

Urban Fiction and Multicultural Literature as Transformative Tools for Preparing English Teachers for Diverse Classrooms

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Discussions of urban fiction and multicultural literature hold great potential for transforming the practice of beginning English teachers in diverse school settings. In this article, the authors, both teacher educators of color, present two case studies of preparing middle- and secondary-level English educators from a diversities perspective. Given continued conversations in the field of English education on how to best prepare new teachers for working effectively with diverse student populations, the authors present situated representations of how teachers' critical encounters with literature can shape their learning to teach processes from the university classroom to their field experiences. Both case studies presented have a particular interest in the critical theoretical and pedagogical insights developed by preservice teachers through their discussions of children's and adolescent literature that deals with diverse, urban, and multicultural perspectives. In doing so, these case studies reposition urban fiction and multicultural literature as transformative tools for teacher education curriculum.

Introduction

The field of English education is ushering in a new generation of teachers who need experiences that will prepare them to acknowledge and engage multiple worldviews as they work with an increasingly diverse population of students encompassing a range of racial, cultural, linguistic, sexual, and economic identities (Blackburn, 2005; Derman-Sparks & Ramsey, 2011; Dyson, 2008; Hallman & Burdick, 2011; Kinloch, 2009). Thus, a goal of English teacher education must be to prepare preservice teachers to teach and learn in ways that respect and honor the diverse backgrounds and histories of the students they will have in their classrooms. This goal is premised on the notion that teacher education programs must move beyond advocating for sound content knowledge and delivery with teachers and toward a sus-

tained commitment of working against oppressive structures that impede the academic success of students from diverse backgrounds.

In this article, we present situated representations of a phenomenon (Dyson & Genishi, 2005)—two case studies of preparing middle- and secondary-level English educators from a diversities perspective (Genishi & Goodwin, 2008). This perspective is greatly informed by our identities as teacher educators of color who each bring to bear our experiences as members of racially, culturally, and linguistically diverse communities on our framework for teacher preparation. Given continued conversations in the field of English education on how to best prepare new teachers for working effectively with diverse student populations, we present these case studies of how teachers' critical encounters with urban and multicultural children's and adolescent literature can shape their learning to teach processes. Each study shares a particular focus on the critical theoretical and pedagogical insights developed by English teachers through their discussions of such literature.

Discussions of urban and multicultural literature hold great potential for transforming the practice of new English teachers. Many researchers have worked to understand the knowledge and language resources children and youth bring to discussions of literature (Bishop, 1997; Dutro, 2003; Enciso, 2004; Lee, 2000; Tyson, 1999). Their questions address how students and teachers rely on language to position themselves and others as readers within a classroom community. The case studies presented here extend this work, with a particular interest in the critical insights developed by preservice teachers through their discussions of children's and adolescent literature that deal with diverse, urban, and multicultural perspectives. In doing so, these case studies reposition urban and multicultural children's and adolescent literature not only as tools for preservice teachers but also as texts central to the teacher education curriculum.

In each case, we discuss how preservice teachers take up critical perspectives with urban and multicultural literature to raise "an awareness of how, why, and in whose interest a particular text might work" (Muspratt, Luke, & Freebody, 1997, p. 220) and promote multiple reading positions and practices for analyzing texts. These cases are unique because they are situated representations of teacher educators of color committed to issues of equity and social justice and who are preparing mostly white preservice teachers to successfully educate a diverse student population. Thus, our own social locations inform how we answer the question: How do we best prepare beginning English teachers to effectively teach an increasingly diverse student population given the interplay between race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and language in our school communities? Our positionalities inform

our examinations of the relationships between pedagogical processes in the teacher education classroom and cultural, historical, institutional, and political factors that shape them.

What follows, first, is a brief discussion of relevant research on preparing teachers for diverse English education classrooms. Next, we present the theoretical and conceptual frameworks that influence our individual and shared inquiries. Each study draws from critical frameworks of literacy teaching and learning processes and multicultural teacher education. Then, we present an overview of the methodological decisions made in each study followed by the presentation of one exemplar from each study that explores how teachers take up critical perspectives on diverse issues through the reading of urban and multicultural literature. We end with collective case findings and present implications for English and literacy teacher education and research.

Literature Review: Preparing Teachers for Diverse Classrooms

An immediate concern for the field of teaching and teacher education is what to do about the growing cultural and linguistic mismatch between teachers and their students (Godley, Sweetland, Wheeler, Minnici, & Carpenter, 2006; Gomez, 1996; Zumwalt & Craig, 2005). Central to current reform initiatives in teacher education and preparation is the fact that an increasingly homogeneous population of teachers is educating an increasingly heterogeneous population of students (see Zumwalt & Craig, 2005); there is an undisputed mismatch in racial, cultural, social economic status, and linguistic background between many teachers and their students in the United States (see Gomez, 1996; Sleeter, 2001a). From current research, we know that (1) the majority of incoming teachers are white, monolingual, and female; (2) today's classrooms are increasingly multilingual and multi-ethnic; and (3) teacher education programs are underprepared to address this cultural and linguistic disconnect (see Zumwalt & Craig, 2005).

The reality of this mismatch is not a new revelation; however, the effects of this mismatch on the educational outcomes of the heterogeneous student population are of grave concern. In educational research, there are numerous examples that highlight both the cultural and linguistic discontinuities between the home and schooling experiences of students and what can occur when a teacher's racial, cultural, and linguistic knowledge is in conflict with that of the home community of his or her students (Gilmore, 1991; Heath, 1983). In contrast, there are research studies that suggest that students are less likely to resist teachers when pedagogies are congruent

with the cultural and linguistic identities embraced by the members of the communities in which they belong (see Benson, 2003; Lee, 1993). This growing gap between teachers and students, and the negative consequences for racially and linguistically marginalized students, suggests that *all* preservice teachers must be trained to employ culturally responsive pedagogies that can address the needs of a linguistically and culturally diverse classroom. So, teacher education programs are faced with figuring out what must be done to best prepare preservice teachers for this reality they face. This imperative requires determining what teachers need to best serve the needs and build on the strengths of all students.

In a review of literature on multicultural teacher education, Cochran-Smith, Davis, and Fries (2003) observed that “there are local pockets of change and a number of individual teacher educators strongly committed to interrogating their own practice and preparing teachers for a diverse society. But the new multicultural teacher education paradigm envisioned by the theorists and conceptual works is not in place” (p. 964). Instead, research on multicultural teacher education suggests that many teacher education programs have added courses and fieldwork experiences that focus on teaching the diverse student—English language learners, students of color, and urban children (Cochran-Smith et al., 2003; Ladson-Billings, 2000; Zeichner & Melnick, 1996). Some educational researchers argue that grounding teacher education reform in multiculturalism, diversity, and urban education has led to only moderate advances in preparing teachers for racially and linguistically diverse classrooms since: “program rhetoric about diversity and multiculturalism is often couched in how we are alike or how White teacher educators and students can explore others as cultural exotics, the racial other, or the object of study for their academic and professional benefit” (Cross, 2005, p. 265). Further, this approach to multicultural teacher education may produce a teaching force that is unaware of how they can use their work to redistribute power and make visible and work against whiteness and racism. Cross (2005) argued that underlying these efforts in teacher education may be an unintended whiteness ideology and that “the language of [teacher education] programs includes social justice and multiculturalism and diversity while the ideology, values, and practices are assuredly reinscribing White privilege, power, and racism” (p. 266). This paradox she terms a “new racism” ideology “locks teacher education into maintaining the same ole’ oppression that objectifies, dehumanizes, and marginalizes others while ignoring whiteness, power, privilege, and racism” (p. 266).

Much of the research literature on multicultural teacher education reveals a preoccupation with addressing the attitudes and lack of knowledge of white preservice teachers (Montecinos, 2004; Sleeter, 2001b). Yet, within the large quantity of research, little actually examines the strategies that prepare effective teachers for diverse students. This research also suggests that teacher educators do their own work in maintaining the overwhelming presence of whiteness. Whiteness is rarely viewed as a racial category but is instead normalized within dominant institutions such as schools of education (Goodwin, Cheruvu, & Genishi, 2008). This normalization is significant in that preservice teachers view categories such as race, ethnicity, culture, and language as “foreign” as they are accordingly positioned as cultural tourists (Haddix, 2008; Lewis & Ketter, 2004). Adding multicultural content to the curriculum or field experiences in diverse settings may be viewed as progressive, yet these efforts often fail to uncover issues of racism, power, and whiteness. Here, we present two case studies that aim to go beyond a “not so critical” multicultural teacher education to push teachers toward a more critical approach for teaching in diverse settings.

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Reading Race in the Teacher Education Classroom

Many researchers have explored the positive outcomes on students’ interests and engagements while reading multicultural and urban texts where they see their race and cultures represented (e.g., Bishop, 2007; Brooks & McNair, 2009). In response to the need for teacher preparation that addresses the growing cultural gaps among today’s teachers and students, the reading of multicultural and urban literature has been identified as a potential tool for preparing new teachers to be more culturally responsive teachers and for developing their understandings of race and racism (e.g., Glenn, 2012; Lazar & Offenber, 2011). The use of multicultural and urban literature helps teacher educators move preservice teachers away from cultural deficit perspectives, which compare racially, culturally, linguistically, and socio-economically diverse peoples to a white, middle-class standard to illuminate the various ways in which they are deficient and toward a “paradigm [that] shifts notably away from notions of inferiority or deprivation to an emphasis on the impact of cultural differences on the lives, experiences, and identities of diverse groups in ways that are not deviant but are unique and specific” (Goodwin et al. 2008, p. 4). Reading and reflecting on multicultural and ur-

ban literature can provide opportunities for preservice teachers to examine their own social locations in relationship to those they view as culturally, racially, and linguistically different.

In her qualitative study of preservice English teachers' use of counter-narrative young adult literature in the teacher education classroom, Glenn (2012) examined the possibilities presented through the use of young adult novels that challenge preservice teachers' existing constructions of race and their assumptions about people of color. She stressed the importance of providing preservice teachers with the time and space to disrupt and interrupt the dominant discourses that marginalize the students they may have opportunities to teach. She found that several of her participants viewed the reading of what she defined as "counter-narrative multicultural texts" as a means to connect across cultures and for them to reconsider their assumptions about unfamiliar cultures. Through the reading of fictional text, preservice teachers are afforded a space to challenge their own normative worldviews and respond to racist ideologies and structures.

While this reading encouraged considerations of race, preservice teachers still require opportunities "to create and employ a framework for what it means to practice racial literacy in the classroom setting" (Glenn, 2012, p. 348). In their study of how teachers in a graduate reading program used picture books reflecting African American heritage with elementary school children in a summer reading practicum, Lazar and Offenber (2011) found that while the teacher education program had some impact on the ways teachers use multicultural literature in practice, there remains a need for teacher education programs to strengthen ways to facilitate dialogue with teachers that confront and address structural racism. Their study supports "more collaborative involvement between teachers and teacher educators to help teachers use literature in ways that are truly transformational" (p. 308). By doing so, teacher educators support teachers' active engagement with texts that can heighten understandings of whiteness and examine how race privileges some and limits others (Glenn, 2012).

Such engagements are possible through the critical reading of multicultural and urban literature because these texts fictionally represent the experiences of youth and communities of color in contemporary times (Brooks, Sekayi, Savage, Waller, & Picot, 2010; Gibson, 2010; Wissman, 2009). Our studies add to this line of research in that we examine pedagogical strategies in the teacher education classroom that encourage preservice teachers' critical encounters with multicultural and urban literature.

Bringing the “Critical” into the Teacher Education Classroom

In this article, we share two situated representations of how English teacher educators can prepare teachers to embrace diverse classrooms as they seek to promote change and embrace social justice. Together these studies support the notion that teachers’ learning processes are sociocultural, sociohistorical, and sociopolitical acts. We draw upon the work of literacy educators who propose that literacies are cultural ways of thinking, reasoning, and doing (Bloome, 1984, 2004; Gee, 1997; Street, 2004) that support how we make meaning and get work done across multiple domains (Faulkner, 2005). Both cases presented below illustrate the potential of critical pedagogy and critical literacy as frameworks to prepare teachers to work in diverse, urban, and multicultural settings.

Critical pedagogy is an orientation toward pedagogy that encompasses classroom practices and pedagogical decisions and foregrounds the premise that people are agents of change. It provides a link between critical theory and classroom practices. Through critical pedagogy, teachers transform their classrooms into spaces where students can engage in conversations around issues of literacy, diversity, and social action. Nieto (2009) described multicultural education as a journey that pushes teachers to work collaboratively on multiple levels—personal, societal, and institutional—for equitable learning conditions that support all students. With critical pedagogy and multicultural education as mirror images (Gay, 1995), teachers are empowered to create lessons that draw upon a variety of tools such as multicultural and urban children’s and young adult literature to “combat intolerance and foster a sense of inclusion and to fundamentally change education and society” (Cai & Bishop, 1994, p. 58). We propose that experientially providing a framework to help English preservice teachers unpack their assumptions about literacy and learning can increase their ability to successfully meet the needs of all students.

Critical literacy practices originated from critical pedagogy, bringing to life the many sociocultural, historical, and political meanings behind texts and contexts (Comber, 2003). Critical literacy practices can be applied to everyday classroom practices in unique ways within and across contexts and “involve people using language to exercise power, to enhance everyday life in schools and communities, and to question practices of privilege and injustice” (Comber, 2001, p. 1). Underlying critical literacy frameworks is Freire’s (1970) notion that critical literacy is about “reading the world” and seeing the world from particular frames. A central aim of critical literacy,

according to Luke (2000), is to “use texts as social tools in ways that allow for a reconstruction of these same worlds” (p. 453). Critical literacy as a framework for reading and studying urban and multicultural literature involves exploring complicated themes in the larger world. This framework draws attention to what is included in and what is left out of a text and pushes us to identify the ideological underpinnings of texts (Luke, 2000). In this way, critical literacy can challenge teachers to think about the ways that they will use literature in the English language arts classroom and to problematize and rethink the overreliance on the traditionally upheld literary canon (Haddix & Rojas, 2011). When teachers encourage critical literacy, they are providing young people with tools to critique and question the world around them as they make sense of texts, including those mediated by the school environment and by popular and media texts. In our studies, multicultural children’s literature and urban young adult literature, as we will discuss below, are exemplars of the kinds of texts that teachers can draw on to support students’ critical literacy practices because (1) both genres provide diverse representations of the world and (2) both genres are inclusive of the varied lived experiences of youth and communities of color.

Critical pedagogy and critical literacy prove useful for teacher educators to examine how the teaching of particular kinds of literature, specifically multicultural picture books and urban young adult literature, are framed inside and outside mainstream educational contexts and how such framings position them and their preservice teachers. This point leads us to an examination of the role teacher educators play in supporting preservice teacher practice and development in diverse school settings, and in particular, their critical encounters with literature, which are presented in the cases below.

Methodology

In this article, we present two case studies that look at the ways urban fiction and multicultural literature can serve as entryways for preservice teachers to problematize situations they are likely to encounter in their own classrooms, or are encountering in their preservice field placements. We both highlight case studies of pedagogical practices from larger qualitative studies conducted in two distinct university-based teacher education programs. Inherent to case studies is the premise that they are situated representations of a phenomenon and not the phenomenon itself (Dyson & Genishi, 2005). Thus while the cases presented may shed light on other contexts, they are not generalizable. Through the use of case studies, we are able to provide more depth to the situations and explore their nuances. In this article, we decided

to look across our cases so that together we could explore the question of how teacher educators can prepare beginning English teachers to effectively teach an increasingly diverse student population through university coursework and field experiences. We specifically examine what happens when teacher educators draw on critical pedagogy and critical literacy when teaching about the use of urban fiction and multicultural literature in middle-level and secondary-level English classrooms. Both cases illustrate how English teacher educators can facilitate critical dialogue about issues related to the intersections of race, ethnicity, language, and class among their preservice teachers and potentially alter perceptions that preservice teachers have about students and communities with different backgrounds, cultivating culturally competent and responsive teachers (Sealey-Ruiz, 2011).

Each case study was documented through participant observational field notes (Spradley, 1980), transcripts of audio recordings, analysis of artifacts (e.g., journals, assignments), and unstructured interviews. The data were examined for patterns and then specific events were analyzed more closely as they related to the use of multicultural and urban literature in the classroom. As the cases were constructed, educational experiences were detailed to illuminate key underlying assumptions about “the production of meaning and its dependence on context” (Dyson & Genishi, 2005, p. 4). Events within the case studies were linked to examine the phenomena more closely (Dyson & Genishi, 2005). Initial interpretations of the data were carefully documented and later confirmed through supporting actions, artifacts, and discourse. Since we individually cased the different “joints” (Dyson & Genishi, 2005, p. 19) presented in this article, the narratives below are written in first person, adding validity and vitality to our distinct experiences and perspectives.

In the first case, Marcelle looks closely at the use of urban fiction as a critical tool for preparing teachers for diverse classrooms. She examines how urban fiction can help English education preservice teachers make stronger links between the literate lives of urban adolescent youth in and outside the classroom. Urban fiction is also referred to as “street” fiction, literature embraced by many urban adolescent readers and that is defined as the genre of novels whose plots, characters, and settings focus on everyday life in contemporary urban neighborhoods (Brooks & Savage, 2009). Drawing on autoethnographic methods, she examines how the use of urban fiction texts became a bridge to move preservice teachers beyond merely seeing critical pedagogy as a teaching method and toward action. Audiotaped and narrative data were collected and analyzed from literature circle discussions and blog postings from her English teacher education course after preservice teachers

read prominent urban fiction texts, such as *Push* by Sapphire and *Coldest Winter Ever* by Sista Souljah. Using urban fiction pushed preservice teachers to interrogate the interplay between race, gender, sexuality, class, and language and to examine how this interplay affects the lives of adolescent learners. She describes how she facilitated English education preservice teachers' examination of the ways in which they positioned these issues within the secondary English education classroom via their own reading of the texts.

In the second case, Detra shares an example of how critical literature discussions became a site where language, identity, and culture shaped knowledge production (Banks, 1995) in a middle school classroom. During one school year, she worked with a preservice teacher to document and examine how Sam (pseudonym for the female preservice teacher) engaged in critical literacy practices with the middle school students during student teaching in a middle school setting. In the case presented here, Detra seeks to understand what pedagogical choices were made to create an engaging learning environment for all students. With a specific focus on student teaching, Detra worked with Sam to document her understanding and application of critical literacy in the language arts curriculum (Price-Dennis & Souto-Manning, 2011). Detra relied on participant observations, interviews, field notes, coursework selected by the participant, and transcripts from audio recordings of lessons, and classroom artifacts to attend to the local meanings that affected her classroom pedagogy. Thus, an ethnographic perspective was used to create a case study for this research (Dyson & Genishi, 2005; Stake, 1994). The data were analyzed using the principles of grounded theory and the constant comparative method, involving repeated reading of multiple data sources to identify significant themes (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Both cases explore our work with preservice teachers, in varying ways, within the teacher education classroom and with preservice teachers' practicum experiences. Marcelle was the instructor for the teacher education course on Teaching Adolescent Literature where data were collected. Although Detra was the instructor for several of her participant's courses, her case focuses on how theoretical constructs presented in multiple courses of the teacher education program were taken up during student teaching. By analyzing findings across our cases, we are able to offer implications for teacher education practice that speak to the use of urban fiction and multicultural literature, within a critical pedagogy and critical literacy framework, in university coursework and in field placements.

Given that data were collected in the teacher education classroom or student teaching placements, it is important to note that each author recognized the impact of their location of power within the work and on

the involvement of the preservice teachers in each study. The appropriate informed consent protocol was conducted and students were invited to participate in each study. Presented in each case below is more direct clarification on how we negotiated these power dynamics and focused intently on our pedagogy as teacher educators and our facilitation of preservice teachers' critical dialogue and encounters with urban and multicultural literature as moves toward transformative teacher practice within English education classrooms.

Literature Texts as Transformative Tools

When Preservice Teachers Read Urban Fiction (Marcelle)

To explore the question of how we best prepare teachers to effectively teach an increasingly diverse student population at the high school level given the interplay between race, ethnicity, gender, class, sexuality, socioeconomic status, and language in our school communities, I (Marcelle) examined the experiences of preservice teachers with reading urban fiction in a graduate course on adolescent literature. The course was a survey of literature written for, about, and by adolescents and young adults. As the instructor for this course, one of my teaching objectives was to expose beginning teachers to literature genres with increasing popularity among young adults and to have them grapple with questions about such genres' place within the secondary classroom. Toward the latter part of the course, many of the students were introduced to urban fiction for the first time, and I engaged them in a number of critical reflection activities that encouraged them to acknowledge their own preconceived assumptions about the genre, their upheld ideologies about the legitimacy of certain literatures against the non-legitimacies of others, and their feelings about whether to and how to teach various literatures within the secondary classroom. From this research inquiry, I came to learn that urban fiction was a contested genre within this preservice teacher education space, and that it was an instigator for preservice teachers' transformative ideologies and, by extension, teacher practice.

Urban fiction is a collection of novels that graphically depict the ills of inner-city life and vividly illustrate the impact of African Americans living in marginalized societies (Morris, 2007). Originally written for adults, urban fiction experienced a growth in readership among young adults in the 1990s (Meloni, 2007). Souljah's *The Coldest Winter Ever* (1999) has been credited with the resurgence of urban fiction as a popular genre from its original appearance in the 1960s and 1970s (Gibson, 2010). Themes sometimes explored in this genre include crime and violence, drugs, incarceration, sexual and

physical abuse, and teen pregnancy and parenthood. Urban fiction is also referred to as street literature, hip-hop literature (Meloni, 2007), black pulp fiction (Osborne, 2001), ghetto lit (Stovall, 2005), urban fiction (Marshall, Staples, & Gibson, 2009), gangsta lit (Venable, 2004), and street fiction (Morris et al., 2006). According to Gibson (2010), urban fiction literature is a genre generally written in first person, from the perspective of the protagonist, and the texts are often written in non-standard English with prominently featured use of slang and profanity. One of the reasons that urban fiction appeals to African American youth, according to Gibson (2010), “is the fact that many urban fiction writers are African American authors who hail from the neighborhoods featured within their texts, and they employ references to real cities and neighborhoods” (p. 567). Popular culture texts and experiences, such as those represented in urban fiction literature, are a part of how young adults make sense of and take power in their worlds (Alvermann, 2001; Bean & Moni, 2003; Moje, 2002; Tatum, 2005).

Here, I report on data collected from one academic semester of the graduate level course I taught on Teaching Adolescent Literature. Twenty graduate students were enrolled in the course—10 were secondary (5–12) literacy majors and 10 were English education majors. Of the 20 students, 17 were white females, two were white males, and one was a biracial African American/white female. At the start of the semester, I informed students of my interest in conducting research that examined how preservice teachers respond to young adult literature. As the instructor, I generally scheduled our reading of urban fiction toward the latter part of the course, after 10 weeks of convening. At the start of targeted class sessions on teaching urban fiction, I asked for the entire group’s permission to audiotape the class discussions and explained the potential for some of our class dialogue to be transcribed and used as data for the study. After the course was completed and grades were posted, I asked each student for his or her permission to use data collected during the course of the semester. The data included blog responses, written reflections, artifacts from in-class activities, and audiotaped class discussions. I assured them that any data used would have student names and other identifying information removed to ensure confidentiality. I gave students the opportunity to provide informed consent to participate in the study or to ask that data connected to them be excluded. All 20 students agreed to participate.

A prominent theme for the course was how to incorporate the use of “challenging” texts in the English classroom and issues of text selection and censorship. The inclusion of urban fiction was instantly seen as a challenging text by most students and not readily viewed as appropriate for inside

middle-level or secondary-level classrooms. When students saw the topic and selected texts on the syllabus, they responded with surprise and admitted not having exposure to the genre. A common initial response from students was in this blog response from one white female student: “I had not read any of the edgier literature such as the vampire texts, urban lit, or novels written around abuse/war.”

During the semester, students read five texts that would fall under the category of urban young adult (or adolescent) fiction: *Push* by Sapphire, *The Coldest Winter Ever* by Sister Souljah, *The Skin I’m In* by Sharon Flake, *Monster* by Walter Dean Myers, and *Locomotion* by Jacqueline Woodson. Myers’s, Flake’s, and Woodson’s texts are more likely to be used in the school context whereas *Push* and *The Coldest Winter Ever* would qualify as “street literature”—texts read by young adults beyond official academic contexts.

I select these texts because of their popularity among urban youth both in and outside school contexts but also their mainstream appeal. For example, *Push* had recently received much notoriety because of the Oscar-nominated film, *Precious*, based on the book. I made it clear to the students that I was not advocating that texts such as *Push* be included in school curriculum

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or taught in the English education classroom without clear justification for their inclusion and appropriate discussions with members of the school community. However, the primary purpose for reading such texts was to stress the importance of teachers having an understanding of the kinds of texts that their students might be reading beyond school contexts. Further, I introduced these texts to call to question the kinds of criteria that teachers and school librarians and others employ to determine what kinds of texts are deemed “appropriate” for young adult readers as well as to disrupt the “othering” of texts that are not a part of the traditional “canon.” While reasons to exclude urban fiction from school curricula are easily constructed, I ask students to contemplate what would happen if we held *all* texts to the same level of scrutiny.

Students participated in online blog discussions about their reading of the texts and completed several critical reflective activities to support their reading of the texts. I also debriefed my own participation and experiences in the class through personal written reflections and through responding to the students’ blog posts. From the onset, most of the students in the class admitted that they could not relate to the themes of urban young adult fiction. This challenged their ability to make connections with characters,

settings, and conflicts. I drew on a critical literacy framework (Luke, 2000) to view their resistance as a starting point for transformative teaching and learning practices. Their resistance toward the texts provided an opportunity for these beginning teachers to identify areas of disconnect that they might experience with their students within particular learning contexts. It also prompted me to encourage students to interrogate these disconnects and the ideologies undergirding their apprehension toward such texts, their plots, and the characters.

All data collected were analyzed for salient themes relative to how urban young adult fiction transformed teacher thinking about such texts and their significance for adolescent literacy learning in the literacy and English education classroom. The use of urban young adult fiction in the teacher education context pushed students to consider and think critically about three interrelated questions regarding urban, young adult literature, and fiction:

1. What do we mean by **urban**? What stereotypes do we have about urban life and the experiences of urban youth?
2. What is the role of **young adult literature** in the English education classroom? Does the use of non-canonical texts in the English literature classroom dilute the classical canon and jeopardize the rigor of the English education experience?
3. How realistic is this **fiction**? What is true about this story? How does this really relate to the kinds of students that I will work with in my classroom?

Two major findings emerged from my examination of our collective exploration of these three questions during the semester: (1) the novel *Push* in particular presented questions relative to the use of nonstandard forms of English language and the role of English teachers as “gatekeepers” of the English language; and (2) the treatment of mature topics was under greater scrutiny with urban fiction in comparison to other genres of young adult literature and the preservice teachers’ censorship of graphic language and content was more immediate.

Gatekeeping the English Language

One major finding that emerged from our reading of the novel *Push* was students’ discussions of teaching texts that included nonstandard, and often devalued, forms of the English language. In *Push* by Sapphire, the narrator, Precious Jones, is an obese and illiterate 16-year-old who is the victim of

both physical and sexual abuse at the hands of both of her parents. She is invisible to the father who rapes her and the mother who batters her and to both the legal and education systems that dismiss her as another casualty. It is only after Precious becomes pregnant with a second child by her father that she meets a determined and nurturing teacher who helps Precious take ownership of her life. In the text, Precious, the narrator, tells her story in her voice. The text is written in a form to illustrate her growth from illiteracy to literacy. Her language practices also represent many features of African American Vernacular Language, including consonant devoicing or dropping, use of “ain’t” for negation, and the presence or absence of the copula BE. For example, this passage illustrates Precious’s language use at the beginning of the text:

For me this nuffin’ new. There has always been something wrong wif the tesses. The tesses paint a picture of me wif no brain. The tesses paint a picture of me an’ my muver—my whole family, we more than dumb, we invisible. (Sapphire, 1996, p. 30)

In this excerpt, Precious was referring to ways that standardized tests had misrepresented her and her family and was presenting her skepticism toward taking more tests when she enrolled in an alternative GED program. In this program, and with the help of a concerned teacher, Miz Rain, Precious learned to read and write and became engaged in learning. By the end of the text, her language use demonstrated the gradual development of her reading and writing skills as in this example:

I took the TABE test again, this time it’s 7.8. Ms Rain say quantam leap! Like I was one place and instead of a step up, it’s a leap! What does that score actually mean? I read according to the test around 7th or 8th grade level now. Before on test I score 2.0 then 2.8. The 2.0 days was really low days because I could not read at all (test just give you 2.0 even if you don’t fill in nothing). (Sapphire, 1996, p. 139)

In the second excerpt, Miz Rain becomes Ms Rain and readers observe Precious’s use of more complex sentences and vocabulary choices.

A prominent reaction from some of the preservice teachers in my Adolescent Literature was shock from the language use, as one white female student blogged, “When I started reading *PUSH* by Sapphire, I was so disturbed. Yes, the language shocked me.” This was a curious reaction to me, given that we had read other texts in the course that featured nonstandard language, particularly because of authors’ desire to accurately portray the voices of their young protagonists. To further explore this issue, I asked the students, in groups, to compare their reading of *Push* to the reading of

another popular young adult fiction text, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* by Stephen Chbosky. *Perks* is the coming-of-age story of Charlie, a troubled high school teen, that deals with tough issues that many adolescents face around sex and sexuality, drugs, suicide, abortion, peer pressures, and family problems. Critics have likened *Perks* as a coming-of-age tale written in the same tradition as proclaimed classics *The Catcher in the Rye* and *A Separate Peace*. Like *Push*, the story is written in the narrator's, Charlie's, voice, as a series of letters by Charlie to an unnamed friend. A major difference, however, is that Charlie is a white adolescent male from a middle-class background. To anchor my students' comparisons of *Push* to *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, I asked them to consider negative and positive reasons for teaching both texts in their future secondary English classrooms (see Figure 1). The chart represents a summary of one small group's comparisons, a group comprised of four white female students and one white male student. This group saw the use of what was viewed as less challenging vocabulary and language practices as a positive aspect of a text like *Perks*. However, this same aspect was viewed as a negative reason for the text *Push*. A few of the preservice teachers expressed the fear that by teaching a text like *Push*, their students would be encouraged to use less formal English in the school-related tasks. There was also a large group consensus that *Push* would not "help proper literacy development." Yet, the use of a less complex language in *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* contributed to the text being viewed as accessible and approachable for adolescent readers.

In the post-group discussions of our reading of *Push*, Precious's language use was critiqued by some students, and many commented that they would not want to use this text with secondary students fearful that it would encourage, as one white male student remarked, "poor English skills." In essence, if students read *Push*, they would be encouraged to emulate Precious's "broken English" in their own writing. One white female student challenged this fear in discussion, asserting, "I went along with the normative culture of school which supports the old classics and standard Academic English, but why does it have to be?" She went on to say that in some ways, censoring certain languages and discourses in literature becomes a "my way or the highway" approach to literacy teaching. The use of this text was also an entry point for the class to have discussions about the role of literacy and English educators relative to teaching reading and writing. One white female student wrote in a blog reflection:

This was my second time reading Push. I picked it up at the bookstore years ago and read it. I think I was in high school by then. The second time around was a lot different. Especially reading it in a teaching program. I

started reading it right after my first tutoring session, and I thought about my tutee who couldn't read. I wish I had read it beforehand so I could have used some of the things the teacher did, like writing the correct spelling under what they wrote. But I'm not a literacy expert and I don't have the knowledge to teach someone to read.

This student described this urban fiction text as not merely a mentor text in terms of developing (or not developing) the mastery of mainstream American English, but the student instead focused on the character of the teacher, Miz Rain, as a mentor “teacher” text. By analyzing the role of the teacher in Precious's literacy development, this preservice teacher was able to identify potential strategies for her own practice. As I reflected on my own teacher educator practice while teaching these texts, I too recognized how the teacher character, Miz Rain, in *Push* was in many ways my co-teacher. The teacher-student relationship between Miz Rain and Precious served as an exemplar for effectively working with a non-academic reader and writer and for implementing a literacy intervention to reengage a student in academic learning in an urban school setting.

Censoring Graphic Language and Content

The small group's comparison in the chart (see Figure 1) also defined the themes of drugs, sex, and abuse as positive characteristics of *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* while these same themes were viewed under greater scrutiny and with more tentativeness for *Push*. The small-group consensus was that *Perks* “deals w/ tough topics but language and scenes are not overly graphic.” With *Push*, the same small-group consensus was that the plot was “highly graphic,” “overly explicit violence,” and “very mature content and language.” In *Perks*, characters deal with date rape, abortion, and sexual abuse, all mature topics. In dealing with these issues with *Perks*, the group wrote that while these are mature topics, as teachers, “you have to know your class” and that this is a positive aspect of teaching this text because there are several takeaway “life lessons.” These were the same ideas that I was advocating for in my objectives for introducing urban fiction—I wanted my students to (1) understand the critical need to know one's students and to understand how their personal histories influence how they construct while reading texts and (2) observe the ways many urban fiction writers present cautionary tales to their young readers. Urban fiction writers are not advocating for such graphic and/or violent experiences, but they acknowledge the reality of their existence among the lives of urban youth and offer a space to reimagine and discuss how to respond in such scenarios. Yet, the majority of the students in the class expressed disbelief and discomfort with

<p>PERKS + Students can relate to it Links to “canonical” texts Well written Not very challenging vocabulary Deals with tough topics but language and scenes are not overly graphic Has takeaway life lessons</p>	<p>PUSH + Students could relate to school struggles and personal struggles She pushes against so much modeling perseverance Models a positive progression in her literacy development Sheds light on multiple kinds of abuse Writing style helps you personally experience her life For literature circles</p>
<p>PERKS – Mature topics—you have to <i>know</i> your class Unrealistically passive main character Unrealistic plot line—too many issues (but might be a plus)</p>	<p>PUSH – Highly graphic Very mature content and language—potentially very offensive Represents poor writing conventions Directed at one demographic—could present issues with middle- or upper-class students Potentially feeds into negative stereotypes of black urban life</p>

Figure 1. *Perks/Push* Comparison Chart

the graphic content in *Push*. The majority of the students in the class came from home backgrounds starkly different from the characters in the urban fiction texts that we read. As a result, the reading of these texts served as a tool to discuss the dominant ideas and images held about urban culture and what is meant by *urban*. This was particularly significant given the current context of teacher education that perpetuates a difference framework between urban/suburban/rural contexts. Students in this context, not unlike any other teacher education context, would often refer to schools and communities in this way. For many, the selected urban young adult fiction texts served as an entry point into urban culture. However, I often questioned whether these texts served to further reify dominant stereotypes about urban life or if they were a tool for dispelling stereotypes about urban life, the experiences of urban youth, and the constructions of urban youth as literate or non-literate. In one white female student’s blog reflection post-reading and class discussion, she wrote,

I don’t think I’ve read any other text that was this graphic or explicit before, and I’m not sure how I feel about it. I think that it makes the circumstances and events all the more real to the reader, which is what a good story is supposed to do. On the other hand, there were times when I felt like it was too vulgar to continue reading but upon reflection I think that this is also good because novels that are real and genuine usually push readers to step outside of their comfort zone and think about things in a new life. For example, literacy becomes the tool that Precious uses to save her own life. I personally will never view literacy in that light, or ever experience it in the same way she does, but it illustrates the broad spectrum of life

events and forces me to think about literacy in a way I never had before I've also become more comfortable with the idea of reading literature through different lenses (sexuality, race, disability) and reflecting on which groups might be included or excluded by the texts. My training and schooling positioned me to focus on the text, and use the themes presented there to analyze, comment upon, critique and draw parallels to “real life,” rather than using the text to address socio-cultural and identity issues as a primary focus. I have considered that addressing controversial topics in class might provide useful opportunities for growth and exchange of ideas even if the discussion raised potentially troubling issues.

In her blog reflection, the student admits that she is, at this stage, not clear about how she feels about texts like *Push* that are so graphic and explicit. Even when the book became too “vulgar” for her to read on, she “pushed” through, recognizing that it is the representation of such raw lived experiences, though fictional, that have potential to shift readers’ thinking about life. In her case, the text exposed her to something new and moved her outside her comfort zone. In the latter part of her reflection, the student expressed how this text prompted her to consider whose stories and voices are “included or excluded” in the texts selected and often privileged in school curricula. By using critical lenses, she recognized the new readings that she can now embrace and, equipped with such tools, articulated an initiative to take up “controversial” and “troubling” topics in her own classroom.

This exercise brought to the surface some deep-seated attitudes and ideologies about what constitutes good English and the intersections of language use with race, class, and gender. This exercise prompted questions about how language is valued differently when the context changes, that is, a middle-class, white, male background versus a poor, urban, black, female one. In reading and engaging in critical encounters with both realistic fiction texts, these preservice teachers started problematizing larger discourses about language superiority and inferiority in meaningful, authentic, and situated ways. They started rethinking their own privileges, becoming meta-aware (Freire, 1970) of their identities, and considering the importance and implications of interrogating the intersections of language, race, gender, and class to their own pedagogies.

Locating Pedagogical Spaces of Possibility When Reading Multicultural Texts (Detra)

In the wake of restrictive mandates that have created unsupportive learning environments, many educators find themselves working to create pedagogical spaces of possibility and inclusiveness. This case documents a preservice

teacher's exploration of critical literacy practices designed to (a) disrupt the common place; (b) interrogate multiple viewpoints; (c) focus on sociopolitical issues; and (d) take action and promote social justice (Lewison, Flint, & Van Sluys, 2002). The goal of this study was to better understand how the participant, Sam, linked theory and practice to create lessons that addressed issues of equity with the students in her classroom. Sam entered her teacher preparation program with a strong stance toward inclusive education and worked to understand how the politics of literacy curriculum design would affect her work as a preservice teacher in a suburban field placement site. As a white female student who experienced segregated K–12 schools, a volunteer for adult literacy programs, and a former NGO employee, Sam's commitment to anti-oppressive multicultural education was formed before she entered the university teacher education program. Taking this information into consideration, along with my stance as a teacher educator who encourages my preservice teachers to build on their students' funds of knowledge, this case represents an expansion of ideas and strategies that one preservice teacher explored in her licensure program, and not a conversion experience. Just as I (Detra) expect my students to value their students' thinking and presentation of ideas at any given time, my documentation and analysis of Sam's practice is an example of this construct in my practice. Thus, as an educational researcher interested in how a critical framework for literacy instruction could prepare preservice teachers for diverse classroom spaces, I draw on Shannon's (1995) work that states:

Critical perspectives push the definition of literacy beyond traditional decoding or encoding of words in order to reproduce the meaning of text or society until it becomes a means for understanding one's own history and culture, to recognize connections between one's life and the social structure, to believe that change in one's life, and the lives of others and society are possible as well as desirable, and to act on this new knowledge in order to foster equal and just participation in all the decisions that affect and control our lives. (p. 85)

Sam's classroom provided a rich context for my yearlong qualitative study of how preservice teachers translated critical pedagogy into practice. I relied on ethnographic methods (participant observation, field notes, interviews, and classroom artifacts) to document Sam's teaching and construct a case study about her classroom literacy practices. I argue that by drawing on the notion of critical literacy, in her planning and teaching, Sam was able to teach students to read and write skillfully, while also working to address the many ways that texts work in society that impede just and equal participation.

Understanding the Dynamics of Context

Sam's student teaching classroom was situated in a northwestern suburb of a large Midwestern city. At the time of this study, the school district was rated Excellent with Distinction on the state report card and enrolled approximately 15,000 students. Within this district, Sam was assigned to Kennedy Sixth Grade School for her field placement experience and student teaching. The focus class for this study was comprised of 27 sixth-grade students, of which three self-identified as non-white.

During her student teaching Sam designed a language arts curriculum that invited students to read and respond to texts in a variety of modes. For example, she organized literacy events that would engage students in the politics of daily life (Lankshear & McLaren, 1995), such as working in small groups to create murals that detailed possibilities of living in a diverse community; charting questions that examined implicit political views of current social issues; and making sure there was time to reflect on how these issues impacted students at school and in their community. To anchor these conversations and explore multiple positions related to equity and diversity, she compiled multicultural text sets. Most of the selections in these text sets were picture books or chapter books that would be classified as traditional multicultural literature. However, her text sets also included other genres that she felt would extend or complicate her students' understanding of topics they were discussing in class related to their unit of inquiry. This case examines the pedagogical choices she made when reading these texts with her students.

At the beginning of her second field experience, Sam expressed interest in creating a language arts curriculum that responded to the changing demographics of her students' community. She wanted to disrupt the one-dimensional negative images of immigrants and English Language Learners that were circulating in her school building and decided that one visible approach could be through her choice of literature. She created a multicultural text set that included political cartoons, historical documents, poems, picture books, realistic fiction, newspaper and magazine articles, and cable news reports related to the topic of immigration. Drawing on previous coursework and conversations she had with her mentor teacher, teacher education faculty, and me, she designed an inquiry unit that provided layered opportunities for students to critically engage in series of literacy events designed to challenge their thinking, expand their sources of knowledge, and discuss multiple viewpoints in their learning community. Her intention was to position various perspectives side-by-side to acknowledge, disrupt, and

expand how knowledge about immigration circulated in our society. During her student teaching, I documented three literacy practices she relied on to examine these issues across the text set: dramatic inquiry, knowledge resources, and peer discussion groups. All of these practices were introduced in most of her teacher education courses, including the four where I was the instructor of record.

Developing a Unit of Inquiry

Within the first few weeks at her placement site, Sam began to discuss current events with her class and brainstorm possible topics for their inquiry project. Immigration was a reoccurring theme that many students expressed interest in and apprehension about exploring in class. As evidenced through their classroom talk about this subject, Sam's students were under the impression that the United States (which they referred to as "our country") was under siege and their safety was at risk. Reflecting on these events, Sam captured the tenor of the conversations in her reflection journal. She wrote:

As a class, the students brainstormed a very sophisticated list of possible topics on which they could write to the men and women running for office. Among these were Iraq/war, stem cell/medical research, hunger/poverty, global warming/polar bears/Antarctica. One, which particularly caught my interest, was the response, "*What's it called when . . . oh . . . people climbing over our walls? People climbing in?*" This was met with lots of "*Ooh! Yeah!*" type responses. I waited it out a while, not wanting to give them the words I knew they were looking for. Finally, Raymond (who is from Eritrea) shouts out, "*Illegals! Illegal immigration!*" I added immigration to the class list, thinking about the changing demographics . . . and wondering how these kids will respond to the changes.

Although Sam mentioned in her journal the students in her school were experiencing a shift in the make-up of their community, the majority of students had no idea that this diversity was also present in their school. During an interview at the beginning of her student teaching, we discussed how her students were responding to this shift in the classroom. As Sam and I discussed her plans and brainstormed ideas about what types of texts she could include, she mentioned how sophisticated her students' understanding of nineteenth-century immigration was in comparison with the knowledge of current-day issues. In the excerpt below we are teasing out a few of these issues before her next teaching session:

DETRA: Do they make the connection that the happy thoughts they hold of immigrants at Ellis Island don't match the thoughts they hold about recent groups?

SAM: That's where we're headed tomorrow. So tomorrow they are going to be given this article that was written in 1854 and is anti-Irish Catholic. Everywhere Irish Catholic is written I have created a blank and they are going to work together to figure who this is about and when it was written. It reads like a lot of stuff written today. I am going to tell them what it is about and when it was written—a lot of people have Irish heritage (I see insignia's on their notebooks)—then ask them what surprised them about the article.

In subsequent conversations and meetings, she explained that her students, fueled by the O'Reilly Factor, Fox News, and Channel 1 (school news network), believed that our nation and their community were under siege by illegal immigrants. In this context, her students were mostly relying on partisan sources and popular culture (sitcoms, movies, video games) to influence and inform their opinions without questioning who benefited from these positions. By repeating and rationalizing particular institutional power discourses that shaped their everyday narratives about immigration (and difference in general), the students were becoming discursively colonized (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999).

The students were always reading and responding to multicultural literature to complicate and learn from others' experiences.

Taking all of this into consideration, Sam was concerned with how these beliefs were being mediated at school and the role multicultural children's literature could have in presenting alternative stories to consider. Sam's interest was in expanding the available texts students had to read and options for responding to those texts to affirm her students' strengths as readers and critical thinkers; in addition, Sam wanted to introduce multiple sources of knowledge. To ground their conversations in a common discourse, Sam chose to read *First Crossing* edited by Donald Gallo. This book is a collection of first-person narratives that explores the impact of immigration from a youth perspective. The authors share stories that expose racism, language deficit ideology, and self-image. This book functioned as a whole-class read-aloud throughout the unit. It also served as a springboard for bringing in other complimentary texts or pieces of literature to extend the students' conversations about immigration. Sam chose this piece of literature to be central to her work with the students because it examines the complexity of immigration while honoring the voices of youth who are determined to share their experiences of starting over in a new place. The students in Sam's class created murals, worked in small groups to create tableaux based on word webs, conducted peer interviews with immigrant

students in their school, and shared key passages from texts that pushed them to reconsider their ideas about immigration and power. The students were always reading and responding to multicultural literature to complicate and learn from others' experiences.

Dramatic Inquiry

Employing a literacy practice she learned in an undergraduate drama course, Sam invited the students to create word webs in small groups based on generative themes from *First Crossing*, along with the political cartoons and editorials they were reading in class. Each group was given a large sheet of colored butcher paper, markers, and the directions to write or draw words, images, or phrases associated with the following words: *border*, *community*, *English as a second language*, *stereotype*, and *immigrant*. Next, each group was given three minutes to write or draw their responses, and then the webs were rotated to the next group. After each group was given an opportunity to respond to each chart, Sam gathered the class together in a circle and discussed their ideas. At the end each group chose one word to represent as a tableau.

By creating space for students to exchange, debate, and explain how they conceptualized each word, multiple and contradictory perspectives were made visible. Inviting students to embody their understanding further extended the discussion and interrogation of how the word circulated in various spaces and the impact each variation had on those connected with the word. This example provides a layered approach to critical literacy that disrupts taken-for-granted assumptions; introduces various points of view; blurs the stance of political neutrality and curriculum; and promotes a humanistic approach to teaching and learning. The students' knowledge on the topic became the foundation for moving to the next activity, identifying the sources they relied on to obtain this information.

While attending to issues of power, language, and schooling can be difficult for experienced critical educators, as a preservice teacher, Sam chose to intertwine issues of power, language, and schooling into meaningful dramatic inquiry-based lessons. She decided to address the sociopolitical nature of immigration and stereotypes associated with these beliefs because her students conveyed an interest in the topic.

Knowledge Resources

To help her students understand how knowledge is constructed and taken up by our society, Sam adapted a version of Banks's (1995) *Production of Knowledge* chart for each student to use as a placeholder for his or her evolving ideas about immigration. As Sam continued to guide them through their

whole-class read-aloud, and the students continued to read picture books, political cartoons, and newspaper articles to inform their discussions, Sam worked with the class to explore the five domains of knowledge that informed their perceptions of immigrants:

1. PERSONAL Cultural Knowledge (“I know someone who . . .”)
2. POPULAR Cultural Knowledge (“I saw this thing on TV . . .”)
3. MAINSTREAM Knowledge (“Well, everyone knows that . . .”)
4. SCHOOL Knowledge (“My textbook says . . .”)
5. TRANSFORMATIVE Knowledge (“Alternatives” to the mainstream)

Students worked on this activity in small groups and then shared their responses during a whole-group debriefing. There was a range of student responses to the prompts on their individual charts, as well as commonalities across the class chart (see Figure 2).

Each group of responses revealed a pattern to associate negative images or ideas with immigrants based on popular notions along with their expressed willingness to investigate alternative knowledge sources. The textbook and

Knowledge Sources Chart

Category	Response Type (from students)
Personal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Know someone who is from another country • Reports having family member from another country • Reports being born in another country
Popular	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mention “illegal” in conjunction with immigration • Refer to Fox News • Mention fence-hopping/wall-jumping or border crossing • Reference Titanic
Mainstream	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Refer to immigrants as “foreigners” • State that Mexicans come here to build houses • State that Mexicans come here to work at Chipotle • Believe immigrants come here for a better life • State people face discrimination based on skin color
School	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Immigrant means foreign • Mention Ellis Island • Connect immigration with a ship • Mention district’s International Festival
Transformative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask someone who went through it • Create your own cartoon to speak back to critics

Figure 2. Knowledge sources chart created by Sam and students to document understanding of how information about immigration circulates in their community.

unit provided by the district offered little space to disrupt or counter the dominant images or ideas about twenty-first-century immigration. Taking this into consideration, Sam understood this activity provided the first opportunity for her students to think about knowledge construction informed by various texts and experience how it was possible to discuss and debate multiple viewpoints on a subject even if they could not be reconciled. In the following statement, Sam provided insight into her teaching and reflection of what her students were learning:

By enabling students to make connections between the words or images they were reading, to the world, and to their own lived experiences, I was able to ensure that my students were not only exploring a critical curriculum based around immigration and stereotypes, but were also receiving a rigorous “language arts” education. (Sam’s Capstone Project, p. 20)

By juxtaposing the texts she selected, Sam was able to make issues of marginalization visible to her students and create new spaces for them to examine competing narratives. Her plans presented multiple sides of the issues related to immigration, diversity, and power, from many voices, including her students. Engaging in practices that centered on the students inquiries created space for them to examine how these issues are taken up in our society. The students read literature and discussed their ideas in small groups, with partners, in a whole-group setting, and during individual conferences with Sam.

Peer Discussion Groups

Sharing ideas about immigration, power, and equity were the pulse of Sam’s classroom. Talk mattered in her classroom and was used to think through ideas and responses to characters’ actions in productive ways. When Sam would read books aloud (*First Crossing* and *Seedfolks*) to the students, she would ask students to turn and talk with a partner about an event that just occurred in the story or find a passage that revealed something new about immigration or power that they had not considered before to read aloud and discuss with the group. She pushed her sixth-grade students to name what was being valued in each text.

She applied this same strategy to an expanded choice of texts while working with students to develop a way of critiquing stereotypes prevalent in the classroom and in their community. Sam wanted to find positive representations of immigrant families and experiences (with a focus on Mexican immigration) that showcased multiple context and family configurations. Introducing the class to children’s literature such as *Barrio: José’s Neighbor-*

hood (Ancona, 1998), *Mama & Papa Have a Store* (Carling, 1998), *Family Pictures/Cuadros de Familia* (Garza, 1990), and *My Diary from Here to There/Mi Diario de Aqui Hasta Alla* (Perez, 2002) served as tools for representing and problematizing stereotypes about immigrant families and English Language Learners. For example, *Barrio: Jose's Neighborhood* and *Family Pictures/Cuadros de Familia* introduce the reader to different aspects of Mexican culture, language, food, and activities in a San Francisco neighborhood (photography) and a traditional Mexican American family (illustrations). Both texts move fluidly between Spanish and English with an emphasis on cultural diversity. Sam was introduced to a few of these texts as part of the curriculum in my teacher education program for preservice middle school teachers of which Sam was part. In a couple of her courses, Sam's instructors gave book talks, shared literature resources, and presented information about authors whose work would invite students to think about social issues from a critical perspective. Sam decided to read these books with her class to make sure the students understood the role they could have in challenging dominant ideologies that were in conflict with ways of being that promoted equity and social justice. She wanted them to engage in language appropriation (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999). By creating space in the classroom for students to engage in critical work around literacy practices and juxtapose texts, Sam helped the students become creators of meaning—she helped them problematize institutional narratives, dialogue, and problem solve together. The students were active participants in constructing how texts are taken up and what actions can occur to address issues related to empowerment.

As a result of this work, Sam began to question the assumptions and practices about diversity, equity, and pedagogy that often got sidelined during staff meetings or professional development workshops. She realized that having a politicized agenda that allowed students to examine diversity, equity, power, and social change was not in opposition to good teaching. She could simultaneously attend to the state standards and interrogate stereotypes with her students; the curriculum did not have to be a mutually exclusive space reserved for ideological neutral lessons. She explains this revelation in an entry from her journal:

Having had such an awakening myself, however, I now have a moral and professional obligation to stick my neck out and have those conversations with my students, and perhaps even my colleagues . . . I find it getting less difficult already.

During the last semester of the school year I worked with Sam, a preservice teacher, to document and examine how she engaged in critical

literacy practices with the middle school students during student teaching in a suburban middle school setting. This case provides a glimpse into how one preservice teacher took up the theoretical framework presented throughout most of her teacher education courses in her work with students in the field. Sam's work in the classroom served as a testament to her commitment to principals of multicultural education in action. She crafted lessons that helped students make connections between the ways (in her own words) "religious/cultural/racial minorities are talked about today and the historical perspective of hateful speech direct against a group with which they more readily identify." By asking critical questions of her pedagogy and reflecting on her practice, Sam was able to create a bridge that joined the less academic topics of diversity, equity, and power with the district's standards-based language arts and social studies curriculum.

Together, the cases serve as situated representations of the use of urban and multicultural texts as tools within a critical literacy framework with preservice teachers for the particular purpose of better preparing largely white, middle-class, and monolingual teachers to responsibly teach an ever-diverse population of students.

Literature, inquiry, and dialogue functioned as tools that allowed Sam to craft experiences for the students that would challenge them to question inequitable beliefs, policies, and practices in their school community. As detailed in her case above, Sam had students brainstorm ideas about topics they were interested in learning about; she drew on their questions as the basis of the curriculum; and she provided space for them to shape the direction of the unit on immigration by incorporating their uncertainties and gaps in knowledge into her lesson plans. By creating space in the classroom for students to

engage in critical work around multiple texts, Sam allowed them to become more informed and vocal citizens of the school community.

Common Findings across Cases

While both cases above include case-specific findings, in this section we provide highlights of cross-case findings. As teacher educators in two different contexts, our commitment to infusing our courses with principles of social justice provided a framework for aligning our teaching experiences and work with preservice teachers in this article. Reading across the cases provides an opportunity to think about how pedagogies enacted in university spaces influence the potential work our preservice teachers take up in their field placements or student teaching sites. Together, the cases serve as situated representations of the use of urban and multicultural texts as tools within a critical literacy framework with preservice teachers for the particular

purpose of better preparing largely white, middle-class, and monolingual teachers to responsively teach an ever-diverse population of students. Within and across the studies, the selected texts represented phenomena that challenge larger discourses that construct diversity as deficit, lesser than, and undesirable.

In urban and multicultural literature, people from traditionally marginalized and minoritized communities are represented in the texts as main characters and protagonists, at times, a cultural demographic that preservice teachers may have never encountered. These texts challenge a (mono)cultural nature of knowledge and white-ification of texts (Kinloch, 2007). These texts make cultural, racial, and linguistic differences visible. In this way, literature becomes both “a window and a mirror” (Bishop, 1990). Such texts represent contexts beyond the academic contexts of school—and extend preservice teachers’ knowledges of issues shaping the lives of historically marginalized populations. Consequently, when added to the teacher education curriculum, these texts experientially disrupt choices based on the “official curriculum.”

In addition, both cases bring to light the humanizing power of literature. Literature is a tool for change, and each case demonstrates how, when teacher educators draw on critical literacy and critical pedagogy in their practice, teacher educators move beyond teaching content and strategies and toward action. By using urban fiction and multicultural children’s texts, teacher educators are pushing the next generation of teachers to confront issues they might otherwise not or that other teaching methods won’t. Across both cases, findings address how to make diverse issues real for the students that we are preparing to become teachers. Critical encounters with literature “make it real” for preservice teachers and thus help them envision a way to make these issues real with their students.

Pedagogically, findings suggest that by drawing on tenets of critical pedagogy in planning and teaching, we, teacher educators of color, were able to (1) shift and expand the definition of literacy practices; (2) introduce counternarratives to traditional power discourses that frame diversities as deficits (Glenn, 2012; Goodwin, Cheruvu, & Genishi, 2008; Valdés, 1996); and (3) explicitly address issues of discrimination, race, and power within the literacy curriculum capitalizing on the experiences that students (and their potential and real students) had inside and outside of the English education classroom. We highlight our identities as teachers of color, working in teacher education programs with predominantly white preservice teachers, because we are keenly aware of how who we are shapes the way issues of race and diversity are taken up in our classrooms. In many ways, multicultural and

urban literature functions as a meeting place for us and our students to work together across our cultural differences.

Both cases illustrate that multicultural children's books and urban fiction can be tools for teacher change, serving as catapults for critical reflection and offering possibilities for embracing multicultural teaching in the teacher education classroom. Yet, the texts do not do it all by themselves; both cases highlight the significance of having teacher educators who will select, include, and teach these texts drawing from multiple critical lenses. Thus, both studies highlight the ways in which particular critical literacy practices positioned books in the teacher education and practicum classroom and can shed light on school contexts.

Implications: Beyond Books, Transforming Teacher Learning through Literature

How do we best prepare beginning English teachers to effectively teach an increasingly diverse student population given the interplay between race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and language in our school communities? Both cases in this article provide valuable insights for teacher educators who work with preservice teachers that occupy a variety of positionalities concerning critical multicultural education. In Sam's case, we learn from a novice teacher how to navigate prescribed curricula to explore counter-narratives about race, equity, and power that are often silenced or ignored. What is unique about Sam's case is her commitment to anti-oppressive education and her willingness to engage in pedagogies she was learning about in her teacher education program. For fellow teacher educators working with students who do not bring this interest or understanding to the field, we suggest making visible a continuum of options they have to align their practice within classrooms. They can position themselves as advocates for their students and work to create lessons and opportunities in school to address issues of equity. Each semester as we work with teacher candidates, the goal is not to replicate Sam's experience, but to help our students (a) shift their thinking from a deficit perspective to a diversities perspective; (b) shift their conceptualization of the curriculum from a "how to" guide into a tool that advances student inquiry; and (c) shift their commitments to disrupting systemic inequities by naming them and creating pedagogies that disrupt them across time and space. For us, movement along this continuum of becoming a critical educator is paramount. We expect each student to bring her or his own histories and understandings that shape how they see their role as future educators to our courses, but it is our job to help them

imagine multiple ways to move their thinking along this continuum and project their stance as a future critical literacy teacher.

Bringing multicultural and urban literature texts into the English preservice teacher education classroom calls for engaged dialogue among teacher educators and the next generation of teachers that affords many possibilities for transformative teaching and learning experiences for diverse student populations. Our studies point toward the need for English teacher educators to metaconsciously (Freire, 1970) think about and critically reconsider the criteria that they use to select books for inclusion in their teacher education curriculum, especially given the task of preparing preservice teachers to do the same in their own K–12 classrooms. Is there still an overreliance on the “classical canon” or on traditional texts? How do we reconcile the demands of the curricular or Common Core State Standards with the expectations in place in schools that dictate which texts our preservice teachers will be expected to use? Reading urban fiction with preservice teachers, for example, is one way to disrupt the norming of certain literature and to turn their attention to the kinds of texts that young people are reading outside of school. This is particularly important given discourses that frame adolescents as disengaged non-readers. As teacher educators, we aim to have open conversations with our students about their assumptions and learned ideologies that allow them to locate certain texts, like urban fiction and multicultural literature, as outside the purview of critical literacy learning and teaching. We hope that our cases illustrate the power of critically engaging preservice teachers with multicultural children’s texts and urban fiction texts in preparing teachers to educate a diverse student population successfully. By framing such texts uncritically or relegating them to second tier choices moved to the back shelves or pulled from the shelves, English teacher educators (knowingly or not) reify monoculturally normed texts and continue to foster inequitable educational futures for diverse children and youth. This is dangerous, given the current climate of banning particular texts, and by extension, silencing certain ideologies and erasing the histories of marginalized and oppressed people. As English teacher educators, we are in a position to cultivate new teacher leaders who will initiate and participate in critical conversations about whose lived experiences are represented, and whose are not, in our school curricula and on our bookshelves.

Another implication of this work is that transformative education occurs when teachers understand how to design lessons that support students in their efforts to interrogate oppressive conditions in our society. Teacher education programs have a unique opportunity to influence how this work is taken up in the classroom, by modeling for and supporting their preservice

teachers' attempts at constructing lessons informed by problem-posing and humanizing pedagogies. Many preservice teachers begin their licensure programs with hopes and dreams of making a positive difference in the lives of young people. Unfortunately these hopes and dreams do not always transfer into effective pedagogies for marginalized populations. Thus, preservice teachers also need spaces within their programs to have sustained conversations about designing lessons from a critical perspective that will allow them to reflect and challenge misconceptions that could adversely impact their practice. A goal of critical multicultural education is to create opportunities for critical reflection on race, equity, and social change, and then translate those reflections into practice. These studies point to the benefits of preservice teachers having explicit models from their teacher educators of how to construct lessons that interrogate those concepts and expose the need for more studies that investigate the influence of university coursework on how novice teachers navigate critical pedagogy during student teaching and in beginning teaching positions.

As English teacher educators, we cannot afford to underestimate the power and potential of literature to transform preservice teacher education. But, this article is not just about reading and selecting literature with preservice teachers; it is about the pedagogical practices teacher educators engage to encourage preservice teachers' interrogation of issues of race, language, and power. What we witnessed in our teacher education courses on teaching literature went "beyond the book"—our goals and objectives went beyond teaching comprehension strategies and literary analysis. As English teacher educators, we employed particular pedagogical practices, grounded in critical pedagogy and critical literacy, to help move our preservice teachers to consider how their own thinking and practice stands to transform the educative experiences and outcomes for a racially and linguistically diverse student population. In real ways, teaching urban fiction and multicultural texts in teacher education courses—texts that deal with diverse lived realities—present scenarios and experiences that our preservice teachers might not otherwise encounter and provide an opportunity for us, as English teacher educators, to facilitate deeper dialogue about how to effectively work with diverse student populations and communities.

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