



Conceptualizing Culture

How Preservice Teachers in the Rural Midwest Confront Subjectivities

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Abstract

This qualitative study examined how elementary and secondary preservice teachers in the rural Midwest conceptualize “culture” and how preservice teachers’ subjectivities and conceptions of culture shape their pedagogical practices. Thirty-six preservice teachers participated in a course on effective planning designed to address topics such as special education, English language learners, race, those living in difficult circumstances, and gender representation. Results reveal that despite exposure to reflections and discussions on privilege and hegemony to confront biases and deficit perspectives, ethnocentrism persisted.

Introduction

Students in U.S. public schools represent, more than ever, a wide range of culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds due in part to immigration and

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refugee resettlement patterns (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018). As school demographics become heterogeneous, the cultural divide between teachers, schools, and students includes explicit differences (e.g., race and language; Gollnick & Chinn, 2016) and hidden school culture (e.g., school expectations; Sleeter, 2001). The challenges associated with this cultural divide provide a tremendous opportunity for teacher educators to support those entering the profession to counter deficit perspectives and thinking.

Preparing preservice teachers (PSTs) for the culturally, ethnically, and linguistically diverse work settings calls for experiences and discourse around the multiple social and cultural contexts that influence children's development and learning. In conjunction with learning effective pedagogical approaches to learning, PSTs need to uncover how they think about schooling and culture. With the increase of cultural and language diversity in rural areas of the United States due to immigration and migration, there is a need for PSTs born and raised in rural areas to develop interculturality (Anthony-Stevens & Langford, 2019). Shifting away from dominant, hegemonic discourses requires an introspective look into how epistemology and axiology influence their ability to be effective teachers in cross-cultural contexts (Rubie-Davies, Hattie, & Hamilton, 2006). The ultimate goal is to prepare PSTs to be effective educators in any and all contexts. This article examines PSTs' (elementary and secondary education majors') underlying conceptions of culture and how these influence their pedagogical development.

The central research question is "How do elementary and secondary PSTs conceptualize "culture"? This investigation is guided further by specific questions:

1. What factors influence students' construction of the term *culture* and its role in education?
2. How does this understanding inform what it means to be "culturally relevant"?
3. What changes (if any) occur as they participate in course activities designed to examine their own and others' cultural practices?

This article contributes to our understanding of the connection between structural and individual components of, and influences on, PSTs' conceptions of culture. Specifically, our purpose for investigating what PSTs share in reflections about culture is to better explain how ethnocentric tendencies contribute to certain behaviors and historically held perspectives of a particular group of PSTs in the rural Midwest, who remain understudied.

Literature Review

Effective teachers must be able to use their understanding of individual differences, diverse cultures, and communities to create an inclusive learning environment where all students can meet high standards. Still, the practice of preparing

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PSTs to understand individual differences and diverse cultures is introspective and complex. Reviewing the knowledge, skills, and dispositions required for educators to be culturally competent reveals the need for critical self-reflection of personal and systematic influences on perspectives of communities, schools, and students.

The Need for Cultural Competency

PSTs enter higher education with a mountain of experience in their own schooling, yet their experiences likely differ from today's diverse classroom environments. Teacher education programs have the opportunity and responsibility to prepare PSTs as culturally competent educators (Cochran-Smith et al., 2015; Mueller & O'Connor, 2007). Culturally competent teachers believe that all students can learn and possess the knowledge and skills to facilitate and sustain the wide range of students' cultural and linguistic experiences into the learning process (Hollie, 2019; Rubie-Davies et al., 2006). Without careful understanding of the construct of culturally competent practice, agency, and culture in a broader sense, PSTs might unconsciously rely only on their own cultural understandings to inform pedagogical decision-making and practice.

Previous attitudes and experiences with teaching and learning become crucial elements in shaping PSTs' decisions to enter the profession, the vision of their own teaching, and the approaches and practices they enact in the classroom (Whipp, 2013). Historically accumulated social and cultural experiences inform the filters through which people make sense of the world and those who inhabit it (Vygotsky, 1978). Each moment or interaction is understood in relation to one's perception of oneself (cultural identity) and others (things or beings). Ethnocentric tendencies to rate and judge things and beings against their own cultural standards and values prevail for students who do not mirror the hegemonic culture (Delpit, 1995) and language (Souto-Manning, 2013) of schools and society. For some, knowledge about "dark" or challenging (e.g., discrimination, economic status) issues are often overlooked due to discomfort around the topics (Zipin, 2009). This contributes to the act of othering and to perpetuating a cultural superiority.

Developing PSTs' mind-sets as culturally competent and relevant teachers who view all children from an asset-based perspective is of utmost importance. The funds of knowledge framework serves to counter the deficit perspective and view "historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills" (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & González, 1992, p. 133) as rich resources that all children possess. At the core of the funds of knowledge framework, individuals use ethnographic principles and personal reflection of assumptions to build *confianza* or mutual trust with others (Moll et al., 1992; Vèlez-Ibáñez & Greenberg, 1992). Educators who connect, honor, and utilize their students' funds of knowledge can improve student success in school (Barton & Tan, 2009; Karabon, 2017). Equipping educators with asset-based methods and dispositions

to equitably teach diverse or unfamiliar populations becomes an important task for teacher education programs.

More than 20 years ago, Cochran-Smith (1995) argued for teacher educators to make issues of diversity explicit in curriculum and reconsider personal assumptions through generative restructuring of programs. The reconstruction included critical theories and authentic experiences in the field (Smolcic & Katunich, 2017). PSTs may view cultural competence, a subgroup of the culturally responsive teaching construct, as abstract and overly theoretical without the context of a practicum (Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Though not a new call to action, there remains a crucial need to prepare PSTs to work with and teach students who potentially come from different cultural or linguistic backgrounds from their own.

Critical Self-Reflection

Teacher education programs seek to advance PSTs' cultural competence in a variety of ways. Scholarship in the areas of social justice and *conscientização*, or critical consciousness (Freire, 1970/2018), has suggested that while there is a need for cultural competency (i.e., knowledge, skills, and attitudes), teacher education programs must foster critical awareness of self, others, and the world to address societal issues in P–12 education. Through honest examination of one's beliefs about oneself and others, PSTs confront biases that have influenced their value systems (Villegas & Lucas, 2002) and reframe deficit assumptions to see others as valuable persons and resources (Moll et al., 1992). Critical reflection in this manner challenges people to understand the factors that contribute to certain behaviors and historically held perspectives (e.g., ethnocentrism, racism). Dyches and Boyd (2017) suggested that utilizing social justice frameworks for teacher education situates teachers to work as change agents in classrooms. They equip PSTs with the skills and knowledge required to develop sociocultural awareness that shapes their dispositions and pedagogical beliefs. Furthermore, work in race and class privilege has highlighted the importance of attention to the social dynamics that construct and constrain access to critical consciousness (Berchini, 2017). With an awareness of the "culture of power" (Delpit, 1995) at play in our society and classrooms through critical reflection, PSTs may attend to inequities to ensure students have access and power within a learning environment.

Dispositions also play an important role in fostering culturally competent and critically conscious teachers. Garmon (2004) suggested that openness and self-awareness are predictors of how likely it is that PSTs will take up critical consciousness during a program. Of the 22 White female teacher candidates Garmon interviewed, those who possessed predispositions of being committed to social justice were more likely to develop greater multicultural awareness. Programs with an aim to foster culturally responsive teachers will see the greatest gains by identifying PSTs who have prior personal experiences with diversity; however,

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teacher education courses tend to serve many who are resistant to changing their ideologies. Thus teacher educators must find ways to support and challenge all PSTs to move along their individual trajectories of developing asset perspectives and cultural competence.

Methods

Context of the Study

Bound within a required introductory course in a teacher education program, this instrumental case study (Stake, 1995) examined the experiences and perspectives of PSTs enrolled in a teacher education program in the midwestern United States. This article describes how the preparation program embedded social justice, equitable education, and cultural competence in coursework at the undergraduate level. The intentional design was to prepare the next generation of culturally responsive educators who are dedicated practitioners, reflective scholars, and responsible citizens prepared to work in any area, metropolitan, suburban, rural, or otherwise.

The educational landscape of the largest metropolitan city in the state, Riverview,¹ is as dynamic and ever changing as the city itself. According to state department of education statistics, as of 2016, the public school system served a diverse student body with over 40% of students economically disadvantaged, almost one-third of students identifying as non-White, and a growing number of students receiving high-ability and special education services. Most notably, the population of students learning English as a second language in the state's largest public school district had increased over 400% since the early 2000s. Representative of the national makeup of schools (U.S. Department of Education, 2014), the majority of PSTs enrolled in the preparation program at the university came from suburban and rural areas surrounding the metropolitan area, identified as White, and were native English speakers.

The Effective Planning Course

Three sections of the course, one elementary and two secondary, provided the context for this investigation. The six-credit-hour undergraduate course focused on effective planning designed to address topics such as special education, English language learners, race, those living in difficult circumstances, and gender representation. Course designers, including the authors, had PSTs consider how aspects of their past and current personal experiences inherently shaped the way they saw themselves, others, and the world to specifically situate culture at the forefront of PSTs' planning and practice.

The unique course structure divided the course into two phases: coursework on campus and supervised field experience. As the semester progressed, scaffolded immersion into community- and school-based experiences provided exposure to and application of theory and topics discussed on campus. All PSTs completed a

60-hour practicum experience in an urban Riverview public elementary, middle, or high school located in three distinct Riverview areas, each heavily populated by a particular minority group: (a) African American (north side); (b) Latino (south side); and (c) refugees from Burma/Myanmar, Sudan, and Somalia (central). The majority of our PSTs had limited to no experience attending schools, living in communities, or frequently visiting areas similar to their practicum placements.

As teacher educators, we drew from Freire's (1970/2018) belief that people are fundamentally "unfinished" and in a state of "becoming" critically conscious of themselves and the world around them. We acknowledged the varied ideologies and entry points of PSTs related to cultural competency and recognized that moving everyone to the same "end point" would be unreasonable. We aimed to provide a variety of experiences to engage PSTs in critical dialogue and reflective activities to better understand their individual funds of knowledge and personal trajectories and how those related to their conceptions of "culture."

Examinations of our PSTs' conceptions of culture occurred on campus, in the community, and in local urban schools. As participant observers in PSTs' learning, we were immersed in their work in each of these contexts as well as through data analysis. We identified two key data sources, reflection papers (see the appendix), in which PSTs conveyed their understandings and perceptions of culture and their personal cultural competence.

Participants

We purposefully selected three sections of the course to provide a range of degree majors in education. A researcher, who was not the instructor, visited each of the three classes to provide an overview of the research. Explanation of the consent form included that participation was voluntary and would not impact their final course grades. Of the 52 students enrolled, 36 participants² provided consent for their course assignments and discussions to be collected only after the course grades were posted. The preservice teacher participants represented a wide range of degree programs, including 6 early childhood, 11 elementary, 10 secondary, 1 K–12 music, 2 physical education, and 6 special education.

Instructors for the three course sections concurrently served as researchers of the study; one self identified as a White, middle-class female; one as a White Hispanic female; and the third as a Black male. As teacher-researchers, our ultimate goal was to better understand how our students conceptualize, connect, and apply cultural competence to their pedagogical practices. Despite our efforts to consider multiple viewpoints of culture (e.g., ethnicity, race, religious affiliation, ability, and language), as we read assignments and participated in class discussions, our lenses as former public school teachers and critical scholars informed our feedback. We too were challenged to think deeply about cultural competency and teaching for and with social justice in relation to our respective fields of early childhood, mathematics, and special education.

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Data Sources

Data were collected during a 16-week course that included a variety of experiences for participants to engage in critical dialogue and reflective activities related to cultural competence and education. Discussions and assignments occurred and centered on campus, online, in the community, and in local urban schools. The key data sources for this research were written assignments in which PSTs conveyed their understandings and perceptions of culture and their personal cultural competencies.

Cultural walk reflection paper. *Culture walks* are unique opportunities to engage PSTs in communities that correspond with their practicum school placements. Culture walks are designed “to assist PSTs in developing cultural competence through positive interactions with leaders and influential people of the communities and to dispel the misconceptions of these communities” (Schaffer, Edwards, & Edick, 2017, p. 24). Providing access to community resources has shown positive effects on teacher education programs (Zeichner, 2010). The culture walks occur once per semester prior to the 5-week practicum experience. Along with their university professors, PSTs hear from local community leaders, gather historical insights as they walk the neighborhood, and hear from adults and students about the advantages and challenges of working with youth in the area. Reflective activities and writing are done before, during, and after the culture walk experience to highlight PSTs’ conceptions of culture, responses to how their perceptions matched reality, and any “cultural moments” they experienced during the culture walk.

Cultural event impact paper. In an effort to help students better understand their own cultures and also the ideas and values of other cultures, PSTs first examine the groups to which they belong. We then ask PSTs to think outside of their “comfort zones” or personal lenses of culture to experience something new that might push their thinking or perceptions. After attending an event, PSTs first describe their chosen cultural event and positionality. Then, they analyze their observations, feelings, and thoughts while attending the event and how the event might have changed their way of thinking. Last, they reflect on how the experience might shape their personal or professional lives in the future. Cultural events self-selected by PSTs vary greatly based on their individual prior experiences.

Data Analysis

Prior to analyzing data sources collectively, each teacher-researcher collected, deidentified, and removed evaluation scores of his or her own section’s data sources. Aware of our subjectivities in the established relationships with our course students, we attempted to bracket our interpretations as we reread for potential themes within our own student responses. We used reflexive journals to continually question and interrogate our role and its impacts on data and to uncover how our subconscious subjectivities and biases framed the analysis and interpretations

of the data. Teacher-researchers held regular meetings to discuss course content and perceptions of students' understandings of culture to draft a set of codes. The preliminary codes based on literature that frames this investigation (e.g., privilege, appreciation of diversity, and hegemonic perspectives) were piloted using a sample of three data sources from another instructor's course. We met to review, revise, and adjust the codebook to alleviate gaps, duplicate codes, and add or edit existing coding protocols.

Data analysis was an ongoing, recursive process of examining, interpreting, and reinterpreting the data (Patton, 2002; Richards, 2009). NVivo qualitative data analysis software housed all data sources, the codebook, and journals and memos documenting student cases and comments of particular interest during analysis. Multiple coding cycles and queries were run to understand the relationships between themes and to figure out underlying ideas (Saldaña, 2013). The first coding cycle included attribute coding and simultaneous descriptive coding based on topics of the research (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Richards, 2009). Regular research team meetings to calibrate coding and examine emerging themes informed the second coding cycle.

Researchers used inductive analysis to gain a systematic overview of phenomena. Queries in NVivo were used to extrapolate patterns and themes. For example, to understand further the factors and influences on constructions of culture, we analyzed a matrix of data coded for social and political consciousness ("prejudgment" and "appreciation of diversity") crossed with cultural expressions ("personal funds of knowledge"). To build *credibility* and "confidence in the findings and interpretations of [the] research study" (Lincoln & Guba, 2013, p. 104), we triangulated data sources, including online discussion posts and in-class writing, which were not primarily included in this article. Data in the findings represent a rich way of arranging collective stories.

Findings

Nurturing asset-based perspectives of culture was one aim of the course. PSTs were asked to consider aspects of their past and current personal experiences that inherently shape their conception of culture and the way they see themselves, others, and the world. Faced with topics of confronting privilege, hegemony, and diversity, PSTs responded in four ways. The first group, 4 of the 36 total participants, inched toward a rare *change and transition* in their thinking about culture over the semester. In contrast, 7 PSTs remained *static and immobile* in their conceptions of culture. In between these dichotomous ends, the majority of students made incremental shifts toward cultural consciousness. We found 11 PSTs would *advance* their thinking about culture, then *retreat* to previously held beliefs, and that 14 teachers acted as *spectators and preservers* of their cultural practices and ideals.

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Change and Transition

While all transition involves change, not all change results in transition. (Freire, 1974/2013, p. 6)

PSTs successful in transforming their understandings of their own and others' cultural practices fully took up notions that all people, from all backgrounds and experiences, possess highly valued resources. This transition is neither easy nor quick. It requires deep reflection, authentic interactions with others, and genuine vulnerability to resistance. Most often, this occurred in the context of developing a teacher identity and stemmed from the affordance of diverse prior experiences and ideologies that positioned them further along the cultural consciousness trajectory.

Dana, Nikki, Sage, and Luke were PSTs who were willing and able to do this level of critical work. They reflected how interactions with individuals different from them was important for them not only as teachers but also as citizens (larger, worldly context). Most important, these PSTs identified and found value in the differences of culture. To do this, they knew they had to position themselves in situations that fostered opportunities to learn more about the world.

For many, the cultural event assignment was a chance, as Dana wrote, to “expand on my way of thinking because I stepped out of my comfort zone.” Though personally invested in this experience to transform her perspective, she experienced pushback from others who had not previously engaged in topics of cultural awareness, diversity, and privilege. “I am from a small town of about 1,100; we don't have a single stop sign and it wasn't till college that I had interaction with someone of a different race.” Dana, and other students with similar small-town living experiences, expressed how others “back home” reacted to the course topics, specifically of working in the metropolitan, public school district. Having done critical reflection work and experienced the school and students, Dana felt offended by the shock and disapproval of her family and friends. She questioned how to express her informed perspectives to those who have not had the same experiences.

In this introductory course, PSTs began to access an identity of the role of a teacher and how this identity fits for themselves. Nikki, an elementary major, aware of the power of building relationships, shared her curiosity after experiencing “cultural situations that reflect their students.” Her experience challenged her preconceived notions and aided her in seeing the strength and potential of children's lifeworlds. Sage, also elementary, was already taking strides toward cultural consciousness through direct personal and service experiences, such as working at “youth camps, teaching blind athletes to ski and snowboard, and volunteering as a mentor with the Big Brothers Big Sisters program.” Sage and others in this category identified with cultural isolation-limited access and exposure to various cultures and were open to understanding themselves and others. Sage wrote,

I'll admit to having been a little apprehension [*sic*] (yes, me, an obnoxious liberal)

prior to my first day but that was alleviated once I met the kiddos. It made me so excited to get to know them as well as get to know myself in this new role.

The willingness to learn alongside others with an asset-based perspective was key for change and transition.

While coursework initiated incorporating culturally responsive teaching into planning, PSTs' experiences during practicum propelled this transition work forward. PSTs observed elements of teacher identities as embodied by their mentor teachers and eventually in their own practice. They connected a mentor teacher's ability to have professional interactions with students and also build personal relationships and connections with them. Sage later reflected on her experience in South Riverview in relation to her childhood experiences:

Although I know very little about Latino culture, the biggest thing I took away was the sense of community. The school, its surrounding neighborhood, and the people are so connected. I truly feel like I have walked into someone's family gathering when come to South Riverview. To see parents so involved at a school, teachers and staff knowing everyone and stopping to talk, even collaboration between teachers has these familial undertones all throughout the environment. This to me says, that building relationships here is going to be (one of) my biggest tasks. It says to me that in these couple of short months, yes we are going to be working on literacy and math, but more importantly I'm going to be getting to know *them*. I write this knowing full well that it sounds cheesy and a little after school special-y, but growing up in west Riverview where the students and teachers were one [White] homogenous group, where we don't bother to get to know our neighbors or talk to really anyone, its [*sic*] entirely new territory for me.

By educating herself on the cultural underpinnings of the school, neighborhood, and people, Sage engaged in a highly important task for change and transformation (Freire, 1974/2013). Her perceptions of society included reference to her personal lifeworlds yet do not position the new cultural awareness as "other." Quite the opposite, she framed them as much more positive and perhaps "better" than what was familiar. Sage, Luke, Nikki, and Dana all possessed the desire and ability to be curious about culture and how it that informs education and curriculum.

Static and Immobility

The fear of freedom is greater still in professionals who have not yet discovered for themselves the invasive nature of their action. (Freire, 1970/2018, p. 156)

Seven participants categorized as static and immobile in their beliefs. They possessed cultural knowledge of some characteristics, history, values, beliefs, and behaviors of another ethnic or cultural group. Knowledge of culture for those in this category reflected a macro perspective and leaned toward generalizations or stereotypes. Generally informed by outside influences, these PSTs approached understanding culture as tokenistic and from an ethnocentric outlook. The element of

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contentment or familiarity had a strong undertone for many like Vera, Nolan, Trish, and Marcela. There was an acknowledgment that all peoples are cultural beings; however, evidence did not support a notable shift in their personal or professional reflections or conceptions of culture.

PSTs in this category held fixed views of students based on demographics. For example, Vera, a secondary library sciences major, described her puzzlement over the socioeconomic status of her students only after reading about it on the school's website:

A vast majority of the students at Riverview South are on free and reduced lunches—almost eighty-eight percent! This has changed my viewpoint of the students slightly. One wouldn't think that the corresponding poverty rate would be so high; most of the students dress very nicely.

The information Vera found contradicted her initial perception of the students and verified her preconceived notions of the association between free and reduced-price lunch, poverty, and appearance. However, as the field experience continued, Vera's preconceived notions dominated her view of the high school students. The students' appearances (clothing) and behaviors were different than what she (and others) experienced in schooling. In written reflections, this led to labels of students as "disengaged" and possessing a "[disdain] for the establishment of education." Other PSTs in this category made similar statements on how demographic information or initial observations of students informed their views of the students prior to meeting or interacting with them.

Less overt were references to the hegemonic social norms of schooling. "They have no excuse of not knowing my expectations." Vera's statement maintains her view of power—that the students are to be subordinate to adults. Issues of power surfaced as Vera reflected on how students utilized the high school library and media center mainly for social interactions and lying on the ground to read or sleep. This description contrasted from how she described the library space's intended use for independent work and access to technology. "It seemed like chaos was abound" was a sentiment Vera shared, and her proposed solutions included changing the environment to eliminate the amount of peer-to-peer interaction. This is counter to the dialogically rich environments and social constructivist learning that is promoted in the education program. Furthermore, students were referred to as "disruptive" and "problem kids," which may have led to Vera's choice for an interventionist solution rather than one of understanding.

Representative of many PSTs, Trish, a 20-year-old from west Riverview, spent most of her own childhood and young adult life interacting with others from her community, whom she said "look like me," and had "limited trips into the city." Her limited knowledge of diverse cultures came from the local news, peer beliefs, and overheard adult conversations of her "overprotective parents." Admittedly very nervous to go to South Riverview, Trish went with a group of peers. She wrote that

she was hopeful for this experience to be eye opening, though a negative interaction dominated her reflection:

As we walked, some men were yelling in Spanish from across the street. I did not look up, but I could feel that the yelling was directed at my group. Jamie [understood them] and tells us that they are yelling nasty things to us women. This is the first time that I have been harassed on the street, so unfortunately it will most likely stick with me.

Trish went on to say how the area where they were walking was not as others had described it and that this one particular instance was something others warned her about. She, like others in this category, wanted to grow in her knowledge of culture, but stereotypes and generalizations continued to dominate. “While I won’t forget my negative experiences, I will do my best to separate them from the children I am teaching because they are different people.”

PSTs categorized as static and immobile held deeply ingrained presumptions about people based on narratives they had constructed through personal exposure or based on anecdotal stories they heard from others. Trish captured this sentiment in her reflection:

In my life, I have had limited interaction with special education. I went to a small, private, Lutheran school. For 11 years I walked down that one hallway thinking that this is how everyone was taught and that no one was different from me. I didn’t really understand that special education existed until I went to high school, which was my first year of public education. Even then, I didn’t really understand what it meant. I thought that if you needed special education you were disabled in some way, not knowing until just a few years ago that because of the advanced classes that I was in, I too could be considered in a different kind of special education.

PSTs often positioned their experiences as a standard against which to measure society. When these “norms” were challenged, PSTs perceived the interactions as different and thus “wrong” or “deficient.” PSTs like Trish attempted to rationalize the difference, drawing connections to their own lived experiences.

Marcela, who identified as a second-generation Latina and is fluent in Spanish, completed her practicum in a third-grade, dual-language elementary classroom. Students spent half of their day learning in Spanish and the other in English. Having grown up and lived in the South Riverview community, she wrote that

the school seems very close-knit and welcoming. I felt normal. This is the community that I’ve grown up in and lived in all my life. I didn’t go to Valdes for elementary school, but I felt as if I was just revisiting my school. As I entered, I felt welcome. I didn’t feel out of place as I usually do. Everyone I saw as I walked into the school either had a smile on their face or they smiled at me, which makes me feel secure.

She saw herself as a cultural insider and initially confident of her role in the school. She heard about the dual-language program three years earlier as a senior in high

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school. She later opened up about her apprehension: “I am fluent in Spanish but there are still some things I need to practice. The Spanish they use in the classroom is more formal than what I am used to speaking at home or with friends.” At the end of the practicum experience, Marcela shared that her role as an observer in the classroom and the age of the children allowed for her to use informal Spanish. She concluded that since it was not a higher grade level, she did not have to learn a lot of new vocabulary. This static notion of expanding her linguistic knowledge demonstrates Marcela’s desire to remain comfortable in what is familiar.

Advance and Retreat

True generosity lies in striving so that these hands—whether of individual or entire peoples—need be extended less and less in supplication, so that more and more they become human hands which work and, working, transform the world. (Freire, 1970/2018, p. 45)

Eleven PSTs shared a common theme where they advanced in their awareness of cultural differences and similarities through new experiences, but quickly retreated back to their previously held viewpoints and values. In examining their retreats, comments were often ethnocentric in nature. Though a majority of PSTs attempted to be positive and careful to “say the right things,” an underlying theme of privilege and “othering” surfaced, showing deficit presumptions about the communities. Quinn, Joshua, McKenzie, Nathan, Becky, Finn, Madelyn, Brian, Jessi, Vanessa, and Erica made progress toward a more critical perspective of culture—reaching beyond their own funds of knowledge—but later retreated in their discourse and reflection. With more time and experience in culturally and linguistically diverse communities, these PSTs demonstrated a willingness to grow in their conception of and competence with culture.

Quinn, a traditional college student and White male, completed his practicum in a predominately Hispanic neighborhood middle school near where he had lived his whole life. While growing up only blocks away from his placement, he commented on “the new culture of South Riverview” and “the people who moved in,” noting that while he identified with the geographical culture of the community, he did not connect as much with the “new” ethnic and racial cultures and individuals now dominating the community. Within just a few short lines, Quinn voiced advancements in his previous opinions and perceptions of the “people who moved in” and the area as a whole after participating in the culture walk experience. However, his statement alluded to a larger perception that the neighborhood had been negatively impacted by the newcomers, who were perceived, at least by him, to be replacing the community’s former identity. Others in the advance and retreat category made similar seemingly positive statements about how experiences like the culture walk changed their views on the area and the people living there.

While their holistic perceptions after being in the neighborhood and working

with teachers and students were substantially more positive, a sense of superiority presented itself in the undertones of the advance and retreat PSTs' comments. Some students commented about their ability to make a positive impact on their classrooms and students. Quinn rationalized that "since I am who I am, I can be a positive male influence." Whereas his comments included care and investment in his students, he postured himself in the "White savior role," demonstrating his perception that his students were deficient of positive, adult role models in their lives and that his presence would liberate students of color and those less fortunate (Matias & Mackey, 2016).

Another representative case in the advance and retreat category was a non-traditional student named Joshua. Joshua brought a global perspective to his reflections and discussions often due to his experiences traveling and living outside of the United States with his Korean wife. Joshua shared an awareness that students might come to school "struggling in various ways at home such as dealing with poverty, neglect, or even the absence of a full-time role model or parent figure" and that it was his job to examine their behavior as a potential indicator of a larger problem in the students' lives.

Joshua, like other PSTs in this category, noted the delicate balance between having high expectations for students and being aware of their needs and circumstances. After further practicum experiences, students like Joshua continued to advance as culturally competent educators. Joshua shared that to combat the negative perceptions, it is important "to get more information before making sweeping judgments, especially when it comes to the whole community." His firsthand interactions with students and teachers in his school made him "forget about the numbers (statistics) and focus on the potential of the students" with whom he worked.

While Joshua had advances in his cultural competence during his coursework and practicum experiences, he also found himself retreating back to prior conceptions of culture as he described his perceptions of the community as a whole:

In a way, this close-minded way of thinking can actually reinforce negative stereotypes. If you perceive your own community as being hopeless and a crime center for the city, you might not feel compelled to make it better. If you have the means, you may choose to move and avoid being caught in a downward spiral. If you do not, you may feel compelled to take a criminal path if it is presented simply because that is the way it is in your community. As an outsider of the community, you will just see your perceptions being vindicated as the community gets worse every day.

Based on his personal experiences and affordances, Joshua simplified that those living in these areas of town lack geographical loyalty or roots and, if unhappy with the environment, could move. Second, he offered a restricted, binary outcome based on the choices of community members. His assumption that staying in the community results in becoming a criminal, but leaving could change the outcome, is another sentiment of deficit perspective for individuals and the community as a whole.

McKenzie revealed that "places that might be a little worn down and not flashy

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or brand new, can have great food, if not better, than the so called nice places.” Joshua made similar comments regarding the appearance of the neighborhood. Comments like Joshua’s and McKenzie’s were not uncommon for PSTs in this category, and they were often found embedded in statements where PSTs also identified assets of the community. The complex realization of assets simultaneously conflicted with a deficit or ill-informed prior perspective on resources, values, and potential abilities of the community and schools that often had these PSTs swaying from advancing to retreating nearly sentence by sentence.

Spectate and Preserve

Liberating education consists in acts of cognition, not transfers of information.
(Freire, 1970/2018, p. 79)

While a number of PSTs demonstrated incremental progress toward cultural competence as they advanced and retreated through course- and fieldwork, more than one-third (14 out of 36) of total participants were categorized as spectators and preservers. Open to the idea of broadening their experiences as future teachers, students like Helen, Sabrina, and Harrison commonly minimized or omitted cultural conversations as if “out of sight, out of mind.” Spectators and preservers had limited cultural and linguistic references in their reflections and discussions. Instead, these PSTs described classroom and community observations and interactions as play-by-play events with minimal contextual considerations. As a group, spectators and preservers revealed feelings of being an outsider in the community and schools and took a more voyeuristic perspective on their experiences.

Spectators and preservers frequently included comments of surprise when referencing the new environment, yet their reflections often read as if they were simply “taking it all in.” Helen, a White, upper-class female in the elementary program, embodied the category as she described feeling “like a tourist in my own city” when walking and shopping in an unfamiliar but nearby community. Helen went on to describe different “cultures” and people she was not accustomed to seeing each day, such as “hardworking people who work just to try and make ends meet, who did not speak my language, and who were happy just to be able to buy groceries to put a dinner on the table that night.” Cloaked in positive framing—hardworking and self-fulfilling—Helen’s description of strangers at a community grocery store is laden with deficit-based assumptions. She assumed shoppers were scraping by and just making do in life. Helen’s interpretation and measuring of “their language” against her own demonstrated “othering,” as it did not reflect her personal and society’s dominant culture (Delpit, 1995; Souto-Manning, 2013).

PSTs grappled with how to interpret their identities in relation to others. Sabrina, a secondary major, experienced this when she used an identity trope that was in accordance with the simplest and widely held beliefs of who a college student is:

I was on a field trip and a student asked me if I was going to buy a snack from the

counter. I replied saying no and that I was a poor college student. She then said, "You're not poor," and she was exactly right. I have never lived in poverty as many of these children had; instead, I did not have a lot of spending money. That moment made me appreciate all of the things I have had growing up, and it taught me to always be humble about my own experiences especially when I am interacting with students who have had far worse situations than my own.

Sabrina and others like her experienced moments of profound clarity in how they viewed themselves in relation to the world and the weight of their words. She internalized the interaction and reflected that her statement could be misinterpreted. As she has advanced further in her cultural competence, she has done so by "othering" or positioning students against her own life experiences.

Similarly, students in this group demonstrated confidence and investment in expanding their conceptions of culture yet remained set in their ways. When presented with opportunities to get out of their comfort zones, the tendency was to take the comfortable way out. For many, the cultural event impact paper proved to be telling based on what they selected. "I chose to visit the Art Collective as the cultural event in North Riverview. The Collective came to my mind because I actually visited it a little over a year ago for an art history class." Trish's decision to participate in something familiar indicated her knowledge of the neighborhood and her contentment.

The practicum experience also presented opportunities for PSTs to observe classroom dynamics and reflect on how they envision themselves as the teacher. Generally speaking, spectators and preservers "took this in" and made bold statements of how they would do things differently. For Harrison, a White male who grew up in a suburban neighborhood and only visited the predominantly African American neighborhood "one other time," overhearing student interactions challenged him to apply course discussions and topics to a high school space. Harrison identified these informal exchanges as culturally responsive teachable moments.

The course encourages PSTs to preemptively engage and lead critical conversations with young adults and children as well as address topics as they arise. In his description of what he would do in that situation, Harrison preserved his own perspective of the word as the "truth." Though he is not wrong, Harrison made plans to *teach* to his students rather than understanding their lens and *learning with* them. He drew on personal experiences to inform his approach to the discussion:

I had friends in high school that were fine with their friends calling them the N-word. At the same time, if that person was not friends with them used the N-word they would have attempted to fight them in the middle of school without worrying about the consequences. The only time I could see it being okay to say it is reading historic books like *Huckleberry Finn* or if you had a mature enough class to handle doing this.

Drawing on his personal funds of knowledge, he attempted to make teachable moments of high school students' social interactions. Harrison went on to reference a

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literary work he read in high school that would justify the use of the word. Though a similar topic, the contexts and people are different, and Harrison did not take this into account. He, like others in this group, spectated cultural interactions by identifying them while preserving what is familiar.

Discussion

Our findings suggest that given opportunities to critically reflect about culture and its role on education, our PSTs shared a variety of perspectives on cultural competence development. Although PSTs' cultural progressions varied based on individual factors (e.g., practicum placement, cultural event selection, prior dispositions and experiences), certain constructs, such as ethnocentrism, emerged among almost all of the PSTs. Ethnocentrism surfaced in their reflections and discussions through positioning or "othering" the unfamiliar or different than what they held as a truth (Delpit, 1995; Souto-Manning, 2013). When asked directly, most PSTs associated or conflated the notion of culture with ethnicity, race, religious affiliation, ability, and language and often hesitated to see themselves as possessing culture. There were those, however, who concluded that culture is fluid, ever changing, and growing.

As the course progressed, PSTs expressed deeply ingrained conceptions of culture after attending countercultural events and critically reflecting on their perceptions and feelings (Sleeter, 2001). Vera, who was categorized as someone who was static and immobile, wrote honestly about her interpretation of the high school students' behavior in the library. This left us questioning how the "controlled chaos" would be accepted, or not, in a different context. How is individualized learning perceived in different contexts? To what extent did the students' demographics inform her reaction? Though a few PSTs in this study made shifts in their conceptions of culture, a significant portion continued to measure what they learned about others against their own or hegemonic perspectives.

More than half of the participants stated inconsistent views and perceptions related to culture and the communities in which they worked. When prompted to discuss cultural implications in particular, many participants placed themselves on the outside looking in. Spectators and preservers like Helen reflected about a variety of topics and observations, including parent involvement, religious celebrations, and other classroom structures. Accounts revealed the unraveling of PSTs' previous unilateral views of the world. Spectators and preservers differed from advancers and retreaters in this area in particular. Advancers and retreaters immersed themselves initially into the discomfort of countercultural perspectives unfamiliar to them, whereas spectators and preservers unconsciously eluded moments due to a cultural imbalance. Early immersion in school settings gave PSTs authentic experiences to broaden their perspectives on the similarities and differences of their own and the students' experiences in and out of school (Moll et al., 1992; Rubie-Davies et al., 2006). The identification of the similarities proved to be surprising and unexpected

for students like Joshua, who advanced and retreated throughout his practicum experience.

PSTs in this study struggled to recognize the existing systemic inequities linked to disparities in achievement. By focusing on the individual structures and observed experiences, PSTs can victimize the learner and avoid acknowledging the influence of race, class, gender, and language on a particular student or environment (Gay & Kirkland, 2003; Gomez Johnson, Karabon, & Nero, 2018). For the four PSTs who took steps to change and transform their conceptions of culture, this structural or systemic awareness was already present. This supports Garmon's (2004) previous findings that those who possess predispositions of being committed to social justice are more likely to develop greater multicultural awareness.

The majority of the PSTs (spectators/preservers and advancers/retreaters) who displayed some aspects of cultural competence have potential to move toward cultural consciousness with more exposure and reflection (Rubie-Davies et al., 2006). Support from faculty who teach social justice and antiracism theory, immersion into multiple schools, and social interactions in school communities aid in the development of critical consciousness over the course of a program, not just in individual classes.

Reframing experience with an approach that positions all people and communities as rich with resources (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005) offers a different and more influential view of communities. Overall, PSTs need more opportunities to “challenge, confront, and disrupt misconceptions, untruths, and stereotypes that lead to structural inequality and discrimination based on race, social class, gender, and other social and human differences” (Nieto, 2010, p. 46). Rethinking the design of educational opportunities to be based on children's funds of knowledge shifts learning experiences away from the traditional “banking model” to being culturally responsive for all learners. Educators must move beyond thinking “about” culture (Vass, 2017) and toward considering the hidden curriculum present in the hegemonic practices of schooling. Teachers need to be responsive to and draw on the rich cultural resources all students possess.

Implications for Future Practice and Research

Teacher education programs of today pursue avenues to address discrepancies between the racial and cultural backgrounds of students and their teachers, including recruiting people of color (Achinstein, Ogawa, Sexton, & Freitas, 2010) and those who speak more than one language. Beyond general teaching methods (e.g., concepts, pedagogy, content knowledge), teacher education coursework should build on and connect learning experiences with people's everyday knowledge and practices. This equips PSTs for participation in public life toward a more just and democratic society through the development of critical understanding about their personal lives (Freire, 1974/2013; Giroux, 1988).

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The responsibility is not solely resting on the shoulders of PSTs. Teacher educators must participate in the work too. Just as we ask PSTs to consider children's cultural resources and experiences to inform their instructional plans, we, too, must model culturally responsive pedagogy. Teacher educators can do this by designing learning environments that promote critical thinking and support agency for social change. We can also consider our PSTs' funds of knowledge when developing course assessments and learning opportunities (Kiyama & Rios-Aguilar, 2017).

Another key consideration of teacher education programs interested in developing socially just educators is to select and recruit potential candidates who possess critical ideologies to serve the racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse community of learners in the United States. Knowing where PSTs situate themselves on a continuum of cultural awareness and competency is key in supporting their individual growth. Though change and transition are the ultimate goals of a social justice-informed teacher education program, they are not the end goals for all learners. Additionally, allowing people to be comfortable with fixed notions of culture and refusing to move the needle forward render people static. It is the responsibility of teacher educators to work with and challenge the diverse group of PSTs who enter their programs. This stance requires being explicitly clear that cultural competence and social justice are essential for a career in education.

To bring awareness of social justice to bear, teacher education programs need to equip PSTs to examine issues of wider society to develop *conscientização* or critical consciousness (Freire, 1970/2018). Yet transformation cannot happen without action. PSTs need experiences applying critical reflection within and about the contexts of schooling and communities in which they will likely teach to unravel underlying conceptions of culture.

Notes

¹ All names, including the name of the city, have been changed to protect the identities of teachers, staff, children, and families in this study.

² Not every PST included demographic information (positionality) in assignments. Since the analysis occurred after the course was completed, rather than make assumptions of demographics, we only make reference to these identifiers if they were explicitly stated in the data.

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Appendix

Culturally Responsive Action Plan

You will write four short papers based on your practicum, each worth 25 points. Papers must be *single spaced*, 12-point Times font, with each section labeled. Students will make connections in their paper to InTASC standards and course content. All papers will use APA style. Length should be approximately 2–3 pages.

1. Reflection Paper #1 Cultural Event Paper (address all three parts explicitly) ***InTASC Standards: 2.2***

DESCRIPTION: Specifically describe the event or community resource you experienced in the community you visited. What did you notice? What behavior and socialization did you observe? What was your positionality?

ANALYSIS: Analyze the cultural event or community resource by thinking about how the experience challenged your thinking in general and how you define/make sense of culture. How did attending this space or event change/expand your thinking in any way?

IMPLICATIONS: How and why might this experience shape your teaching practice and you personally? How might you draw on this experience to make connections with students and influence curriculum decisions?

Reflection Paper #2 Site Description (address all three parts explicitly) ***InTASC Standards: 2.2, 9.3***

DESCRIPTION: In one page, describe your school (community, grade level(s), student population, etc.). You are required to log on to the websites of the building and the Nebraska Department of Education (Search “NDE state of schools report”), review the websites, and integrate facts in the description. You can also see basic school demographics in the Field Experience portion of LiveText.

ANALYSIS: Analyze your site (~1 page). Integrate the following into this section: (a) as you drove up to the site, how did you feel? (b) As you entered the building, how did you feel? (c) How will you use the information from the Culture Walk during your practicum?

IMPLICATIONS: Following your orientation and the Culture Walk, how are you feeling about your site? What do you hope to learn?

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Reflection Paper #3 Meeting the needs of ALL students (address all three parts explicitly) ***InTASC Standards: 2.2, 3.3, 4.3***

DESCRIPTION:

General Classroom Description (i.e., setting and number of students)

- ◆ What is your placement (e.g., general education, special education, other)?
- ◆ What types of professionals are in the classroom when you are there?
- ◆ How many students do you see while you are in the classroom?

General Routines and Procedures of the Classroom

- ◆ Describe the procedures of the classroom while you are there (e.g., what content is covered, what type of classroom management procedures do you see, what do transitions look like? How are transitions managed?)
- ◆ Use specific days, dates, and times when observing this information.

Instructional Techniques (teacher-centered, student-centered, technology used)

- ◆ What kinds of instructional techniques do you see while you are in your classroom (e.g., small group, whole class, direct instruction, group activities)?
- ◆ Identify what types of instructional techniques were used for different content areas, if appropriate.
- ◆ Use specific days, dates, and times when observing this information.

Learning Needs Identified in the Classroom

- ◆ What learning needs do you observe in the classroom while you are there (e.g., ELL/emergent bilinguals, different learning styles/preferences)?

IEPs and 504 Plans (number of students)

- ◆ Disability and accommodations that should be provided.
Note: your teacher does not have to provide you with the IEP.

ANALYSIS: Analyze some of the different ways that you can be or have already been involved in the daily instruction of your classroom. Try to name at least 3. How do you view your role? How do the students view your role?

IMPLICATIONS: What impact can you make on this classroom? How can you grow as a student and teacher through your engagement in instruction in this classroom?

Reflection Paper #4 Mini Case Study and Reflection (address all three parts explicitly) ***InTASC Standards: 1.2 & 2.2***

DESCRIPTION: Spend 1 week observing and documenting a particular student's behavior (of interest) who stands out in the classroom for their effect on classroom dynamics. What are the interactions like between the student and adult(s) in the classroom? *Submit your classroom documentation notes for this section.*

ANALYSIS: Analyze the procedures/routines/management in general for this classroom by explaining how they are (or are not) conducive to learning. How do the behaviors of this student impact their learning? How do the behaviors of this classroom impact the environment?

IMPLICATIONS: What modifications would you implement to improve this student's behavior? How do you believe this would impact the entire classroom dynamic? Overall, what have you learned about procedures/routines and classroom management?