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## Searching for Mirrors: Preservice Teachers' Journey Toward More Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

Tanya Christ  
*Oakland University*, christ@oakland.edu

Sue Ann Sharma  
*Madonna University*, dr.sueann@gmail.com

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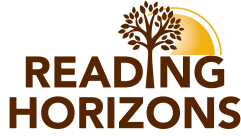
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## Searching for Mirrors: Preservice Teachers' Journey Toward More Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

Tanya Christ, *Oakland University*

Sue Ann Sharma, *Madonna University*

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### Abstract

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Culturally relevant text selection and pedagogy support students' motivation, engagement, literacy outcomes, and positive identity formation. Nevertheless, there is limited research on teacher preparation that fosters these outcomes. The authors explore 17 preservice teachers' challenges and successes with culturally relevant text selection and pedagogy for their students' literacy instruction. Data sources include reader responses, lesson plans, and reflections. Emergent coding and constant comparative analysis yielded four categories of challenge (resistance, limited view of culture, lack of knowledge about students' cultures and identities, and lack of opportunities for students to develop critical consciousness) and three criteria for success (knowledge about the students' culture and identity, attention to multiple dimensions of text selection, and use of culturally relevant text selection and pedagogy in combination). Professional development should focus on supporting teachers' learning about their students' cultures and identities, applying this knowledge to text selection and pedagogy, and explicitly guiding this development over time.

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**KEYWORDS:** culturally relevant text, literacy instruction, teacher education

At the beginning of the school year, Ms. Tomlin planned to read the book *Big Red Barn* by Margaret Wise Brown to her third-grade African American and Latino students in Brooklyn. This book reminded her of her own childhood in rural America, as she grew up living down the street from a dairy farm. This made her fond of the book, and she was sure that her students would enjoy it as much as she did. She started by accessing their prior knowledge, asking, "What would you find on a farm?" Gerard enthusiastically replied, "Hot dogs!" This response prompted Ms. Tomlin to ask whether the children had been to a farm before, and none indicated they had. Ms. Tomlin read *Big Red Barn* and tried to support the connections that children were trying to make, such as how animals on farms produce meat that then can be used to make hot dogs, but it was difficult for children to make connections that would support deep thinking given their lack of experience with many of the concepts. Instead, the discussion became focused more on concept development and vocabulary.

Ms. Tomlin recognized, however, that this book provided a window into another world for her students—life on a farm. Although this was valuable, she also wanted to provide opportunities to create dynamic student engagement, make personal connections, and have critical conversations. To support these goals, Ms. Tomlin chose a book that better mirrored her students' lives. She chose *Last Stop on Market Street* by Matt de la Peña as it has African American and Latino characters, an urban setting, and events that mirror those of the children's everyday lives. Her student Gerard deeply connected to the boy in the book who had to take the bus. He shared that his family also did not have a car, and he longed for one as well. This started more critical conversations about why some families have cars and others do not, the importance of the mass transit system in New York City, and the opportunities that you might have or miss depending on whether you have access to a car. By providing a text that mirrored her students' own images, lives, and experiences, Ms. Tomlin provided new opportunities for making connections and having deeper, more critical conversations.

Bishop (1990) used the terms windows and mirrors to refer to texts that could transport children into other worlds that they had not experienced (windows) and in which they could see themselves and their lives mirrored “as part of the larger human experience...[as] a means of self-affirmation” (p. ix). As she and others have argued, mirror texts can sustain students' cultures and identities, and thus should be integrated into literacy instruction (Alim & Paris, 2017; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Sims, 1983). As illustrated in the opening vignette, a mirror text, such as *Last Stop on Market Street*, can support students' reader identity, motivation, agency, and reading outcomes (Alim & Paris, 2017; Barksdale-Ladd & Hefflin, 2001; Bell & Clark, 1998; Garth-McCullough, 2008; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Murphy, 2007; Sims, 1983; Taylor, 1997).

The White middle-class culture privileged by schools, and reflected in text choices such as *Big Red Barn*, reflects less than 50% of U.S. students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). Thus, teachers need to become knowledgeable about selecting and integrating mirror texts that reflect their students' identities and experiences to provide more equitable opportunities for all students to reap the benefits of being able to connect deeply to text.

Although much has been written on the topic of multicultural text selection, which aims to help students “increase cultural awareness” and “grow in understanding of themselves and others” (Norton, 1990, p. 29)—that is, provide windows—limited research is available on teachers' selections of culturally relevant, or mirror, texts or how to integrate these texts into literacy instruction in a culturally relevant way. Given that tomorrow's teachers are being prepared today, and those teachers will instruct the most diverse population in U.S. history, it is critical to explicitly prepare teachers to engage in these practices. Therefore, although we view window texts as important in the curriculum, we focus solely on selecting and integrating culturally relevant mirror texts since there is evidence that such a focus does not regularly occur in many classrooms (e.g., Currie, 2013). Thus, this study addresses the following research question: What challenges and successes do preservice teachers experience when selecting culturally relevant (mirror) texts and when engaging in culturally relevant pedagogy over time in a service-learning literacy teaching methods course? To address this question, we identify patterns regarding what works and what needs further work for teacher preparation in culturally relevant text selection and pedagogy.

### **Culturally Relevant Texts: Mirrors Into Readers' Lives**

We operationalize culturally relevant texts as those that reflect readers' cultures and identities, thus helping readers connect with text, affirm their identity, and increase their motivation to read (Bell & Clark, 1998; Ebe, 2010; Garth-McCullough, 2008; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Sims, 1983). Harste and Vazquez (2018) argue that “no one really becomes literate without seeing themselves in literacy” (p. 17). Culturally relevant texts are those in which children can see themselves—in which their “knowledge, beliefs, values, and practices” are mirrored by the “character development, plot, and language” (McCullough, 2013, p. 398). Although certain texts coupled with classroom dialogue may stimulate imagination and motivate the love of reading without mirroring a student's life (May, Bingham, & Pendergast, 2014), we believe that specific narrative elements of text are central to defining the cultural relevance of texts because they embody cultural and identity characteristics. The dimensions of culturally relevant text that should be considered during selection relate to the following narrative elements (Christ et al., 2018; Ebe, 2010; Sharma & Christ, 2017):

- Characters (age, race/ethnicity, gender, and dialect): Are these characteristics similar to those of the student who is reading the book?
- Setting (place and time period): Has the student who has been reading the book been to similar places and lived in the same time period portrayed by the book?
- Plot (events, problems, solutions): Has the student who is reading the book had life events similar to those that occur in the book?

Further, texts are not merely culturally relevant or not; rather, they have gradations of cultural relevance based on analysis of multiple dimensions, such as those identified above. A teacher's not attending to the multiple dimensions of cultural relevance of a text for an individual student may result in student overgeneralizations or global assignment of culture connections, relevant or not, to a text (Christ et al., 2018; Paris, 2012). By considering multiple dimensions of cultural relevance, you can better capture the complexities of fluid, hybrid, and shifting identities of individual students within a culture (Paris & Alim, 2014).

### **Culturally Relevant Pedagogy**

Once culturally relevant texts are selected, it is critical to integrate them into literacy lessons in ways that reflect culturally relevant pedagogy. Ladson-Billings (1995) identified three tenets of culturally relevant pedagogy, which follow her foundational prerequisite that teachers should have sociocultural consciousness and should holistically care for students' needs.

First, teachers should have high expectations for the academic success of all students (Ladson-Billings, 1995). In previous research, this has included using students' strengths as an instructional starting point, modeling and scaffolding, investigating and taking responsibility for students' success, and creating nurturing and cooperative environments (Morrison, Robbins, & Rose, 2008). Recently, researchers also have argued that this should include decentering Whiteness by using texts, methods, and outcomes that are not aligned with White middle-class norms (Alim & Paris, 2017). Further, Ladson-Billings (2017, p. 143) argues that gains in “reasoning ability, problem-solving skills, and moral development” should be considered in addition to curriculum standards.

Second, teachers should develop cultural competence to support the formation of students' positive cultural identities (Ladson-Billings, 1995). To accomplish this, researchers

have called for reshaping the prescribed curriculum (Banks, 1985; Morrison et al., 2008) to “perpetuate and foster—to sustain—linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of schooling” (Alim & Paris, 2017, p. 1). One aspect of this is the texts chosen for literacy instruction and whether they provide a mirror into students’ lives (Sims, 1983). Although research has shown that in-service teachers who received professional development on teaching diverse students select texts that reflect their students’ backgrounds and address issues of social justice, equity, and diversity, it also shows that cultural-linguistic aspects of lesson participation, such as inviting call-outs in conversations, were not taken up by teachers (McIntyre & Hulan, 2013).

Third, teachers should include opportunities for students to develop critical consciousness to address social inequities (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Research has addressed this through engaging students in critical literacy and social justice work, making society’s power dynamics explicit, and sharing power in the classroom (Morrison et al., 2008). Tenets for developing a more critical approach to teaching diverse learners include teachers and students engaging in (a) joint activities to produce outcomes together, (b) opportunities for language development and instruction that connects to students’ lives, (c) deep thinking, and (d) instructional conversations (Center for Research on Education, Diversity & Excellence, 2018). Instructional conversations should be on meaningful topics, encourage student participation over teacher participation, and use analytic, open-ended, and uptake questions that focus on elaborating a specific topic from the conversation (Christoph & Nystrand, 2001; Goldenberg, 1993; McIntyre, Kyle, & Moore, 2006).

### **Why Students Need Culturally Relevant Texts and Pedagogy**

From a theoretical perspective, culturally relevant texts and pedagogy improve students’ outcomes because they help students anchor to their identities and personal experiences via a specific subset of prior knowledge (i.e., culturally relevant knowledge; Gray, 2009). The dynamic transactions (Rosenblatt, 2005) between culturally relevant text, the reader’s culturally relevant prior knowledge (nested within their broader prior knowledge), and the context in which this instruction is engaged (i.e., culturally relevant pedagogy) help readers construct deep meaning. Through these dynamic transactions, culturally relevant texts and pedagogy improve motivation, engagement, and outcomes (Alim & Paris, 2017; Christ et al., 2018; Heflin & Barksdale-Ladd, 2001; Morrison et al., 2008).

When books and pedagogy mirror children’s lives, children are motivated to read more; but when they do not mirror children’s lives, children are more likely to disengage and read less (Alim & Paris, 2017; Flake, 2007; Heflin & Barksdale-Ladd, 2001). Flake (2007, p. 14) argues, “We’ve got to give them books that remind them of home—who they are”—to help them see how reading is relevant to their lives (Heflin & Barksdale-Ladd, 2001). Likewise, Alim and Paris (2017) argue that we need to sustain students’ language and culture—their ways of being in the world (e.g., social interaction, language patterns)—through our pedagogy, which improves motivation and engagement as well.

In addition, culturally relevant texts and pedagogy support students’ literacy outcomes because readers are more likely to be able to gain literal, inferential, and critical understandings of texts when they engage in lessons that provide opportunities to interact in ways that reflect their ways of being in the world and mirror their lives and cultures, as compared to when they engage in lessons that do not (Al-Mahrooqi, 2013; Alim & Paris, 2017; Christ et al., 2018; Ebe, 2010; Garth-McCullough, 2008; McCullough, 2013; Morrison et al., 2008). This occurs because culturally relevant texts contain more

information that students can access as clues, and cultural views affect interpretations of text, which support students' monitoring, inference, and making connections (Ebe, 2010; Keene & Zimmermann, 2007; Porat, 2004; Pritchard, 1990; Ramirez, 2012). Further, positive reading achievement is related to students' identities as capable and competent readers, because reader identity shapes how readers transact with texts (Hall, 2012; Zacher, 2008). When children read books that reflect and affirm their culture, this supports positive identity formation (Gonzalez, Huerta-Macias, & Tinajero, 1998).

In sum, motivation and engagement, reading achievement, and identity are intertwined, and all are positively affected by children's opportunities to read culturally relevant texts and have their ways of being in the world sustained through culturally relevant pedagogy. Given this, as teachers' beliefs affect their practices (e.g., Ertmer & Ottenbreit-Lefwich, 2010), it is critical to develop their theoretical understandings about the use of culturally relevant texts and pedagogy as part of teacher preparation and development.

### **Teachers Need to Develop Culturally Relevant Text Selection and Pedagogy**

The limited research on teachers' culturally relevant text selection suggests that few culturally relevant books are being selected by teachers for inclusion in classroom libraries or instruction (Currie, 2013; Gray, 2009). Several factors contribute to this: (a) too few published books represent people of color (Cooperative Children's Book Center, n.d.); (b) few books that represent people of color are promoted on reading lists, professional book lists, or book order forms such as those provided by Scholastic (Gangi, 2008; McNair, 2008); (c) only 39% of teachers are able to identify even two children's books that reflect any person of color (Brinson, 2012), and (d) teachers traditionally select texts that preserve their own social and cultural identities and values in society (Williams, 2014).

Research on preservice teacher preparation and development for engaging in culturally relevant pedagogy is limited as well. One study examined a preservice teacher's changes over time with the support of a mentor as she worked toward a more culturally relevant pedagogy. The results indicate significant transformations in the teacher's comfort level working with urban students and in understanding the importance of clear expectations and modeling of lesson content (Hall, 2012). Another study explored how in-service teachers developed cultural competence through engagement in and reflection on experiences in an African American community across a yearlong "cooperative inquiry" (Seidl, 2005, p. 168). These studies underscore the importance of collaboration, reflection, and experiences over time in preparing teachers to engage in culturally relevant pedagogy.

## **Methods**

### **Participants**

Twenty preservice teachers at a Midwestern university who were enrolled in a service-learning literacy teaching methods course were invited to participate in this study. Culturally relevant pedagogy was an integral part of the literacy practicum instruction. Of these preservice teachers, 17 agreed to participate in the study. Thirteen were female, four were male, and all were White. All names used here are pseudonyms.

### **Setting**

The service-learning course was set in an afterschool program at an urban community center that served 28 children across Grades K–8 (six kindergarteners, seven first graders, two second graders, six third graders, three fourth graders, two fifth graders, one seventh grader, and one eighth grader). Twenty were African American and eight were

Latinx. The preservice teachers worked in grade-level groups (K, 1, 2–3, 4–5, 6–8) to plan a unit of instruction that focused on literacy development and integrated culturally relevant pedagogy as part of the instruction. They implemented these unit plans one-on-one or in small groups across 5 weeks of the semester for 1 hour per week during the class time while the professor was present to observe and coach their instruction.

### Teacher Development for Culturally Relevant Text Selection and Pedagogy

Several methods were used to support preservice teachers’ understanding of the importance of culturally relevant text selection and pedagogy, and learning about methods for selecting culturally relevant texts and teaching (Figure 1). First, the preservice teachers read articles about culturally relevant pedagogy, which explained its importance and provided examples of its implementation. These articles included Brown’s (2007) “Educating All Students: Creating Culturally Responsive Teachers, Classrooms, and Schools”; Ladson-Billings’s (2014) “Culturally Relevant Pedagogy 2.0: A.K.A. the Remix”; and Morrison et al.’s (2008) “Operationalizing Culturally Relevant Pedagogy: A Synthesis of Classroom-Based Research.” In online discussion board forums, preservice teachers discussed ideas from these articles and how they might apply ideas from them to their literacy instruction.

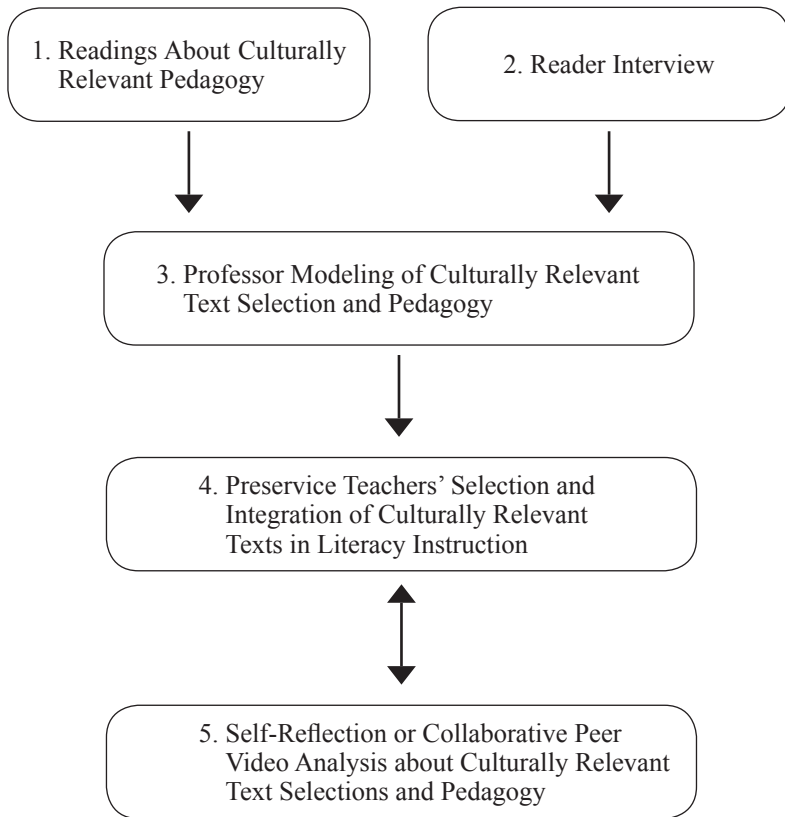


Figure 1: Teacher development for culturally relevant text selection and pedagogy



Next, preservice teachers engaged in a reader interview assignment with their students, intended to help them learn more about students' cultures and identities (more details and the assignment template are presented in Sharma & Christ, 2017). Then, based on the reader interview data, the professor modeled selecting culturally relevant texts and engaging in culturally relevant pedagogy for a specific student. Book lists such as the Coretta Scott King and Tomás Rivera award winners, Google search techniques, how to order books through interlibrary loan, and culturally relevant text selection criteria were presented (links to book award lists and examples of search techniques are presented in Sharma & Christ, 2017).

Culturally relevant methods for the African American and Latinx children in this urban setting, such as collaborative group work, using digital tools to access information and improve engagement, and high interactivity and allowing for overlapping talk were discussed and modeled (for more details see Christ, 2018). The professor also presented examples of texts that would not be culturally relevant but might be mistaken for such texts, including those that aligned with only one or two aspects of culture or identity but not others. Further, she discussed how culturally relevant texts could be used without engaging in culturally relevant pedagogy, such as using the workshop model of instruction with a group of students when more highly interactive and collaborative learning would be better aligned with students' ways of interacting and using information (Christ, 2018).

After that, across the five sessions, preservice teachers engaged in recursive learning opportunities as they (a) selected texts that they thought would be culturally relevant for their students' instruction and integrated these into their unit plans with the aim to use culturally relevant pedagogy, (b) implemented the lessons and discussed the students' perspectives on the texts and cultural relevance of the lessons, (c) were coached during and after the sessions by their professor, and (d) reflected on their text selection, pedagogy, and how to improve these using both video-based self-reflections and collaborative peer video analysis (CPVA). Teacher coaching included providing suggestions for more culturally relevant text selections, modeling more culturally relevant pedagogy, discussing teachers' concerns and difficulties immediately after the lesson, and supporting the teacher in developing a plan to address those difficulties. Self-reflections included viewing the video-recorded lesson and engaging in analysis of the teaching event, particularly attending to the issues in the self-reflection template (see Table 1). For CPVA, preservice teachers chose short clips from their video-recorded lessons to share and discuss with their peers and then completed a CPVA response sheet after the discussion (see Table 2). Further, the professor responded to concerns based on the reflections both in person and via e-mail to support teachers' changes in perspectives and practices.

Based on Nieto's (2005) assertion that providing "resources and support" and "encouraging prospective and practicing teachers to reflect deeply on their beliefs and attitudes" (pp. 217–218) supports their development of more culturally sensitive teaching, and based on findings that the use of CPVA supports improvements in teachers' instruction (Christ, Arya, & Chiu, 2015), we hoped that the preservice teachers would be able to shift their practices toward more culturally relevant pedagogy. We also recognized, however, that changing teachers' beliefs is difficult and "comes slowly" as "we each occupy a normative universe...from which we are not easily dislodged" (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017, pp. 35, 49). Thus, we recognized the possibility that not all preservice teachers would develop more culturally relevant pedagogy during this one-semester course.



**Table 1**  
**Libby's Self-Reflection Responses After Her Second Lesson With Tisha Data Sources and Collection**

Question	Responses
After using the text/method, how culturally relevant do you think it really was? Why?	I think the book was fairly culturally relevant to my African American student because she felt a connection between the family in the biography and her own family. She made a comment about having brothers and sisters just like Rosa Parks did.
What went well about the integration?	The student was able to learn a lot about Rosa Parks that she did not previously know. There was also a digital literacy biography about Rosa Parks that was used as well as a video, which engaged the student and kept her interested.
What didn't go so well?	I think the time period that Rosa Parks grew up in was much different from the time period now that my student is growing up in. She did not specifically say anything about the time period but she made a couple comments about the black-and-white photos that were in the two biographies. I just think she could have related more with a person that was from a time period closer to the one she is growing up in. This may have taken away from the cultural relevance that the student felt about the text.
What will you do differently next time to address what didn't go so well?	Next time, I will try and pick a book about someone from a time period that is closer to today. This way the student may know more about the person and be able to connect with them better and it will be more culturally relevant.

**Table 2**  
**Angelina's Collaborative Peer Video Analysis Responses After Her Second Lesson With Jose**

Question	Response
What did you learn from your colleagues' discussion of your video clip?	In order to help students make connections with a text, it will help to ask more specific personalized questions than just broad questions.  Help guide their thinking toward reasons why I think a book might be culturally relevant. They might not realize right off the bat, but by guiding them toward the connections they may see how the book is relevant to them.
What did you learned from discussing colleagues' video clips?	I learned that you can often learn things about your students during a lesson that you previously did not know.  I also learned that students may often need to be guided toward connections they have with a text because they do not always realize it right after reading a book.

**Data Coding and Analysis**

Data sources included preservice teachers' reader responses from the discussion boards for each of the three articles they read, unit plans that included an analysis of the texts that they selected and the lesson planning for each of their five sessions, two self-reflections that focused on their culturally relevant text integration at different points in the semester (one after the initial lesson and a second after several lessons had been implemented), and their responses to six CPVA discussions that occurred across the semester, including one that involved reflecting on their reader interview. In all, three reader response discussion boards, five unit plans created in collaborative groups by the 17 preservice teachers (each of which included five lesson plans), 34 self-reflections, and 102 responses to CPVA discussions that focused on culturally relevant pedagogy were collected for analysis. We did not have permission to use the videos of instruction, however, as a data source.

## Data Coding and Analysis

We took the following steps to code all three sources of data (reader responses, lesson plans, and reflections). First, we identified challenges (e.g., the teacher wrote that the student was disinterested in the text and had difficulty making connections) and successes (e.g., the teacher wrote that the student was very engaged and made meaningful connections to the text). Then we used emergent coding to identify categories of challenges and constant comparative analysis to combine or disaggregate them to best fit the data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). We engaged in this coding and iteratively compared, discussed, refined, and were informed by the relevant theoretical frameworks (e.g., dimensions of culturally relevant text selection, tenets of culturally relevant pedagogy). The final categories of challenges were resistance, limited view of culture, lack of knowledge about students' cultures, and lack of opportunities for students to develop critical consciousness. When we engaged in a similar process with successes, we found that each success had multiple dimensions (i.e., having knowledge about the students' culture and identity, attending to multiple dimensions of text selection, using culturally relevant text selection and pedagogy in combination), thus we found it impossible to parse apart examples of success into multiple categories. Instead, we identified that successes tended to have these three elements.

Looking at the multiple data sources across time provided a deeper understanding of the issues at hand and strengthened our confidence in the findings. For example, through this process we could examine how sequential data points across sources (e.g., reader response → lesson → self-reflection → CPVA) for a particular teacher shifted in terms of addressing the principles of culturally relevant text selection and pedagogy. These shifts in time align with previous research that also found teachers' development of more culturally relevant pedagogy across time through practice and reflection on practice (Hall, 2012).

## Findings and Discussion

Five interrelated and fairly sequential themes emerged from our data. Four of these concern challenges that preservice teachers experience related to selecting and integrating culturally relevant texts in their literacy instruction. One theme concerns a key shared aspect of preservice teachers' successful culturally relevant text selections. These themes are presented as they emerged in the data, primarily in sequence across the semester, with examples from across the sources in the dataset.

### Challenges

**Resistance.** Despite the readings and class discussions about the benefits of using culturally relevant pedagogy as part of literacy instruction, one barrier to teachers' use of this approach was their doubts about its value. For example, in a reader response near the beginning of the semester, Gladys expressed her skepticism about using culturally pedagogy: "I feel this is going above and beyond my responsibility as a teacher.... [F] or students, their success may be out of their reach because of their circumstances." This response lacked the prerequisites for culturally relevant pedagogy—sociocultural consciousness and holistic caring for students' needs (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Essentially, she viewed her student as incapable, rather than exploring his assets, and did not have high expectations for his academic success (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Additionally, the text that she chose for her student (*The Diary of a Wimpy Kid*) reflected her own White middle-class values. Gladys did not seem to identify the bias in her views of the student or text

selection, nor did she recognize the need for her student to experience a mirror text that would better support his comprehension as compared with a less culturally relevant text (Christ et al., 2018). She perpetuated the tradition of selecting texts that reflected her own culture and values (Williams, 2014).

The proportion of teachers who did not value culturally relevant text pedagogy after the readings, discussions, and professor's modeling of culturally relevant text and teaching practices, as demonstrated by their text selections and reflections after the first lesson, was low (3 out of 17 teachers, or 18%). Two of those teachers shifted their views early in the course, demonstrating their valuing of selecting culturally relevant texts and pedagogy in subsequent lesson plans and reflections. Although our methods do not allow for testing whether there was a causal relation between our teaching methods and these changes in teachers' perspectives about the culturally relevant pedagogy, given the resources and instruction that they received, and how these aligned with researchers' suggestions for shifting teachers' beliefs and practices (Christ, Arya, & Chiu, 2015; Nieto, 2005), we believe that they are likely related.

Only one teacher (Gladys) retained the view that culturally relevant pedagogy was unimportant, despite her engaging in multiple one-on-one discussions with the professor that challenged her beliefs and viewing and discussing specific examples of how culturally relevant texts and pedagogy better engaged the children in the setting where she was teaching and supported better outcomes. This finding for Gladys reflects that changing teachers' beliefs, or "ideological anchors", can be difficult (Gay, 2010, p. 145). Due to the challenge of shifting teachers' beliefs and practices, it is critical to identify ways to address deep resistance. Based on Gay's (2010) suggestions, we expect that to achieve shifts in beliefs and practices for preservice teachers such as Gladys, a programmatic focus on culture and culturally relevant pedagogy is needed.

**Limited view of culture.** A second difficulty that preservice teachers experienced was a limited view of culture. Despite the professor's modeling how to consider multiple dimensions of culturally relevant texts and pedagogy, including recognizing children's often multifaceted and fluid identities and ways of being in the world, many preservice teachers initially chose texts that simply had a character with the same skin color or the same gender as their student, without considering other dimensions of their student's cultures or identities. Consider the rationale for one of Angelina's initial text selections for her Latino student, Jose:

The book that I thought could really connect to our students was *What I Like About Me*. It really connects to several races. It talks about how it is okay to be different. To celebrate the differences. The last page has a mirror on it, where it asks, "What do you like about you?"

Although this text addressed multiculturalism well, it did not reflect the multiple dimensions of Jose's culture or identity. It did not present a family that looks and sounds like his or engages in activities that he and his family engage in, nor did it present friends who hang out in places such as Jose does or include things that he talks about with his friends. Further, because Angelina focused on identifying differences between the various cultures in the book during the lesson, this did not facilitate Jose's being able to make strong connections based on his cultural knowledge and experiences to respond successfully to Angelina's questioning during their discussion of the book (Ebe, 2010; Pritchard, 1990; Ramirez, 2012). Angelina's lesson lacked Ladson-Billing's (1995) second tenet of culturally relevant pedagogy: cultural competence.

Through practice and engagement in reflection, over time teachers began to recognize when they were not attending to multiple dimensions of culture and identity. This occurred in Libby's reflection about the Rosa Parks texts that she chose for her African American student, Tisha:

I just think she could have related more with a person that was from a time period closer to the one she is growing up in. This [time period] may have taken away from the cultural relevance that the student felt about the text. I think the time period that Rosa Parks grew up in was much different from the time period now that my student is growing up in.

Although Libby attended to race and gender in selecting a book with a main character like her student, she did not attend to several other important dimensions of cultural relevance, such as similar age, experiences, and places that Tisha may have visited. Tisha was in fourth grade, had not experienced segregation on a bus, and had never been to the southern United States. Further, the time period in which Rosa Parks was active was unfamiliar to her. Overall, the text only very minimally reflected Tisha, and mainly in superficial ways (race), rather than those that more dynamically represented her culture and identity. This resulted in Tisha having difficulty connecting to the text during the lesson. Libby reflected:

Tisha did not connect with her. She saw Rosa as a person of the past and had trouble making comparisons to herself because of this. When I asked Tisha how she was similar to Rosa Parks, she did not have a response.

Libby's conclusion, that when the text selected is less culturally relevant students have more difficulty making connections, aligns with findings from previous research (Ebe, 2010; Pritchard, 1990; Ramirez, 2012). Despite the lesson not being particularly successful, Libby did engage in investigating and taking personal responsibility for her student's success, one aspect of having high expectations for all students (Morrison et al., 2008). Her reflection also shows that she was gaining cultural competence (Ladson-Billings, 1995) through her reflective process.

**Lack of knowledge about students' cultures and identities.** Often, preservice teachers' difficulties were related to not knowing enough about their students' lives (i.e., lack of cultural competence). For example, Sara wrote:

I chose a book [*Kitchen Dance* by Maurie Manning] that had some Spanish words in it because my student told me [during the reader interview] her parents speak Spanish at home. However, she could not read the Spanish words.

She explained how this had a negative impact on the lesson. "I just had her skip them because I didn't know what they meant or said either" and she did not make "much of a connection with the character in the story."

Sometimes this lack of information was due to difficulties with learning about students through the reader interview. In her CPVA response, Angelina wrote, "I couldn't get a lot [of information] out of him so I was asking [my peers] what I could do to get some more information on him." This suggests that she and other preservice teachers may need more support when engaging in effective reader interviews.

Several preservice teachers recognized that they needed to know more about their students' lives and attempted to gather additional information during their lessons. For example, Mary explained that she "tried to build more relationships with students and tried to learn more about their backgrounds and where they live and what their home lives are like." This helped her learn more about her Mexican student, Pedro, and select a text about

luchadores (Mexican professional wrestlers; *Niño Wrestles the World* by Yuyi Morales) that were part of his family's regular television-viewing routine. Her lesson with this text supported Pedro in making connections and developing deeper comprehension, skills with which he had struggled previously.

Based on these findings, providing more support for teachers' engagement in reader interviews, or other methods, to identify deeper knowledge about their students' cultures and identities appears to be important. Further, framing this learning about students explicitly as an ongoing process that teachers should engage in during each lesson may be helpful as well. Future research might explore ways of better supporting teachers' learning about their students' cultures and identities to increase their cultural competence (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

**Lack of opportunities for students to develop critical consciousness.** Across the lesson plans and reflections, we saw many examples of high expectations for students' success (Ladson-Billings, 1995) and development of cultural competence (Ladson-Billings, 1995), but no examples of opportunities for students to develop critical consciousness (Ladson-Billings, 1995). In fact, across the texts that were chosen to be culturally relevant (Table 3), although several (e.g., *Please, Puppy, Please; I Love Saturdays y Domingos*) likely affirmed students' lived experiences, only a few addressed issues that might support students' development of critical consciousness or social action (e.g., the texts on Rosa Parks and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., *Chocolate Me*). Even when integrating these texts in instruction, however, teachers avoided topics of race and racism in their instruction and discussions of the books. This finding aligns with Ladson-Billings's (2017) assertion that this is the most ignored tenet of culturally relevant pedagogy. In retrospect, we realize that although we modeled instructional conversations with culturally relevant texts, we did not explicitly model conversations focused on race, equity, and social justice. Thus, we are much to blame regarding the lack of development of critical consciousness.

### Successes

Through their recursive engagement in selecting culturally relevant texts, trying to integrate them into instruction to provide culturally relevant pedagogy, and engaging in self-reflections and CPVA about these attempts, over time preservice teachers improved their ability to select culturally relevant texts and engage in culturally relevant pedagogy. When they engaged in culturally relevant pedagogy successfully, they learned more about their students' cultures, identities, and ways of being in the world; recognized cultural relevance as multifaceted and used this knowledge to improve culturally relevant text selection; and used culturally relevant texts and pedagogy in combination. For example, when Katie reflected on her selection of *Maniac Monkeys on Magnolia Street* by Angela Johnson for her African American student, Kiera, who had just recently moved to the area, she considered several dimensions of culture and identity:

The characters in the story were the same race as my student [African American], and they talked like her [dialect]—because I asked if the characters in the story talked similar to the way she talked, and she said “yes.” Also, they were around her age as well. Not only was the language [in the text] similar [to her oral language], but the story was about growing up in a new neighborhood [place] and meeting new friends [experiences], and my student said that she had to move to a new school and meet new friends and it was difficult at first, similar to the main character in the story.

**Table 3**  
**Teachers' Text Selections and Objectives**

Grade	Teacher	Texts Chosen as Culturally Relevant	Objective
K	Alice, Angelina, and Jenny	What I Like About Me by Allia Zobel Nolan	Making connections
K	Alice, Angelina, and Jenny	I Got the Rhythm by Connie Schofield-Morrison*	Sequencing events and retelling
K	Alice, Angelina, and Jenny	Rap a Tap Tap by Leo and Diane Dillon	Sequencing events and retelling
K	Alice, Angelina, and Jenny	I Love Saturdays y Domingos by Alma Flor Ada*	Sequencing events and retelling
K	Alice, Angelina, and Jenny	Not Norman by Kelly Bennett	Sequencing events and retelling
1	Charlotte, Mary, Jackie, and Janice	Please, Puppy Please by Spike Lee and Tonya Lewis Lee*	Learning word recognition and fluency
1	Charlotte, Mary, Jackie, and Janice	Language experience stories (dictated by the children about their own personal experiences)	Learning word recognition and fluency
1	Charlotte, Mary, Jackie, and Janice	Chocolate Me by Taye Diggs**	Making connections
1	Charlotte, Mary, Jackie, and Janice	Niño Wrestles the World by Yuyi Morales*	Making connections and inferences
1	Charlotte, Mary, Jackie, and Janice	Lola at the Library by Anna McQuinn	Comprehension monitoring and retelling
2-3	Tammy, Sara, Nathan, Sam, and Matthew	Soccer Surprise by Jake Maddox	Identifying characters' motivations
2-3	Tammy, Sara, Nathan, Sam, and Matthew	Jessica Loves Soccer by Joe Slade	Asking and answering questions to monitor comprehension
2-3	Tammy, Sara, Nathan, Sam, and Matthew	Happy Like Soccer by Maribeth Boelts	Identifying characters' traits, motivations, and feelings
2-3	Tammy, Sara, Nathan, Sam, and Matthew	I Got the Rhythm by Connie Schofield-Morrison*	Sequencing events and retelling
2-3	Tammy, Sara, Nathan, Sam, and Matthew	Kitchen Dance by Maurie Manning*	Distinguishing and defining literal and nonliteral language
4-5	Colin, Kathy, Libby, and Katie	National Geographic Kids: Martin Luther King Jr. by Kitson Jazynka and YouTube video on Dr. King ( <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TQJxWAWrF_A">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TQJxWAWrF_A</a> )	Identifying facts
4-5	Colin, Kathy, Libby, and Katie	Jump by Floyd Cooper	Learning vocabulary
4-5	Colin, Kathy, Libby, and Katie	iBiography app text and YouTube video on Rosa Parks	Comparing and contrasting
4-5	Colin, Kathy, Libby, and Katie	Maniac Monkeys on Magnolia Street by Angela Johnson*	Making connections
4-5	Colin, Kathy, Libby, and Katie	Kidzworld biography of Michael Jordan ( <a href="http://www.kidzworld.com/article/24941-michael-jordan-bio">http://www.kidzworld.com/article/24941-michael-jordan-bio</a> )	Identifying features of autobiographical texts
6-8	Gladys	None was chosen to be culturally relevant	NA

\*We recommend considering these books' potential cultural relevance for urban African American and Latino students.

\*\*We recommend this book for fostering critical conversations about race and racism.



Katie found that Kiera was able to deeply connect with and respond to this text due to its multiple dimensions of relevance and the way Katie and Kiera engaged in dynamic, fluid instructional conversations about the text, which allowed for call-outs, excitement, and simultaneous talk. Katie's selection of a text and pedagogy that reflected Kiera's language, experiences, and ways of being in the world acted to "perpetuate and foster—to sustain" aspects of "linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as a part of schooling" (Alim & Paris, 2017, p. 1). Further, Katie's use of a conversational approach to discussing the book mediated her instruction in a way that engaged and motivated her student, as has been seen in previous research (McIntyre et al., 2006).

Similarly, when Charlotte reflected on her selection of *Please, Puppy, Please* by Spike Lee and Tonya Lewis Lee for her African American student, Tamar, she also considered several dimensions of its cultural relevance:

[It] was written and illustrated by an African American...took place in a yard similar to what my student's yard might look like [place]...[and] the characters were African American and had a pet dog like my student [experience].

Tamar, who was often disengaged in previous lessons, was enraptured by this book. He told Charlotte all about his yard and dog. Charlotte's engagement in open-ended and uptake questions helped to encourage Tamar's engagement in the conversation (Christoph & Nystrand, 2001; Goldenberg, 1993). Due to these aspects of text selection and pedagogy, his experience with this book was more positive and yielded better outcomes, but Tamar and Charlotte also developed a deeper, more personal, and caring relationship through their conversation—an important prerequisite for culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings 1995).

Likewise, Angelina's description of her choice of *I Love Saturdays y Domingos* by Alma Flor Ada for her Latino student, Jose, considered several dimensions of his culture and identity as well. In addition to considering that the author and main character were Latino, like her student, she also considered Jose's language: "After a few conversations with Jose I had the suspicion that he spoke Spanish. I also had this idea from when we were doing the word recognition [because] he started saying words in Spanish." Thus, the dual Spanish-English language used in the text reflected Jose's own dual language use. She also wrote, "I believed this story would be perfect for him...since it involved grandma and grandpa and he had mentioned his grandparents [in many conversations]." This was a clear shift from her more limited view of culture in her earlier text selections for Jose. She even explicitly articulated in a self-reflection the importance of considering multiple dimensions of cultural and identity:

It is important not only that the student is from the same cultural background [as the characters], but can picture themselves in those characters' shoes as well. They need to be able to relate to the character and have similar experiences like them. The stories also need to be more recent [i.e., relevant time period].

Based on the more culturally relevant text selection, Jose was able to make meaningful connections to the text:

He connected to it by telling me about his "Abuelito Nacho." There was also a part in the book where the grandpa gets his granddaughter a fish tank. He got really excited and began telling me ALL about his fish Nemo. He also told me he understood the Spanish really well. At the end of the book the character has a birthday party where she has a piñata. He told me about how at one of his parties HE had a piñata and that that was his favorite part.



These connections supported Jose's attainment of the lesson objectives and his ability to sequence events and retell the story. Further, this text also provided an opportunity to perpetuate and foster cultural pluralism as part of literacy instruction (Alim & Paris, 2017). These opportunities were due to both thoughtful text selection and carefully crafted instructional conversation, which included open-ended and uptake questions as well as a conversational tone (Christoph & Nystrand, 2001; Goldenberg, 1993; McIntyre et al., 2006).

### **Implications**

Our findings suggest that preservice teachers need to develop five characteristics related to culturally relevant text selection and pedagogy. First, they need to believe in the value of using culturally relevant texts and pedagogy. Second, they need to be able to engage in effective ways of learning about their students' cultures, identities, and ways of being in the world to inform their culturally relevant text selection and pedagogy (see Sharma & Christ, 2017, for ideas). Third, they need to know the dimensions of culture and identity that they should consider and to engage in analysis of multiple dimensions of cultural relevance when selecting texts and pedagogy. Fourth, they need to develop their instructional conversation skills to include open-ended and uptake questions and a conversational tone, which elicit more participation and engagement in instructional conversations by children than do other approaches. Finally, they need to develop the ability to use instructional conversations to help children develop critical consciousness and social action. These five needs for preservice teacher development are important to consider in planning teacher preparation for culturally relevant pedagogy.

Preservice teachers' recursive engagement in selecting culturally relevant texts and trying to integrate them in culturally relevant ways, and then reflecting on these attempts, are imperative to helping teachers such as Angelina make the shift toward culturally relevant pedagogy. Although reading about culturally relevant pedagogy may be helpful for informing some preservice teachers' practices, based on our data it seems insufficient to convince skeptical preservice teachers to use culturally relevant texts. It is also important to note that although two out of three teachers shifted their perspectives and valued culturally relevant texts and pedagogy by the end of the course, one (Gladys) did not. Figuring out how to reach teachers such as Gladys is imperative and an important focus for future research. Likewise, although the professor's modeling of culturally relevant text selection and pedagogy may have been helpful, our data show that it does not ensure that preservice teachers adequately understand these processes. Based on previous research, the best way to accomplish these goals may be to design teacher preparation programs that address culturally relevant pedagogy across all methods courses since change comes slowly (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Gay, 2010). It is also valuable to specifically model instructional conversations about race and social justice in the hopes of supporting preservice teachers in engaging children in instruction that fosters critical consciousness and social action. In sum, although readings and models of practice may be helpful, teaching practice and reflection on practice are key features of effective teacher preparation for culturally relevant text selection and pedagogy.

To further harness the potential of the cycle of teaching practice and reflection on practice that seem to help preservice teachers shift toward more culturally relevant pedagogy, future research might explore the use of guide sheets for teachers' reflections, observations, and activities to get to know students better. For example, providing a rubric that presents the criteria for culturally relevant text selection might guide preservice

teachers' engagement in culturally relevant text selection. Likewise, asking teachers to reflect on which tenets of culturally relevant pedagogy they did or did not attend to in their lesson might help them more deeply consider their engagement in culturally relevant pedagogy. Further, it would be valuable to spend more time developing preservice teachers' skills to learn more about their students' cultures and identities, which should be understood as multifaceted, fluid, and dynamic, and to more explicitly guide them in their ongoing learning about their students (e.g., a student log with entries about what they learned about their student during each teaching session). Finally, guide sheets to support teachers' instructional conversations to foster students' critical consciousness and social action seem needed. Future research should explore the development and use of such resources.

### Limitations and Future Research Directions

Although this study adds to the field's knowledge about preservice teachers' culturally relevant text selection and pedagogy, it has a few important limitations. First, because the data sources were limited to what teachers wrote about their ideas and experiences in reader responses and reflections, as well as what they planned to teach in their lesson plans, we do not know what potentially important problems went unrecognized by preservice teachers. Further, we were unable to analyze aspects of culturally relevant pedagogy that would have been evident in videos of the lessons, but might not have been attended to in teachers' lesson plans and reflections. For example, we could not analyze the dialogue for instructional conversations, but instead relied on teachers' reports about what was working (or not working) during instruction. Thus, future research would benefit from the use of videos of preservice teachers' instruction to provide more insights into their culturally relevant pedagogy. Not having videos of teachers' lessons limited our analysis of how culturally relevant their teaching was, and in what ways it was or was not relevant. Finally, given that the findings from this study were based on a convenience sample of preservice teachers, they are not generalizable to all preservice or in-service teachers.

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### About the Authors

Tanya Christ is an Associate Professor of Reading and Language Arts at Oakland University. Her research focuses on developing critical and culturally sustaining pedagogies; early childhood vocabulary, comprehension, and digital literacies; and literacy teacher development. She can be reached via email: [christ@oakland.edu](mailto:christ@oakland.edu).

Sue Ann Sharma is an Assistant Professor and Director of Graduate Literacy in the College of Education at Madonna University, Livonia, MI, USA. Her research interests include culturally responsive pedagogies; digital curation; and online teaching and learning. She can be reached via email: [sasharma@madonna.edu](mailto:sasharma@madonna.edu).