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## Disruptive Teaching: Centering Equity and Diversity in Literacy Pedagogical Practices

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## **Disruptive Teaching: Centering Equity and Diversity in Literacy Pedagogical Practices**

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### **Abstract**

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Teacher educators must prepare preservice teachers (PSTs) to become equitable practitioners who honor the voices and experiences of their future students. In this article, we advocate for centering equitable teaching in literacy education courses and making explicit how to disrupt traditional perspectives of teaching diverse students. This qualitative study investigated PSTs' perceptions and attitudes about teaching diverse students after a series of modeled lessons. Analysis revealed that over the course of the semester PSTs either continued to focus on barriers related to equitable teaching, began to discuss new possibilities for teaching, or were ready to enact the practices they had learned. This study revealed the importance of moving PSTs beyond surface-level teaching to affirming and inclusive practices.

***Keywords:* teacher education, literacy, equity, diversity**

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The United States is in a state of unrest (Kitch, 2018) and our schools, always microcosms of the larger society, must meet the turmoil in meaningful ways. Teacher preparation programs must focus on explicitly preparing preservice teachers (PSTs) to effectively work with students from backgrounds different than their own. Today's teachers are tasked with preparing an increasingly diverse student population to succeed in a global society—a society in which they will encounter people from a plethora of linguistic, ethnic, and racial backgrounds, with a variety of abilities, gender identities, and sexual orientations, and supported by different socioeconomic levels. PSTs to adopt mindsets and employ pedagogical practices that meet the needs of diverse learners is a timely challenge. Many scholars advocate for the preparation of culturally responsive, social justice-oriented educators. The challenge, however, is how to do so.

Although the answer to this challenge is complex, we advocate for teacher educators to make more explicit for PSTs how to disrupt traditional thinking about and approaches to teaching diverse K–12 students. By intentionally teaching PSTs how to

deeply interrogate myths about poverty, develop accurate and affirming language about gender identity and sexual orientation, and plan social justice literacy lessons, we posit that implicit biases perpetuated in literacy education become more visible and can be rectified.

In an effort to critically reflect on our own use of literacy research as a form of activism, this article reports findings from a recent study that documented PSTs' reflections across three model literacy lessons focused on disrupting traditional thinking about and approaches to diverse K–12 classrooms. Central to our individual and collective work with PSTs is Nieto and Bode's (2012) definition of social justice as "a philosophy, an approach, and actions that embody treating all people with fairness, respect, dignity, and generosity" (p. 12). We use this lens because it provides opportunities to move beyond awareness and understanding to *affirming* the culture and experiences of students to create more inclusive and equitable classrooms (C. Howard & Ticknor, 2019).

In recent years, student and family diversity in the United States has increased and become more visible. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2019), slightly more than half (50.5%) of students enrolled in public schools in fall 2014 were students of color. Further, about 15 million children were from families living in poverty in 2014. Additionally, "youth are coming out as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ) in larger numbers and at younger ages than ever before" (Russell, Horn, Kosciw, & Saewyc, 2010, p. 5), increasing the need for greater understanding and awareness of LGBTQ issues from teachers and schools.

Although teacher education programs across the country have begun the work of better preparing the nation's educators to effectively meet the needs of a diverse student body (Bissonnette, 2016), more work can be done. Recognizing the systemic inequities affecting children and families from diverse backgrounds, many programs are actively seeking to prepare educators who are willing and able to promote social justice through pedagogy. This paradigm shift calls for moving beyond "tolerance" or "celebrating diversity" to critically analyzing the policies and instructional decisions that disadvantage particular groups of students (Nieto, 2000). Teacher education must actively counteract these policies in the ways we prepare educators to think about, speak about, and speak to students.

A great deal of literature has been written regarding the best ways to approach this work (Trent, Kea, & Oh, 2008). Although scholars agree on the need to move away from standalone diversity courses to a model in which multicultural education is centralized and embedded throughout the curriculum (Hyland & Heuschkel, 2010), the best methods for doing so are the subject of continued study. Some efforts have been found to be ineffective or even counterproductive due to lack of time invested, lack of conceptual clarity, or lack of transformative experiences (Bissonnette, 2016; Glazier, Charpentier, & Boone 2011; Nieto, 2000). Teacher educators have found that deconstructing curriculum standards then reconstructing curriculum to include more diverse literature, multiple forms of inquiry, and tenets of critical literacy can promote more equity and agency in classrooms and teacher practices (Bissonnette, 2016; C. M. Howard & Miller, 2017; Jones, 2006; Jones, Clarke, & Enriquez, 2010; Overstreet, 2019; Ryan & Hermann-Wilmarth, 2018). Many teacher educators agree that PSTs need repeated opportunities to critically reflect and dialogue with their peers and other teachers (Bissonnette, 2016; G. Howard, 2007; Ticknor, 2015). Ahmed (2018) writes that we need to "give ourselves permission to create learning conditions where kids can ask the questions they want to ask, muddle through how to say the things they are thinking and have tough conversations" (p. xxii). As teacher educators we have

a responsibility to our PSTs to both engage with and model for them similar learning conditions so that they are well prepared for tough conversations with their students.

According to Zoss, Holbrook, McGrail, and Albers (2014), “Teacher education programs that provide extensive opportunities to talk, write, and think about what it means to teach have lasting impact on the quality of teachers who populate U.S. classrooms” (p. 40), and we enthusiastically agree. As literacy teachers, much of our teaching includes multiple opportunities for our PSTs to read, write, talk, and listen *as teachers* and *as students* engaged in literacy activities. We know “as educators it is critical to become aware of how language positions and possibly hurts people” (Kuby, 2013, p. 87), and we model affirming and strength-based language and encourage our PSTs to use similar language to talk to and about students and their families. Educating PSTs to be metacognitive about their language choices can be taught in the context of literacy courses to tease out subtext within written and spoken language about literacy education.

Zoss et al. (2014) explored the meanings of *literacy*, *urban*, and *teaching* as used by PSTs in their methods courses. The researchers discovered that much was implied by these everyday words, and, in particular, the word *urban* held negative connotations. Through explicit attention to and discussion of PSTs’ definitions of each term, and the nature of language in general, they were able to discern their students’ beliefs and to counteract hidden deficit perspectives regarding teaching literacy in urban schools. Similar studies suggest that PSTs first “made sense of becoming teachers in relation to the language of authorities and cultural models” (Farnsworth, 2010, p. 1483). Hence, Zoss et al. found their PSTs took up the language used by professors, indicating the potentially powerful impact of teacher educators and programs on the ways PSTs perceive and speak about children, families, and communities.

Many PSTs have been conditioned to aspire to *tolerance*, a language choice that most advocates for social justice have moved past (Schmidt, Chang, Carolan-Silva, Lockhart, Anagnostopoulos, 2012), and this perspective hinders people from learning how to talk *to* and *about* one another in positive and respectful ways. In our work with mostly White PSTs in the southeastern United States, our students share similar hesitations to discuss or teach about diversity in their future classrooms. Some students have reported that they are uncomfortable discussing diversity, have misconceptions about social issues, and are unfamiliar with language that is affirmative and accurate and that does not perpetuate deficit, socially constructed norms. PSTs often enter education programs uncritical of their own privilege, assuming everyone shares their background and espousing well-meaning colorblind philosophies of education (Glazier et al., 2011). White teachers may misunderstand racism and inequity by “assum[ing] that the United States affords equal opportunities to members of all racial and ethnic groups,” which can “have a devastating impact on the outcomes of students from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds” (Wilson & Kumar, 2017, p. 183). G. Howard (2007) conveys similar sentiments in his work with White educators teaching in diverse classrooms’: “The point is, our disposition toward difference makes a difference in the lives of our students. It is not whether I am White, but rather my disposition toward issues of race and Whiteness that really matters” (p. 1).

According to G. Howard (2016), growth in teacher beliefs and behaviors about Whiteness happens in three stages of awareness in thought, feeling, and action: fundamentalist (the most rigid stage in which a person either consciously or unconsciously ascribes to White supremacist thinking), integrationist (a more advanced stage in which a person is willing to acknowledge issues of race to a shallow or superficial degree), and

transformationist (the most advanced stage in which a person understands that diversity issues are complex and ever changing, characterized by a willingness to engage in uncomfortable self-interrogation). Howard noted that, unlike non-White populations, White people (certainly in the United States) are able to move through life without acknowledging or analyzing their own racialized identities, though they are unconsciously internalizing beliefs about other races. Although Howard conceptualized these stages of *racial awareness*, we see these stages and definitions as applicable to our study of PSTs' perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs about a larger range of diversity and equity in literacy classroom practices.

In this article we present findings from our recent study into the impact of direct and tangible instruction in PSTs' perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs about diversity and equity in literacy teaching. We take up G. Howard's (2007) call for authentic dialogue between teachers and extend his sentiment to engaging our PSTs in dialogue about their "own culturally conditioned realities" in our literacy education courses so they can transcend their "particular truths and perspectives and come to a place of greater breadth and cultural competence" (p. 3). We, and many others, believe teacher educators should explicitly model how to disrupt traditional thinking about and approaches to diverse K–12 classrooms in combination with teaching PSTs to work toward building more inclusive and loving classroom communities.

## Method

### Study Context

The context for this study was a large public university located in a mostly rural area of the southeastern United States. The university graduates approximately 150 elementary (K–5) teacher candidates each year. We each teach in the Reading Education Program and collectively teach all of the reading courses offered to elementary and special education PSTs. One 15-week face-to-face course, Literacy Learning in a Diverse World, offered to PSTs who concentrate in reading, is the specific context for this study. Christy regularly teaches this course, and for purposes of the study, Anne and Mikkaka guest taught one lesson, for a total of three model lessons specifically aimed at building cultural awareness and understanding with the intent of affirming students' lived experiences (see C. Howard, Overstreet, & Ticknor, 2018, for in-depth lesson descriptions). Model lessons were spaced over the 15-week semester.

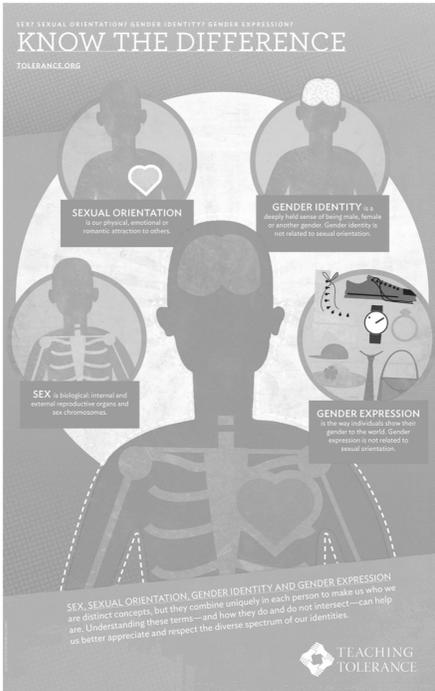
**Overview of lessons.** Mikkaka taught the first model lesson, which focused on disrupting myths about poor and/or diverse families. In the lesson PSTs were first asked to read a chapter of Compton-Lilly's (2002) *Confronting Racism, Poverty, and Power* titled "Twelve Myths About Poor and Diverse Parents." The PSTs responded to the reading through a process known as "ink shedding," during which they free-wrote for a timed period, shared and responded to one another's writing in small groups, and then held small-group discussions. Mikkaka then facilitated a whole-group conversation to tease out common themes, address and counter misconceptions, and offer additional evidence to consider (see Table 1 for all model lesson assignments).

Table 1  
*Model Lesson Assignments*

Model Lesson	Assignment	Description	Focus
1	12 Myths reading & Ink Shedding reflection	In this lesson, PSTs experience an Interactive Read Aloud focused on developing affirming and accurate vocabulary. Specific vocabulary is introduced before the text reading then the text is read with attention to vocabulary. PSTs are encouraged to use vocabulary through the IRA process. Then PSTs review texts to find affirming & accurate vocabulary to highlight within an IRA lesson.	Disrupting myths about poor and/or diverse families
2	Interactive Read Aloud with focused vocabulary instruction & children's literature exploration	In this lesson, PSTs experience an Interactive Read Aloud focused on developing affirming and accurate vocabulary. Specific vocabulary is introduced before the text reading then the text is read with attention to vocabulary. PSTs are encouraged to use vocabulary through the IRA process. Then PSTs review texts to find affirming & accurate vocabulary to highlight within an IRA lesson.	Facilitative texts to scaffold affirming and accurate language use
3	Literature based social justice lesson planning & process reflection	In this lesson, PSTs are introduced to children's picture books through a social justice lens. They are asked to read and discuss the texts in small groups using critical questions to guide their discussion. Once preservice teachers have read and discussed the text, they are asked to plan and create social justice focused tasks that they might use with these texts as they engage their future students in exploring texts through a social justice lens with a focus on action.	Children's literature for social justice

Anne taught the second model lesson using facilitative texts to scaffold affirming and accurate language use about gender identity and sexual orientation. She introduced specific vocabulary about gender identity and sexual orientation (Figure 1) then read aloud *A Day in the Life of Marlon Bundo* (Bundo & Twiss, 2018) to PSTs.

Figure 1. LGBTQ+ Affirming and Accurate Language



Anne facilitated a discussion after the reading that focused on the affirming language scaffolded in, or facilitated about, gender identity and sexual orientation by reading the text. Then PSTs worked in small groups to examine additional children’s literature (Table 2) as resources to use as text to facilitate accurate and affirming language (C. Howard & Ticknor, 2019).

Although Christy is the instructor of record and taught the regular content of the course, her model lesson was the final one in the study. The lesson highlighted literature used to teach social justice. Christy introduced the definition of social justice and the ways in which it can be found in children’s literature. She used five picture books as example texts (Figure 3) and assigned each group of students one of these books.

Table 2. Facilitative Children’s Literature for Gender Identity and Sexual Orientation

Book Titles
de Haan, L., & Nijland, S. (2000). <i>King and king</i> . Berkeley, CA: Tricycle.
Elwin, R., & Paulse, M. (1990). <i>Asha’s mums</i> . (D. Lee, Illus.). Toronto, ON, Canada: Three O’Clock Press.
Ewert, M. (2008). <i>10, 000 dresses</i> . New York, NY: Seven Stories Press.
Hall, M. (2015) <i>Red: A crayon’s story</i> . New York, NY: Greenwillow Books.
Herthel, H. & Jennings, J. (2014). <i>I am Jazz</i> . (S. McNichols, Illus.). New York, NY: Dial Books
Kilodavis, C. (2011). <i>My princess boy: A mom’s story about a young boy who loves to dress up</i> . (S. DeSimone, Illus.). New York, NY: Aladdin.
Love, J. (2018). <i>Julián is a mermaid</i> . Sommerville, MA: Candlewick Press.
Newman, L. (2009). <i>Mommy, Mama, and me</i> . New York, NY: Tricycle Press.
Newman, L. (2009). <i>Daddy, Papa, and me</i> . New York, NY: Tricycle Press.
Parr, T. (2003). <i>The family book</i> . New York, NY: Little, Brown.
Parr, T. (2007). <i>We belong together: A book about adoption and families</i> . New York, NY: Little, Brown.
Polacco, P. (2009). <i>In our mothers’ house</i> . New York, NY: Philomel.
Richardson, J., & Parnell, P. (2005). <i>And Tango makes three</i> . (H. Cole, Illus.). New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.
Sanders, R. (2018). <i>Pride: The story of Harvey Milk and the rainbow flag</i> . (S. Salerno, Illus.). New York, NY: Random House.
Zolotow, C. (1972). <i>William’s doll</i> . New York, NY: HarperCollins Press.

In groups students read their book and participated in initial reflection discussions. After their discussions, as a group they created social justice lessons based on their books and then completed final group and individual reflections.

**Authors.** Although we all teach in the same Reading Education Program at the same university and approach teaching using a similar social justice lens, we identify and embody our identities differently. Anne identifies as a White, heterosexual woman. Mikkaka identifies as a Black, bisexual woman. Christy identifies as a Black, heterosexual woman. All three of us have taught a range of grade levels at a variety of education settings. Additionally, we have taught students with a variety of linguistic, ethnic, and racial backgrounds and with a variety of abilities, gender identities, and sexual orientations. Collectively, we have taught grades K–12 across all regions of the United States for over 50 years.

**Participants.** Our institution attracts first-generation college students, students from the local and rural area, as well as students from all over the United States. Sixty-

seven percent of all university students at our institution identify as White, and 59% of students identify as female. Eighty-nine percent of participants enrolled in this study identified as White, 6% as two or more races, 3% as Black or African American, and 3% as American Indian or Native Alaskan. Ninety-four percent identified as female, and 5% identified as male. The participant demographics for our study closely mirrors a National Center for Education Statistics (2019) report that found 82% of public school teachers were White and 76% identified as female. Our participant sample also echoes G. Howard's (2007) assertion that "achieving greater equity and excellence in public education is in large part of the process of transforming the beliefs and behaviors of White educators" (p. 1).

Table 3. Children's Literature for Teaching Social Justice

Book Titles
Cohn, D. (2002). <i>Si, Se Puede!/Yes, We Can!: Janitor Strike in L.A.</i> El Paso, TX: Cinco Puntos Press.
Levinson, C. (2017). <i>The Youngest Marcher: The Story of Audrey Faye Hendricks, a Young Civil Rights Activist.</i> New York, NY: Atheneum books.
Weatherford, C.B. (2007). <i>Freedom on the Menu: The Greensboro Sit-ins.</i> New York, NY: Puffin Books.
Tonatiuh, D. (2014). <i>Separate Is Never Equal: Sylvia Mendez &amp; Her Family's Fight for Desegregation.</i> New York, NY: Abrams.
Tuck, P. (2013). <i>As Fast as Words Could Fly.</i> New York, NY: Lee & Low Books.

All participants were undergraduate students ( $N = 39$ ), ages 18–30+, with 83% of them between the ages of 18 and 20. Seventy-eight percent of participants were enrolled in the elementary education degree program, 14% were enrolled in the special education degree program, and 8% were enrolled in other degree programs, including university studies, which is a general degree program and does not qualify for teacher licensure. However, because all students enrolled in this course were interested in teaching K–12 students in some capacity, all participants are referred to as PSTs.

### Data Sources and Analysis

This article reports findings from a recent study that documented PSTs' reflections across three model literacy lessons focused on disrupting traditional thinking about and approaches to diverse K–12 classrooms. Data sources for the larger study include a prestudy survey, a poststudy survey, videos of our three model lessons and one complementary lesson taught by a teacher resource librarian at our institution about diverse books, student-generated documents from the model lessons and related course activities (e.g., exit slips, reflections), and researcher-generated documents (e.g., field notes taken during each model lessons, reflections after each model lesson, notes from post lesson discussions with each other).

During data collection, we used constant comparison methods (Glaser, 1965) to determine emerging themes and to determine next steps in our lessons. For example, after Mikkaka's lesson, "Combating Popular Myths of Poor and/or Diverse Families," all three of us discussed the need to ensure that PSTs wrote during each subsequent lesson to encourage more reflection by participants. We also discussed how to engage PSTs in subsequent lessons based on the previous lesson and participant interaction. Once data collection was complete, we used content analysis to identify overarching themes and categories across all data sources.

This article reports findings from categories that emerged related to PSTs' perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs about diversity and equity across the three model lessons. In particular, the analysis categories resembled G. Howard's (2016) stages of White identity. Though Howard's stages of White identity have been useful in considering how our PSTs' thinking about diversity and equity in literacy teaching was impacted by the three model lessons, we quickly realized that we needed to expand on Howard's stages to be more inclusive of the range of diversity we address in this study. First, we recognize that people of color in our society often unknowingly internalize White supremacist ideologies based on the sheer prevalence of them across shared systems (Emdin, 2016). Second, we considered PSTs' beliefs and language use across demographic categories beyond race, including sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, and socioeconomic status. Thus, we have broadened the definitions as follows:

- **Fundamentalist:** the most rigid stage in which a person is either consciously or unconsciously predisposed to avoid, deny, or rationalize racial differences, heteronormativity, xenophobia, misogyny, and so on, thus distancing themselves from any need for self-examination regarding the meaning or impact of their own identity (G. Howard, 2007)
- **Integrationist:** a more advanced stage in which a person begins to question their beliefs or preconceived notions and/or is willing to acknowledge differences of identity with little commitment to change
- **Transformationist:** the most advanced stage in which a person understands that identities are complex and ever-changing, characterized by a willingness to engage in uncomfortable self-interrogation and inviting growth

Moreover, we consider the stages as a spectrum on which PSTs might advance and regress based on the context, conversation, the particular identity under discussion, and a number of other unknown factors.

## Findings

In this section we present illustrative examples from each model lesson. The first model lesson, "Combating Popular Myths of Poor and/or Diverse Families," was taught by Mikkaka. Anne taught the second lesson, "Facilitative Texts to Scaffold Affirming and Accurate Language." The final lesson, "Literature for Teaching Social Justice," was taught by Christy. We review relevant lesson details, then we present illustrative examples of findings related to each of the three stages toward more diversity and equity awareness.

### **Combating Popular Myths of Poor and/or Diverse Families (Mikkaka)**

In my lesson, I asked PSTs to read a chapter debunking prevalent beliefs about families from poor and/or diverse backgrounds (Compton-Lilly, 2002). The deficit-oriented statements were as follows:

- Parents are content to rely on welfare.
- Parents are caught in a cycle of poverty.
- Parents are often children themselves.
- Poor households are vacant of print.
- Parents have no interest in their own learning.
- Parents do not care about school.
- Parents don't know how to help their children with reading.
- Parents don't help their children with reading.
- Parents can't read.
- Parents don't read.

For each statement, the chapter PSTs read by Compton-Lilly (2002) provides counterevidence to disprove or complicate the myth.

After reading the chapter, PSTs silently completed a timed free-write response. Then, they reread what they had written, highlighting or underlining key points. The final steps in the ink-shedding process involved sharing and discussing their responses with their peers, followed by a whole-group discussion and debrief, during which I facilitated thoughtful conversation, addressed any misconceptions, and provided further data to consider.

The PSTs' responses revealed a range of beliefs and emergent stances regarding issues of identity. Some seemed confused, others resistant, still others seemed to recognize and connect to aspects of their own identities. The following excerpts are examples along the modified G. Howard (2016) spectrum described in the previous section.

**Fundamentalists.** Often for fundamentalist-leaning PSTs, factual evidence did not outweigh personal experience. In her ink shedding of the "Twelve Myths" chapter, one such PST wrote,

Although there are 12 myths listed, I have had experiences with students in the past that prove some of them to be true. Some parents I have encountered say they care about their child's reading ability and say they help them, but the child doesn't seem to improve. Most parents I encounter are what I like to call "ghost parents." Meaning they never show up to anything and aren't involved in their child's education. Most of them have their reasons like work, other children, etc., but others just simply think the little involvement they take part in is enough, which is far from the truth.

In this case, despite reading evidence to the contrary, this PST's own experiences "proved" that these deficit-based statements were true about "most" parents. Rather than considering alternative explanations, she took this opportunity to make broad statements about families and to elevate her life experiences over the knowledge of a veteran teacher and researcher. Similar fundamentalist responses weighed personal anecdotes and "common knowledge" heavily, despite the readings and discussion.

As Tschida, Ryan, and Ticknor (2014) argue, the responses from these PSTs demonstrate the danger of the single story:

Single stories are created when we show a people or an event as only one thing, over and over again, training us to see in this limited way. Over time, these single stories become so much a part of our lives that we are often unaware of the ways in which they operate. These stories then become commonsense narratives in our thinking; they become the definitive way that we view a particular person, a group of people, or a set of circumstances, reducing that person or thing to a single perspective on who we think “they” are. (pp. 30–31)

Many of our PSTs had the single story of uninvolved, uninterested, and uneducated poor and/or diverse parents reinforced through interactions with practicing teachers, through media portrayals, and sometimes from being taught such stereotypes about “others” by their own families. My attempts to disrupt that solitary narrative were thus met with a great deal of resistance fueled by years of conditioning. Often, though they may not make huge leaps, such disruption can move PSTs into the next stage: integrationist.

**Integrationists.** Integrationist responses were often combinations of noncommittal regurgitations of the texts and contradictory statements. PSTs in this stage often took no particular stance, only summarizing or paraphrasing the text itself. Their responses were confusing and unclear. For example, one PST wrote the following:

One myth that I find particularly interesting is “parents don’t care about learning” which can lead you to be stuck in a poverty cycle, also another myth. I think how parents interact with literacy greatly effects [sic] their kids.

Often integrationist responses were enthusiastically excited to learn that these were myths (“I’m so glad to learn these are not true”) but seemed devoid of deep analysis. Instead, they accepted the facts from the reading with the same readiness that had guided their previous beliefs in commonsense or anecdotal evidence. Integrationists seemed to be easily swayed—not necessarily grounded or sure of what they believed, unlike the transformationists, who understood and began to question their beliefs.

**Transformationists.** Transformationists were characterized by their inclination to reflect on their own biases, beliefs, and thinking. Without dwelling in guilt or shame, these PSTs recognized their own complicity and began to analyze their own mindsets. One student wrote,

The article...opened my eyes to see my own internal bias. I have often caught myself making some of these assumptions about poor and diverse families. I’ve heard myself say/think “well this child can’t read because their parent can’t read” or “this child does not have access to literacy.” These statements are just not true. After reading the article I began to think and reflect on my skewed wrong beliefs. Why do I think these things? What people and experiences have lead [sic] me to believe these things? What gives me the right to assume these things?

In this example, the PST not only admitted her biases, but started troubling them. She asked important questions such as “what people and experiences have led me to believe these things?” This kind of question not only illuminates how harmful biases are formed but makes room for awareness so that the biases won’t be as easily reinforced or expanded in the future. The introspective and critical nature of transformationist responses suggests a willingness to do the hard work of self-analysis that is necessary to teaching for equity.

## **Facilitative Texts to Scaffold Affirming and Accurate Language (Anne)**

I taught a model lesson about using facilitative texts to scaffold affirming and accurate language about the topics of gender identity and sexual orientation. At the start of the lesson, I reviewed the concepts of windows and mirrors in books (Bishop, 1990), which were introduced in the lesson from the librarian, then introduced several LGBTQ+-related terms to informally assess PSTs' familiarity with these terms and their definitions (see Figure 1). My intent was to then model these terms during the read-aloud and in the subsequent discussion and to encourage and scaffold PSTs to use terms accurately. PSTs were then to use these terms as applicable in their exploration and sharing of additional texts about gender identity and/or sexual orientation (see Figure 2). I concluded the lesson with an exit slip (Cross, 1998) to capture PSTs' learning and lingering questions about lesson themes. The exit slip posed the following questions.

1. What did you learn today that you will use later?
2. What questions do you still have about today's lesson?
3. How did this lesson influence you as an educator?

The exit slip was designed to encourage PSTs to reflect about what they learned from the model lesson and how the lesson scaffolded affirming and accurate language about gender identity and sexual orientation. PSTs' responses to the questions fell into the three stages described earlier: fundamentalist, integrationist, or transformationist. Examples from each of these stages are presented and described next.

**Fundamentalist.** G. Howard (2007) describes teachers in the fundamentalist stage as “predisposed to avoid, deny, or rationalize racial differences, thus distancing themselves from any need for selfexamination regarding the meaning or impact of their own racial being” (p. 1). In the context of affirming and accurate language about gender identity and sexual orientation, this stage translates to avoiding, denying, or rationalizing differences from their own gendered or sexual being. In this lesson “others” were contextualized as future students, however, PSTs did interpret “others” as teachers, parents, administrators, or people other than themselves in more general terms. The following exit slip example is from a PST demonstrating the fundamentalist stage:

1. I don't think I will use this info later because I feel pushed.
2. Why do we need to teach this in elementary schools?
3. It's still the same because I keep learning the same thing over and over again.

Avoiding and denying differences between others and the PST is clearly evidenced in each of these three responses. In the first response, the PST explicitly states that the lesson information (accurately and affirming language about gender identity and sexual orientation) will not be used in the future due to the feeling of being “pushed” to take up this language and/or build increased awareness about LGBTQ+ issues. Response 2 denies that the lesson information is needed in elementary schools, and response 3 clearly states that the information is not new learning; however, it is actively avoided information.

**Integrationist.** G. Howard (2007) states that teachers in the integrationist stage are more open compared to teachers in the fundamentalist stage because they “acknowledge that differences are real and even worthy of celebration” (p. 1), but continue to “resist any serious interrogation of privilege, power, or their own potential complicity in the dynamics underlying ...inequities in school outcomes” (p. 2). The following example from a PST exit

slip exhibits an integrationist stance by acknowledging differences in responses 1 and 3 in conjunction with resisting “serious interrogation” of privilege or power related to gender identity and/or sexual orientation in response 2.

1. That it is okay to use books like we discussed today in a future classroom—make more people aware of the issue.
2. How can we make this a comfortable topic to talk about without making someone feel “awkward”?
3. These are real life issues we shouldn’t be afraid to address.

Responses 1 and 3 illustrate the PST’s belief that differences are “real,” and response 1 encourages action and more awareness of gender identities and sexual orientation. Response 3, which asks PSTs to share how the lesson influenced them as educators, highlights differences as worthy of discussion. However, responses 2 and 3 also highlight assumed “awkward” feelings and fear when gender identity or sexual orientation differences are discussed or read about in literacy contexts.

**Transformationist.** G. Howard (2007) states that teachers in the transformationist stage “actively seek to bring difference into their lives, precisely because this engagement challenges them to grow both personally and professionally” (p. 2). In other words, PSTs who exhibited transformationist stage tendencies, or more awareness of diversity and equity, in their exit slips sought more ways to challenge themselves, grow in their knowledge, and engage in the “tough conversations” Ahmed (2018, p. xxii) encourages. An example from a PST in the transformationist stage follows.

1. I learned differences in the identification [sic] that I did not realize before.
2. How in this ever changing world can we be sure to represent different gender identities and sexual orientations when we are still struggling to represent a variety of races?
3. I feel as an educator I must be prepared to answer the tough and “scary” questions and being well versed in these subjects is the best way to do so.

This example demonstrates a transformationist outlook in each response. In response 2, the PST points to the continued “struggle” to include racial identities in classroom teaching activities and, at the same time, invites this challenge to grow. The use of “we” in response 2 calls attention to the PST both facing and accepting this challenge along with other educators. Response 3 solidifies the transformationist stage by invoking responsibility as an individual educator and the need to be prepared and to engage in tough conversations about diversity and equity in literacy education.

### **Literature for Teaching Social Justice (Christy)**

Following Mikkaka’s and Anne’s lessons, my lesson focused on literature for teaching social justice. I asked PSTs to engage critically with texts and to consider how they might help their future students make real-world, relevant connections to texts. It was my intention to focus on the action piece of social justice with my PSTs as they considered how they could help their future students enact change.

I put students in groups, with each group assigned to read a picture book related to real-world social justice issues where the actions of characters created change in their communities (see Figure 3). In each group PSTs read their book and completed their book talk discussion. The discussion prompts included questions related to agency, amplified

voices, and social and cultural experiences. After their discussion, PSTs created three lessons using the book that would promote social justice. They were provided with an example lesson and asked to work in their groups to create new lessons. At the conclusion of this work, PSTs wrote group and individual reflections on their learning.

**Fundamentalist.** As previously discussed, fundamentalists tend to allow their personal experience to outweigh factual evidence. Some PSTs still held to their personal opinions about challenges and concerns about social justice even after solutions were provided to address their concerns in class discussions.

Based on previous in-class discussions, I anticipated that students might have concerns about addressing social justice issues in their classrooms. Specifically, I knew they might be concerned about the responses they may receive from parents. Because of this, before introducing the PSTs to their picture books, I gave them suggestions for helping parents understand how their lessons addressed curriculum standards and the importance of social justice lessons in helping students be more responsible citizens. Even with this approach, some PSTs still left with the belief that parents might be a reason for not integrating these topics in their classrooms. One PST shared, “My only concern with bringing diversity into a classroom is the parents. I know that there isn’t much advice because parents are all different, but I think that is a major roadblock for most teachers.” This comment reveals that despite having specific conversations about the importance of teaching social justice and using research-based evidence to support teaching these topics, some PSTs still held to their beliefs or opinions related to the challenges and reasons for not teaching through this lens. Helping PSTs push through the fundamentalist stage will be essential for their growth and understanding related to diversity and equity.

**Integrationist.** Similar to the responses to Mikkaka’s lesson, the integrationist responses to the social justice lesson were often noncommittal statements. Although PSTs did not reject their new understandings, they simply reiterated their learning and considered the possibilities without committing to integration. In this case PSTs discussed how they interpreted the ideas as useful but did not commit to integrating the ideas in the future. For example, one PST noted,

What I learned about social justice, especially with our book, is that it is okay for us as teachers to present these kinds of topics to our students in the classroom. We can present it in a teacher/kid friendly way and use it to expand on our students [sic] knowledge about this topic. This project helped me better understand how to go about teaching topics like this in my own classroom.

In this response, the PST shared how she learned it was “okay” for teachers to present these topics and that they “can” present these topics. She even went as far as to say she had gained a better understanding of teaching social justice topics in her own classroom. She was, however, reluctant to say that because of this understanding she would actually use the book or discuss social justice issues in her classroom.

Other PSTs had a similar stance. They recognized that they had learned a lot about the role of literacy in social justice, and even cited the positive effects of teaching social justice, but they were reluctant to move beyond what “could” be done to taking a stance on definitive action. One PST shared,

During this course I have learned a lot about literacy and social justice and how experiencing these events *can* be applied to the classroom.... I also was not aware of the importance of social justice. Teaching about social justice effects

the classroom because it helps students be aware of their actions. It teaches them about important issues in today's society while also helping students grow into well rounded individuals, students, and advocates. The effects of teaching literacy and social justice are seen in not only classrooms but everyday life also.

Another PST shared,

I learned about social justice through Audrey and her boldness to fight for what she believed in. We *can use* this book in our classrooms to teach about social justice because of what Audrey and children like her did, and the outcome that came from it. We were able to pull several important activities from the text that can benefit our students. The students fought for what they wanted while the adults stood by and watched.

In these examples, similar to the first PST, these participants highlighted their new understandings with comments such as "I learned" or "I also was not aware of," but they did not commit to acting on these new understandings. Although they both acknowledged the benefits of integrating social justice topics, they lacked specificity in regard to how they would implement these ideas. As integrationists, these PSTs certainly advanced beyond the fundamentalist stage, and although their language shows an understanding of social justice issues, they lacked a defined willingness to enact these lessons.

**Transformationist.** As previously discussed, in the transformationist stage, the person understands the complex issues, and they are willing to engage with these issues, even if they are uncomfortable. After the social justice lesson, several PSTs were explicit that they would engage in these acts in the classroom and gave clear rationales as to why. One PST shared,

After reading *Separate Is Never Equal*, I learned a lot about a topic that does not get discussed enough in the classroom. Before reading this book, I had never heard of the Mendez vs. Westminster case. I believe this book belongs in all classrooms, not just elementary schools. In the younger grades, you as a teacher could use read-aloud exercises, while older grades may do research on the topic or similar ones. This children's book shares themes of inequality, injustice, segregation, activism, and more.... The book also offers a means for discussing the subjects of resistance and social justice. I will definitely be using this book in my classroom one day to discuss these topics as the books make it clear to understand and gives way to talk about court cases comparable to this one.

In this example we see the PST take a strong stance, saying this topic is not discussed enough in classrooms. She shared the belief that these texts should be in all classrooms. In addition, the PST provided an example of how this belief can be enacted in classrooms with younger grades using read-alouds and older grades doing research. She also provided specific examples of themes she found meaningful in the text and recognized that although these topics and themes can be challenging, she would "definitely" be using this book in her classroom in the future. She even provided other examples of social justice texts that could be used in a future lesson.

One PST was not only "willing" to engage with these issues, but she took the stance that as educators we "have to" use social justice to honor our students and make spaces for their voices to be heard:

This assignment has really helped me understand how Social Justice and Literacy can go together, and how literacy takes a major role in how Social

Justice is played out. Taking examples from the book we see how the children are using literacy by writing and creating signs to help with their Social Justice strike.... As we grow into wonderful teachers we need to constantly be aware of everyone in the classroom and their culture. Not honoring or ignoring another child's culture is one way to show the other children that their culture and voice isn't heard. We have to, as teachers, be culturally aware at all times and understand that none of our children are going to be the same.... The worst thing in the world is to force children to do things they don't want to do and take their voice away. You have to compromise and give options that are creative and interesting enough to keep children engaged.

From this excerpt we see the PST beginning by acknowledging her new understanding of the connections between social justice and literacy. She provided specific examples of action taken to enact change in the text, showing that she recognized these actions as meaningful. She further reflected that "we need" to be aware of various cultures in our classrooms and we "have to" acknowledge differences in our students. She asserted that when we fail to honor children's differences we stifle their voices and devalue their experiences. The passion this PST felt reveals her stance as a transformationist. It is not an option to address these issues; for the well-being of our students, it's a requirement.

### **End-of-Semester Reflections on Model Lessons**

At the end of the semester-long course, for their final reflection assignment Christy asked PSTs to consider how the lessons had influenced and shifted their thinking about teaching diverse populations of students. One PST reflected on the lesson taught by Mikkaka:

I realized that I focus a lot on stereotypes. I believed a lot of the 12 myths in the article.... Learning about 12 myths has made me wrong about my inner thoughts. All students deserve an equal education and deserve to feel accepted by their teacher.

This statement reveals that some PSTs come into our programs with preconceived notions of children. If we fail to disrupt these misconceptions, PSTs will likely leave our programs with these same notions. However, with an opportunity to reflect on these stereotypes provided by Mikkaka through ink shedding, PSTs were able to shift their negative perceptions.

When Christy initially introduced the connection between social justice and literacy, several PSTs cited their fears related to pushback from parents or school administrators. However, by the conclusion of the lesson many PSTs felt more confident in their personal knowledge and their ability to bring these topics to the classroom. One PST shared,

Before this course, I had no idea of how much of an impact teachers have on students when it comes to social justice issues. I was always afraid of the idea to include these issues in my teaching instruction, but I am not afraid anymore.

PSTs bring many different experiences to the classroom, and these experiences shape their beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions about teaching. One PST shared how her previous experiences shaped her thinking and how the class shifted this thinking:

After taking this course, my entire outlook on teaching literacy in a diverse world has been changed for the better! My eyes have been opened to the real

world. So often throughout my years of schooling I was so sheltered, living in a bubble, never having to deal with controversial topics like race, LGBTQ, and ageism.... Taking [this class] has helped me grow to learn and understand things.... I will carry with me what I have learned and use the knowledge I have gained in my future classroom.

This PST described how her views changed to show her the experiences of more diverse groups of students and helped her understanding grow in ways that would enable her to take this new learning into her future classroom. As we reflect on our teaching, we continue to think about how we can move more PSTs to this point of reflection, comfort, and planned enactment.

### **Discussion**

Findings from this study speak to teacher educators, practicing teachers, and literacy researchers in several ways. First, the need for teacher educators to explicitly model how to develop, build awareness, and *affirm* the culture and experiences of all K–12 students. Second, the importance of teacher educators engaging PSTs in reflective dialogues about their awareness of diversity and equity in literacy teaching and how their awareness may grow through critical reflection and dialogue. Third, the value of supportive and safe communities of educators who are engaged in similar equity work. Finally, the need for literacy researchers to engage in similar studies to expand the growing literature about how teacher educators can model and engage PSTs and teachers in strategies to move to more transformationist practices.

Findings point to the need for teacher educators to explicitly model how to develop and build awareness of the range of K–12 student diversity throughout the courses they teach. For many of our PSTs, the explicit modeling of how to develop, build awareness, and affirm the culture and experiences of their future students was new to them. Although some PSTs shared that they had heard similar ideas in previous teacher education courses and resisted (see Facilitative Text fundamentalist example), several PSTs reported in their postsurvey that affirming diversity for more equitable teaching practices either was a new idea or had not been previously demonstrated. When we modeled how PSTs could disrupt traditional thinking about teaching diverse students, we gave them an opportunity to engage in the critical analysis of inequitable policies and teaching practices that Nieto (2000) advocates. However, as shown in each model lesson’s fundamentalist responses, some PSTs continued to resist, deny, or actively avoid the need to self-reflect or alter fundamentalist stage tendencies when presented with counter evidence. As Christy noted, she anticipated PST resistance to including topics of diversity in classroom reading based on perceived parental resistance. PSTs’ questions indicate “the significant gatekeeping mechanism teachers understand parents to play when it comes to approving or disapproving their curricular choices, especially related to topics that have been historically silenced or that challenge particular communities’ beliefs or standards” (Hermann-Wilmarth & Ryan, 2019, pp. 89–90). In each of our model lessons, we anticipated PST questions about parents and tried to “interrupt notions that negative responses from parents are reason enough to avoid” (Hermann-Wilmarth & Ryan, 2019, p. 96) centering diversity and equity literacy pedagogical practices.

Findings echo repeated calls for teacher educators to engage PSTs in reflective dialogues about diversity and equitable teaching practices (Bissonnette, 2016; C. Howard et al., 2018; G. Howard, 2007). Although this was not explicitly indicated in PSTs’ responses, each of the model lessons included critical and reflective dialogues to call attention to and

increase PST awareness of diversity and equity in literacy teaching. Each of us facilitated and guided these discussions to support PSTs to investigate personal biases or stereotypes that they held about diverse groups of students. Similar to how Bissonnette (2016) works “to create opportunities for students to explore how their own sociocultural identities might shape their interactions with their future students” (p. 20), we designed critical and reflective dialogues to occur in small groups and with the entire class. Our intent was to encourage growth in PSTs’ awareness, similar to G. Howard’s (2007) advice:

It is through dialogue that we create the opportunity to discover how we are similar or different from others, and to build bridges of communication and understanding.... [D]ialogue is powerful precisely because it provides a reality check across our different perceptions, perspectives, and practices. Such exchange opens the possibility of growth. (p. 2)

These possibilities for growth were intentionally spread across a 15-week semester, with repeated themes of diversity and equity, and with different voices and literacy practices to enable us to counteract PSTs’ deficit perspectives (Zoss et al., 2014) and well-meaning, yet colorblind, philosophies of education (Glazier et al., 2011). Based on presurvey data, we knew that the PSTs represented a range of stages of diversity and equity awareness. As teachers and researchers, we recognized that our PSTs would bring different perspectives into this study, and we hoped to both honor their experiences and expand their perceptions related to literacy learning in a diverse world. From the very first class meeting, Christy set the stage that each PST voice would be heard and honored in the same way we would hear and honor their voices in our teaching. However, modeling critical reflection for purposes of discovery and growth is

not easily undertaken, as evidenced by the difficulty teachers have in performing the action (Siwatu, 2007). Just as teacher educators should model for their students how to differentiate instruction, manage their classrooms, and modify assessments, so too should they model critical reflection. (Bissonnette, 2016, p. 20)

This study pushed us to engage in critical reflection with and for our PSTs as well as individually and through dialogue after each model lesson to bring about our own discovery and growth. Our reflective dialogues have informed our current project, which is a self-study of our teaching from a social justice lens in literacy courses.

Although this study focused on PST perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs about diversity and equity, findings also speak to practicing educators who are already engaged in disrupting traditional thinking about diversity and inequitable teaching practices. PSTs reported that discovery and growth about diversity and equity did not occur in isolation or without guidance from others. Our findings, and the richness of our PSTs’ responses, point to the value of a supportive and safe community to share, try, and revise learning about and implementing teaching practices that promote equity (Staley & Leonardi, 2016). A supportive community between and with teachers who are engaged in similar discovery and growth is “the essence of professional learning communities and a key component of effective school improvement efforts” (G. Howard, 2007, p. 2). However, as our data show and our PSTs noted, not all PSTs were in the integrationist or transformationist stages at the point of data collection. As stated earlier, PSTs might advance and/or regress in stages based on the context, conversation, the particular identity under discussion, or a number of other unknown factors. We see this finding as pointing out to teacher educators and literacy researchers that more work in this area is needed.

Finally, findings indicate a need for more research into teaching practices that promote growth and discovery that lead to more equitable literacy teaching. Although the field is growing, there is still much more work to be done. In our previous work (C. Howard et al., 2018; C. Howard & Ticknor, 2019) we explored the literature to find documented reports of actual practices teacher educators use in their university classrooms to promote more transformationist orientations. As Christy modeled in her lesson, making clear the connections between curriculum standards and diverse texts takes a reconstruction approach to building curriculum that is more reflective and more affirming to student cultures and experiences (Bissonnette, 2016, p. 23). Mikkaka notes that successful efforts to disrupt myths that continue to infiltrate PSTs' thinking and understanding of poverty continue to resonate. This is the kind of long-lasting impact we hope to have on our PSTs' teaching and thinking about their diverse students (Zoss et al., 2014).

### **Limitations and Implications for Future Research**

We recognize the limitations of studying our own students and the possibility that they may give us responses to our inquiries that they think we hope to hear. For this reason, identities of students who agreed to participate in the study were kept anonymous until the conclusion of the study. This protocol was in place with the expectation that PSTs would be as honest and forthcoming as possible about their experiences. Moving forward, in our future research with PSTs, we intend to keep this protocol in place.

In future research opportunities, we will continue to analyze and report data from this larger study, which includes survey data, videos of class sessions, and student- and researcher-generated documents. These data sources from the larger study will help us examine student responses to various lessons and see more specific shifts in language and stances using the survey data.

This study has revealed there is more work to be done as we prepare PSTs for K–12 classrooms. With this in mind, we are engaged in a longitudinal self-study that examines how faculty in a reading education program use a social justice lens to inform literacy education courses. Through this self-study, each faculty member examines their own teaching practices, their instructional decisions, and how these decisions are made in relation to their personal theories of social justice. In addition, we examine the impact these instructional practices have on student interactions and learning. Through this self-study, faculty members will collaborate on course planning and have deliberate group reflections to analyze their practices. The purpose of this study will be to examine our individual practices and to find and implement effective strategies and resources to better engage in culturally responsive instruction and continue our growth as literacy educators.

Additionally, we hope to engage in longitudinal research that shows how our PSTs carry their knowledge into their other courses at the university level and how they take up these practices in their future classrooms. As we work to make our classrooms more inclusive, it is essential that we prepare PSTs to engage in culturally responsive teaching. In order to do this in higher education, we must continue to further explore our practices through research.

### **Conclusion**

When we, as teachers and as researchers, consider the outcomes of this study, it is our hope that PSTs not only understand the importance of diversity and equity in literacy teaching, but also take up these practices in their literacy classrooms. We recognize that for many PSTs this means their perspectives about teaching diverse populations of students

must shift. Taken together, these findings give us hope and encouragement that explicitly educating our PSTs to become equitable practitioners and honor the voices and experiences of their students is worthy of continued study. We deeply believe that literacy research, and research around literacy teaching, has the potential to work against social inequities or to further perpetuate harm and even be used against the people and communities it is meant to serve.

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