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Developing Preservice Teachers' Critical Literacy Praxis in a Rural Teacher Education Program

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Abstract

This research examined preservice teachers' beliefs about critical literacy praxis in a rural teacher education program. Using qualitative methods, preservice teachers participated in interviews, reflective engagements, and picture book analysis. Thematic analysis was used to understand preservice teacher reflections on critical literacy, structured around discussions about multicultural literature, and preservice teacher experiences with critical literacy practices in their coursework. This article presents preservice teachers' beliefs on critical literacy praxis.

Keywords: *critical literacy praxis, preservice teachers, rural teacher education*

While recent efforts have been made in teacher preparation to cultivate critical literacy educators (Azano & Biddle, 2019; Crawford-Garrett et al., 2020; López, 2020; Papola-Ellis, 2020), beginning teachers continue to enter increasingly diverse classrooms without the necessary understandings, skills, and orientations to teach from a culturally relevant perspective, responsive to students' linguistic and cultural backgrounds (Bennett et al., 2018; Vasquez et al., 2019). Scholars continually emphasize the tensions associated with cultivating critically minded teacher candidates (Handsfield, 2018; Hendrix-Soto & Mosley Wetzel, 2019; Warren, 2018). These tensions comprise (1) a nod to racial, cultural, and linguistic diversity in one or two courses on multiculturalism (Cochran-Smith & Zeichner, 2009; Shannon-Baker, 2020; Sleeter, 2017; Tinkler & Tinkler, 2013); (2) the strong divide between mainstream public education and how historically underrepresented identities are absent from curricula (King, 1997; Wetzel et al., 2019); and (3) the pervasive apprenticeship of observation phenomenon (Lortie, 2007) where understandings about how to teach and learn culturally responsive tenets are influenced by preservice teachers' previous experiences as students, their teacher education program, and their life experiences and social backgrounds (Barnes & Smagorinsky, 2016; Sotirovska & Vaughn, 2022).

With systemic inequities and inequalities increasing globally, we are at a crucial time to implement critical literacy in teacher preparation programs and in doing so interrogate dominant narratives and social injustices of historically underrepresented

students, families, and communities. Across the literature, there are examples of critical literacy teaching in urban settings (Abednia & Crookes, 2019; E. Bishop, 2014; Gordon, 2019; Hetrick et al., 2020; Ladson-Billings, 2016; Robinson, 2019; Thomas et al., 2020). However, scholars emphasize the need to strengthen our understandings of what critical literacy looks like in rural teacher education contexts given the unique complexities associated with rurality (Reagan et al., 2019).

Broadly, several factors make rural teacher education challenging, including fewer opportunities for preservice teachers to apprentice with experienced teacher mentors (Guerrettaz et al., 2020), fewer schools for teacher placement (Vaughn & Saul, 2013), in-service teacher attrition and turnover (Nguyen, 2020), scarcity of school resources and underfunding (Henderson, 2021), high dropout rates (Tran et al., 2020), and a plethora of socioeconomic challenges. As rural teachers also tend to be predominantly White and monolingual (Han, 2018) and often have to serve multiple grade levels across various content areas, opportunities for preservice teachers to engage in mentorship relationships with in-service teachers about critical literacy in rural education contexts can be limited (Nguyen, 2020). Vaughn and Saul (2013) framed the challenges of rural teacher education as follows:

Unlike other larger urban school districts, due to budget cuts and teacher retention, rural schools like those in which these teachers taught that are small and located in remote, rural areas of the country, may be more likely to cancel courses and programs that are desperately needed for students' future success. (p. 5)

Across the literature, there is well-documented research on how critical literacy manifests in urban and suburban teacher education (Gay, 2002; Janks, 2017; Morrell, 2015); however, critical literacy has rarely been explored in rural teacher education. Efforts have been made to dispel the image of rural communities as monolithic and ethnically and culturally homogeneous groups and to increase investment in multicultural practices. For example, Means (2019) explored how systemic supports and community-based cultural programs for underrepresented middle school students in rural Georgia can increase their social capital and facilitate their educational and professional aspirations. Like this research, growing scholarship underlies how educators have the ability to help reshape narratives of equitable opportunities in rural schools and systems by improving access to resources (e.g., Grooms & Bohorquez, 2021; Karabon & Johnson, 2020) to support historically underrepresented students.

Although there is a concerted effort to teach critical literacy in rural teacher education programs, it becomes increasingly hard to ensure sustained dedication to said practices once preservice teachers become classroom educators. For instance, Bodur (2016) found that as preservice teachers assume classroom positions, their interest in implementing responsive pedagogies may dissipate outside of the university classroom due to a lack of sustained mentorship in their practicums. Additionally, Goulah and Soltero (2015) found that in-service teachers across rural areas in the midwestern and southwestern United States struggled to contextualize their teaching within diverse student identities, thereby reinforcing the lack of equitable practices in rural education.

Critical teacher educators have made efforts to incorporate critically oriented practices to counter systemic issues, such as race/ism, in rural teacher preparation pro-

grams (Anthony-Stevens et al., 2020; Spezzini et al., 2015). To define the scope of rural diversities in this study, we drew from recent statistics that revealed that 9 million U.S. students, or roughly 20%, attend a rural K–12 school (Dhaliwal & Bruno, 2021). Students of Color are underrepresented in rural contexts under the guise that rural students are predominately White and monolingual. However, Showalter et al. (2017) found that “nearly half of rural students are from low-income families, more than one in four is a child of color, and one in nine has changed residence in the previous year” (p. 1), and over half of the students in 23 states attending schools in rural areas grapple with poverty. Corbett (2010) framed rural diversity around intersectional identity constructions and geohistorical and land-based economies. When discussing the role rurality plays in preservice teacher education, educators must consider the geography of space and place across history. Anthony-Stephens, Jones, and Begay (2020), through a geo-historical lens, examined the impact of recent policy reforms concerning Indigenous ways of knowing on teacher education in eastern Washington and Idaho. The researchers reported that preservice teacher education should challenge White colonial and settler perspectives in cultivating critical preservice teachers who make systemic efforts toward equitable schooling in conjunction with an awareness of Indigenous histories and race/ism. Moreover, 54% of Indigenous peoples live in rural areas, and the same areas have experienced an 150% increase in Latinx migrant population in the last decade. As Ratledge (2020) explicated,

There are rural counties in southern states that are predominantly Black and have been so for hundreds of years. Large portions of the Southwest are predominantly Latino, including some communities that predate American statehood. Tribal lands in Hawaii, Alaska, the Southwest, and the Mountain West have been home to Native and Indigenous people for 15,000 years. (p. 1)

Rural landscapes are complex and dynamic systems, and schools must evolve to mirror these ever-changing communities, but to do so, teacher education coursework relies on developing skilled candidates through praxis. Praxis refers to how content and pedagogical knowledge, as theory and practice, come together through mediation (Glass, 2001; May & Sleeter, 2010). The need to understand critical literacy praxis is imperative in today’s highly charged landscape to counter the systemic inequalities embedded in schooling that disproportionately affect underrepresented peoples and groups (Apple, 2012; Bacon, 2020; R. Bishop & Glynn, 2003). Teacher candidates will enter increasingly diverse teaching contexts once they begin teaching in their own classrooms. While by the year 2024, 56% of the student population is going to be progressively more diverse and linguistically abundant, 82% of the teacher workforce will remain predominantly White (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). Building from this stance, the research presented in this article explored preservice teachers’ critical literacy beliefs in rural teacher education, or how preservice teachers engage in critical literacy as learners and teachers of pedagogy. The following research question guided this study: What are preservice teachers’ critical literacy beliefs about their pedagogical praxis in a rural teacher education program?

Preservice Teacher Education and Critical Literacy

Teacher education programs are charged with the daunting task of developing dispositional and technical skills in candidates (Allen & Hancock, 2017; Bristol & Goings, 2019; Zygmunt & Clark, 2016). This often manifests in adherence to developing

preservice teachers' technical skills according to education standards, like the Common Core and curricula facilitating instructional programming. In addition to these increasingly challenging demands, teacher education programs must cultivate dispositions (Danielson, 2013) that are anchored in critical stances and reflect an understanding and knowledge of the diverse student population preservice teachers will meet as they enter their classrooms (Cochran-Smith et al., 2020). However, repeatedly, across the literature, preservice teachers rarely interrogate larger sociopolitical contexts of equity in education (Hoffman, 2020; Husband, 2016; Varghese et al., 2019) or have access to engage in critical literacy praxis, where candidates can apply critical literacy theories in practice (E. Bishop, 2014; Caldas, 2018).

As critical literacy practices are embedded in social justice, many educators struggle to move from content-focused teaching to critical literacy praxis (Kunnath & Jackson, 2019; Navarro, 2018; Utt & Tochluk, 2020; Vasquez et al., 2019). Cochran-Smith et al. (2020) suggest that research should focus on critical literacy practices in teacher preparation courses, which require a praxis-oriented approach (Kunesh & Noltemeyer, 2015; Wetzel et al., 2019; Wetzel et al., 2020). For example, Hendrix-Soto and Mosley Wetzel (2019) found that preservice teachers were opening conversations about critical literacy using children's literature but found it difficult to interrogate their religious, ideological, and deep-seated beliefs about literacy. Further, Vaughan (2019) discovered that preservice teachers largely perceived student success and their ability to learn as solely dependent on the individual's doing and upbringing, devoid of systemic factors (e.g., racism, poverty, gender identity discrimination, immigration status). In Ng's (2017) study, when asked to implement critical literacy practices in their lessons, preservice teachers showed limited understanding of critical literacy, and some were ambivalent about adopting a critical stance when afforded the opportunity. Nganga et al. (2020) found that preservice teachers struggled to internalize critical literacy practices in the form of taking action for social justice and lacked critical experiences with race and ethnicity; in actuality, data revealed that 80% of the preservice teachers did not address sociopolitical issues in their coursework before taking a social studies methods course.

While this work highlights how teacher preparation looks at teacher candidates from a bird's-eye view of teaching critical literacy, we rarely have opportunities to understand perspectives of why preservice teacher programs fail to develop culturally responsive candidates. The field struggles to understand what critical literacy looks like in the K–12 classroom or how to facilitate critical literacy praxis in the teacher preparation classroom. The problem with the implementation of critical literacy praxis is twofold: practical and ideological. First, preservice teachers often lack a clear understanding of how critical literacy as educational theory and pedagogical practice differs from reading techniques and skills that aid comprehension (Cho, 2015; Lewis Chiu et al., 2017). Second, learning of pedagogy as praxis requires preservice teachers to examine their deep-seated beliefs about literacy and identity (Howard, 2016; Umutlu & Kim, 2020).

Theoretical Framework

This study was guided by critical literacy theories (Janks, 2000; Luke, 2012; Lewison et al., 2015; Vasquez et al., 2019). As critical literacy is embedded in power relations, Lewison and colleagues (2002) provide a framework for examining preservice teachers' critical literacy beliefs through four critical literacy dimensions (see Table 1), namely, "(1)

disrupting the commonplace, (2) interrogating multiple viewpoints, (3) focusing on socio-political issues, and (4) taking action and promoting social justice” (p. 382).

Table 1. *Critical Literacy Constructs, Concepts, and Propositions*

Disrupting the commonplace	Interrogating multiple viewpoints	Focusing on sociopolitical issues	Taking action and promoting social justice
Engaging in critical discussions to examine how knowledge is constructed (Shannon, 1995)	Putting oneself in the shoes of others (McAllister & Irvine, 2002)	Situating teaching in a sociopolitical context (Vasquez et al., 2019)	Situating teaching praxis in social justice practice (E. Bishop, 2014)
Critically evaluating texts for how historically underrepresented peoples are portrayed (Marsh, 2000; Vasquez, 2000)	Examining master narratives and counternarratives (Farrell, 1998)	Questioning unequal power relations in the systems in which we operate (Boozer et al., 1999)	Becoming a reflective practitioner with agency by questioning preconceived notions about schooling (Giroux, 1993)
Bringing systemic inequities to the forefront of the classroom (Harste et al., 2000)	Exploring diverse knowledge sources to engage with multiple viewpoints (Vasquez et al., 2013)	Examining curricula and classroom materials for messaging about dominant discourse (Lewison et al., 2015)	Taking action for social justice to bridge the school with the community (Janks, 2000, 2017)
Applying a critical lens when choosing classroom materials, such as children’s and young adult literature (R. S. Bishop, 1990)	Interrogating different knowledge bases in creating a critical literacy vision (Lewison et al., 2002)	Evaluating the connection between language and power (Fairclough, 1989)	Increasing opportunities for students to become <i>critical citizens</i> (Morrell, 2015)
Including students’ identities (Gee, 1990) and leveraging students’ funds of knowledge in the curricula (González et al., 2006)	Evaluating various perspectives simultaneously (Lewison et al., 2002)	Interrogating how the systems in which we operate shape our beliefs, experiences, actions, and visions (Lewison et al., 2002)	Reflecting on one’s critical literacy praxis (Freire, 1970)

Note. This table details the four critical literacy dimensions as devised by Lewison et al. (2002) and additional tenets summarized from the critical literacy literature published over the last two decades.

Core concepts from critical literacy are useful in articulating how preservice teachers form critical literacy beliefs. In addition to the four critical literacy dimensions (Lewison et al., 2002), the concept of discourse (Gee, 1990) served to analyze preservice teachers' beliefs. Discourse is defined as language that is constructed in a sociopolitical context and conveys the purpose, ideology, and beliefs of a given group, such as that of preservice teachers (Gee, 1990). To analyze preservice teachers' discourse, prominent concepts, constructs, and propositions were analyzed to understand the intersectional and intertextual references conveyed in the participants' interviews and written reflections.

Disrupting the Commonplace

Disrupting the commonplace involves seeking more equitable narratives and practices outside of the traditional curriculum. Disrupting the commonplace entails more than just wanting to teach with social justice in mind but acting to disrupt power hegemonies. Educators disrupt the commonplace by reimagining their roles from disseminators of curriculum and content to activists in their communities of practice (Takaki, 1993; Lewison et al., 2002). Disrupting the commonplace centers on the inquiry about how historically underrepresented peoples and communities are positioned and constructed in dominant literacies. Preservice teachers explore the importance of students' funds of knowledge as means of connecting the curriculum to students' inner worlds in order to leverage their full potential (González et al., 2006).

Interrogating Multiple Viewpoints

Interrogating multiple viewpoints acknowledges multiple ways to view and experience the world. Master narratives perpetuate one-sided views of the world and the word (Freire, 1970; Takaki, 1993). One way of interrogating multiple viewpoints in teacher education programs is through the analysis of power in texts, by asking: Who is heard and who is silenced in the narratives read? (Botelho & Rudman, 2009). Counternarratives create pathways in examining different knowledge bases. In this way, researchers study the crux of participants' identity intersections rather than subsume participants to singular identities (Crenshaw, 1989). This contrapuntal approach democratizes who has power over how, why, and whose perspective is shared (Said, 1994; Sotirovska & Elhess, 2021). Preservice teachers study contrapuntal angles in literacy artifacts and create more robust knowledge bases to serve diverse students more responsively and in congruence with their experiences.

Focusing on Sociopolitical Issues

Focusing on sociopolitical issues encourages preservice teachers to question their own beliefs about master narratives and examine the world through a different lens (Lewison et al., 2015). Evaluating texts through a sociopolitical lens elucidates how systems of power shape individuals' beliefs about the world (Sotirovska & Kelley, 2020; Sotirovska & Vaughn, 2021; Vaughn, Jang, et al., 2020; Vaughn, Premo, et al., 2020). Within those systems, we encouraged preservice teachers to examine the relationship between language and power (Fairclough, 1989; Gee, 1990; Vasquez et al., 2013).

Taking Action and Promoting Social Justice

Taking action and promoting social justice focuses on situating school curricula in the world. One central aspect of this dimension for understanding how teacher knowledge is embodied is *critical literacy praxis*, which involves the interaction between and across individuals, discourses, and systems where knowledge is co-constructed (E. Bishop, 2014; Gravett, 1998).

Bishop (2014) situated critical literacy praxis in activism, which Freire (1970) framed as the emergence of a sociopolitical consciousness, or *conscientization*. Critical literacy praxis thus conveys how theory and practice come together through physical or ideological embodiment. For example, praxis with teacher educators gives preservice teachers opportunities to practice visioning, develop personal ideologies, and reflect on histories, and in so doing cultivate knowledge of critical literacy. Artifacts are tools that evoke critical moments in which preservice teachers begin developing a sociopolitical consciousness through reflection, self-awareness, and interrogation of their long-held beliefs (Holland et al., 2001). These artifacts can include texts, textbooks, and picture and chapter books that could transpose preservice teachers' learning from the classroom into the social world. In all, critical literacy praxis supported by literacy artifacts provides a framework for examining preservice teachers' critical literacy beliefs.

Methods

Research Design

This research was conceptualized as part of Vera's (the first author's) doctoral coursework to explore how preservice teachers experience critical literacy through the lens of picture books. Margaret (the second author), a tenured literacy professor, was the guiding professor in this research project and facilitated project development. At the end of Margaret's class, the Institutional Review Board permission form about the project was shared with preservice teachers. A sample of preservice teachers volunteered to participate in this research, which consisted of attending an intensive workshop on critical literacy spanning two semesters, participating in interviews, and completing written reflections. The purpose of the research was to understand how preservice teachers explored critical literacy through literacy artifacts, such as picture books and other preservice teacher-selected texts. The following research question guided this project: What are preservice teachers' critical literacy beliefs about their pedagogical praxis in a rural teacher education program?

Data Collection

Setting and Participants

Using a case study design (Yin, 2014), the phenomenon of preservice teachers' experiences with critical literacy was examined through the lens of seven teacher candidates. Participants were volunteers from a teacher preparation program in a rural, land grant higher education institution in the Pacific Northwest, nestled in the ancestral territories and homelands of Indigenous peoples, such as the Nez Perce, Coeur d'Alene,

Kootenai, Shoshone-Bannock, and Shoshone-Paiute. The participants ($N=7$) were White, identified as cisgender women, and consisted of five seniors and two juniors who planned to be elementary school teachers in the United States.

To address the research question in this study, Vera organized a workshop focused on critical literacy and collected interviews ($n = 21$) and written reflections ($n = 7$). In the following paragraphs, each measure is discussed.

The Workshop Context

The workshop spanned two semesters in fall 2019 and spring 2020. After recruiting preservice teacher volunteers, Vera introduced the workshop and the picture book readings, after which preservice teachers were given time to read and analyze the selected picture books prior to the first interview. While the participant recruiting and workshop introduction were conducted face to face, because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the interviews were completed via the Zoom platform and the written reflection (a book analysis and reflection questions) was completed independently and emailed to us. The workshop was designed to explore ideas related to the critical literacy dimensions (e.g., disrupting the commonplace, exploring multiple viewpoints, focusing on sociopolitical issues, taking action and promoting social justice), and from the critical literacy concepts, constructs, and propositions a chart was devised (see Table 1; Lewison et al., 2002).

We envisioned the workshop as a space where deep discussions about critical literacy would emerge. The workshop was a setting that enabled us, as researchers and teacher educators, to combine pedagogical practice and document pedagogical learning of critical literacy. To examine how preservice teachers engaged in critical analysis, we selected picture books with animal characters to unpack anthropomorphic veneers (Sotirovska & Kelley, 2020) and discern sociopolitical issues. The preservice teachers were encouraged to reflect and apply critical literacy principles.

During the workshop, preservice teachers were asked to read one of five picture books centered on different social topics ahead of the interview sessions: *A Panda in Bearland* (Rim, 2017), *Pancho Rabbit and the Coyote: A Migrant's Tale* (Tonatiuh, 2013), *And Tango Makes Three* (Richardson et al., 2005), *The Chickens Build a Wall* (Dumont, 2013), and *Welcome* (Barroux, 2016). Books featuring animal characters represent 27% of the published books for children, and books featuring White characters constitute 50%, while only 23% feature books by and about Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (Cooperative Children's Book Center [CCBC], 2019). Human representation transforms picture books into windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors (Bishop, 1990). Concurrently with the CCBC (2019), picture books with animals are prevalent in elementary school classrooms and teachers gravitate toward them (Burke & Copenhaver, 2004). As anthropomorphic books are widely used in the elementary school classroom, we encouraged preservice teachers to grapple with the animal abstractions by performing critical analysis of the texts and images (Botelho & Rudman, 2009). In addition to reading the picture books, preservice teachers made connections to texts and books read in their social studies and literacy methods courses that related to critical literacy practices.

Interviews and Written Reflections

Interviews focused on one of the four aforementioned critical literacy dimensions (see Lewison et al., 2002). The first interview was based on concepts related to disrupting the commonplace, the second interview was based on concepts related to focusing on sociopolitical issues, the third interview was based on concepts related to examining multiple viewpoints, and the written reflection piece as well as the accompanying questions were based on concepts related to taking action and promoting social justice (see Table 1).

To explore preservice teachers' experiences with reading books through a critical literacy lens, we asked them to complete written reflections as the final activities in the literacy workshop. In these reflections, preservice teachers were asked to share a book(s) that facilitated critical awareness for them and to answer questions about concepts related to taking action for social justice. For the book reflections, preservice teachers recorded the title, author and/or illustrator, genre, grade level, and publication date, and they evaluated the book's suitability to raise critical awareness in K–12 students, shared a powerful quote and/or image, and explained why this quote and/or image engaged them critically. These artifacts were used for data analysis.

Data Analysis

To analyze the data collected in the study, we categorized each data set with multiple rounds of analysis comprising four stages and used thematic analysis to explore preservice teachers' discourse (Gee, 1990) with attention to specific keywords, phrases, and references (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Clarke & Braun, 2013). In the first layer of analysis, we performed open coding of the interview transcripts to familiarize ourselves with the data. Then, we looked across all seven of the participants' cases and deduced common patterns and themes. This procedure encompassed Stages 1, 2, and 3. We coded the data to generate themes that were later aligned with the critical literacy dimensions (Lewison et al., 2002). This was integral to examining how well the final codes (*Literacy Artifacts: A New Lens for Rethinking the Past and the Present*, *Literacy Artifacts: Ideologies in the Making*, and *Literacy Artifacts: Windows and Mirrors to Social Justice*) represented Lewison and colleagues' (2002) critical literacy dimensions (disrupting the commonplace, interrogating multiple viewpoints, focusing on sociopolitical issues, and taking action and promoting social justice). This procedure covered Stage 4.

Stage 1: Familiarization With the Data

First, we read the preservice teachers' transcripts to get a general sense of their beliefs about critical literacy. Each participant was first examined as an individual case, and then the data (three interviews and individual written reflections on critical literacy) were reanalyzed for themes and patterns across all cases. We explored each case separately to understand the participants' backgrounds, and Table 2 presents details on all the cases. To organize the data, we looked across each case portrait for every preservice teacher and examined how preservice teachers discussed critical constructs.

Table 2. *Participants in the Study*

Participant pseudonym	Academic level	Grade level preference	Experiences reading multicultural literature	Book(s) of choice
Lauren	Senior	Elementary	Some experiences	<i>Esperanza Rising</i> (Ryan, 2000)
Casey	Senior	Elementary	Some experiences	<i>Gorilla, My Love</i> (Bambara, 1972)
Amelia	Junior	Elementary	Limited experience	<i>Tales of Bunjitsu Bunny</i> (Himmelman, 2014)
Ana	Junior	Elementary	Some experience	<i>Esperanza Rising</i> (Ryan, 2000) <i>Out Of Many: A History of the American People</i> (Faragher, 1994)
Sarah	Senior	Elementary	Some experience	<i>Black Ants and Buddhists: Thinking Critically and Teaching Differently in the Primary Grades</i> (Cowhey, 2006)
Jessica	Senior	Upper elementary/ middle school	Limited experience	<i>The Proudest Blue: A Story of Hijab and Family</i> (Muhammad & Ali, 2019)
Julia	Senior	Elementary	Limited experience	<i>Name Jar</i> (Choi, 2001) <i>Home of the Brave</i> (Archer, 2007)

Stage 2: Preliminary Codes

In the second stage, we employed thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to make claims about preservice teachers’ beliefs. The goal of this data analysis was to identify initial codes, such as “a word or phrase describing some segment of [the] data that is explicit” (Rossman & Rallis, 2003, p. 282), of preservice teachers’ experiences with critical literacy praxis. The initial codes were ways of knowing, a different lens, hidden histories, books as windows and mirrors, Whiteness, possible selves, social justice, and empathy. Below, we present examples to showcase Stage 2 of the coding procedure.

Example 1 Code: Whiteness

As a Caucasian woman, I didn’t notice representation in books because the characters were people like me, who I could connect to. As an adult now

when I look back, I realized there isn't a lot of options in other categories. And so, standing up to that and taking action in my classroom would be making sure there are books for everyone.

Example 2 Code: Books as Windows and Mirrors

I think books are a useful window for students to see into the real world. We often shelter kids from hearing about the real world and thinking critically about what's actually happening around them. Students need books that will give them the truth and provide insights into where we are right now in combating that ignorance.

Stage 3: Defining Themes

In the third analysis stage, we used Braun and Clarke's (2006) guidelines for thematic analysis to make sense of the preservice teachers' beliefs about critical literacy. We applied deductive coding to reconceptualize the codes into themes that describe "more subtle and tacit processes" (Rossman & Rallis, 2003, p. 282). The final themes reflected the relationships between the literacy artifacts as affordances and the critical moments they mediated for preservice teachers.

Preservice teachers' beliefs comprised the following themes:

- Literacy Artifacts: A New Lens for Rethinking the Past and the Present
- Literacy Artifacts: Ideologies in the Making
- Literacy Artifacts: Windows and Mirrors to Social Justice

Stage 4: Juxtaposition of Themes to the Dimensions of Critical Literacy

Deductive coding was administered to group the data guided by the interview questions, which were then situated in the critical literacy dimensions (Clarke & Braun, 2013). This was necessary to examine if and how the themes captured the four critical literacy dimensions. As critical literacy praxis is a process and a cycle (E. Bishop, 2014), it was important to examine the affordances these preservice teachers were given to form beliefs about critical literacy.

To illustrate, Lewison and colleagues (2002) operationalized the critical literacy dimension of disrupting the commonplace through the following concepts and constructs: "knowledge as a historical product" (Shor, 1987), positionality in a system of power (Luke & Freebody, 1997), "the language of critique" (Shannon, 1995), and "cultural discourses" (Gee, 1990) (p. 383). Parallel to this dimension, we looked for similarities between the final codes and the dimensions of critical literacy to generate themes. Thus, the four dimensions (Lewison et al., 2002) served as a guidepost for the thematic analysis in Stage 4.

Findings

This research examined preservice teachers' beliefs about critical literacy praxis during two semesters in a literacy methods course and a supplementary workshop on critical literacy. Two major findings emerged from the preservice teachers' interviews and written reflections. First, preservice teacher learning was mediated with literacy artifacts, such as picture and chapter books, textbooks, and other assigned readings, affording preservice teachers with pedagogical knowledge of critical literacy. Preservice teachers' pedagogical learning focused on two dimensions of critical literacy: focusing on sociopolitical issues and interrogating multiple viewpoints. Second, preservice teachers critically engaged with their past and present literacy experiences to theorize their praxis as reflective practitioners. The second finding highlights that, by leveraging their possible selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986; Rossiter, 2007), preservice teachers envisioned themselves taking action for social justice. How these critical literacy practices—critical moments and possible selves—were enacted in preservice teachers' praxis is discussed next.

Literacy Artifacts: A New Lens for Rethinking the Past and the Present

Preservice teachers discussed books they read before and during the study in their literacy and social studies methods courses and critical literacy workshop. The books spanned a variety of genres, including picture books, young adult novels, adult nonfiction, and other literacy artifacts that acted as mediational tools for critical literacy learning. Critical moments constitute dynamic and socially mediated experiences that result in some form of transformation. In the first phase of the interviews, the preservice teachers were asked to choose one of five picture books centering on different social topics. Out of the seven participants, three chose *The Chickens Build a Wall* (Dumont, 2013), two chose *A Panda in Bearland* (Rim, 2017), one chose *Pancho Rabbit and the Coyote: A Migrant's Tale* (Tonatiuh, 2013), and one chose *And Tango Makes Three* (Richardson et al., 2005). The predominant reasons for choosing the books were “cute picture on the cover,” “interesting title,” and “interesting pictures.” In response to the question “How would you talk about these books in your classroom?” preservice teachers described strategies such as read-alouds, discussions and literature circles and broadly spoke about human differences with a focus on historical perspectives. For instance, Lauren read *Pancho Rabbit and Coyote: A Migrant's Tale* and responded,

When I read this book, I thought about history. In my English class, I'm reading a book about the train stakeholders in the United States and the Coyotes who took advantage of migrants crossing the border. That's exactly where the book [*Pancho Rabbit and Coyote: A Migrant's Tale*] is going, the author brings this big...sociopolitical issue into the elementary classroom. I just thought that is so interesting because we very rarely see books like that in the elementary school classroom.

Preservice teachers situated the picture books in the current sociopolitical discourse and listed themes such as immigration, bullying, and othering. Lauren presented the need for more authentic voices and experiences to be brought to the forefront of classroom literacies by including books that highlight world issues. Similarly, Amelia explained that while statistics can be informative, numbers are not always conducive to

understanding human experiences. Amelia, who read *A Panda in Bearland* (Rim, 2017), stated,

We are beings with emotions and feelings; in textbooks, people are just statistics. I know, and the students know, we're more than that. We are *the novels* if that makes sense. If we just give students the logic, like I was oftentimes given, I found that I was very ignorant of some things, and I wonder why I was quiet about my ignorance. I want students to be like, I don't agree with that—and that's okay. Even at a first-grade level.

Amelia pondered her experiences as a K–12 student and expressed that she wanted her students to have a “better education than [she] did” and to be critical thinkers as early as first grade. She emphasized that “we [people] are the novels,” in so doing questioning her complacency and ignorance about the context in which facts had been presented in her experiences with schooling. Most importantly, she wondered why she had been quiet about her ignorance and felt an urgency to create critical literacy opportunities for her future students.

When asked about examples of teaching with a focus on social justice, Ana revealed that she had been taught history through technical knowledge and statistics devoid of affective dimensions. She reflected on learning about the Native American boarding schools from a textbook and then later through an autobiographical account in her social studies methods class:

It was a statistic. It was an event in the past, it *was*, it just happened. And it was a chapter in a book, and you went on to another chapter in history. But this book [*Stringing Rosaries*] was from the perspective of the author, who is the great-granddaughter of the character. It talks about the character's personal experience, her emotions, and her feelings. For me, critical awareness like that is *knowing* that there is more than just numbers and statistics. It's people with feelings and perspectives.

Ana and Amelia interrogated their views on teaching historical fiction to understand the dynamic forces that mediate human experiences. A critical aspect of this study was the opportunities teacher educators created for preservice teachers to reflect on their social ideologies, such as cultivating feelings of empathy and connecting those emerging feelings to their classroom practice.

Literacy Artifacts: Ideologies in the Making

Another salient theme that emerged from preservice teachers' discourse (Gee, 1990) was meaning-making by interrogating multiple perspectives. By this theme, we reference how participants supported their responses within a mindset of believing and enacting critical literacy ideologies. Casey's developing social ideology centered on “combatting ignorance” by situating classroom literacies within a wider social landscape:

I think books are a useful window for students to see into the real world. We often shelter kids from hearing about the real world and thinking critically about

what’s actually happening around them. Students need books that will give them the truth and provide insights into where we are right now in combating that ignorance.

Jessica engaged in critical reading of narratives by “taking apart texts” to consider everything that was featured “on the page”:

Critical awareness is understanding that everything that you read isn’t always going to be true and being able to take everything that you read with a grain of salt, to apply your own knowledge of what’s happened, taking apart the text for the words in the sentence structure and everything presented on the page.

The participants also discussed their privileged perspectives as White cisgender women raised in predominantly middle-class families. All seven participants expressed that negotiating identities in the classroom, both their own and those of others, is one of the more challenging tasks when enacting critical literacy. Ana explained,

As a Caucasian woman, I didn’t notice representation in books because the characters were people like me, who I could connect to. As an adult now when I look back, I realized there isn’t a lot of options in other categories. And so, standing up to that and taking action in my classroom would be making sure there are books for everyone.

Ana mentioned that “taking action in the classroom” to ensure there are “books for everyone” aligns with the critical literacy principles of interrogating multiple viewpoints and focusing on sociopolitical issues.

In her social studies methods class, Lauren was made aware of the reductionist views of the White male historian’s perspective. By reading about historical events rendered from underrepresented perspectives, she appeared empowered to question authoritative knowledge (such as textbooks) and seek alternative perspectives when developing social studies lessons:

In my social studies methods class, the textbook [*A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America*] challenges the classic White male perspective on history in a way I haven’t thought about before. I was used to the perspective of the White male historian and this new textbook is written from a minority lens. I experienced an overwhelming aha moment; it was a moment of clarity but also a moment of confusion.

Lauren experienced a critical moment that shaped how she thought about classroom literacies through different perspectives. This praxis was crucial in how literacy artifacts were used in the teacher education classroom to facilitate preservice teachers’ critical literacy beliefs and pedagogical visions.

Literacy Artifacts: Windows and Mirrors to Social Justice

Multicultural books and texts that focus on hidden histories and voices prompted preservice teachers to leverage their agency for social impact. In her K–12 schooling,

Sarah had read texts from a single dominant perspective, but as a preservice teacher, she explored literacy artifacts, such as children's and young adult books, as windows to diverse human experiences:

When I'm teaching different perspectives, I'm giving students a way to look at the world around them that they might not experience by just going through life; I'm offering a window to another world where we can see ourselves and also see others by reading about a character with a personality, an actual story, and a family that students can relate to and empathize with.... We can take a paragraph and pull out each different lens and show the story differently through different eyes; growing up, I didn't get a lot of that.

Sarah explained that certain stories can foster feelings of empathy with the protagonists and equip readers with "different lenses" to read texts "through different eyes." In a similar vein, Ana reflected on the master narratives she had been taught as a K-12 student and how she began to question said narratives as a preservice teacher:

Just recently, I realized that growing up, the lessons I was taught weren't as well researched as they should have been. They were taught to me in a way that wasn't from every perspective; it was usually from one, from one source. For example, on the topic of Thanksgiving, I found out through research in my college classes that it wasn't quite like the Europeans and the Native Americans sat down and had a feast.

Similar to Sarah's and Ana's experiences with literacy artifacts as windows to diverse human realities, Casey's exposure to multicultural literature facilitated a critical perspective by which she juxtaposed competing narratives from her K-12 and college schooling experiences. She recalled, "I grew up thinking White characters were the norm.... I was only exposed to [children's] books I read as a kid." By accounting for multiple perspectives in her college literacy methods course, Casey reevaluated the master narratives she had been taught as a K-12 student for messaging about dominant discourse, which led to a proliferated understanding of her pedagogical praxis. By way of reflection, preservice teachers deepened their understandings of critical literacy practices and the tools and strategies that support them.

Jessica's limited knowledge of how to actualize social justice tenets in her teaching created discomfort in her praxis, which she described as lacking "authenticity." She questioned her pedagogical readiness and competence to address social injustices that systemically affect historically underrepresented groups:

I think I will be a bit uncomfortable when I am teaching about the indentured and enslaved people of America. I just do not want to say the wrong thing and accidentally offend some students. I've been wondering about how to teach certain aspects of history. If I bring a book that the parents feel strongly against, and I try to talk about it in class... what should I do? I wouldn't want the students to miss out on that conversation. But you can't sway their opinion to my opinion because I'm building a relationship.

Despite preservice teachers' enthusiasm for engaging students in critical conversations through multicultural literature, they felt "inadequate" and "uncomfortable" and were left "wondering about how to teach certain aspects of history." Jessica posed a crucial question—"If I bring a book that the parents feel strongly against, and I try to talk about it in class... what should I do?"—that comes with teaching critical literacy, especially where the home discourse might differ exponentially from the school discourse (Gee, 1990). Julia expressed similar concerns regarding the competing ideologies students bring into the classroom:

When you find a great book that we can all learn from, but the community goes, NO, we're not comfortable. These reactions are not right, however, when it comes down to it, you can follow your vision, but you also have to do what's best for the community and the children in it.

Similarly, in two instances throughout the semester, Amelia reiterated that she had "to tread carefully" and "cover herself" to ensure that parents were not concerned about what their children were learning, especially when teaching different perspectives on religion, culture, race/ism, and other critical constructs.

The seven preservice teachers' praxis-oriented experiences—practice, apprenticeship, and reflection—are the building blocks of critical literacy praxis (E. Bishop, 2014; Lewison et al., 2002). This praxis-oriented approach to critical literacy integrates theory and practice through literacy artifacts as situated media (children's and young adult literature, textbooks, and autobiographical accounts) in university and K–12 classrooms. For these preservice teachers, the most impactful critical literacy experiences were the "real-world" examples in the form of autobiographical accounts, the books as "windows into diverse worldviews," and "other sides" of knowledge that they got to wrestle with, in comparison to traditional instructional approaches often removed from social justice.

Discussion

The findings show that preservice teachers appeared to examine their privileged ideologies by interrogating multiple perspectives and building a repertoire of critical literacy artifacts. Of particular significance was exposing preservice teachers to counternarrative storytelling of historical events. This was achieved in courses where teacher educators employed explicit and targeted critical literacy instruction. In their social studies methods course, for example, preservice teachers analyzed historical events from underrepresented perspectives, and in their literacy methods course, they critically read texts that challenged their long-held beliefs and in so doing experienced discomfort. For example, Ana applied a critical lens to examine master narratives in her history textbook and other classroom literature, while Lauren grappled with the reductionist lens of "the White male historian" and the absence of historically underrepresented narratives in K–12 curricula (Anthony-Stevens & Langford, 2020). Because of the prevalent White characters in children's literature, preservice teachers had never questioned the books they read as students because in those characters they saw themselves. Preservice teachers' praxis began to be transformed via their awakening to the discrepancy between the lack of underrepresented peoples and groups in school curricula and the deficit portrayals of said communities in popular discourse.

Moreover, preservice teachers' enthusiasm for critical literacy practices was seemingly replaced by fear at the thought of enacting said practices in their own classroom with students, which stands in contradiction to their visions of social justice teaching. This finding is consistent with observations by Nganga et al. (2020) that preservice teachers grappled with taking action for social justice and lacked experiences with race/ism in their teaching programs. Similarly, in this study, preservice teachers interrogated multiple viewpoints but had difficulties conceptualizing the other three critical literacy dimensions: disrupting the commonplace, focusing on sociopolitical issues, and taking action and promoting social justice. Once presented with anthropomorphic books, preservice teachers struggled to see past the "cute" veneers and their analysis of the books lacked the depth needed to achieve praxis in the remaining three dimensions of critical literacy, especially those that concern leveraging preservice teachers' agency and ideology.

The assigned picture books prompted preservice teachers to theorize about the critical literacy possibilities with children's literature to an extent. For example, all but one preservice teacher engaged in surface analyses of the picture books and did not unpack the anthropomorphic veneers or grapple with character representations. It is vital to examine books with anthropomorphic characters from both a literary perspective and a sociopolitical perspective in terms of the potential dangers of stereotyping characters that portray historically underrepresented peoples and groups, especially in the elementary school classroom where said books are widely used.

Preservice teachers' visions of social justice started to take shape but were vaguely articulated, as evident in their linguistic framing of historically underrepresented peoples and communities as "other categories" or using euphemisms for slavery and other atrocities as "certain aspects of history." Euphemisms and other metaphors used as discursal placeholders points to preservice teachers' discomfort with teaching about historical injustices and further removes preservice teachers from the realities of the present systemic inequities. Additional elements of preservice teachers' discourse included the descriptor *Caucasian*, a racial euphemism that stems from a racialized taxonomy. The term *Caucasian* denotes favorability toward the White race and distances speakers from the realities of race/ism (Mukhopadhyay, 2008). To enact critical literacy, preservice teachers must practice the "language of critique" (Shannon, 1995) instead of the language of othering that perpetuates the status quo. Explicit instruction on inclusive language is necessary for how critical literacy constructs are operationalized in preservice teachers' discourse.

While preservice teachers expressed interest in home visiting and building a community through collaborative interaction—central to critical literacy praxis—some also maintained that the emphasis on social justice in their teaching could jeopardize their relationship with the parents and the students they will serve. This finding is congruent with Stallworth et al. (2008), who explored teachers' perceptions of multicultural literature in rural Alabama, where a teacher reported, "The novels we teach at our school tend not to include as much diversity as they should. This is still the rural South, and students and their parents are accepting of diversity only up to a point... I don't want to rock the boat" (p. 484). These findings reveal a state of preservice teachers' cognitive dissonance in enacting critical literacy, which entails enthusiasm for change hindered by a significant

fear of challenging the status quo in literacy teaching at the elementary school level.

Concurrent with findings from Anthony-Stevens and Langford (2020), Howard (2016), and Shannon-Baker (2020), preservice teachers in this study felt overwhelmed at the possibilities for “open-ended inquiries” (Lewison et al., 2002, p. 383) in literacy education, a process that can be contentious for novice educators (Lewison et al., 2000). In the social studies and literacy methods courses, preservice teachers learned about rural diversities through a geohistorical approach and community partnerships, while in the critical literacy workshop, they interrogated their ideologies. Such work is autobiographical (Sotirovska & Elhess, 2020; Vaughn & Kuby, 2019) and requires a flexible and adaptive approach to ensuring equitable literacy opportunities (Vaughn, Sotirovska, et al., 2021; Vaughn, Wall, et al., 2021). This study offers a snapshot of the critical literacy beliefs of preservice teachers in a rural teacher education program.

Implications

Given the large percentage of White teachers in the field of education, there is a clear need to examine Whiteness and to support preservice teachers with antiracist teaching practices to underscore critical literacy work. Some participants expressed concerns over introducing critical literacy topics in the classroom and felt inadequate discussing issues like racism. As many teacher education programs continue to implement culturally responsive practices and place a stronger emphasis on power distributions in the curricula, more work needs to be done in teacher education programs to address systemic issues and develop critically oriented preservice teachers.

In our rural teacher education program, introducing autobiographical accounts—such as critically reading *Stringing Rosaries: The History, the Unforgivable, and the Healing of Northern Plains American Indian Boarding School Survivors* (Lajimodiere, 2019), which showcases Indigenous peoples’ survival stories during the boarding school era in the United States—was instrumental in exposing preservice teachers to critical literacy teaching that moves beyond the teaching of empathy and diverse fiction books. As teacher educators, we must do more than include books to move toward critical conversations with preservice teachers in order to create opportunities for historically underrepresented voices to be heard in rural spaces. While integrating this work into both the social studies and literacy methods courses was an eye-opening experience for participants’ understandings of complex geographies and literacies, it is pivotal to continue this work beyond these courses into the curricula and practicums and as preservice teachers assume classroom positions. As Anthony-Stevens and Langford (2020) state, “Conceptualizing diverse ruralities with preservice teachers is not a checklist. It involves unpacking ideological operatives and engaging teachers in discourses of learning that make space for complex local/global systems of power and marginalization” (p. 342).

The aim of critical literacy is to distinguish between praxis-oriented approaches that resist master narratives, which Freire (1970) named conscientization, and those that exercise a critical consciousness but remain apolitical (E. Bishop, 2014). It is precisely this sociopolitical consciousness that preservice teachers have yet to develop and articulate by independently resisting, questioning, and evaluating literacies. Despite being conceptualized as social activism, critical literacy historically has been taught in the teacher education classroom with minimal attempts “to take social action to redress political

inequities and injustices within the context of school-based literacy curricula” (E. Bishop, 2014, p. 58). In this rural teacher education program, critical literacy was the focus of two courses: social studies methods and literacy methods.

In discussing teaching from a critical perspective, King (1997) said, “I introduce them to the praxis of teaching for change or transmutation experientially in a way that includes conceptualizing not only the realities of racism, poverty, and so on, but a role for themselves in the struggle against this reality” (p. 169). Thus, the role of teacher preparation programs is to facilitate both the ideological and pedagogical aspects that shape preservice teachers’ identities in the making. Exposing preservice teachers to critical literacy practices and artifacts helped them envision their possible selves as critical practitioners and accounted for a paradigm shift.

This work marks only the beginning of what should be a greater undertaking in situating critical literacy in rural contexts and equipping preservice teachers with the ideological and practical tools to enact critical literacy in their future classrooms without hesitation and fear. The fear of community backlash is a real threat to social justice education in rural contexts and perpetuates the status quo that critical literacy teaching is trying to disrupt. Therefore, exposure to critical literacy needs to take place early on in preservice teachers’ experiences as students, apprentices, and teachers. Teacher educators should explicitly counter preservice teachers’ fears of teaching critical literacy with strong pedagogical approaches and theory driven by practice. The depth of critical literacy application among elementary school teaching majors needs to be further problematized and explored.

Conclusion

This research highlights the importance of developing preservice teachers’ critical literacy beliefs in rural teacher education. The first key finding focuses on preservice teachers’ reflective experiences with books. Reflective practice is crucial in the enactment of critical literacy pedagogy that teacher educators use in preparing preservice teachers. The second key finding focuses on preservice teachers’ reflective practice of teaching in the university classroom, where they experienced a transformation that influenced how they act upon the world as future K–12 educators.

Findings reveal that preservice teachers in rural teacher education programs are still grappling with their convictions and biases about race/ism, how to articulate their social justice visions without using the language of othering, and how to best serve their students without fearing community backlash. While some preservice teachers view critical literacy as a polarizing practice and would rather focus on discipline-focused learning (Ng, 2017; Shelton & Altwerger, 2014), others are enthused to engage in critical literacy activism as they take classroom positions (Alford et al., 2019). Bridging this epistemological divide between the individual and the community makes up an ideological and practical undertaking not only in teacher education programs but also in teacher practicum and K–12 curricular mandates. These results warrant more surveying of preservice teachers, teacher educators, and administrators to understand why teachers fear and feel underprepared to teach critical literacy, especially in rural contexts. Researchers have begun developing approaches to understanding rurality intersectionally and its impact on teacher education through the interrogation of systemic factors (e.g., racism, poverty,

gender identity discrimination, immigration status). This study underscores important aspects of critical literacy pedagogy by exploring praxis through four critical literacy dimensions (Lewison et al., 2002) and the enactment of critical literacy in rural preservice teacher education.

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