Exploring Intergroup Dialogue as a Sociocritical Pedagogy in Preservice Early Childhood Education

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Abstract

This study examined the impact of intergroup dialogue on a cohort of preservice early childhood educators. Specific attention was paid to the ways in which participation in intergroup dialogue shaped participants' sense of identity, the ways in which they "saw" multiple and intersecting identities in schools and classrooms, and how participants envisioned dialogue impacting their future early childhood classrooms. Data collection methods included qualitative analysis of written reflections from participants during and after intergroup dialogue as well as interviews with participants 6 months after participating in intergroup dialogue. Results suggest that intergroup dialogue contributed to participants' sense of self as related to their praxis by expanding their sense of identity to be more inclusive and aware of dimensions of power and privilege. Additionally, participants came to see issues of identity with young learners in more complex ways. Furthermore, participants experienced a sense of empowerment around navigating and engaging

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this complexity with their students. This study demonstrates that intergroup dialogue offers participants a space within a teacher education program for sociocritical reflection and identity expansion. Implications for teacher education are discussed.

Introduction

Whereas research has demonstrated both short- and long-term benefits of high-quality early childhood education (Ansari et al., 2019; Bakken, Brown, & Downing, 2017; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000), less is known about preparing effective early childhood educators, especially in the areas of diversity and identity. This study examined how one approach to engaging diversity, *intergroup dialogue*, shaped a cohort of preservice early childhood educators. Specifically, this study asked the following research questions:

RQ1: How does intergroup dialogue with preservice early childhood educators shape participants' sense of identity as related to their praxis?

RQ2: How does intergroup dialogue influence how participants "see" multiple and intersecting identities in schools and classrooms?

RQ3: How do early preservice childhood educators envision intergroup dialogue contributing to their future professional lives?

While it has been established that developing culturally responsive dispositions and practices in early childhood educators is important (Boutte, 2018; Chu, 2014; Kidd, Sánchez, & Thorp, 2008), this project extends previous work by exploring the possible impact of intergroup dialogue as a specific pedagogy to achieve such goals.

Literature Review

Considering the significance of race and culture in classrooms and society, I engage sociocritical theories as explanatory frameworks for understanding identities in context (Gutiérrez, 2008; Gutiérrez & Rogoff, 2003). Sociocritical approaches contextualize the meaning of socially constructed categories, such as race, by attending to both variance and regularity within groups in social and cultural contexts (Gutiérrez & Rogoff, 2003). They acknowledge the role of structural "-isms" and explore how individuals make meaning of varied access to power and privilege. They also discourage binary and deficit thinking and encourage viewing individuals as members of social and historical communities that "live culturally" (Gutiérrez, 2000), thus bringing a situated and dynamic perspective to conversations about teacher and student demographics.

Identity and Reflection in Teacher Education

Persisting segregation in the United States suggests teachers may have had few opportunities to engage across difference and, consequently, may enter the classroom

with problematic, stereotypical views of students and colleagues who are different from them (Causey, Thomas, & Armento, 2000). Accordingly, teacher education programs encourage critical reflection to help future teachers de-bias themselves (Howard, 2003; Lynn & Smith-Maddox, 2007; Šaric & Šteh, 2017). The practice of self-reflection is imperative to helping preservice teachers understand themselves in a sociocritical context—a prerequisite for understanding the experiences of students who are different from selves (Gay & Howard, 2000; Howard, 2003; Sleeter & Owuor, 2011); however, the specifics of *how* to best engage and support developing teachers in this work warrant more exploration. Intergroup dialogue, an approach used in higher education, may provide some insight.

Intergroup Dialogue as a Sociocritical Pedagogy

Intergroup dialogue is a structured and purposeful practice for engagement across difference. Results from research in higher education on intergroup dialogue suggest that participation in intergroup dialogue leads to identity engagement, development, and reflection (Gurin, Nagda, & Lopez, 2004; Rodríguez, Nagda, Sorensen, & Gurin, 2018; Schoem & Hurtado, 2001). Centering participants' experiences within their respective identity groups (e.g., racial identity) is an integral part of the process. Focusing on group membership allows for exploring the ways that social and historical relations of power (e.g., racism) play out in the daily lives of individuals, while attending to both regularity and variance.

Nagda, Kim, and Truelove (2004) assessed intergroup learning as facilitated by both enlightenment (lectures, readings) and encounter (hearing and learning from people from other social identity groups) in a cohort of undergraduates. Results from pre- and posttest surveys indicate that

> the course as a whole, focusing on learning about difference using varied learning modalities, had an overall significant impact on increasing students' motivation for intergroup learning, their assessment of the importance of prejudice reduction and promoting diversity, and their confidence in doing so. (p. 208)

These results were consistent for both students of color and White students.

In addition to pedagogical processes, communication processes in intergroup dialogues are important. Nagda (2006) identified four main communication processes that occur in intergroup dialogue: alliance building, self-engagement, critical self-reflection, and appreciating difference. Nagda found that appreciation of difference facilitated self-engagement, which in turn facilitated critical self-reflection and alliance building. Lastly, the communication processes of self-engagement and alliance building contributed to the psychological processes of bridging differences. According to Nagda,

> when critical self-reflection happens in the context of dialogue, it can spur greater insight into both the social structural forces of inequality as well as the individual impact on participants in the dialogue and the dialogic engagement itself. Thus,

> critical self-reflection sets intergroup dialogues apart from solely anti-bias, preju-
> dice reduction, and other efforts directed toward intergroup harmony. (p. 568)

Given the transformative potential of intergroup dialogue, as well as empirical support that it moves college age participants engage in social justice advocacy work (Ford & Lipkin, 2019; Hopkins & Domingue, 2015) it is worth exploring the impact of such a program on teachers.

Engaging intergroup dialogue in teacher education may prepare preservice teachers by offering a structured space for critical reflection about dimensions of identity, power, and privilege. Research on the effects of intergroup dialogue has suggested that participants develop the ability to perspective take and feel more comfortable communicating across and building bridges across difference (Nagda & Zúñiga, 2003)—all skills that are important for teachers working with diverse populations. While this type of engagement has historically been missing from the preparation of early childhood educators, this study aimed to deepen the understanding of the dynamic and complex ways that we prepare early childhood educators for work with culturally and linguistically diverse children.

Methods

Data collection occurred over the course of an academic year. Participants were selected from an incoming 2013–2014 18-month urban residency early childhood education and elementary multiple-subject cohort at a large, public Pacific Rim university with a teacher preparation program committed to preparing teachers to teach in underserved communities of color. In addition to receiving their preliminary multiple-subject credential and child development permit, participants were working toward their MEd. The cohort comprised nine preservice teachers (all of whom identified as women, two as White, two as multiracial, two as Asian American, and three as Latina), and all nine participated in this study.

Two types of qualitative methods were used to evaluate the impact participation in intergroup dialogue had on early childhood preservice educators: document analysis and interviews. It is important to note that the actual dialogue was not recorded—data came from participant reflections on the dialogue. Data collection began with an intergroup dialogue experience that was offered as part of a required Exploring Identities course in which all participants enrolled. The course followed the classic four-stage intergroup dialogue model as described by Zúñiga, Nagda, Chesler, and Cytron-Walker (2007). Stage 1 focused on forming and building relationships among participants, Stage 2 involved exploring identity and differences and commonalities of experiences, Stage 3 offered an opportunity to explore and dialogue about "hot" topics (the focus was on engaging children's developing attitudes about race, class, gender, sexuality, and ability in the classroom), and Stage 4 concentrated on action planning and collaboration in their work as educators. Participants read relevant articles on issues of identify, power, and privilege and met

once a week to dialogue and participate in experiential activities for 3 hours for a full academic quarter. Five in-class reflection papers and a final course reflection paper were analyzed to assess the impact intergroup dialogue had on participants during and immediately after dialogue. Interviews took place at the end of the academic year to see what effects, if any, participants had maintained over the course of a year.

In addition to being the primary investigator for this study, I was the instructor of the course from which participants were recruited. Given my dual roles, it is important that I speak to my positionality in relationship to this study. I identify as a multiracial, middle-class, heterosexual woman who has both participated in and facilitated intergroup dialogues for years and was a doctoral student collecting data for my dissertation at the time of the study. It was made clear to participants that their participation was voluntary and that they were able to withdraw from the study at any point without fear of penalty. All students enrolled in the class elected to participate in the study. All papers were scored without names attached so that my knowledge of participants did not bias my scoring. In addition, I conducted two anonymous check-ins with students during the dialogue to make sure that they did not feel that the research was taking away from the goals of the course.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic coding strategies (Miles & Huberman, 1994). As data accumulated and open coding took place, codes were grouped, and axial coding occurred (Corbin & Strauss, 2014). Data points were constantly compared to others in the pursuit of category construction. Codes from each data point were documented and merged into a master list of codes, which subsequently led to the refining of categories and, ultimately, theory development. This process of continuous reevaluation also meant that various data pieces were recoded, modified, and/or supported. Once data saturation occurred, analysis shifted from inductive to deductive, and the focus became checking for the existence of developed theoretical patterns (Corbin & Strauss, 2014). Member checks were utilized to incorporate the participants in the analysis portion of this study (Creswell & Miller, 2000).

Findings from this study are not meant to generalize to the larger population. Rather, this close qualitative case study provides a grounded and situated understanding of the possible impacts of intergroup group dialogue on new teachers.

Findings

Data are presented both chronologically and thematically to reflect developmental shifts in participants' thoughts about themselves as teachers and members of cultural-historical groups. Influenced by Bogdan and Biklen's (2007) organizational approach to writing qualitative results, I begin this section with an assertion: that intergroup dialogue functions as a sociocritical pedagogy that prepares early child-

hood educators for the ideological and reflective components of teaching across difference. Data from this study demonstrate that through sociocritical reflection, intergroup dialogue expands participants' sense of identity, promotes a sense of empowerment and commitment to action, sharpens participants' vision, and enables them to "see" how children may make meaning of socially constructed categories. In the following sections, I define and illustrate sociocritical reflection and share how it contributed to developmental shifts among participants.

The University: Fall 2013

I first met the participants of this study on October 1, 2013, in a classroom that would become our regular meeting space. I explained my dual role—that I was both the facilitator for their dialogue and a researcher who would be studying the impact of dialogue on the ways in which they thought about race, identity, and teaching. Throughout the 10 weeks of dialogue, I collected in-class reflection papers at five points as well as a final course paper. The in-class reflection papers asked participants to reflect on dialogic pedagogy and what was happening in the moment, whereas the final paper allowed participants a space to reflect more broadly on their development as social justice educators, the meaning of identity in their lives, and how dialogue contributed (or did not) to that process.

Sociocritical reflection and identity expansion. According to final course papers, participants developed a more comprehensive sense of their multiple identities through a process of sociocritical reflection. Building on the concept of critical self-reflection (Nagda, 2006), I define sociocritical reflection as a reflective learning process in which participants ground their self-examination in the context of their own and others' experiences as cultural-historical actors. While participants submitted individual reflections, their reflections were rooted in group activities and dialogue and the understanding that their experiences as individuals occurred in a broader sociocultural context. This sparked a collective Third Space (Gutiérrez, 2008) where participants facilitated one another thinking more complexly about cultural-historical group memberships and how they played out in their daily lives. Prior to participating in dialogue, all nine participants stated that they thought of themselves along primarily raced dimensions, with five out of the nine thinking of themselves primarily along raced and gendered dimensions and four out of the nine thinking of themselves as raced and classed beings. Through participation in dialogue, all nine participants developed more expansive understandings of identities as being multiple and intersecting. To demonstrate, Trisha[1] explained the ways in which she experienced identity expansion:

> Before experiencing this class, I was aware of the fact that I am a biracial female, but that was the extent of my knowledge. How I felt in my own skin and the many privileges I take for granted were unbeknownst to me. Although I realized the fact that society places me in the category of a White female and that comes with

> privilege, I just didn't realize how much privilege. . . . This class has taught me such rich insight into how many different identities I actually possess. For example, I am a heterosexual, young adult female that is educated and able bodied. I am biracial but also believe in God and had a Christian based upbringing. . . . Juxtaposing my understanding of what social identities are before and after this class I see that I walk around with privilege that I truly did not understand. (December 15, 2013)

Trisha shared how she came to see herself as a member of multiple social groups, including someone with privilege. The notion of understanding, locating, and grounding privilege may seem uncomfortable, but due to the humanizing space collectively built in the dialogue, it led to growth. For some, a sort of liberatory consciousness, as explained by Kacy, accompanied this process of recognizing unearned privilege:

> I do not remember clearly what I thought about my identity before going to our [dialogue] class this past quarter. I could have said that I am a White woman, but I might not have thought to mention my Christian heritage or heterosexuality and I certainly would not have thought to mention that I am able bodied. I think that previously, I would have been more likely to say that I am "White, but . . ." and follow it with some qualifier about how challenging life is for me too and something about how I am also a real person. I do not feel the need to do that now. In looking closer at White Identity Literature, I see that scholarship on my racial privilege does not disqualify my legitimacy as a human (that struggles as all humans do). . . . I would say that the process that I went through in this class freed me from a great deal of defensiveness. (December 18, 2013)

Earlier on in the dialogue, Kacey reported feeling "puzzled" by her "discomfort" around engaging the topic of race, but after a quarter of reflecting and dialoguing on identity, she appeared to have shifted into a new place where she can work for change without the barrier of defensiveness.

The ability to engage in a group context was important. According to Kacey, "together, we are able to question inwardly and outwardly" (December 18, 2013). Returning to the idea of a collective Third Space (Gutiérrez, 2008), Kacey and others were able to deepen their understanding of their own identities and memberships in cultural-historical groups by holding up a mirror to their own selves and getting a window into the lives and experiences of others. This dual processing allowed for development within a "safe" and "brave" space. Chrissy also commented on how the group processes contributed to her development. In reflecting two aspects of identity that she had not considered before (class and ability), Chrissy wrote, "I would have never been able to come to terms with these aspects of my identity if it wasn't for this class. Hearing other's honesty really inspired me to be honest" (December 14, 2013). Thus participation in intergroup dialogue facilitated both sociocritical reflection and identity expansion among participants.

Scaffolding sociocritical reflection through dialogic principles. Data from final reflection papers suggest that sociocritical reflection occurred as a product of

engaging dialogic principles and practices.[2] While participants wrote about different aspects of the dialogue that shaped and shifted them, all nine reported development as a result of dialogue. According to Portia, dialogue helped her become a more empathetic educator. In the following excerpt, Portia discussed the ways in which she first gave in to deficit thinking about a student and how her experience in dialogue helped her reflect and reframe:

> About 6 weeks into my first quarter student teaching [placement], I found myself giving into the deficit thinking that prevailed within the inner sanctum known as the teacher's lounge. A student with an individual education plan (IEP) was only seen as a troublemaker with a disability. . . . I quickly realized my snap judgments and tried to figure out ways of changing my thinking. . . . I learned that I should always go back to the basics, empathy and perspective taking, when I lack understanding and am in a "deficit thinking mode." (December 16, 2013)

While Portia was initially vulnerable to "teacher lounge toxins" (Keller, 1999, p. 329), she was able to engage in sociocritical reflection and shift her thinking. This experience also prompted Portia to think about what kind of educator and colleague she ultimately wants to become; Portia concluded her reflection by stating, "I want to be the teacher who changes school culture for the better. . . . I want to change the type of language that accompanies many teachers' lounges across the country" (December 16, 2013). Like Portia, Naomi saw connections between what she learned in dialogue and the type of educator she hopes to become:

> In this course, I have gained intergroup skills that are essential for a future social justice educator. In order to effectively communicate with other people who might have different perspectives than mine, I need to engage in dialogue, actively listen with empathy, and to respect others' perspectives. (December 14, 2013)

The next section examines another aspect and outcome of development through dialogue: participant empowerment and commitment to action as related to praxis.

Empowerment and commitment to action. After a quarter of participating in intergroup dialogue, participants reported feeling excited and empowered about taking their new skills into the classroom. According to Lydia,

> [intergroup dialogue] has helped me set a clear plan and pathway for myself as a social justice educator. For one, I want to be more in touch with my multiple identities, because oftentimes we only think of a few. I also want to learn more about the oppressions that other identities, that are separate from my own, have faced. Exploring these multiple identities will allow me to discover and become more aware of my own bias, which will help gear me in creating change within myself. . . . It is crucial for me to understand my role as a social justice educator and acknowledge the challenges I will endure, in order to make my classrooms more inclusive for all of my students. Ultimately, I have gained a lot more knowledge and self-confidence after [intergroup dialogue], which I hope will translate into my role as an educator and into my classroom. (December 13, 2013)

Lydia identifies dialogue as a "plan and pathway" that will better prepare her to teach in a changing world. She better understands the significance of identity after experiencing dialogue, and she feels that this new and expanded understanding will inform her efforts to build more inclusive classrooms.

Simone shared a similar conviction. In the following excerpt, Simone, like Lydia, reflected on her own learning as well as plans for how to continue her growth and development as a social justice educator:

> This quarter I learned more about my own identity. I also learned about how to dialogue and build coalitions. . . . I want to empower my students with information. I want them to understand the systems of power in the United States, so they know what they are up against. I know each and every one of them can be successful but only if they know it will be difficult, if they know that they face racism, classism, ableism, sexism, and other issues. . . . What I will be bringing to my classroom then is all of these experiences and skills, and using them to help my students think about their own identity. I want to teach my students to dialogue, and teach them to really listen to one another, to listen in solidarity. It will take modifying and simplifying but it can be done. (December 14, 2013)

Whereas Lydia saw dialogue as a tool to help her build more inclusive classrooms, Simone saw the potential for teaching children how to dialogue. Simone also described an experience that she had with her guiding teacher in which she was able to apply what she had learned in dialogue to interrupt sexism in her preservice placement:

> I also plan to apply these skills on a more personal level. I want to interrupt -isms I see functioning in my own life. For example, my mentor teacher made several sexist comments to me. . . . After about a week of this I talked to him after school about the issue seriously and explained why I felt the way I did. He apologized and stopped the behavior. On my last day in the classroom he thanked me for doing that and said we all have things we are working on. It was hard to talk to someone who was above me like that but I am happy I did it. It showed me I can stand up for what I believe in. It empowered me. (December 14, 2013)

Simone's excerpt speaks to the multiple ways that teachers can use dialogue. By sharing how dialogue helped Simone navigate a professional relationship, we see that dialogue contributed to feelings of empowerment. Furthermore, by engaging her mentor teacher dialogically, Simone worked toward shifting school culture by encouraging empathy and reflection in a colleague.

Participation in intergroup dialogue helped participants shift from more individualized notions of identity to more complex, situated, and dynamic understandings of people as members of cultural-historical groups in context. While participants engaged in the same dialogue experience, they found different applications for dialogue in their own lives, including feelings of empowerment and commitment to action.

Taking It to the Field: Winter and Spring 2014

After a quarter of intergroup dialogue, I was curious to learn how participants were "seeing" and making meaning of race and culture in their student teaching placements. To assess this, I asked participants to fill out "quick writes" on their winter placements, which were in elementary classrooms, and their spring placements, which were in early childhood settings. These quick writes asked participants to reflect on what they had noticed about race and other identities in the classroom, what they had noticed about how their guiding teachers did or did not engage race and other identities, and if participants could draw connections between what they were seeing in the field and what they had learned in intergroup dialogue. Data from quick writes indicate that participants were attuned to the significance of identity categories in the lives of their students. Participants attributed these observations to a heightened sensitivity around multiple and intersecting identities that they developed through intergroup dialogue. At the same time, their comments suggest that their guiding teachers made deliberate decisions not to engage topics of identity with their students. This section unpacks three key themes that emerged from quick writes written by participants about their observations in their student teaching placements. First, I share with readers the ways in which participants "saw" these concepts in their student teaching placements. Next, I detail the ways in which participants described cultivating a heightened sense of sensitivity around identity as a function of participation in dialogue. Finally, I report on participants' perceptions of their guiding teachers' lack of meaningful identity engagement in the classroom.

"Seeing" identity and kids. All nine participants documented "seeing" issues of identity in their practicum placements, and eight participants reported explicit attempts to engage students around identity. To demonstrate, Dominique stated,

> From last quarter's dialogue, I have tried when I could to open up some thought to get my students to start thinking about their identities or at least to open up topics that would connect to how they see themselves. One discussion topic I used for a writing mini-lesson was to have students find evidence about why Los Angeles is a special city. One student said, "because of the Mexicans." As I probed his half-joke of an exclamation, he began to say really interesting things about what it means to identify as Mexican and Chicano. (February 1, 2014)

With her student, Dominique co-created an opportunity for dialogue and opened up possibilities for students to say what these identities meant to *them* in the context of their lives. The ability to do this can be explicitly connected to intergroup dialogue, where participants are encouraged to listen, affirm, and respond as narratives and perspectives are shared. As a function of dialogue, Dominique held space for students to share what otherwise may have remained unspoken.

Heightened Sensitivity as a Function of Dialogue

In quick writes, some participants attributed heightened sensitivity to participation in dialogue. According to Dominique, "from last quarter's dialogue, I think I have become much more sensitive to seeing what is happening (language and actions) around my students to build their different social identities" (February 1, 2014). Also important were the ways in which students saw identities—as fluid and intersecting, as opposed to static and fixed. According to Ariella, "what I learned in the fall is that everything is intertwined and that a person's religion, sex, gender, and race influence perspective" (June 25, 2014). This demonstrated her understanding that identities influence positionality and standpoint in complex ways. As participants develop this understanding, they attend to structural power implications behind each identity category and resist flattening students to prescribed identities. Reflecting on one's own process can be helpful in thinking about the unique perspectives that students bring with them to school. According to Trisha,

> after understanding my own identity and connecting it to the classroom I understand that every child has a unique story and specific needs. I feel it is very important for me to create a space that the children feel comfortable and safe. This will include modeling the proper behavior and dialogue within the classroom. Understanding one's identity and feeling safe within that identity is very important and necessary in order to progress and learn. (February 2, 2014)

Trisha recognized that children need teachers to co-create safe spaces for them to learn and develop the ways that they think about issues of identity in a sociocultural context. Trisha went on, in a later quick write, to reflect on the importance of understanding how one uniquely experiences one's sense of identity. She stated, "I am more aware of not putting people in fixed categories such as race. Even though it was never in a negative way, there could still be negative outcomes of such classifications" (May 20, 2014). These excerpts speak to the complexity of teaching with an identity-conscious lens. When doing so, there is a complicated dance between attending to the lived realities of embodying categories that are both socially constructed and significant and, at the same time, practicing caution and not reducing students to essentialist categories.

When we consider the types of sensitivities that are required to "see" children and their multiple and intersecting identities authentically, it is important to do so using what Kris Gutiérrez (as cited in Lee, 2008) referred to as "binocular vision" (p. 273)—a way of viewing children and their communities with one lens looking for regularity and another lens looking for variance. In these quick writes, participants wrote about the discomfort they experienced when both regularity and variance were unaccounted for. To demonstrate, Lydia wrote about the ways in which gender was constructed as fixed and rigid in her classroom placement. According to Lydia,

> there seems to be this reoccurring theme/ideology that gender roles need to be set, which makes me uncomfortable at times. For instance, boys are only allowed to

> do XYZ, while girls are only allowed to do XYZ. In my spring quarter placement, the children were asked to sing a popular Disney song from the movie *Frozen*. The teacher separated the girls from the boys, asking the girls to stand on one side while the boys stood on the opposite side. I didn't understand why she wanted to set the performance up in such a way to separate the students. Although I tried to suggest a different format, it was very difficult for me not to say anything specific because I did not want to step on any boundaries. (July 16, 2014)

Although Lydia could see gendered patterns, the hierarchical setup of student teaching meant that it was challenging for her to feel comfortable exploring this with her guiding teacher. This is different from other participants, who felt more empowered after dialogue, showing that development is contextual. Ariella faced a similar struggle around gender binaries in her classroom that prompted her to engage the skills that she had learned in dialogue with students. According to Ariella,

> whenever the topics of gender and sexuality come up in my classroom, which tends to be around conflict resolution solutions, I try to dialogue with my students. I try to ask open-ended questions and make them reflect on what they are saying and the emotions they're feeling. However, in my classroom, I don't see the TAs or my mentor teacher really doing that. What I hear is language that tells children they can only be a boy or a girl. They're often dismissed from whole group activities by boy/ girl. The activities that the teacher has them do for art are also separated by boy/girl. "The wristlets are only for the girls . . . the scarves are for the boys . . . teacher, we need more pink ones for the girls." (May 22, 2014)

While Ariella resisted gendered practices in the classroom by dialoging with her preschool students, it was challenging, and she felt uncomfortable engaging in a practice her master teacher did not encourage. As the next section details, Ariella was not alone, as several other participants shared feelings of frustration around the ways in which identities were and were not engaged in the classroom.

Reflecting Back and Looking Ahead: Summer 2014

The last phase of data collection took place during the summer, when participants were preparing to teach in their own classrooms in the fall. To understand if dialogue had shaped participants after time had passed, I utilized a semistructured interview with each participant, which allowed them to speak openly about their dialogue experience and share thoughts on children, race, and teaching across difference. Themes that emerged from interviews included participants' commitment to engaging sociocritical pedagogies with children in their work as teachers and their yearning for guiding teacher mentors who could effectively model social justice pedagogies in the classroom.

Commitment to engaging antiracist pedagogies with children. Participants were attuned to the ways in which students in their placements were aware of race and other identities. According to Trisha, engaging identity with students was an

important place to begin, not a peripheral consideration. When asked for her perspective on the importance of engaging identity with youth in the classroom, Trisha replied, "I would even start there. If you don't know who you are, it's hard for you to carve out where you stand and what your perspective is, and perspective taking is really important for students to learn" (July 22, 2014). In addition to the theoretical value of addressing identity and being conscious of one's own standpoint, participants reported belief in the value of addressing race with students in the classroom to interrupt the development of problematic ideologies. According to Kacey,

> So if you're paying attention, you know that students are very aware of identity, about power differences, about skin color, and they have ideas, and they want to talk about those ideas, it's really just the discomfort of the adults that restricts that, not the actual need of the students. As I actually experienced in my last placement working in a preschool classroom, all of the students in the classroom were Latino, and they had ideas about race. They had ideas about Black people in particular, just going from a series of conversations that came up about Black people in general, and kids had a chance finally to say something about what they thought, and they had quite a few racist ideas that were coming out. . . . So they obviously need a chance to talk about things and be questioned, and to have reading material that addresses topics of identity. (July 1, 2014)

To respond appropriately, Chrissy must reconstruct her curriculum. Research by Christianakis and Mora (2012) demonstrated that hegemonic dominance continues to pervade children's curricular materials, and when "multicultural" efforts are made, they celebrate heroes of color as exceptional individuals but don't address structural or historical realities, nor do they address contemporary issues in children's lives. Participants reported tensions in classrooms between Black and Latino students—tensions that would not be improved through mainstream "multicultural" texts that place issues of race and racism in the past instead of the present. Chrissy, in sharing an experience that came not from her classroom but from one of her colleagues,' speaks to the importance of addressing these tensions at a young age with appropriate materials. According to Chrissy:

> It has to be then, because [someone] was telling me about one of her four-year-olds who was reading about the civil rights movement, and [she] was telling her that before Martin Luther King Jr. fought for civil rights and equality, African American children and other children weren't allowed to play. The White children were separate, and [she] asked her if she thought that was ok. The little girl was like, "Yeah, obviously, Black people are scary! They should be separate!" So she got the opposite message from the book she was reading about separation and segregation—she thought it was a good plan. (July 29, 2014)

Chrissy's comment illustrates the importance of deliberately engaging with students around these topics and not just being satisfied with having curricular materials that make token references to historical figures of color. Furthermore, it speaks to the importance of listening to and engaging with children's developing ideas about

race and ethnicity to scaffold, extend, and promote more critical social thought among children.

The need for sociocritical mentors. All participants spoke about the lack of sociocritical mentoring in their placements. While several complimented their guiding teachers on other dimensions of their practice, participants often experienced a sense of frustration at the lack of explicit engagement with students around issues of identity. During her interview, Simone mentioned that she had formally complained about this:

> I actually complained in the end of the year survey. When I was asked about what I didn't like about my placements, I said that all of the teachers were great, they were very supportive of me, and were good mentors, but none of them thought about social justice, or seemed to have any clue about it, and they in no way made any connections to what we were learning about in our classes on social justice. (July 8, 2014)

This lack of explicit mentoring around social justice impacted participant self-efficacy. The disconnect between what participants expected and experienced could potentially lead to a teacher leaving the profession, as 15% end up doing within the first 5 years of being in the classroom (Gray & Taie, 2015). Utilizing mentors who effectively engage social justice and deliver high-quality education to their students may offer a more sustainable vision for what one may become in one's career.

Simone went on to share her perspective on the split between theory and practice in her teacher education program:

> I think it's really hard when you just read theory, because it's supposed to be that you read the theory and then you see it in practice. That's the model they have developed, and it just doesn't work if there's not that connection—it just falls apart. I think I just tried to do things on my own and took that initiative. . . . Both of my elementary placements let me do it, so I tried to do it, but it's super hard when it's not supported. (July 8, 2014)

Simone's experience is not unique—the disconnect between university course experiences and school-based experiences has challenged the field of teacher education for decades (Zeichner, 2010). Engaging concepts of hybridity and the Third Space, Zeichner called for blending university, classroom, and community-based knowledge. Zeichner asserted that this integration best prepares preservice teachers for the real-life challenges that will emerge in the classroom—challenges like the ones participants in this study expressed.

When asked their thoughts on engaging issues of race and identity with children, participants unanimously agreed upon the value of confronting such issues head-on. Unfortunately, Portia was the only one in the cohort who had a teacher mentor who supported her efforts. When asked about her students and race, Portia spoke about racism in her first-grade placement. After a Latino student threatened an African American student, Portia realized that she needed to address the issue

with the class as opposed to the students. She brought in the story of Ruby Bridges and created opportunities for journaling and small-group discussions on race, to which her students were very receptive. According to Portia,

> for a lot of them, it opened it up more that they could talk about each other, and they were more open to talk about it, that it was no longer a taboo thing, like, let's talk about it and let's talk about why it makes us uncomfortable. They would write it in their journals. Even if they were working on a different lesson, they would go back to the original lesson I taught and write more on it. It sparked interest, which I think was good, and opened the room up for dialogue. (July 8, 2014)

In addition to student enthusiasm, Portia's mentor teacher was receptive. They co-created a space where students expressed what life was like for them as children of color in Los Angeles. This contributed to Portia's developing sense of agency around her praxis, leading her to conclude that such work was advantageous to her students. As a preservice teacher, Portia was able to engage and challenge students' attitudes and ideologies around issues of race and racism in their community. According to Portia, "the benefit is that you're setting foundations, so that once they're older, it's already ingrained in them. Even us as adults, we struggle with identity, so it's like we're giving them tools that I wish I had" (July 8, 2014). This speaks to the importance of offering preservice teachers structured spaces to explore issues of identity.

Conclusion and Implications

When we refer back to the research questions, we see that intergroup dialogue contributed to participants' sense of self as related to their praxis by expanding their sense of identity to be more inclusive and aware of dimensions of power and privilege. Additionally, participants came to see issues of identity with young learners in more complex ways. Furthermore, participants experienced a sense of empowerment around navigating and engaging this complexity with their students. This study demonstrates that intergroup dialogue offers participants a space within teacher education programs for sociocritical reflection and identity expansion. At the same time, while some participants took it upon themselves to engage these topics with children in their practicum placements, many felt they were missing mentoring from guiding teachers on how to be social justice educators who blend theory and practice. In light of the findings of this study, I conclude with four points that speak to the importance of preparing teachers to teach effectively across difference: (a) the need for dialogic opportunities in teacher education, (b) the need for excellent mentor teachers, (c) the importance of a culturally relevant (Ladson-Billings, 1995) and permeable curriculum (Dyson, 1993), and (d) coursework for preservice teachers on the intersectional development of children's racial, gendered, and cultural development.

Despite the significance of teachers in the lives of children, outcomes in

teacher education continue to be underresearched (Cochran-Smith, 2005). In light of shifting demographics and the demographic divide, it is important for teacher education scholars to study the ways in which we prepare teachers for increasingly diverse classrooms and to build practices around outcomes-based research (Hollins & Guzman, 2005). This is especially important when one considers early childhood education and the reality that teachers enter those spaces with even less preparation than is required for K–12 classrooms (Muñoz & Powell, 2016). Furthermore, it is imperative that teacher education programs create spaces for interpersonal development within their curricula for preservice teachers. According to Darling-Hammond (2000),

> developing the ability to see beyond one's own perspective, to put oneself in the shoes of the learner and to understand the meaning of that experience in terms of learning, is perhaps the most important role of universities in the preparation of teachers. . . . The capacity to understand another is not innate; it is developed through study, reflection, guided experience, and inquiry. (pp. 170–171)

Darling-Hammond (2000) positioned teacher education as a site for developing content and pedagogical knowledge, as well as engaging in perspective taking and reflection. Participation in intergroup dialogue hones these skills. Results from this study extend what we know about the effects of intergroup dialogue in higher education to a different demographic: preservice teachers. Intergroup dialogue offers teacher education programs an approach to supporting preservice teachers as they move forward in "a paradigm and mind-set shift" (Milner, 2010) through sociocritical reflection and identity development and expansion. The collective, participatory nature of dialogue helped ignite shifts within the participants that enabled them to better see the ways in which intersecting and multiple identities mattered in their lives and in the lives of their students.

Given the importance of mentoring in the development of teachers (Ronfeldt & Reininger, 2012), it is critical that preservice teachers be paired with mentor teachers who understand the sociocultural context of teaching. Participants in this study appreciated the good intentions of their supervising mentor teachers; however, with the exception of Portia, participants in this study did not feel mentored or prepared to engage in meaningful work with children around issues of identity because that kind of work had not been modeled for them in their practicum placements.

Finding mentors who can scaffold and support preservice teachers' development into sociocritical educators is important for producing the next generation of teachers who can create culturally relevant (Ladson-Billings, 1995) and permeable (Dyson, 1993) curricula. While a culturally relevant curriculum promotes student achievement, affirms student identity, and challenges inequitable social structures (Ladson-Billings, 1995), a permeable curriculum builds on who children are and what they do and allows for interplay and negotiation between teachers' and children's worlds (Dyson, 1993). According to Dyson,
such a curriculum seeks to acknowledge and respect the complexity of children's

> social worlds and cultural materials. And it attempts, not only to create bridges between worlds, but to support children's own naming and manipulating of the dynamic relationships among worlds. (p. 28)

Without a permeable curriculum, teachers bring their own ideas about what may be relevant or interesting to children, but those ideas, while well intentioned, may not speak to children's lived realities and interests. To effectively enact a permeable curriculum, teachers need to understand that children are active social negotiators who are both influenced by and influence their context of development (Christianakis, 2010; Dyson, 1993; Rogoff, 1990). This speaks to the need for formal coursework in teacher education on the intersectional development of children's racial, gendered, and cultural development as well as preparation for how to engage these topics with young learners (Bellini, Pereda, Cordero, & Suarez-Morales, 2016).

Future Directions

Results from this study suggest that teachers need to develop more complex understandings of the role of race and other socially constructed categories in the lives of students and that intergroup dialogue may help them do this. Teachers have the power to co-create classroom spaces with children that support developing the tools to effectively grapple with social inequity; however, before early childhood educators can do that for their students, they should grapple with issues of power, privilege, and identity themselves (Doucet, 2019). Intergroup dialogue offers one way for teachers to develop more critical, sensitive, and reflective perspectives on cultural-historical group memberships. As results from this study demonstrate, dialogue provides preservice teachers a space for reflection and expansion of ways in which they think about themselves, their students, and their colleagues. Furthermore, participants are able to "see" identity in context after participation in dialogue, thus positioning them to better hear and listen to what the youth with whom they work on a daily basis are communicating about the significance of multiple and intersecting identity categories in their lives. Results offer "critical hope" (Duncan-Andrade, 2009) that educators can transform themselves and their perspectives—a first step on the path toward transforming schools and, ultimately, society.

Notes

[1] All names presented in this manuscript are pseudonyms.
[2] Dialogic principles and practices include, but are not limited to, empathy, perspective taking, suspending judgment, recognizing triggers, and so on.

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