, for research purposes. Other ethical issues were also considered and reflected upon (Byram et al., 2025). The university provided the ethical framework and procedures for the project. The university teachers’, student teachers’, and graduate tutors’ informed consent allowing the use of their written reflection logs and surveys for research purposes was collected by myself.

The study reported here focuses on the reflection logs written by the university teachers and tutors, and a survey (see Appendix A for the instrument), collected during 2017–2018. The research question is as follows:

What challenges and possibilities arise in the implementation of a social justice language education project in a difficult context in the Global South?

The data were analysed qualitatively using content analysis (Cohen et al., 2018). The procedures in Denzin and Lincoln (2017), Gibbs (2007), and Saldaña (2021) were followed. After obtaining a global gist of the data set, the logs and survey responses were read and re-read several times, and this reading was complemented with informal handwritten annotations and comments. Salient aspects were compiled in a chart. Ethnographic descriptions of the setting and descriptive and narrative accounts of each workshop were written. The three dimensions of social justice in Tikly and Barrett’s (2011) conceptualisation, namely inclusion, relevance, and democracy, were used as analytical categories to guide a final re-reading of the data set. Finally, new emerging themes, unique perspectives, and commonalities were identified. Throughout the process, descriptive, narrative, and interpretive vignettes were written, and multiple examples from the whole data set were selected to document the analysis and illustrate findings. Data extracts appear *verbatim*. Phrases between single inverted commas indicate that the words belong to the participants. Italics and bold are used to highlight the evidence for the points made in the selected data excerpts chosen for illustration.

4. Results

I group findings in two dimensions, namely challenges and possibilities.

Challenges

Two main challenges emerged: (a) disconnection between theory and practice; and (b) difficulty in grasping local conditions and developing sensitivity to the context.

(a) Disconnection between theory and practice

Seven university teachers and tutors were middle aged. This means that their teacher education at this university had not addressed social justice at all. For instance, thirty years ago, when these participants were doing their undergraduate studies, English language teacher education had a strong instrumental orientation aimed at the development of students’ linguistic competence. They were expected to ‘master’ the English language by completing grammar exercises, learning vocabulary lists and the uses of tenses and prepositions in isolation, and writing texts which were judged on the basis of accuracy and

correctness (see [Porto, 2019](#)). This education was anchored to a language ideology based on the native-speaker model, a static focus on language systems, and monolithic conceptions of English and of language proficiency ([Hall, 2013](#)).

There was therefore a disconnection between the theoretical framework on social justice on which the project was based and participants' prior teacher education, which in turn amounted to a lack of practical pedagogical experience of social justice. This is revealed in the fact that for all of them, this project was their first experience of the kind as shown in the reflections logs below ('I'd never worked outside a classroom', 'I never had the chance to', 'my practices did not follow'). The use of denials is to be noted ('never', 'did not') (in bold).

In 30 years of teaching experience, *I'd **never** worked outside a classroom.* (Estela)

While I was studying at University *I **never** had the chance to participate and collaborate in any project. I was **never** included in any plan that involved democratic or inclusive practices.* That is why for many years of my career as teacher *my practices **did not** follow social justice principles.* (Susana)

There were two young tutors, in their late twenties, whose teacher education had familiarised them with social justice perspectives. However, it was a first experience for them too ('for the first time').

This experience allowed me to work in an informal teaching context *for the first time.* (Patricia)

All participants noted that this lack of direct grounded experience prevented a genuine understanding of social justice principles.

Not until you go through (such) an experience, do you fully understand what (those) concepts mean. (Estela)

(b) Difficulty in grasping local conditions and developing sensitivity to the context

Participants experienced difficulty in grasping local conditions ('had other interests, needs and preferences', 'different from', 'challenging', 'didn't recall') despite the participatory and situational diagnosis that had been previously undertaken.

The children in this environment *had other interests, needs and preferences, different from those I was familiar with (...)* It was challenging to propose motivating tasks. (Estela)

I didn't recall that some members of children's families were immigrants and spoke aboriginal languages as their mother tongue. (Carmela)

This difficulty led to inadequate assessments of children's backgrounds, prior knowledge and experiences ('re-visit and re-consider my assumptions', 'get to know the children better', 'see the real needs of children'), affecting pedagogical planning and implementation ('did not adapt', 'I had to postpone my plans'), and resulting in mismatches between actual teaching and children's needs and possibilities ('the children didn't know how to', repeated twice, 'some problems and limitations in their reading and writing skills').

After a few meetings, *I realized that what I had originally planned did not adapt to the children, both in terms of the teaching material and the methodology. I had to re-visit and re-consider my assumptions, and get to know the children better.* (Estela)

I began the workshop and handed in one copy of the storybook *The mixed-up chameleon* (Eric Carle) to each child. I had planned several activities after the shared reading, for instance recreating the chameleon using plasticine and then personalising it. *But the children didn't know how to handle the book, they put it upside down. I learned from the NGO coordinator that no one had books at home.* They

also looked at the plasticine and did nothing. *They didn't know how to use it. I had to postpone my plans to address these issues first.* (Carmela)

This experience gave us the possibility to see the real needs of children in vulnerable contexts. Based on previous observations and after a thorough assessment of the context and of children's skills, some problems and limitations in their reading and writing skills were noticed. (Florencia)

Possibilities

Two areas offering potentialities to advance social justice language education locally were identified: a) a hands-on experientially grounded project; and b) teachers' self-perception as moral agents.

(a) A hands-on experientially grounded project

The project was an experientially grounded praxis of social justice language education in the setting. This praxis was built around three pillars, namely increased awareness of inequality in the setting, increased awareness of the principle of relevance, and collaboration and mentoring to breach theory and practice.

Increased awareness of inequality in the setting

The project initially raised awareness of the fact that none of the children had had any contact with the English language up to then ('aren't usually exposed to', 'no access to learning English', 'completely unknown'), indicating some sensitivity to the context and local conditions ('vulnerable contexts'). In Argentina, it is usual that middle class families pay for private English lessons for their children from an early age (see [Porto et al., 2021](#)).

These children aren't usually exposed to English. (Estela)

The children had had no access to learning English as a foreign language during their mainstream education, revealing inequity and structural disadvantage. The workshops represented the entrance door to a world completely unknown to many children belonging to vulnerable contexts. (Florencia)

In addition, the proposed pedagogical tasks were also new to the children ('completely unknown', 'blank face', 'didn't know what to do').

The children were experiencing new situations and were involved in tasks that were completely unknown to them. You could tell from their faces, and they also said so. Other times they kept silent and with a blank face, indicating they didn't know what to do next. (Florencia)

The project led to the appreciation of the significance of the NGO as a valuable informal learning context ('apart from formal schooling') from where to dismantle such inequality ('expanded my understanding on access to education', 'to include these children', 'avoid inequity and structural disadvantage', 'attend to these infringed rights', 'have access to').

It expanded my understanding on access to education, which I know now can take many forms apart from formal schooling. (Patricia)

This experience at the NGO made us aware of the importance of this project to include these children in practices and areas which would have been inaccessible to them otherwise. The principle of inclusion was realised in the main objectives of the project which promoted concrete actions and practices to avoid inequity and the structural disadvantage of the participating children, ensuring their linguistic and cultural rights through, in this case, the teaching of English. The framework based on intercultural citizenship and human rights adopted in the workshops let us attend to these infringed rights, allowing these children to have access to an area of knowledge completely ignored by them. (Florencia)

Increased awareness of the principle of relevance

The teachers were clear about the need to adjust to children's situations and realities. For instance, they quickly realised that some of the themes they had selected and some activities they had initially designed were not suitable ('too abstract').

The development of these social justice issues in the workshops was, at times, too abstract for the students. (Carla)

They considered the fact that the children had not been in contact with English before. Consequently, they wished to emphasise the value of the language to communicate in real situations ('use language communicatively'), such as interacting with others during breakfast:

We tried to give them *the opportunity to use language communicatively*, not only through the interaction with the materials provided but also while having breakfast. (Estela)

talking about themselves ('speak about themselves')

They also *were able to speak about themselves and their interests in another language*. (Susana)

and addressing new topics ('in topics not generally presented in formal schooling').

The children *participated actively in another language in topics that are not generally presented in formal schooling*. (Susana)

In this way, the teachers were appreciating and explicitly recognising the value of each child ('felt cared, valued', 'feel that their opinions and perspectives mattered')—the essence of the principle of relevance in social justice:

For me, *they felt cared, valued and worth to be listened to*. (Susana)

Everyone had the possibility to participate and be listened to. We wanted to deliver classes that *made all children feel that their opinions and perspectives mattered*. (Susana)

Finally, the teachers acknowledged the important role of multiliteracies and multimodality ('stories, songs, and games', 'imagination', 'ludic, artistic, creative, and social activities') as well as translanguaging pedagogies ('Spanish and Guarani', 'valued the languages and cultures of origin') to enact the principle of relevance in social justice education.

The children enjoyed learning through stories, songs, and games. They also appreciated that *we welcomed Spanish and Guarani* too. (Estela)

It was clear to me that a strong focus on grammar or lexis (as in formal schooling) was not appropriate. *So I fostered the use of children's imagination to begin to approach English and the topics. I also valued the languages and cultures of origin*. For instance, we designed teaching sequences that encouraged an initial contact with English by means of *integrated, ludic, artistic, creative, and social activities within real contexts*. Some examples were *a birdwatching outing in the NGO premises, a guided tour around the NGO neighbourhood, and the description of children's pets and of their own families*. (Florencia)

To cope with this situation [problems and limitations in children's reading and writing skills], *we developed a multiliteracies approach* through both English and Spanish. (Florencia)

Collaboration and mentoring to breach theory and practice

In this project, the dissonance between theory and practice mentioned before was initially breached by the hands-on nature of the experience ('projects that allow the implementation of all that theory in real contexts', 'experience in practice what we read and study', 'possibility to participate in the design and implementation of the workshops').

As teachers, we may read about concepts, theories, approaches but, it is not common to have the possibility to take part in projects that allow the implementation of all that theory in real contexts. Having the possibility to experience in practice what we read and study as university students, is what helps us be real agents of change. Having the possibility to participate in the design and implementation of the workshops made me more aware of the real need to change and think of more inclusive and socially just experiences in curriculum and pedagogic practices. (Florencia)

Collaboration among all stakeholders was also considered an important asset ('exchanges we had as members of a team', 'all our discussions', 'worked collaboratively without hierarchies', 'horizontal exchange of ideas', 'reflect together', 'truly participative', 'work together', 'hand in hand').

The exchanges we had as members of a team during the different stages of the project helped me internalise the concepts connected to social justice and the principles that make it up. All our discussions were related to finding the best way to offer practices which guarantee inclusion, relevance and democracy. (Florencia)

For this experience, student-teachers and tutors worked collaboratively without hierarchies, which allowed for a horizontal exchange of ideas and the possibility to reflect together on social justice issues. (...) Working in small works allowed for the design and delivery of the workshops to be truly participative. (Patricia)

We could all work together, hand in hand, to create unique tasks and sequences. (Carla)

Sometimes the direction of learning was from the most experienced university teachers to the least experienced and youngest ones ('learn from more experienced tutors').

We had the chance to learn from more experienced tutors, who brought diverse professional backgrounds and understandings of these principles. (Patricia)

Other times, the direction of this learning was reversed ('I learned to listen to younger teachers').

I learned to listen to younger teachers who had many ideas and were more skillful at multimodal views. I am always learning from others, every idea contributes to my professional development in a practical way. (Susana)

All in all, this hands-on basis and a foundation on collaboration helped breach theory and practice ('feel and actually BE engaged', 'made me more aware of the real need to change and think of more inclusive and socially just experiences in curriculum and pedagogic practices', 'helped me internalise the concepts').

The project made me feel and actually BE engaged in socially just practices which promoted and allowed equal and fair participation of children belonging to vulnerable contexts. (Florencia)

(b) Teachers' self-perception as moral agents

The project instilled a particular philosophy of education in participants ('gave as all a moral purpose', 'impacts the children's lives', 'visions of solidarity and commitment', 'impact in a community', 'teaching transcends the classroom') and a vision of themselves as committed teachers ('our commitment to education', 'feel deeply committed').

This project gave as all a moral purpose and we were driven by our commitment to education and belief in the principle of solidarity. I also learned how the teachers' positionality impacts the children's learning experiences, and eventually their lives, thus the importance of teaching from a social justice perspective. (Patricia)

The project did make me feel deeply committed to be part of an educational and social plan. For me, all the project, from the very beginning, included visions of solidarity and commitment. (Susana)

The way our practice was intertwined with social justice issues allowed us to be aware of the impact the teaching of a foreign language can have in a community. We exploited and developed our creativity and understood that teaching transcends the classroom. (Carla)

It specifically fostered a sense of agency in all participating teachers ('gave us a sense of agency', 'empowering them with a new voice', 'a sense of having achieved something big and important', 'directly develop a sense of agency in teachers').

By being a project with social impact, it empowered us and gave us a sense of agency in expanding learning opportunities for others. One of the most vivid memories I have of this project are the smiles on the children's faces when they heard themselves speaking another language. Empowering them with a new voice had a significant impact on me. (Patricia)

The classes, the planning and the outcomes gave us a sense of having achieved something big and important: to get to children from vulnerable contexts with a strong academic support. I felt my work was valuable and could be put into practice in other contexts. (Susana)

This project was an excellent way of putting theory into practice to directly develop a sense of agency in teachers. (Carla)

Finally, the project fostered deep reflexivity ('I felt I had the obligation') accompanied by a sense of pride ('what has been extremely rewarding', 'profoundly touched', 'great impact', 'extremely interesting and promising', 'highly rewarding') and accomplishment ('I always wanted to have the chance to', 'insightful').

I always wanted to have the chance to teach in vulnerable contexts. Because I felt I had the obligation somehow to return to society what public education (UNLP) had given me. (Susana)

What has been extremely rewarding to me was to see many children experiencing practices and doing tasks that had been completely unknown to them before. (Florencia)

At a personal level, I was profoundly touched by the experience. It has had a great impact on me. (Florencia)

The experience was extremely interesting and promising. The moment of actual teaching was highly rewarding and insightful. (Carla)

5. Discussion

Through this project, the teachers in this setting experienced social justice language education in an informal learning context for the first time. This was true for all the participating teachers, whether middle aged or younger, more experienced or less experienced. This finding resonates with [Barahona and Ibaceta-Quijanes \(2022\)](#), who highlight teachers' insufficient professional knowledge and experience in the Latin American region. In this sense, and together with [Porto \(2022b\)](#) this study shows the importance of enabling grounded, hands-on pedagogical experiences and practices for teachers from the very beginning of their teacher education. In this study, this foundation based on the praxis of social justice was important because it helped teachers see how theory and practice could be coherently united in concrete and practical ways. In other words, the praxis of social justice contributed to alleviating some of the tensions that characterise social

justice education, such as the disconnection between theory and practice (Dover, 2015) and teachers' vague, unclear and sometimes competing conceptualizations (Cochran-Smith et al., 2009; McDonald & Zeichner, 2009; Struthers Ahmed, 2020).

This study enabled a genuine understanding of Tikly and Barrett's (2011) social justice education principles, particularly inclusion and relevance. In terms of the principle of inclusion, teachers gained increased awareness of inequality in education in general and of the crucial role of access in the setting. This awareness is especially significant in Latin America, as the question of access is critical (Riquelme et al., 2018), and local circumstances are, at many times, 'difficult' (Kuchah & Shamin, 2018; López-Gopar et al., 2021; Romero, 2023). Although access in the region is generally guaranteed by law and secured in education policies, the reality in the territory many times contradicts such mandates (Gluz et al., 2018).

In terms of the principle of relevance, together with Banegas and Sanchez (2024) and Ortaçtepe Hart (2023), this study shows the significance of providing personally, linguistically, culturally, and socially relevant learning experiences, particularly for vulnerable populations. The teachers addressed topics and designed materials and tasks that were responsive to children's interests, and they were also aware of children's possibilities and potentialities. However, sometimes they designed materials and tasks that were beyond the children's reach—an indication of their difficulty in fully grasping local conditions and developing sensitivity to the context. When this happened, they devoted time and effort to adjusting their pedagogical tasks with the ultimate aim of assuring the appreciation and recognition of every child. For instance, they adopted multiliteracies, multimodal and translanguaging pedagogies (Ortega, 2019), defined as those which welcome the use of all available languages (Spanish, English, Guaraní) and all means and resources for meaning making (visual, artistic, performative, etc.). Other studies in the region have also foregrounded this principle of relevance as an essential component of social justice pedagogy locally (Porto, 2023; Banegas, 2022; López-Gopar & Sughrua, 2023). All in all, in alignment with Diaz Maggioli (2022) and Banegas et al. (2024), this study emphasises the important role of teachers' understanding of social justice education principles for the provision of a social justice foundation for English language learning in a Global South context known as 'difficult' in the literature.

More specifically, echoing Tavella and Fernández (2023) and Porto et al. (2022), teachers gained awareness of the significant role of multiliteracies, multimodal and translanguaging pedagogies to contribute to enacting the principle of relevance in social justice education. For instance, as teachers spotted children's difficulties in reading and writing skills, they enabled and favoured alternative means and resources for meaning making, beyond the linguistic, such as singing, drawing, colouring, acting, and using their bodies. They also welcomed any available languages, and consequently, Spanish, English, and Guaraní were heard. This points to the significance of honouring students' linguistic repertoires, as Ortega (2019) and Garzón-Díaz (2021) did in Colombia, López-Gopar and Sughrua (2023) in Mexico, and Duque Salazar et al. (2024) in marginalised rural communities in the whole Latin American region.

This study also shows that through this praxis of social justice teachers embraced, and at the same time enacted, a vision of social justice education as their philosophy of education. Together with Ayers et al. (2009), Luckett and Shay (2020), and Luke (2018), this social justice agenda aims at helping individuals develop their full potential. The teachers saw themselves as committed teachers and gained awareness of their role as agents of change and of the power of social transformation in the setting. They reflected deeply on this role and felt proud and self-fulfilled as they saw the children's faces of happiness during the workshops. This drive is what Kubanyiova and Crookes (2016) consider the

‘moral purpose’ of empowering learners to live better and more fulfilling lives. While Kubanyiova and Crookes (2016) acknowledge that this role as moral agent is usually not sufficiently supported by institutions and society at large; in this study, by contrast, it was endorsed by the NGO and the university teachers. Importantly, this vision and purpose are not, in general, fully addressed in teacher education programmes and take time to develop (Crookes, 2015), indicating that teachers need routinized experiences of social justice principles to cultivate and develop this moral sense.

6. Conclusions

This study described the challenges and possibilities of implementing social justice language education in a difficult context in the Global South, particularly in a nongovernmental organisation in Argentina. It has identified the following dimensions involved in the fostering of social justice principles in action in English language teaching in this specific setting: conscious sensitivity to the context and local conditions; attention to children’s actual needs, interests, and possibilities; flexibility to adjust to emerging assessments of children’s possibilities at particular circumstances; sensitivity to specific ‘difficult’ circumstances in the setting; ability to act upon those circumstances; development of context-sensitive and locally responsive materials and tasks; self-perception as an agent of change; collaboration among all stakeholders; a moral purpose; and a vision of education based on care and solidarity. These dimensions could become the foundation of social justice language teacher education. However, there is no claim here concerning the direct transferability of the results obtained in the NGO to mainstream English language education. Further research is needed to determine whether these dimensions are relevant in different contexts within and beyond Latin America and which additional elements might be significant in other regions or settings.

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Appendix A. Research Instrument: Trigger Reflection Questions for the University Teachers and Tutors

- 1- Was the project planned and realised in ways that raised your awareness of social justice principles, issues and practices? If so, how?
- 2- In which ways did your engagement in the design and delivery of the workshops (including tasks and materials) respond to the social justice principles of inclusion, democracy and relevance? For example, what do you think about the socially relevant themes for the workshops such as identity issues, child rights, difference and otherness, beauty, responsible pet ownership, and world peace? What was your specific

- contribution in the selection of these themes and tasks? How did you feel about the workshops and their outcomes in terms of social justice?
- 3- This project used multiliteracies, multimodal, and translingual pedagogies. What did you learn while designing and delivering tasks based on multiliteracies, multimodality, and translanguaging in connection with social justice principles? Did that contribute to your professional development and if so, in which ways?
 - 4- Did the experience help you develop an experientially grounded sense of social justice education? In which ways? If not, why not?
 - 5- Can this project be considered a beginning or a step in your professional development? Please justify.
 - 6- In which ways did collaboration with other project participants (teamwork) increase your understanding of social justice education and its enactment in practice?
 - 7- In which ways did the impact on the children's learning experiences attest to the significance of social justice approaches to language education in your opinion?
 - 8- Did the experience help you grow professionally from a social justice perspective, for example, in your role as facilitator of social justice learning opportunities?
 - 9- Did this project offer possibilities for your individual transformation? And for social transformation with an impact on the local social milieu? If so, how?
 - 10- Do you think the project helped you to 'forge moral visions and readiness for action' (Kubanyiova & Crookes, 2016, p. 126) as well as theoretical understanding, a moral purpose, and a deep vision of education (Kubanyiova & Crookes, 2016; Luke, 2018)? Please explain.
 - 11- What else?

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