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"It Made Me See What Kind of Teacher I Want to Be:" Critical Literacy in a Pre-service Literacy Methods Course

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“It Made Me See What Kind of Teacher I Want to Be:” Critical Literacy in a Pre-service Literacy Methods Course

Abstract

Drawing on critical literacy as a theoretical framework, this paper explores how a children’s book writing assignment designed to center the experiences of underrepresented communities in children’s literature contributed to shifts in awareness among predominantly White teacher candidates. The study occurred at a large urban university in California and included 77 participants who all participated in a required Literacy Methods course in a teacher preparation program. Teacher candidate surveys and critical content analysis of candidate-authored books revealed that candidates: (1) selected topics to write about because they had a personal connection to the issue or because of its relevance to their students; (2) created books that evidenced their ability to apply traditional literacy concepts through a critical lens, (3) evidenced a deepened understanding of representation and diversity in children’s literature. Findings highlight the importance of critical literacy experiences in teacher preparation as a way to develop teacher candidates’ critical lens. Implications include the importance of integrating critical literacy with traditional literacy content -- it is not something “extra;” the need for a critical perspective to be an integral part of Teacher Performance Expectations and standards; and the need for ongoing professional development for both teachers and teacher educators.

“It made me see what kind of teacher I want to be:” Critical Literacy in a Pre-service Literacy Methods Course

While the students in U.S. public schools are very diverse, the teaching force and the literature students encounter in the classroom do not reflect this diversity. The U.S. teaching force is 80% White and 77% female. In contrast, 53% of students nationally were students of color in 2019-20 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020) and in California, the location of this study, students of color comprised 77% of all students (California Department of Education, 2020). Coming from a wide range of cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic backgrounds, K-12 students have different Funds of Knowledge (Moll et al., 1992), cultural and linguistic capital (Yosso, 2005), literacy capital, and home literacy practices (Compton-Lilly & Nayan, 2016) than their primarily White teachers (Ladson Billings, 2006). These differences have historically been viewed through a deficit lens (Bartolomé, 1994; Heath, 1983; Lippi-Green, 2012).

Like the teaching force, children's books also lack diversity. According to The Cooperative Children's Book Center's (2022) analysis of books published in 2021, fewer than 2% included Native American characters, 7% included Latinx characters, 11% included Asian / Pacific Islander characters, and 13% included African or African-American characters. In contrast, over two thirds of books had White characters or used non-human characters like animals. It is no surprise that literacy researchers (Haddix, 2017; Wetzel et al. 2019) have called for a change in literacy instruction and teacher preparation that better meets students' diverse needs. Teacher candidates (TCs) can be part of this change by taking an active role in creating safe and equitable classroom spaces where students with intersectional identities can thrive (Briceño & Rodriguez-Mojica, 2022; Rodriguez-Mojica & Briceño, 2019; Tschida et al., 2014).

Understanding that using diverse literature is one small but important way to achieve that goal (Senokossoff & Xiang, 2014; Wetzel et al., 2019), we engaged TCs in a Literacy Methods course in a small group assignment that asked them to author a children's book from the perspective of an underrepresented group. We draw on critical literacy to examine how their creation of the books contributed to shifts in awareness among predominantly White teacher candidates. The following research questions guided this study: (1) What diversity topics did TCs pursue in the creation of their books and why? (2) How were course concepts evidenced in the TC-authored texts? (3) Did the assignment influence TCs' awareness of underrepresented communities and critical literacy practices? If so, how? We begin with a discussion of critical literacy and then review literature on preparing TCs to teach literacy to diverse students. Next, we share the methods, including pedagogical methods used in the course under study and data analysis methods. Findings with analysis follow, and we conclude with a discussion about implications for literacy teacher education and policy. Wetzel and colleagues (2019) stated, "There is a strong sense of urgency in the field of education to prepare teachers to be responsive to diversity" (p. 150). This paper contributes to that shared goal and to the literature by providing a detailed course project that has been shown to develop TCs' critical lens.

Critical Literacy

We draw on critical literacy as both a theoretical framework and a pedagogical tool to guide our attempts to prepare TCs to support their students' literacy practices in school through children's literature. Through the "author a book" assignment, we aimed to center TCs' experiences in a wide range of underrepresented communities and provide an opportunity to both voice and hear traditionally silenced perspectives. To support diverse students, TCs must learn to examine and transform problematic systems of belief (Picower, 2009) and counter negative

messages to engage students' holistic selves in literacy acts. Such a transformation requires a significant shift in the way we prepare TCs and, we argue, must include the development of TCs' critical literacy lens (Freire & Macedo, 1987). Failure to transform how we prepare TCs to teach diverse children could continue the silencing and marginalizing of young students at the hands of their well-intentioned teachers (Arneback & Jämte, 2022).

Critical literacy rejects literacy as a mechanical process divorced from its ideological and historical contexts and instead views it as a tool to enable traditionally oppressed peoples to "reappropriate their history, culture, and language practices" (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 157). Vasquez, Janks and Combs (2019) describe critical literacy as a way of being and doing and offer ten key tenets drawn from the critical literacy literature. Four of these tenets guided the development of the assignment explored in this study and helped us understand how the assignment influenced TCs' critical literacy, including: (1) diverse students' cultural knowledge should be used in building curriculum, (2) all texts are constructed from a particular perspective and are never neutral, (3) critical literacy should focus on social issues, including class, gender, race or disability inequities and the ways we use language to shape our understanding of these issues, and (4) text design and production can provide opportunities for transformation (Vasquez et al., 2019). These tenets can support TCs in becoming change agents for their students.

Teachers who act as change agents acknowledge the schooling process to be historically inequitable. To address the inequity, they teach in counterhegemonic ways that view knowledge as mutually constructed and shared (Freire, 1970). Preparing teachers to be agents of change is especially important given the current anti-immigrant and explicitly racist political climate in the United States (Arneback & Jämte, 2022; Lash, 2021). Since teaching and learning are primarily mediated through language and literacy, it is critical that TCs gain an understanding of how

culture influences, and is influenced by, literacy practices in schools, homes, and communities (Arellano et al., 2016). Reorienting methods courses to take on a critical perspective is one way to support TCs in this process (Vaughn & Kuby, 2019). Teacher preparation course assignments that employ writing as sociopolitical discourse may be a productive way to develop TCs' critical literacy lens (Bomer et al., 2019). Authoring books that center the knowledge and experiences of communities often silenced demonstrates how TCs can employ literacy as a tool to create change and demonstrates critical literacy as a way of being and doing.

Preparing Literacy Teachers to Teach Diverse Students

A recent literature review identified themes in preparing primarily White teachers with sociocultural knowledge to teach literacy to diverse students and concluded:

In general, practices that were most promising engaged future literacy teachers to question deficit discourses of students that circulate in educational spaces, to acknowledge the social practices that hold inequalities in place, and to shift educational practices in ways that disrupt whiteness and White privilege. (Wetzel et al., 2019, p. 150)

Wetzel and colleagues rightfully ask literacy educators to disrupt White privilege in primarily White contexts like schools of education. While some studies have found that TCs are willing and eager to engage in difficult conversations about complex sociopolitical factors that influence power, status, and privilege (Damrow & Sweeney, 2019), other studies showed that TCs resisted the incorporation of students' cultural and linguistic capital into their teaching (Skerrett et al., 2015; Souto-Manning & Price-Dennis, 2012) and did not see sociopolitical curriculum as relevant to literacy (Wetzel et al., 2019). A review of the literature showed that White TCs "denied the existence of structural and institutional forms of discrimination" and "*imagined*

barriers related to the context of teaching, citing unknown school or district policies, classroom management, parent engagement, or censorship” (Wetzel et al., 2019, p. 151, italics in original).

Picower (2009) shows that differences between teachers and students can induce fear in teachers; differences in themselves are not harmful or dangerous, but racist interpretations of differences cause fear. Picower’s (2009) study reveals a White preservice teacher’s association of Black teens and Black men with danger because she viewed their bodies as physically bigger and their behaviors as different. The preservice teacher carried these constructions into an urban teaching placement as she shared her fear of Black third graders: “I mean, I’m a small person and like I’m in a third grade classroom and some of the boys are the same height as me. It’s intimidating” (Picower, 2009, p. 203). The unfounded fear and association of Black boys and men with danger and intimidation is based on racism. By reading their teachers’ nonverbal cues, students perceive fear and discomfort. For example, when teachers were uncomfortable with topics their elementary students raised, their perceptive young students read their physical response as discomfort and understood that certain lived experiences were not welcomed in the classroom (Jones, 2004). In this way, students learn to silence their authentic narratives within school walls from a very young age (Jones, 2004) and begin to internalize messages of inferiority (Arce, 2004; Briceño et al., 2018; Brito et al., 2004). Clearly there is a need to integrate critical literacy in teacher education, which is still largely made up of White TCs.

Literacy teacher preparation scholarship is increasingly calling attention to the excessive focus on helping White TCs understand their Whiteness at the expense of preservice teachers of color (Haddix, 2017; Willis, 2003). Haddix (2017) explained:

Instead of being in programs that acknowledge their cultural knowledges and center on curriculum and practice, students of color are expected to excel in Whiteness-centered

teacher education programs and in standardized teaching metrics (i.e., teacher certification examinations) to be identified as “a teacher.” For students of color, becoming a teacher means erasing or hiding their racial, linguistic, cultural, and sexual identities to fit a set standard. (p.145)

Irizarry’s (2011) study of five Latinx TCs, for example, describes the systematic silencing of their voices across curriculum and instruction, school policy, and social spaces. Alongside the documented marginalization of TCs of color, research has shown that they often serve as community cultural brokers, communicate high expectations for students of color, and are more likely to use culturally relevant pedagogies (Brown, 2018). The Latinx TCs in Irizarry’s (2011) study viewed their academic success as resistance and hoped to use their credentialed teaching positions to change oppressive systems and improve education within their own communities.

Kinloch (2017) describes critical educators as those committed to “Turning the gaze away from White middle-class expectations and onto the heritage and community practices of youth of color” (p. 39). A comparative case study showed that one teacher was able to enact critical practices despite an environment with restrictive language and curricular policies by positioning students as knowledgeable about their familial cultures and ensuring equitable participation structures (Michener et al., 2015). Implementing critical literacy is a complex process of learning from and about students and their communities and instructing in ways that honor and respect students’ cultural and linguistic histories as legitimate sources of knowledge (Freire & Macedo, 1987). Children’s literature that includes a broad representation of diversity can aid the enactment of critical literacy instruction.

Children’s Literature in Teacher Preparation

Bishop's (1990) seminal work explains that texts can be windows that offer views into other worlds, sliding glass doors that enable readers to enter those worlds, and mirrors that reflect back our own lives and are self-affirming. Diverse texts are needed so children of color can see themselves in books, physically, culturally, and emotionally, as well as see other worlds through windows and doors (Bishop, 1990; Johnson et al., 2017). In our highly segregated society, White children need diverse texts to "meet people unlike themselves" and to fight ethnocentrism (Bishop, 1990, p. ix). As Adichie (2009) explains in her TED talk, without diverse literature we run the risk of creating a "single story" about books that excludes people of color and others. Mirrors, windows, and sliding doors can be used to help TCs examine books for power, voice, and equity by questioning and critically examining the perspectives offered and silenced in books (Tschida et al., 2014).

A review of the literature by Flores and colleagues (2019) found that diverse children's literature was used in three ways in primarily White pre-service education settings: (1) to build understandings about culture, broadly defined, (2) to build understandings about race and ethnicity in particular, and (3) to learn transformative pedagogies. However, the "transformative pedagogies" included TCs simply reading and reflecting on diverse texts (Szecsi et al., 2010), or using diverse texts as read-alouds with children (Lohfink, 2014). While such practices are necessary for pre-service teachers to learn, neither requires TCs to consider individual students' lived experiences and teach based on children's assets.

Aligned with critical literacy, the current study focuses on "critical texts," or "texts that highlight salient categories of difference" (Riley & Crawford-Garrett, 2016, p. 94). Studies have shown White TCs' resistance to critical texts, including urban literature (Haddix & Price-Dennis, 2013), religious-themed texts (Escamilla & Nathenson-Mejía, 2003), and texts addressing

controversial issues (Papola-Ellis, 2016). Riley and Crawford-Garrett (2016) found that TCs blamed their own whitewashed education as a barrier to including critical texts, feeling underprepared to address complex issues of race and power in their own classrooms, both because of their own lack of experiences with these types of conversations, and due to their unfamiliarity with Black and Brown histories. The use of critical texts can be a way to develop empathy in TCs, and engaging teacher candidates in perspective taking invites TCs to learn about students and the sociocultural context where they will teach (Warren, 2018).

Methods

In this paper, we combine surveys and critical content analysis (Johnson et al., 2016, 2019) to explore how an Author a Book assignment designed to center TCs' learning in experiences that are traditionally underrepresented in children's literature influenced TCs' understandings of diversity. Specifically, we ask: (1) What diversity topics did TCs pursue in the creation of their books and why? (2) How were course concepts evidenced in the TC-authored texts? (3) Did the assignment influence TCs' awareness of underrepresented communities and critical literacy practices? If so, how?

The "Author a Book" assignment was incorporated in three sections of Author 1's pre-service literacy methods course over two semesters, totaling 77 TCs. This required course is the only Literacy Methods course in a graduate level teacher credential and master's program at a large public university in the West and it is taken in the second semester of a 3-semester program; all TCs in the three course sections were part of the study. While there was a range of ages and previous work experiences among participants, there was homogeneity among TCs' race and gender: 58% self-identified as White and 90% self-identified as female.

The Assignment Process

The group assignment, authoring a book from a perspective that is underrepresented in children's literature, was aligned with the four tenets of critical literacy guiding this study. Acknowledging that diverse students' knowledge belongs in the curriculum (tenet one), the assignment required that at least one author in the group be a part of the community represented in their book. Understanding that all texts are constructed from a particular perspective (tenet two), the assignment required that their book be written from the perspective of a group that is underrepresented in children's literature. While the assignment did not require a specific focus on race or culture, the activities leading up to the assignment prepared students to focus on social issues such as gender, disability, class, race and language inequities (tenet three). The Author a Book assignment, as a whole, aimed to use text design and production to deepen and transform TCs' understanding of diversity (tenet four).

To prepare students for the assignment, Author 1 engaged students in ground-setting experiences starting on the first day of the course. Cognizant of and cautious about the dangers of tokenism and putting an onus on the TCs with lived experiences underrepresented in children's literature, Author 1 explicitly addressed these issues and risks with the class. We include a few examples of the ground-setting experiences to demonstrate how the assignment was situated within a Literacy Methods course guided by Critical Literacy. In the first class, TCs played Literacy Capital Bingo, where they realized that the types of literacy capital (Compton-Lilly & Nayan, 2016) that are valued by schools are based on White, middle-class values, influence how students are perceived by teachers in the primary grades, and have lasting effects throughout their schooling. TCs also watched Adichie's (2009) "The danger of a single story," and wrote Language and Literacy Autobiographies in which they examined their own experiences of language and literacy learning through a sociocultural lens. Throughout the

semester, Author 1 used diverse texts to model multiple literacy practices, such as interactive read-alouds and shared reading. For example, Author 1 modeled an interactive read-aloud of Gary Soto's (1995) *Chato's Kitchen*, which, despite being created by a Latinx author and illustrator, contains negative Latinx stereotypes. Appendix B contains a list of course topics by week with an asterisk to denote when diverse texts were incorporated.

TCs also completed a classroom library audit investigating representation of diversity in the texts in their student teaching classrooms. They were asked to bring five diverse (broadly defined) books to class and analyzed them using a tool adapted from the article, "10 Quick Ways to Analyze Children's Books for Racism and Sexism" (California Department of Education, 1998). During class discussions, TCs consistently shared concerns with using diverse texts based on not knowing enough about diverse groups and a fear of unintentionally perpetuating stereotypes. The class discussion addressed these concerns and brainstormed solutions.

The Author a Book assignment was introduced mid-semester. The class brainstormed a wide range of topics that are generally underrepresented in children's literature, and were asked to identify topics they would be willing to work on, both based on their personal experiences and the lived experiences they wanted to learn about, before self-selecting book topics and groups in the next class session. TCs were asked to write from the perspective of a group that is underrepresented in children's literature, but were not specifically asked to write about race or culture to prevent tokenism. At least one person in each group was required to be in-group for the topic of choice. TCs tended to prefer to write from their own perspective; with few exceptions, all members of the group were in-group. The groups wrote interview questions for the required interview of an in-group person and, over several weeks, Author 1 met with small groups to discuss their interviews and plans for their book. Groups workshopped drafts of their

texts with another group in class and were specifically instructed to look for tokenism, negative stereotypes, and deficit-oriented language and illustrations. Prior to the final class, students completed a member check of their book with the interviewee to ensure it was an appropriate, respectful representation of the topic. At the last class, each group presented their completed book, received feedback, and the class engaged in a discussion about how a teacher might use the books in their classroom.

Data Sources and Analysis

Data sources include a researcher-made, qualitative, online, open-ended survey (Appendix C) and the books the TCs produced from the assignment. The survey asked TCs to reflect on their experience and learning and was administered after all the books had been presented. The instructor was not present when the TCs completed the survey. Using the qualitative analysis software Atlas.ti, we analyzed the anonymous survey responses to understand how the assignment influenced TCs' awareness of underrepresented communities and critical literacy practices (research question three). After multiple readings of the data, Author 1 completed an initial round of open coding within the bounds of the study's research questions. Author Two then confirmed all the initial codes and deepened the coding structure by adding child codes. The first author then checked all the secondary codes, and the authors met to talk through disagreements until 100% agreement was reached.

Our analysis of the TC produced books helped us identify the diversity topics pursued (research question one) and how the Literacy Methods course concepts were evidenced in the books (research question two). We employed critical content analysis to analyze the TCs' books following the process delineated by Johnson and colleagues (2016). Aligned with Critical Literacy, critical content analysis focuses on finding power in social practices through

uncovering, understanding and transforming inequities (Johnson et al., 2016). By employing critical content analysis we make our intentions to transform conditions of inequity explicit. First, we analyzed by genre, underrepresented topic, language (some were bilingual or in Spanish), and the types of traditional literacy characteristics present in the books (e.g., vignettes with varying text levels, readers theater scripts, and sophisticated use of illustrations and literary devices to convey meaning; see Table 1). Author 1 completed the first round of coding, and Author 2 checked it (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Discrepancies were discussed and resolved.

A second round of critical content analysis focused on the tenets of critical literacy present in the student-authored books (Vasquez et al., 2019). The same two-phase process for analysis was employed (results are in Table 2). We re-read all the books and made notes about our initial reactions, connections to characters' multidimensional identities, and whether and how the books evidenced Vasquez and colleagues (2019) tenets of critical literacy. Then, we scanned the book pages and imported them into the qualitative software Dedoose. We each independently open-coded half of the books. Once we coded independently, we exchanged books and continued blind coding. We then discussed disagreements, returned to the texts and collaboratively agreed on final codes. Data from the qualitative survey, initial coding of books, and second coding of books were triangulated to determine themes. The themes and books were then shared with a focus group of four colleagues for external validation.

Researcher positionality is relevant to the subjectivity of data analysis, thus we must deeply understand how our identities, our role in the research process, and our privilege impacts our work (Lather, 1993). Author 1 is an ethnic White woman who is the result of assimilation and language loss in her own family. A Spanish learner, she has been a bilingual teacher, teacher educator, advocate, and researcher for two decades. Author 2 is a Latina teacher educator and

researcher who acquired English as her second language in school. She is a former bilingual teacher. We recognize the privilege we hold as light-skinned, formally educated, heterosexual, cis-gender females, and how these factors, coupled with our roles as professors, may impact the research process.

Findings

Employing the tenets of critical literacy as a frame for analysis, we found that the TCs created books covering a wide range of topics traditionally underrepresented in children's literature. The texts evidenced application of traditional literacy concepts such as concepts about print and genre, as well as ways books can support TCs' sociocultural understandings. TCs' awareness and understanding of underrepresented communities deepened through the Author a Book assignment as they gained insights into how to enact critical literacy in their classrooms.

The Diversity Topics TCs Pursued

TC-authored books included a broad range of diversity issues that incorporated diverse cultural knowledge in the curriculum (critical literacy tenet 1) and were created from non-neutral perspectives (tenet 2). The books focused on social issues (tenet 3) such as immigration experiences, LGBTQ issues addressing both children and their families, mental and emotional health issues, neurodiversity issues, first-generation college experiences, race, religion, foster care, child abuse, and parental substance abuse (see Table 1). The primary issues explored in the TC-authored texts were less culturally and racially diverse than anticipated given the diverse demographics of the geographical area. Of the 19 texts, five were culturally relevant to the local community: two books focused on biracial families, one on immigration, one on the experience of being a Latinx first generation college student, and one book was about Ramadan. The remaining 14 texts centered on different issues that are also underrepresented in children's

literature, such as child abuse, youth in foster care, depression, anxiety, and LGBTQ+ issues. Multiple books evidenced characters with multiple intersecting identities. For example, in a book about anxiety, the main character was a child of Indian descent, and in a book about living with a parent with an emotional disability, the child's character was non-binary. In this way, TCs enacted critical literacy through their use of language and text design to disrupt readers' understanding of underrepresented communities as a single identity. Through their books, they shaped a more nuanced understanding reflecting multiple intersecting identities.

Likely due to the in-class conversations about the dangers of misrepresenting a community, TCs tended to write from their personal experiences. Of the 19 books, there were only two groups in which individual TCs were not part of the group themselves or had a close family member who was part of the topic. In one case, two TCs wanted to learn about Islam from a peer who was very willing to instruct. In the other group, one of the TCs was transgender and chose to collaborate with peers and trans community to produce *Two Spirit*. This had the benefit of limiting inappropriate representation and expanding some TCs' perspectives.

Insert Table 1 here

Surveys showed that many TCs selected their topic based on a personal connection and/or because the topic was relevant to their PK-8 students' lives. They wrote comments such as, "It applied directly to my family life," or the topic was a "very common reality for children." TCs connected their personal childhood lived experiences to that of their students. One expressed that her experience with anxiety and her students' similar experiences were the motivation for her group's book. She said, "I chose to do anxiety for the book because I was a student with anxiety and still struggle with it at times. I also had students in my student teaching class with anxiety. I think it would have been helpful to see children in stories with anxiety."

TCs tended to self-select into groups based on a shared experience. One TC said, “All of our group members are first-generation [college] graduates and we all felt this was an important thing in our life and so we decided to include a little bit of our childhood.” A member of a group comprised of all biracial TCs commented, “Being biracial is something that I used to be ashamed of, but now that I’m older, I’m loud and proud of it. I’ve never seen books about being biracial so I wanted to take this opportunity to share my own story and experience.” Another TC explicitly noted how the incorporation of her own story in the classroom validated it. She said, “I didn’t grow up reading about first generation college students, so being able to put my story out there to share made it feel valued.” A different TC echoed this idea, saying, “It also gave the part of me that doesn’t have a voice, a voice.” These future teachers identified one of the intended purposes of this assignment: to provide an opportunity for them to voice their own stories and to have their voices publicly valued. TCs appreciated how this assignment modeled bringing students’ lived experiences to the forefront of instruction. Whether they were first generation, multiracial, or from families with histories of alcoholism, depression, or anxiety, the parts of their cultures that schools traditionally silence were suddenly given voice. The TCs’ book topic selection explicitly addressed the first three of Vasquez and colleagues (2019) tenets of critical literacy by incorporating diverse student knowledge in the content, constructing texts from non-neutral perspectives, and centering the books on social issues.

Traditional Literacy Concepts Evidenced in the TCs’ Texts

The TCs’ books evidenced knowledge and application of topics traditionally addressed in a literacy methods course. For instance, the books contained readers theater scripts at various difficulty levels, multiple narratives on the same topic for different maturity levels, the sophisticated use of illustrations to communicate meaning, and particular attention to audience.

One TC commented, “The most important learning was finding how to combine all aspects of a book to convey a message. It's not just about the text; it's about the language, illustrations, layout, and style.” The bilingual group that wrote about a child’s border crossing story wrote the text in Spanish, and then rewrote it in English when they thought more deeply about their intended audience; they wanted an English monolingual audience to access the story’s content. TCs used age-appropriate language to communicate significant and important ideas about diversity, leading to increased confidence in their willingness to discuss controversial and equity-related topics with elementary students.

The TC-authored texts also evidenced the critical literacy tenets guiding this study (see Table 2). All but one text evidenced all 4 tenets; most texts normalized the chosen topic, showing a day in the life of a child from the particular subgroup. For example, the book, *So What?* included three leveled readers’ theater scripts that show ways in which gender norms are commonly perpetuated, such as princess books only being for girls or soccer being a boy’s activity. The racially diverse characters in the book question and overcome the stereotypes. Another text, *The Story of Us*, used both illustrations and the TCs’ actual family photographs to represent cultural and ethnic diversity. The authors discussed their varied experiences of identifying as biracial by analogizing it to three different types of ice cream: mint chocolate chip represents pieces of one culture in the broader context of another; Neapolitan represents the experience of maintaining separate identities and cultures; and rainbow swirl sorbet represents the different cultures mixing together. The three different experiences of being biracial presented in the book were intended to open windows for mono-racial students and sliding glass doors for multi-racial students (Bishop, 1990). The three ice cream metaphors also open readers’ minds to

the possibility of each individual's experience being different yet valuable, as they present varied ways of supporting mixed racial identities.

Insert Table 2 here

These and other characteristics of the texts open doors for conversations that more traditional books leave closed. For example, during a read-aloud of *Sami's Mad Dad*, a child may ask, "Is Sami a boy or a girl?" The authors intentionally made Sami gender neutral, enabling all students to personally connect, and opening opportunities for conversations about gender fluidity and gender norms. Through this process, TCs identified the significance of incorporating the perspectives and cultures of their local community (tenet 1), identified that texts are crafted from a particular perspective and thus are never neutral (tenet 2), focused on social issues (tenet 3), and designed texts that provide opportunities for transformation (tenet 4, Vasquez et al., 2019). In sum, the texts assessed TCs' understandings of traditional literacy concepts, sociocultural understandings, and critical literacy concepts.

TCs' Shifting Awareness of Underrepresented Communities and the Tools They Acquired to Enact Critical Literacy

Our analysis of the qualitative survey responses showed that creating a text about communities that are generally underrepresented in children's literature resulted in TCs' deepening awareness and understanding of these communities and the need to learn about others. Moreover, survey responses communicated that the personal nature of the assignment facilitated their acquisition of tools to enact critical literacy in their own classrooms.

Building Awareness and Understanding

TC survey responses reflected an increased awareness of differences between themselves and the students they serve. They identified how their own identities influenced their experience

of the assignment, saying, for example, “I learned that there are a ton of things that I hadn't even thought of that may affect my students.” Another TC commented, “Being white, I didn't realize this [book topic] is such an issue with children.” One TC further explained:

I believe this assignment was very valuable. I found that this assignment opened my eyes and made me realize, more than I had already noticed before, that not all students are the same. They have different traditions, cultures, problems that they face in their daily lives, routines, family styles/backgrounds. It is important to learn about your students and be understanding and inclusive of their needs.

TCs expressed how their understanding shifted through the assignment. One stated, “I feel like I have become one step closer to learning how to become culturally responsive and respectful of other cultures that I am not too familiar with; I have become more knowledgeable and open-minded about underrepresented groups.” The assignment’s focus on social issues like race, class and gender facilitated TCs increased awareness of the differences between themselves and their students and their willingness to be open-minded about underrepresented communities. Critical literacy’s focus on social issues aims to shape understanding of the issues (tenet three) and it views text design and production as an opportunity for transformation (tenet four). The TCs reflections demonstrate a clear development of these two tenets of critical literacy.

Yet another TC commented, “I was able to recognize my own biases and learn more about underrepresented groups by looking at the story from an insider's perspective; I feel ‘with’ them instead of ‘against’ them.” Another TC echoed, “I realize it is important to connect with all of my students and not just some of them.” Acknowledging that all texts and stories are told from a particular perspective (tenet two), these TCs evidenced critical literacy’s understanding that

texts are never neutral. TCs began to understand that culture and literacy practices are intimately intertwined (Arellano et al., 2016; Compton-Lilly & Nayan, 2016).

TCs also arrived at the conclusion that representation is crucial in children's literature and that they will need to intentionally work to ensure representation of difference, rather than trusting a curriculum or a school library to provide it. This conclusion demonstrates critical literacy's understanding that diverse students' cultural knowledge should be part of the curriculum (tenet one). A TC explained, "It really made me think about how to make big ideas accessible and what would be helpful to have in my classroom library." Many echoed this idea with statements such as, "I learned the importance of including books in the classroom that incorporate underrepresented populations." Some also explained why representation is important, such as, "It helps students feel less alone and also teaches them about diverse experiences they might have never heard about before." Many TCs commented that they would be intentional and thoughtful about ensuring representation in their classroom libraries. This outcome counters Wetzel and colleagues' (2019) finding that TCs were reluctant to incorporate relevant sociopolitical curriculum, as well as other studies showing TCs' reluctance to use diverse texts in the classroom (Escamilla & Nathenson-Mejía, 2003; Haddix & Price-Dennis, 2013; Papola-Ellis, 2016).

Our analysis of TC survey responses showed that sharing the texts they had authored at the end of the semester was powerful. One stated, "The sharing at the end of the semester brought it all together for me. Seeing how there are many different topics that just aren't represented in the classroom, really made this much more powerful." Another TC stated, "For my book it made me see what kind of teacher I want to be. With other books that were shared it made me think about what books I want to bring into the class." The diversity of the texts

presented in class enabled the participants to see a wide variety of groups that are underrepresented in children's literature and to develop empathy through their peers' experiences with the topics.

As we discussed earlier, TCs entered this assignment fearful of using diverse texts because they did not want to unintentionally perpetuate stereotypes (Riley & Crawford-Garrett, 2016). TCs shifted from feeling fearful of topics traditionally underrepresented in children's literature, to feeling empowered to address them in child-friendly ways. One TC said, "Listening to all the books, I was able to see that there are a lot of topics that are not discussed in the classroom. I realized that there is a fun, eye-opening way to talk about delicate topics." Another said, "This assignment got me thinking about what stories are not being told and what we can do to change that." A different TC said:

I am not a part of many of the cultures/stories represented in the books written this semester, so having had the experience of seeing others' processes was a great way to delve deeper into the idea that we as teachers need to actively seek out the stories we don't know.

While the sharing of texts prompted TCs to consider action, moving from building awareness of diversity to sustaining it in classrooms can be a challenge. TCs shared that this assignment provided them with tools to center traditionally minoritized student groups' knowledge and experiences and to enact critical literacy.

Learning to Enact Critical Literacy

TCs reported having acquired an understanding of the importance of preparing to productively engage K-12 students in classroom discussions about challenging diversity issues. A TC shared:

I already knew that I needed to be careful about how I approached these things and that it was important to do so. However, I don't think I had really thought about *how* I would talk about this to students. These books helped me think through that and gave me some good ideas.

Another TC commented, "[This assignment] really helped me to think about how to broach difficult topics in a child friendly fashion." Two others said, "It gave us the language needed to address sensitive issues," and "These topics can and should be talked about in class." Another TC said, "These books put into practice what we have been learning as a teacher." TCs felt that the assignment gave them tools to use in their classrooms to enact the type of culturally sustaining education they had been hearing about in class.

The act of writing a book for children from the perspective of an underrepresented group in children's literature helped TCs to see that these topics have an important role in classrooms, and provided them with two primary means of enacting critical literacy: incorporating diverse literature in their classrooms in authentic ways, and valuing children's writing and personal histories (making diverse students' knowledge the curriculum [tenet 1], and focusing on social issues [tenet 3]). Many TCs commented on the need for diverse literature in their classrooms for use as mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors (Bishop, 1990). One TC said, "I will try my best to get books about underrepresented groups, because students need to know they are not alone and even if they do not fall within these groups, they need to learn that people are different." Another echoed, "It made me want to keep books that discuss these topics in my classroom." Other TCs focused on the act of writing as a way to learn about their students and enable children to share their voice. One said, "I would try this assignment with my future students as a way to get to learn about my student's funds of knowledge." Another stated, "We could let

children write their own books to incorporate their own funds of knowledge and feel that their voice is valued.”

Some TCs viewed their books as vehicles to normalize differences and create change in their classrooms. A TC explained:

Our group has recognized heteronormativity in our classrooms and stereotypes that put boys and girls into this box of what is considered to be normal. We wanted to approach this in a way that would help students reflect upon these stereotypes while normalizing our differences.

Also wanting to normalize difference, another TC stated, “All of our students deserve to share their stories in an authentic, meaningful way without being singled out as different.” A few TCs commented more broadly, incorporating the importance of families and recognizing the risk of misrepresenting cultures or groups of which they are not a part. One said, “I would be more careful to vet how I represent underrepresented groups before talking about them in class. I would accomplish this by talking with students and families beforehand.” Another explained:

I want to be more inclusive of different traditions in my classroom. I also want to learn about the individual differences and needs of each of my students and do all I can to accommodate those in the classroom. Learning about the different backgrounds of students (ex: divorced families, foster care, family history, traditions, etc.) will allow me to understand all of my students and meet their needs in and out of the classroom.

The opportunity to engage in writing through a lens of sociopolitical discourse (Bomer et al., 2019) provided TCs a sense of advocacy and empowerment to enact critical literacy through their self-authored books. One TC concluded, “It was an empowering assignment,” highlighting Vasquez and colleagues’ (2019) fourth tenet of critical literacy, that text design should provide

opportunities for transformation. Authoring a book from a diverse perspective and hearing their peers' books shifted TCs' awareness of diverse perspectives. It also shifted their perspective about their own willingness and ability to engage students with complex sociopolitical issues through children's literature.

Discussion

Overall, findings show that the Author a Book assignment shifted TCs' awareness and understanding of underrepresented communities. The assignment contributed to their desire to use diverse children's literature to transform the traditional narratives of schooling. Furthermore, TC-authored books evidenced the four tenets of critical literacy. This is significant because more work in this area could lead to counter-hegemonic schooling that values communities of color and reflects their strengths and humanity through literature. This assignment supported TCs in considering how to enact critical literacy while simultaneously exploring traditional literacy concepts such as audience, genre, and concepts about print. It thereby eliminated the issue of critical literacy being something extra that may not fit into teacher educators' coursework. Moreover, enabling candidates to select their own book topics expanded the types of diversity an instructor would have been able to address deeply in a one-semester course.

Implications for Teacher Preparation Programs Aiming to Transform Conditions of Inequity

Our critical literacy and critical content analysis approach explicitly challenges assumptions and actions that privilege some teachers, students and families and oppress others (Johnson et al., 2016). Describing critical content analysis Short (2016) writes, "Adding the word "critical" in front of content analysis signals a political stance by the researcher, particularly in searching for and using research tools to examine inequities from multiple perspectives" (p. 4).

We embrace this stance as we aim to transform conditions of inequity in teacher preparation through literacy practices. This study has important implications for teacher preparation programs with similar goals. TCs must have opportunities to understand differences and reflect critically on the power dynamics that influence or result from those differences if they are to become “subjects,” rather than “objects,” of their literacy teaching and learning (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p.156). Young children are aware of race, power, and privilege and should be provided with the tools to critically assess their social context (Hagerman, 2019). We argue that critical literacy –and a critical perspective more broadly– should feature strongly in teacher preparation in order to develop TCs’ critical lens and enable them to fully embrace and leverage their students’ multiple identities and cultural knowledge rather than oppress them. Haddix (2017) explained that in traditional teacher preparation programs, TCs of color are expected to hide their identities to conform to White, middle class norms. Asking TCs to collaboratively author a book from an underrepresented perspective is the opposite of the norm, positioning diverse candidates as knowledgeable and positioning White, middle-class TCs as requiring other perspectives to succeed. Such efforts, however, require much preparation to support the centering of diverse TCs as valuable knowledge holders. Without ongoing professional development for teacher educators, this assignment and others like it could result in tokenization and harmful experiences for minoritized TCs.

While this assignment successfully contributed to TCs’ cultural awareness and their ability to enact critical literacy, it is insufficient as a stand-alone assignment. Instead, a critical perspective should be integrated throughout teacher education programs and aligned with state expectations for teacher practice and knowledge. We have shown that it is possible for teacher candidates to develop literacy concepts while learning how to enact critical literacy. Teacher

education programs can ensure that all classes are taught through a critical lens so that TCs experience the pedagogy themselves and have opportunities to enact it in classrooms. Ensuring that future educators have opportunities to learn through critical lens may also bring more traditionally underrepresented people into the profession.

Implications for Policy

While state policies for teacher preparation vary widely, all states have the opportunity to advance their teacher preparation policies for educational equity. All need to prepare teacher candidates to teach literacy to students who are diverse in multifaceted and intersectional ways, including race, culture, socioeconomics, language, gender, sexual orientation, religion, and myriad other ways. Adopting tenets of critical literacy (Vasquez et al., 2019) into standards for preparation programs or teacher performance expectations (TPEs) for candidates would be a significant step toward advancing more equitable teaching, as the exploration of literacy, power, and social issues would better enable preparation programs to develop teachers who can support diverse learners. In addition to preparing teachers to use these critical literacy tenets with youth, teacher preparation programs should employ and model these tenets in order to better serve and attract diverse teacher candidates.

In California, the site of this study, critical literacy is not part of the state's TPEs (California Commission on Teacher Credentialing, 2013). Instead, it is up to individual literacy teacher educators to decide to address the literacy TPEs through traditional means or through critical literacy. The absence of critical literacy in TPEs is particularly problematic in California, where the one year, post-bachelor nature of teacher credential programs results in minimal literacy coursework (e.g., three semester units at this university).

It is critical that states' teacher preparation standards expand their definition of literacy to be inclusive of diverse literacies and the people who practice them. State departments of education can provide support for teacher educators to transition to a critical perspective, as professional development and ongoing professional learning communities for teacher educators would be needed. Once teachers are being prepared to educate students using a critical lens, policy makers can consider revising the Common Core and other state standards to reflect critical literacy.

Limitations and Reflections

While our participants expressed a desire to employ critical literacy, it is unclear if their experience with critical literacy in the Literacy Methods course will translate into practice once they graduate. Our hope was that the Author a Book assignment would foster TCs' desire to truly know and respect their students and school community. However, as Metz (2018) found, some TCs tended not to leave their comfort zones. Since many candidates chose to write from their own experiences, it is unclear whether there were enough opportunities to learn about other issues. This was particularly problematic when White TCs grouped themselves together. Avoiding tokenism is a challenge in the current version of this assignment. A newer version of the assignment includes TCs partnering with parents from the local community to create books honoring the parents' (and therefore the children's) lived experiences. The parents are co-authors, approve the final version of the book to ensure accurate representation of their stories and are given a bound copy of their book. This revision aims to support TCs in moving beyond writing from their own experiences to seeing diverse families, regardless of formal education or profession, as holders of knowledge. It also aims to deepen their understanding of cultural and racial diversity. Additionally, this revision ameliorates the risk in requiring only one person in a

group to belong to the group being written about, as it could put an undue onus on that individual. While this assignment developed TCs' critical literacy perspective, it might have a limited impact as a stand-alone assignment. Rather, it should be a piece of a larger puzzle in a teacher education program that supports TCs' critical perspective. Future research might explore if and how TCs draw on similar preparation to enact the tenets of critical literacy in their own classrooms after graduation.

Conclusion

Guided by critical literacy, we have shown how a children's book writing assignment designed to center the experiences of underrepresented communities in children's literature contributed to shifts in awareness and understanding of diverse students among predominantly White teacher candidates. These shifts are crucial in today's schools as students continue to be more diverse than the teachers teaching them. Teachers and teacher educators have an opportunity to better support TCs and students with multiple diverse identities. Do we have the collective political will to do the hard work of making change? When teacher preparation, state departments of education, and policymakers collectively embrace critical literacy for educational justice, critical literacy could move from a conceptual framework to becoming common classroom practice.

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