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White Pre-Service Teachers' Perceptions and their Development of Culturally Relevant Literacy Practices

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By 2024, over half of the U.S. school population is expected to be composed of students of color (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). In most urban school districts, students of color already constitute the majority (Leonard, McKee, & Williams, 2013). Moreover, the number of White students in public schools is projected to continue decreasing (McFarland et al., 2017). Though the U.S. student population is becoming more racially and ethnically diverse, the fact remains that White women dominate the national teaching force in today's public schools where they represent 84% of the population (National Center for Education Information, 2011). In "inner cities" (p. 27), only 12% of teachers are African-American while 13% are Latinx (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). Thus, a cultural mismatch is plausible in classrooms across the U.S. (Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010). The cultural disparity between teachers and students can, at times, lead to the development of biases and lowered expectations for student achievement (Singer, Catapano, & Huisman, 2010). These two factors have contributed to the deficit-perspective known as the *achievement gap* which refers to "the disparity in academic performance between different groups—different, for example, in income, cultural background, or gender" (Teale, Paciga, & Hoffman, 2007, p. 344). Anderson (2015) highlights the recent shifts of children of color being homeschooled as a likely outcome due to the lack of teacher diversity and onslaught of (in)equity issues

in the classrooms of the nation's public schools.

An estimated 40% of U.S. public schools do not employ a single teacher of color (Waddell & Ukpokodu, 2012). Thus, the preparation of White pre-service teachers to work with students of color, particularly within urban school contexts, is imperative. As Farinde-Wu, Glover, and Williams (2017) write, "For a majority of practicing teachers, lack of preparation in and exposure to fundamentally sound culturally responsive practices within their teacher preparation programs...have left them ill-equipped with a conceptual understanding of [culturally responsive pedagogy]" (pp. 282-283).

Many White pre-service teachers lack the cross-cultural knowledge and experience (Saffold & Longwell-Grice, 2008) that would prime them for working in urban schools. Pre-service teachers' preconceptions of urban schools largely involve ideations of students' race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, intelligence and/or ability, and motivation (Hampton, Peng, & Ann, 2008). These preconceptions can stem from implicit biases, which can impact the educational opportunities afforded to students in urban schools. Scholars have recommended increased field experiences in urban schools, immersion in urban communities, and teacher education courses held on-site (at urban schools) as a means of better preparing pre-service teachers as urban educators (Waddell & Ukpokodu, 2012; Singer et al., 2010). However, other research has found that these recommendations are not enough to reshape teacher ideologies about working with students of color (Groulx, 2001; Kondo & Bracho, 2019; Ndemanu, 2018).

As means to changing perspectives about teaching diverse students and building cultural competency, there is a need to increase the conceptual understanding of

culturally relevant pedagogy to White pre-service teachers through combined content-based coursework and urban school field experiences. This qualitative case study explored the perspectives of pre-service teachers regarding teaching reading in an urban school setting which emphasized culturally relevant teaching practices. The following research questions are posed:

- (1) What are pre-service teachers' initial perceptions about teaching literacy in an urban school?
- (2) What conceptual understanding of culturally relevant pedagogy is gained as a result of the literacy methods course and urban school field experience?

The first research question is similar to previous studies that explore how providing teacher candidates with context-specific field experiences can develop a desire to teach in urban schools and (re)shape teacher ideologies. In most cases, these studies were conducted in classes that centered on developing pedagogy. However, this study is significant because research less commonly explores context-specific field experiences within a particular content area, such as literacy. The second research question addresses Ladson-Billing's (1995) notion of teaching behaviors amongst culturally relevant educators in that participants recognize tenets based on (1) conceptions of self and others, (2) social relations, and (3) conceptions of knowledge.

Review of Literature

Recommendations for Addressing Urban Teacher Turnover at the Pre-Service Level

In some urban schools, the turnover rate for teachers, of all races and ethnicities, may be as high as 21% (Singer et al., 2010). Scholars offered several practices for teacher education programs to incorporate in

order to mitigate a high urban teacher turnover rate and equip pre-service teachers for success in urban schools. One suggestion was for pre-service teachers to engage in situational learning (Darling-Hammond, Hammerness, Rust, & Shulman, 2005). Within the context of preparing pre-service teachers to work with urban students, situational learning would involve field experiences as well as teacher education courses conducted within urban schools (Singer et al., 2010). This notion is supported by the fact that novice teachers who identified themselves as highly qualified to work with urban students often completed an intensive, one-year internship in an urban school (Singer et al., 2010).

Waddell and Ukpokodu (2012) recommended even more field experience in urban schools as they suggested that pre-service teachers work as early as the fall semester of their freshman year and have an urban school field placement each semester thereafter to combat negative perspectives about urban school environments. Beyond increased field placements in urban schools, colleges of education might work to actively recruit pre-service teachers of color, students with prior experience in urban schools and/or communities, and students who have previously worked with diverse children (Waddell & Ukpokodu, 2012). In addition, Singer et al. (2010) suggested the implementation of a community-based model of teacher preparation which would involve activities geared toward educating pre-service teachers about the rich resources offered by urban communities, a poverty simulation to spur thinking about issues of social justice, and on-site supervision offered by faculty to directly address concerns that arise from urban school field placements (Singer et al., 2010).

In terms of teacher education courses, Waddell and Ukpokodu (2012) recommended to include courses that

embody the following: (1) an exploration of content through the lens of urban issues; (2) courses that build pre-service teachers' awareness of diverse cultural identities; (3) courses that are taught by faculty members who have prior experience in urban schools, and (4) courses that emphasize culturally relevant pedagogy. Daniel (2016) suggested that teacher educators utilize videos in order to foster pre-service teachers' sense of culturally relevant pedagogy. Finally, Gunn and Williams (2015) used teaching cases to foster culturally responsive literacy instruction amongst their primarily White pre-service teachers. Culturally relevant pedagogy can foster White pre-service teachers' cultural humility (Vesley, Brown, & Mehta, 2017) in that they learn how to advocate for others, continue in self-reflection, and recondition imbalances of power (Tervalon & Murray-Garcia, 1998). Tinkler and Tinkler (2016) shared about the necessity of instilling cultural humility in pre-service teachers because "humility informs responsive practice" (p. 199.)

Another way to shape ideologies about diversity and difference among pre-service teachers is through having a *cultural insider* in the classroom. Younker (2018) associated the term with a person who demonstrates how to maneuver or navigate through an unfamiliar setting or someone who bridges understandings between differing worlds. In this way, teachers of color in undergraduate education programs can be seen as *cultural insiders* and facilitate understandings about working with diverse student groups. Goodwin (2004) identified the value that non-White teacher educators bring to academic spaces in relation to their White students in a qualitative case study involving seven teacher educators of color. Findings revealed that participants centered their teaching practices around issues of diversity which were deeply grounded in historical, personal, and political perspectives about

equity and inclusion. In addition to content knowledge as an integral component of their teaching, "respondents all were in agreement that teachers should be aware of the cultural dimensions of practice and the implications for diversity of instruction" (p. 10). In consideration that *all* teachers should have knowledge of culturally diverse groups, Goodwin (2004) phrased the term *specific knowledge* as a type of *knowing* about the lives and ways of groups labeled as *different*.

Based on the literature provided, it seems the best way to combat urban teacher turnover at the pre-service teacher level is to provide increased exposure through field experiences and provide settings where pre-service teachers can develop cultural humility and increased awareness of culturally relevant teaching practices. It also helps to have a *cultural insider* that can foster learning and development about equity and inclusion in schools. Research also suggests that developing undergraduate courses that address urban education issues and preparing teachers to mitigate them through culturally relevant pedagogy can also be impactful.

Addressing White Pre-Service Teacher Resistance to Working in Urban Schools

Despite these recommendations and intended efforts to create educational programming that will well-equip undergraduates, recent literature has shared pre-service teacher resistance for entering such field placements in urban settings, and even teaching in urban schools.

Bennett (2012) offered insights on a study that examined eight White, middle-class pre-service teachers' perspectives on culturally responsive teaching prior to and following a literacy-focused field experience involving tutoring students of color at an urban community center. Bennett (2012) wrote,

“Five out of the eight preservice teachers...thought the course instructor influenced their understandings about culturally responsive teaching” (p. 404.) Bennett’s (2012) study underscores the range of influence that teacher educators have on pre-service teachers’ perspectives of culturally responsive teaching, especially given that the teacher educator in her study was White.

Similarly, Groulx (2001) shared a study that interrogated junior-level teacher candidates’ initial and concluding attitudes about teaching in an urban school environment. In a mixed methods investigation, participants were surveyed as part of a professional development school (PDS) project and asked to rank their preferences in teaching environments whereas urban, suburban, and private schools were provided as selections. Students were also asked about their comfort levels with teaching in settings where there was a predominant population of African American or Hispanic/Latinx students. For the initial sample ($n = 112$), most participants reported having minimal experiences of working with diverse student groups. Survey results reflected that participants were most comfortable and most interested in working in suburban, and secondly, private schools.

Of the original sample, 29 participants were surveyed a second time after student teaching had been completed. The concluding survey revealed greater interests in teaching in suburban schools, and participants held many negative assumptions and dispositions about working with diverse students. Groulx (2001) noted that “only 7 of the 112 participants rated teaching at the Hispanic or African American neighborhood schools as equally or more comfortable or interesting than teaching in suburban or private schools.” Findings support the notion that, even with increased exposure and

experiences with urban schools and diverse student groups, White pre-service teachers still feel most comfortable in spaces in which they are not *othered*. In addition to these findings, Siwatu (2011) examined the influence of school context (i.e. suburban or urban) on pre-service teachers’ sense of preparedness and self-efficacy and found that pre-service teachers felt more prepared to teach in suburban, rather than urban, schools. The pre-service teachers in Siwatu’s (2011) study also felt more prepared to teach White students versus African-American and/or Latinx students.

These findings also align with the study conducted by Chizhik (2003) who shared challenges she experienced in preparing pre-service teachers for careers in urban schools. In a multicultural education course designed to address systemic inequities and deficit-model pedagogies in an open and transparent format, students were still resistant to engage in discussions about social justice issues in education. Recent studies have also documented the challenges that teachers of color face when teaching about diversity and multicultural education (Kondo & Bracho, 2019; Ndemanu, 2018). A faculty member of Asian descent wrote about her experiences integrating critical literacy into an elementary literacy education course at a rural, Predominantly White Institution (Han & Leonard, 2017). Critical literacy entails “(1) disrupting the commonplace, (2) interrogating multiple viewpoints, (3) focusing on sociopolitical issues, and (4) taking action and promoting social justice” (Lewison, Flint, & Van Sluys, 2002, p. 382). On her course evaluations, the pre-service teachers enrolled in her class provided remarks such as, “we need to learn more about phonics than social justice topics” (p. 123) and “we do not want to hear about poor multiracial students” (p. 123). Zoss, Holbrook, McGrail, and Albers (2014) also found that pre-service teachers

problematized urban schools yet, the researchers hypothesized that that could be the result of their “sanction[ing] [of] the idea that urban spaces could have problems and that preservice teachers could be designers for solutions” (p. 68).

Major themes from the existent literature highlight that White pre-service teachers are still resistant to working in urban settings, to the extent when teachers of color strive to facilitate educational environments that breed cultural competence and critical consciousness. As such, this study recognizes those challenges as a continual theme in the attempts to immerse White pre-service teachers in urban-centric environments. However, unique to this study, topics of culturally relevant pedagogy were broached explicitly through a content-based course in literacy. It should also be noted that unlike the existent studies where whole-group and open-ended discussions about sociocultural issues were primarily used as a means to elicit student participation and engagement about urban schools, this study focuses more explicitly on the pedagogical differences that exist amongst urban and suburban schooling types.

Exploring Culturally Relevant Literacy Instruction

A U.S. Department of Education report noted, “The average reading score for 4th-grade public school students in large cities (214) was lower than the national public school average reading score (221)” (McFarland et al., 2017, p. 163). This finding supports Milner’s (2012) argument that students of color experience an *opportunity gap*. Milner (2012) framed the opportunity gap as stemming from: (1) assertions of color blindness on the part of pre- and in-service teachers (2) cultural conflict (3) the myth that our educational system operates as a meritocracy (4)

approaching “others” from deficit perspectives and setting low expectations, and (5) having a context-neutral mindset. Similarly, Reardon, Valentino, Kalogrides, Shores, and Greenberg (2013), who analyzed both NAEP and state assessment data found a correlation between “racial socioeconomic disparities and racial segregation” (p. 14). Researchers have found that while, some state education agencies have worked to eliminate opportunity gaps for students, others continue to widen due to policies related to school accountability, funding, and early childhood education (Reardon et al., 2013).

Within historically underperforming urban schools, ineffective commercial reading programs are often utilized for reading instruction (Maniates, 2017). A qualitative study conducted by Maniates (2017) underscored the importance of teachers’ adapting the core curriculum to best meet their students’ needs. Michelle (pseudonym), a biracial first-grade teacher, who participated in Maniates’ (2017) study, successfully modified her school’s commercial reading program to one that was more culturally relevant through her utilization of multicultural literature and by explicitly connecting the content to her student’s lives.

Parsons, Parsons, Morewood and Ankrum’s (2016) study of three different contexts (i.e. high-poverty urban, medium-poverty rural, and low-poverty suburban) found that a new administrator in the high-poverty urban school was reluctant to allow teachers to adapt the basal reading program to best meet their students’ needs because of a district-wide policy concerning fidelity of basal instruction. In the same study, a first-grade teacher at the high-poverty urban school faced pressure by her grade-level colleagues to keep her basal instruction unchanged (Parsons et al., 2016). However, it should be noted that while research posits

effective literacy practices for urban students, not all teachers are given the freedom to exercise their professional judgment and adapt their instruction to best meet their students' needs. In an effort to lessen the opportunity gap, it is necessary to provide teacher (and administration) appropriate training and professional development for those who currently work in urban school sites because it is highly likely that entering/novice teachers will follow suit with the pre-established instructional and content-specific norms of the school/district.

The notion of culturally relevant literacy instruction for urban students is supported by Walker-Dalhouse and Risko (2008) who profiled high-achieving urban schools. Walker-Dalhouse and Risko (2008) stated that these schools took the following steps to ensure their students' success: (1) made the content relevant, (2) demonstrated an appreciation for various students' cultures and languages, and (3) utilized cultural and linguistic differences as a resource. Research conducted by Christ et al. (2018) suggested that utilizing culturally relevant texts in assessing a student's reading skills may better inform instruction. Similarly, Teale et al (2007) advocated for using diverse texts as a means of helping urban students to reach higher levels of literacy. Culturally relevant literature often reflects the backgrounds of diverse students (Peterson, 2014) and provides greater motivation towards reading and therefore can be seen as impactful at increasing literacy skills and development. Additionally, culturally relevant instruction meets the intellectual, social, and cultural needs of diverse students (Peterson, 2014).

McIntyre and Hulan's (2013) study of four elementary teachers who melded research-based reading instruction with culturally responsive instruction suggests that the two can be successfully intertwined.

May's (2010) study of a third-grade teacher found that culturally relevant instruction was well-suited to teaching reading comprehension strategies that were identified by the classroom teacher. However, pairing culturally relevant instruction with state-mandated reading comprehension strategies was found to be more difficult (May, 2010).

The aforementioned studies indeed demonstrate the existence of an opportunity gap between U.S. urban schools and their rural/suburban counterparts, and in some cases, the disparities that are present in literacy achievement. Empirical studies provide implications for culturally relevant pedagogy through the use of multicultural literature and the utilization of instructional strategies that foster connectivity to students' lived experiences. However, there are barriers that persist in the form of curricular mandates, administrative influence, and/or school/district climate around diversity and inclusion practices. Still, culturally relevant literacy instruction can be achieved. It is hoped that this study will contribute to the existent literature on preparing pre-service teachers to teach reading in urban schooling environments.

Methodology

Theoretical Framework

This study utilizes the theoretical underpinnings of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy, as developed by Ladson-Billings (1995). Ladson-Billings (1995) coined the term *culturally relevant pedagogy*, a pedagogical approach that intentionally "helps students to accept and affirm their cultural identity while developing critical perspectives that challenge inequities that schools (and other institutions) perpetuate" (p. 469). In recognition that teacher ideologies and beliefs about children of

color have profound impacts on students' educational attainment, she conceptualized an academic approach that is seen as a continuum of teaching behaviors that are deemed *culturally relevant*. She shared that culturally relevant educators have three main propositions that guide their actions in the classroom: (1) conceptions of self and others, (2) social relations, and (3) conceptions of knowledge (Ladson-Billings, 1995). In her study, these concepts are elaborated. First, in conceptualization of themselves and their students, culturally relevant teachers identified the role in which they played in their students' lives. Ladson-Billings (1995) elaborates that they "believed that all students were capable of academic success" and "saw themselves as members of the community" – among other attributes (p. 478).

Second, these educators understood that the relationship between a teacher and his/her students are "equitable and reciprocal" in that learning was seen as an autonomous exchange in the classroom because both teacher and students have practical and personal knowledge that influence learning. She highlighted that culturally relevant teachers "demonstrate a connectedness with all of the students" and "encourage students to learn collaboratively and be responsible for another" (p. 480). Finally, she commented that culturally relevant educators have an understanding that knowledge is a verb in that "knowledge must be viewed critically" and "assessment must be multifaceted, incorporating multiple forms of excellence" (p. 481). Using the tenets of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy, the study examines pre-service teachers' perspectives about teaching reading at a school that Milner (2012) would categorize as urban-emergent. Teaching behaviors that are deemed *culturally relevant* as noted by Ladson-Billings (1995) will be juxtaposed in the findings and discussion.

Research questions. This study examined the perspectives of pre-service teachers on teaching in an urban classroom by answering the following research questions: (1) *What are pre-service teachers' initial perceptions about teaching literacy in an urban school?* and (2) *What conceptual understanding of culturally relevant pedagogy is gained as a result of the literacy methods course and urban school field experience?*

Perception is defined as the process of detecting a stimulus and assigning meaning based on objective reality and existing knowledge (Smith, 1975; Woolfolk, 2001). By interrogating pre-service teachers' objective reality and existent knowledge about urban schools, it is hoped that teacher education institutions can provide more explicit training and development on eliminating implicit bias and emphasize the importance of culturally relevant instruction. Second, *conceptual knowledge* is defined as gaining an understanding (implicit or explicit) of the principles that govern a domain and the interrelations between facets of knowledge in a domain (Rittle-Johnson & Alibali, 1999). In other words, the term describes the knowledge one gains as to why something happens in a certain way (Hiebert, 1986). This is critically important for the field of education in that pre-service educators must be consciously aware of the social and cultural dynamics that influence schooling and learning.

Participant Demographics and Context

This study was conducted through qualitative inquiry. Twenty-five White, female, monolingual pre-service teachers from a private, predominately White institution enrolled in two sections of an upper elementary literacy methods course participated in the study. The teacher education program has several partnerships

with local districts; however, one of the chief partnerships is with a district (shall be called Trinity ISD [pseudonym]) that enrolls primarily students of color (57% Latinx, 30.2% African-American, 10.5% White, 2.3% other races/ethnicities). Pre-service teachers are placed in field experiences each year of their undergraduate career, and some of the field experiences occur within the aforementioned school district. However, it should be noted that participants' field experiences are typically conducted in a *magnet* school (defined as a public school that offers specialized instruction or distinctive educational programs that are not offered elsewhere in order to attract a diverse student body) within Trinity ISD or in a high-achieving affluent neighboring district that spurred from White flight.

As a component of the literacy block, students are concurrently enrolled in an upper elementary literacy methods and language arts course as well as a field experience practicum – all of which total to 12 credit hours of coursework for the semester. During the semester in which this study was conducted, pre-service teachers had two field experiences – the practicum as mandated through program requirements and one that was created in the upper elementary literacy methods course. The latter experience was developed to address the issue of pre-service teachers not having field-based opportunities to teach culturally relevant instructional literacy strategies (grades 3-6) that were broached in the course since the practicum involved working in primary grades (K-2) of an elementary school in an affluent district. Due to the district's testing schedule, teacher candidates are typically placed in non-tested grades during the Spring semester. As such, the field experience was conducted in a middle school in Trinity ISD in order to provide pre-service teachers the opportunity to practice the instructional strategies

learned in the literacy methods course as well as serve as literacy enrichment for the struggling reader demographic at the middle school. It should be noted that the instructor of the course was a teacher of color and served as a cultural insider between the pre-service educators and the students they taught. In addition, the notion of situational learning is enacted whereas classes meet for six weeks of the 12-week course on the middle school campus in Trinity ISD. The researchers utilized archival data (i.e. open-ended surveys developed by the course instructor administered at varying points during the semester) for this study.

The literacy methods course focused on literacy development and practice, word analysis and decoding, reading fluency, comprehension, and assessment and instruction of developing literacy. In addition to the routinely sequenced activities of the course, a few additional measures were taken to increase diversity awareness. Multicultural children's literature book talks were held each class session to provide added exposure to prevalent topics about diversity and culturally relevant teaching lessons (such as connecting to students' lived experiences and the use of media to explore varying perspectives) were demonstrated. Added, the instructor provided testimonial narratives and invited two guest speakers to share in ways to foster a culturally inclusive classroom.

With regard to the field experience, each pre-service teacher spent six weeks at the urban middle school working with two sixth-grade struggling readers (*struggling reader* was defined as a student who had significant reading areas that needed improvement as determined by benchmark assessment provided by the district). Middle school students were purposively selected by the school's literacy specialist. Two weeks were spent assessing students' reading abilities and targeting literacy

instruction, and four weeks were used to conduct the novel study which involved culturally relevant literacy lessons. Lesson plans also required students to consider components of diversity, such as a student's previous knowledge and/or background about a topic, the explicit teaching of new vocabulary, and differentiation techniques that accommodated social, cultural, and linguistic differences among students. At the end of the four weeks, students produced and presented case reports, received feedback from the instructor, and provided copies to the classroom teacher.

Research Design

Informed by Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009), the teacher of color sought to engage in practitioner research. *Practitioner research* is defined as a means of “rethink[ing] practice...and challeng[ing] the status quo—not only in the schools and other sites of professional practice but also in the university” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p. 89). Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) argue that practitioner-researcher can forward social justice initiatives by contributing to reform, including within teacher education. As faculty of color, both authors are committed to social justice education and reform and integrate culturally relevant instruction in their teacher education courses. Therefore, as a practitioner-researcher, the first author constructed each survey in order to inform her instruction and gauge the receptiveness of the pre-service teachers enrolled in her courses to foster culturally relevant literacy instruction and focus on PK-12 urban education.

Data collection and instrumentation. In order to answer the research questions that guided the study, the researchers utilized archival data which included informal surveys, and to a lesser extent, teacher

memos from class sessions and observations in the field and pre-service teachers' final projects on the novel study. Utilizing multiple collection methods provided triangulation of the data as Fielding and Fielding (1986) assert that using different ways to check one another and examining if each instrument strengthens or weakens a single conclusion help to eliminate bias in the research (Maxwell, 2013). It should also be noted that Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was obtained in 2015 from the researchers' institution to conduct this study.

Informal surveys. The instructor collected informal surveys to inform and reflect upon instructional practices in the literacy methods classroom. Moreover, the questions asked on each survey allowed the course instructor to elicit specific feedback related to culturally relevant pedagogical practices and experiences ingrained within the course. The collection of surveys at various points of the semester also enabled the instructor to make changes to the course, as needed.

Survey 1 was administered at the beginning of the semester on the first day of class. As a pre-requisite of the course, students had previously taken an elementary literacy methods course that centered on instructional practices for primary grade learners.

Table 1
Survey 1: Beginning of semester (January) (n = 25)

Question	Prompt
1	Please tell me what you already know about teaching literacy in the elementary grades. Be sure to think about previous courses, your experiences, and other things you have learned along the way.
2	Please tell me what you hope to learn in this course.
3	Please ask 2-3 questions that will help me to better assist you in this course (e.g. (1) How can I differentiate instruction? (2) What are some key strategies for working with urban students? (3) Is it difficult working with students with learning disabilities?)

Survey 2 was administered and collected in the eighth week of the course. In the previous weeks, pre-service teachers had completed six weeks of lecture- and activity-centric class meetings pertaining to literacy

instruction and one week of the field experience where they assessed students' reading abilities and collected information via reading interest inventories.

Table 2
Survey 2: Mid-semester (March) (n = 25)

Question	Prompt
1	Tell me what you know about teaching literacy.
2	What have you learned from the course thus far?
3	What do you still hope to learn from this course?
4	How has the class helped you with preparing for diverse student populations?
5	With regard to teaching diverse student populations, what do you still want to know more about?

Survey 3 was administered and collected during the final week of class meetings. At this time, pre-service teachers had completed their field experiences and all other course assignments and were simply waiting to take the final exam.

Table 3
Survey 3: End of semester (May) (n = 25)

Question	Prompt
1	How has this course prepared you to work with elementary students?
2	What literacy concepts have you grown most fond of as a result of the course?
3	How has your perspective about teaching in urban schools changed since being enrolled in this course?
4	What new insights have you gained from this course in terms of teaching literacy to urban students?
5	Has this class influenced you in terms of preparing to teach diverse student populations? Please explain why or why not.

In total, the pre-service teachers responded to three surveys in the beginning, midpoint, and end of the semester. Each survey consisted of open-ended questions that were developed by the course instructor. The pre-service teachers completed these surveys on a voluntary basis, but it should be reflected that all students completed the surveys, therefore, providing a 100% response rate. To a lesser extent, personal communication between students and the course instructor are also included as a source of data in this study.

Data Analysis

The researchers utilized the data analysis spiral suggested by Creswell and Poth

(2018). The first step of the data analysis spiral consisted of first organizing the data. The second step entailed memoing or noting “short phrases, ideas, or key concepts that occur to the [researcher]” while reading the data in its entirety (Creswell, 2013, p. 183). Coding occurred at the third stage of data analysis. Relationships amongst categories emerge during coding as a result of “a progressive process or sorting and defining” (Glesne, 2011, p. 194) the data. The third stage of data analysis led to the emergence of themes. The researchers interpreted both the codes and themes to gain a larger sense of the data as suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Finally, a visual representation—in this case a table—was created to facilitate drawing conclusions from the collected data (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014).

To ensure qualitative reliability, the researchers worked to ensure that intercoder agreement was reached (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). Intercoder agreement was achieved as the researchers first individually coded the data and then compared their codes for uniformity (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). One component of qualitative validity concerns transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In this article, the researchers provide thick, rich description (Merriam, 1988) of the study context, participants, and research design to aid in transferability (Creswell, 2013). The second component of qualitative validity is reflexivity (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Reflexivity is addressed, in part, by clarifying researcher bias (Merriam, 1988). The researchers previously clarified their bias by acknowledging their positions as faculty of color committed to social justice and culturally relevant pedagogy within teacher education.

Findings and Discussion

This study examines the perspectives of twenty-five White pre-service teachers from a predominately White, private university regarding their initial perceptions and gained conceptual understanding of culturally relevant pedagogy while teaching reading at an urban middle school. Ladson-Billings' (1995) theory of culturally relevant pedagogy was the undergirding framework used to answer the two research questions posed. This section is organized based on the two research questions and following, emergent themes are introduced and expounded upon using salient quotes and/or supporting data.

Initial Perceptions about Teaching Literacy in an Urban School

Survey 1 was used to answer the first research question: *What are pre-service teachers' initial perceptions about teaching literacy in an urban school?* From the data, two primary themes emerged. First, pre-service teachers revealed that despite the *context* of field experience, they were still *genuinely interested in extending their learning about literacy* in order to combat reading challenges in the classroom. A great majority of participants hoped to further develop effective literacy practices and to become more efficacious in their teaching abilities. One participant shared:

I hope to learn how to help my students more with literacy and recognize different ways in which I can help them to develop and succeed. I hope to be a better teacher when it comes to literacy.

Others wanted to learn techniques specific to literacy for motivating and engaging students. A great majority of students asked questions that related to teaching literacy to diverse students, including students with

dyslexia, students identified as Gifted & Talented, English Language Learners (ELLs), upper elementary students, and struggling readers. For example, one student posed the following questions:

What are key strategies to working with ELL students and urban students? Can literacy instruction be taught both directly and as an exploration lesson?

Almost half of the participants (11 of 25) expressed a desire to learn more about differentiating instruction to meet the needs of diverse learners. A third of participants (9 of 25) asked questions related to social differences between themselves and their students. For example, one pre-service teacher asked, "How can I work better with students who see me as a 'rich, white, lady?'" Another participant wondered, "How can I make connections and better meet the needs of children with a low socioeconomic background?" From these responses, it is clear that while literacy remained to be the central focus of their interest in the course, they were also aware of social and cultural differences that could impact learning in the classroom. It should be noted that some students were deeply interested in the possibility of teaching reading within the urban school context:

What are some key strategies for working with urban students? I want to work in urban areas so this would be beneficial for me! How do you keep students engaged throughout the course of your lessons?

This response, along with a few others, demonstrates a genuine interest and intentionality in developing culturally relevant teaching practices.

Pre-service teachers seemed to be receptive to the use of culturally relevant pedagogy within the content area of reading, similar to the study conducted by McIntyre and Hulan (2013) because they saw the potential benefits it could have on their

students. All participants seemed to be cognizant about the need for differentiation and varied strategies as a foundational component to teaching reading effectively. However, at this stage of the study, participants were less aware of how school/district curricular mandates or administration could have impacted the classroom. It is fitting to mention that findings from existent literature narrate that often times, culturally relevant teaching practices that require adaptations of the curriculum are met with resistance from teacher colleagues and/or educational administrators (Parsons et al., 2016).

The second theme which emerged from the data was that *implicit bias about students in urban schools* continues to exist. A few students provided responses that are important note. One commented:

I hope to learn how to approach situations in which the students shut down and won't accept the help you are trying to give while reading. How [should I] respond when students basically ignore my presence? Yes, [this has] happened with a 1st grader - a sassy little girl I was tutoring here in [Trinity ISD].

From this response, the pre-service teacher reflects on previous field experience in the district where she was unable to connect to a young learner while tutoring. From this previous experience, the participant assumed that all students in the district will have the same attitude towards learning. Another pre-service teacher shared:

I hope to learn how to keep teaching them (without getting frustrated) if they get stuck and very often, are on a very low reading level. Also, how to keep up with multiple reading levels in the classroom, especially if they are drastic. [I want to know] how to motivate students who don't like reading.

It is evident from this response that the pre-service teacher perceived students from the

district to have low academic abilities and will be disinterested in reading. A few responses (5 of 25) exemplified negative dispositions about teaching reading in urban schooling environments. One participant commented:

How do you motivate students who don't like reading? How much time do you have to spend outside of class teaching lower readers?

Another asked:

"What are strategies to better connect with urban students who seem stand off-ish?"

These responses exemplify some negative assumptions about working in urban schools – (1) students in urban schools have a dysfunctionality to learning, and (2) urban educators must sacrifice more time outside of school in order to facilitate learning for their students. It seems that some of the pre-service teachers problematized what working in an urban school would look like, similar to the findings of Zoss et al. (2014) who found that teachers neglected to consider their own biases and limited perspectives about diverse students. Hampton et al. (2008) discuss that White teachers' preconceptions about urban students directly influence academic outcomes. The chief recommendation posed is for increased exposure to urban schooling environments to eliminate implicit bias (Hampton et al., 2008; Wadell & Ukpokodu, 2012; Signer et al., 2010). In reference to Groulx's (2001) study that revealed pre-service teachers were most comfortable and interested in working in suburban and private schools, the participants of this study seem to echo this sentiment.

From the emergent themes, it can be concluded that pre-service teachers have an interest in developing instructional practices to be effective literacy educators. However, similar to the findings from existent literature, the participants were less excited

and comfortable about entering a field experience where the context was explicitly “urban.” Responses revealed implicit bias and negative assumptions about students which also proved to be consistent with existent literature. It is also fitting to note, however, that pre-service teachers were not resistant to the experience, as earlier considered from the works of Kondo and Bracho (2019) and Ndemanu (2018).

Conceptual Understanding of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

The second research question asked: *What conceptual understanding of culturally relevant pedagogy is gained as a result of the literacy methods course and urban school field experience?* From this question, three themes emerged: (1) *increased awareness of culturally relevant teaching practices*, (2) *more preparedness of working with culturally diverse students*, and (3) *development of culturally relevant literacy instruction*.

The first theme that emerged was that of pre-service teachers having *an increased awareness of culturally relevant teaching practices*. The earliest depiction of this is present in Question 1 of survey 2 where participants are asked to share what they had learned in the course thus far. It should be noted that a great majority reported an increased knowledge in comprehension and vocabulary strategies. These types of responses were expected, to say the least. However, what was noteworthy was the developing characteristics of culturally relevant teaching behaviors. Ladson-Billings’ (1995) proposition of social relations became visible for some teachers. One participant shared how they learned “how to relate to students and teach literacy in a way that is related to students” and other commented, “I have learned a lot of strategies to use and reach multiple

students.” Another eluded to the conceptions of knowledge by mentioning how she learned about “comprehension strategies and how to adapt them to certain students and certain situations.”

This is also reflected in memos taken by the instructor noted that students had participated in 18 multicultural book talks and had learned about 14 different comprehension and vocabulary strategies. With each book talk, students were asked to create a mini-lesson for teaching one of the strategies to best meet the needs of diverse learners. Consistent in the mini-lessons, pre-service teachers provided students with opportunities to discuss their prior knowledge about a topic and made time to introduce key vocabulary by providing students with definitions and related terms to build comprehension and extend thinking while reading.

Some memos recorded during the eighth week of class also highlighted almost half of the students (10 of 25) in both sections expressed that they were more knowledgeable of diversity-related issues and multiculturalism due to the instruction they received in the elementary literacy methods course. One participant shared having increased sensitivity to about student and teacher difference in the urban classroom. Another commented that they are now more “mindful” of cultural differences that exist in the classroom. Another student shared that she learned that “ELLs need specific instruction tailored to their needs.”

Pre-service teachers’ awareness of the need to utilize culturally relevant pedagogy and instruction also grew. Initially, pre-service teachers’ responses to Survey 1 focused primarily on teaching literacy. The pre-service teachers did not convey feelings of confidence in differentiating instruction or working with urban students at all. By the second survey, pre-service teachers shared their growing awareness of the

importance of culturally relevant pedagogy and instruction. And by the final survey, the majority of study participants (23 of 25) stated that they felt more equipped to provide culturally relevant instruction and differentiation as the course drew to a close. One participant, for example, communicated that “the course prepared me to provide instruction for multicultural students.”

The study’s findings contrast those of Bennett (2012)’s study whose White, pre-service teachers had a “modest understanding of culturally responsive teaching” (p. 393) prior to their literacy-focused service-learning experience with students of color. This study’s findings parallel those from research conducted by Zoss et al. (2014) whereas pre-service teachers initially described urban students as low-achieving and from poverty-stricken areas, the language and way in which terms like “low-income” and “poor” were juxtaposed in ways that demonstrated empathy and an ethic of care when referencing students. In fact, some pre-service teachers also shared that “urban students” were the same as other students but faced greater hardships via community and family resources which may or may not have had an impact on their academics and schooling. Still, there were negative dispositions about teaching in urban schools, which regrettably, was to be expected.

This theme relates to previous research conducted by Bennett (2012). Katherine (pseudonym), a pre-service teacher who participated in Bennett’s (2012) study, commented, “I think culturally responsive teaching is about a teacher’s ability to connect on a deeper level with each student” (p. 381). Notably, the pre-service teachers who participated in this study were not resistant to the inclusion of culturally relevant pedagogy in their literacy methods course as were those who participated in Han and Leonard’s (2017) study.

A second theme, *more preparedness for working with diverse student groups*, emerged from findings reported in surveys 2 and 3, and students’ final projects. Almost half of the participants (10 of 25) shared that they felt better equipped to work with students from low socioeconomic backgrounds because of the multitude of resources provided in the course related to differentiation. One participant commented: “I have learned the importance of relating to diverse students through literature.” Another shared, “I have learned that I need to be intentional in connecting to my students’ lives.”

The field experience also helped pre-service teachers to imagine the possibility of working in urban schools someday. One participant shared, “It showed me that I do enjoy teaching reading to older grade level students and that I’m called to work in an urban school district” while another said, “It has helped me a lot to see how teaching may be different at an urban school.” Findings also revealed that participants developed a critical awareness and appreciation for cultural differences and a recognition of how such differences influence learning and the classroom environment. One participant shared: “just to be accepting of others regardless of difference” and another stated that she had become more “sensitive to multiple perspectives and backgrounds.” Perhaps most powerful, one pre-service teacher shared, “I can definitely understand my students better. Also, I am really driven to work in an urban school now.”

The notion of situational learning, as reported by Darling-Hammond et al. (2005) is important to mention here, as pre-service teachers were immersed in the urban field experience by not only working with students but also having class on the middle school campus. In this way, the researchers feel strongly that being more frequently on campus helped to reduce anxieties about

working in urban school settings, and in some cases, humanized the pre-service teachers' experience. The comments reflecting sensitivity and acceptance of differences illustrate the possible unguarding of resistant behaviors and preconceptions and instead, the development of ones that are deemed culturally relevant (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

In addition to this data, students' final projects also demonstrated an increased understanding of what it takes to work with diverse students. For example, when prompted to share what was learned from the field experience and how tools will be used in the future, a final reflection from one student is provided below:

I learned so much from this experience. I cried on the last day we left [school]. I will miss my students. I didn't realize how much I cared, until the last day when we had say goodbye. I remember you when first told us about this project, I was really scared. I had never taught in middle school and never WANTED to teach in middle school. I remember having the worst experience in middle school and the thought of going back was terrifying. Not to mention, most of the students were bigger than me. I honestly was afraid of them the first week we were there. Walking through the hallways just to get to our classroom was scary – it was so loud! But after that week, I started to see that they were just kids and I was letting things I had heard about these kids control my thoughts. I couldn't have been more wrong. These kids just want someone who's gonna care about them and love on them. They want a teacher who is going to ask them about their day. I had no idea that something as simple as reading a book with them could show that you cared. I will admit, I struggled with some of [slang] in the book, and many times, [student] laughed at me. But, they

helped me and I realized that as teachers, sometimes we don't know it all. And it's okay. I learned how incredibly smart [student] is, but in his regular classes, he doesn't talk – which can make it seem like he doesn't know. I wonder if he feels like his teachers care. I wonder if they do. I know moving forward, I will never make some of the assumptions I did about teaching in urban schools. I know that teaching at a school like [school] may be more challenging, but it seems that much more rewarding to know that you are forming that relationship with them and they know you care.

Tinkler and Tinkler's (2016) notion of cultural humility should be considered here – as this teacher, along with several others, reflected deeply on how their perspectives about students impacted instruction.

Tervalon and Murray-Garcia (1998) mention that cultural humility is praxis and that teachers must intentionally continue to reflect, advocate, and challenge power structures for their students.

Finally, the theme of teachers' *development of culturally relevant literacy instruction* emerged. Perhaps as the main goal of the course, survey 3 revealed an overwhelming majority of pre-service teachers (24 of 25) who shared that they felt better-prepared and more knowledgeable of differentiation techniques and specific strategies to foster students' comprehension and vocabulary development. One participant shared, "These students, like all students, need support, scaffolding, and texts they are naturally interested in." Another commented, "I have had more understanding of how important it is to individualize the teaching in order to meet students' needs." And another made explicit connections to Ladson-Billings' (1995) conceptions of self and others proposition by sharing: "It is important to really know students as they

will be a platform for your words holding value to them.”

More than half of the participants (19 of 25) mentioned that the course had increased their interest in teaching in urban schools, mainly as a result of the experiences the instructor shared. For example, one pre-service teacher shared, “It helped me see the different sides and perspectives of urban schools and has truly shown me that an urban school is where I need/hope to teach in the future.” Another remarked: “I feel more comfortable after this class! I don’t know why I was so nervous.” And another shared, “I would love to teach urban students, and I actually hope to stay here in [city] for a few years and do that.”

Almost all pre-service teachers (22 of 25) communicated that they felt better equipped to provide culturally relevant instruction and differentiation. One participant shared,

This course has been very beneficial to my journey of becoming a teacher. I have enjoyed learning more about urban environments and the reading strategies will most certainly help me a lot.

Almost half of the participants (12 of 25) specified the need to demonstrate more empathetic practices when teaching students from urban school sites. One pre-service teacher noted, “It has made me more understanding of students from different backgrounds and given me a new appreciation for my role as a teacher.” Finally, almost half (11 of 25) shared that the course challenged them to explore diversity practices in order to make their classrooms more multicultural.

In addition, teacher memos reflect students’ deeper understanding of culturally relevant literacy practices. It was documented that, in the other field experience where students worked with primary grade learners, pre-service teachers began to use more multicultural children’s books as an opening activity in lessons,

according to another instructor. Teacher memos also noted that within lesson plans developed by pre-service teachers for the other field experience, a section on accommodations for ELLs, gifted and talented, and struggling readers became a standardized component. This finding aligns with that of existent literature that discusses how culturally relevant literacy instruction can be achieved and beneficial (Maniates, 2017; McIntyre & Hulan, 2013; Teale et. al, 2007).

Study Limitations

The data collected initially served as a resource in structuring the course. However, through the initial survey responses, later surveys were developed to extend questions about teaching reading in urban schools and working with diverse students. The course is a literacy methods course, not a course specializing in teaching diverse student populations. However, as Goodwin (2004) mentions the power of having a teacher educator of color, the instructor of the course intentionally infused tenets of culturally relevant pedagogy into literacy instruction by also providing a related urban field experience component.

Implications

Over the course of the semester, the pre-service teachers began to recognize the potential for a cultural mismatch to arise due to cultural differences between themselves and their urban students. On Survey 1, study participants communicated a desire to learn how to work with students of color and students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. By mid-semester, study participants expressed increased awareness of the potential for cultural disparity and efforts to mitigate any related negative consequences of cultural mismatch (Survey

2). For example, one pre-service teacher expressed her cultural sensitivity increased and this was also reflected in observations of teaching and, in her final project. As the conclusion of the course, pre-service teachers elaborated on an increased understanding of how cultural differences can influence learning and the classroom environment. One pre-service teacher expressed greater recognition of her potential impact as a teacher as well as a greater understanding of students from diverse backgrounds. Our findings suggest that the pre-service teachers enrolled in this literacy methods course began to develop cultural humility and parallel findings from Tinker and Tinker's (2016) study.

This study's findings support the claim that the inclusion of culturally relevant pedagogy within teacher education is imperative. Furthermore, pre-service teachers need culturally relevant pedagogy across their teacher education courses (Daniel, 2016), not only in literacy methods courses. Pre-service teachers need a learning community in which they can voice their hesitations and/or preconceptions about teaching urban students in a safe environment. And, in some cases, colleges of education can work be intentional with recruiting teacher educators of color so that they can become cultural insiders and assist in reshaping ideologies about working in urban schools (Goodwin, 2014).

As it relates to building the cultural competence of pre-service teachers, study findings add to previous research that has called for the examination of pre-service teachers' attitudes and perceptions of working with students from marginalized communities (Gonzalez, Moll & Amanti, 2005). While there is a gamut of studies that evidence the impact and influence of exposing pre-service educators to urban school populations, there is still much to be done in consideration of how these

experiences ultimately impact the retention of teachers in urban schools, and ultimately, the learning outcomes of diverse student groups. It is hoped that this study provides an increased perspective on the use of culturally relevant and affirming pedagogies to transform teaching practices.

Conclusion

This study examined how White pre-service teachers enrolled in a literacy methods course a gained conceptual understanding of culturally relevant pedagogy through an urban middle school field experience. Consistent with existent literature, initial perceptions about teaching urban students revealed implicit bias and negative preconceptions. However, findings revealed that throughout the duration of the literacy methods course, students were able to develop culturally relevant teaching behaviors. It's also important to note that through situational learning and, possibly as a result of having a teacher educator of color throughout the duration of the course and field experience, students were more prepared to work with diverse student groups. This study exemplifies the need for teacher education programs to prepare their students for teaching in diverse settings. Findings from the study suggest that content methods courses emphasizing culturally relevant pedagogy and instruction have the potential to enhance pre-service teachers' awareness of the potentially negative effects of cultural disparity while also increasing their desire to teach in urban schools. However, it should also be noted that great care and intentionality was used for this study. In preparing White preservice candidates for an urban-context field experience, those looking to replicate the study should be active participants of Ladson-Billing's (1995) culturally relevant pedagogy and also have varied experiences

in urban school settings or sites with a concentration of culturally and linguistically diverse students.

Future research studies could survey White pre-service teacher candidates about the role (and influence) of having a teacher of color as a facilitator of an urban school field experience. Goodwin (2004) shares how having a teacher of color builds additional types of knowledge for pre-service teachers, and as a result, this study could have been impacted in the same way. However, because the data collected did not explicitly examine this topic, more work could be done in this area. In addition, there is a need to deeply examine the impact of situated learning on an urban-context field experience within a specified content area. Previous studies have mentioned that with greater exposure, pre-service teachers lessen bias and stereotype threat, and as such, this may be a means of increasing teacher retention in urban schools at the pre-service educator level.

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