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Fostering In-Service Reading Teachers' Understanding of Multicultural Literature and Teaching Stance through Structured Asynchronous Online Discussions

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Abstract

Rooted in critical literacy, critical multiculturalism, and social constructivist theories, this study examined how structured asynchronous online discussions (SAODs) fostered in-service reading teachers' understanding of multicultural literature and a teaching stance that embraces the transformative potential of multicultural literature in an online graduate literacy course. Data sources included whole class and small group SAODs throughout the eight-week course. Through a naturalistic data analysis method, findings indicate that SAOD as an evidence-based practice supported participants in developing deeper and expanded understanding of multicultural literature, themselves and others as cultural beings, and a teaching stance that acknowledges and values diversity in practice. This study suggests that literacy teacher educators and researchers use multicultural literature to address diversity and equity. It also recommends ways to deliver an online course in multicultural literature and how carefully structured discussion is a viable mode of delivery.

Introduction

The interest in online education has increased in higher education in the USA since federal and state funding for education started to decline due to the severe economic crisis of 2008 (Sun & Chen, 2016). The U.S. National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) (2021) reported that in Fall 2019 37.2% of students enrolled in distance education courses at degree-granting postsecondary institutions, and 17.6% of college students enrolled exclusively in distance education courses. Among students who chose online degree programs in 2018, 47% shared that their existing commitment did not allow for attendance in campus-based courses and 21% believed that online learning was their only way of obtaining a degree in their field of interest (Bastrikin, 2020). In historical 2020, the unprecedented outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has forced colleges and universities in all 50 U.S. states to shift to online-only instruction since March (Smalley, 2020), and so many have chosen the remote learning mode in the 2020–2021 academic year.

During 2020, we also witnessed movements for social justice and equity among diverse racial and cultural groups throughout the U.S. These events along with politics in an unusual presidential election year bring the topics of social justice and equity closer to the forefront of national discussions. It is crucial for our education system to cultivate citizens who understand and

appreciate diverse cultures and stand up for justice and equity and for our communities and schools to value the cultures and experiences of all their inhabitants.

Taie and Goldring (2020) report that in public schools in the 2017–18 school year, 79% of teachers were non-Hispanic White, while students consisted of 48% White, 15% Black, and 27% Hispanic. Student diversity continues to grow while the racial composition of teachers remains overwhelmingly White with inadequate attention given to helping teachers prepare for the increasing racial/ethnic diversity in the nation's schools (Frankenberg with Siegel-Hawley, 2008). Teacher educators want to prepare their future teachers to be social justice activists and to cultivate and sustain the cultural practices of diverse populations.

In literacy teacher education, International Literacy Association (ILA) (2017) released *Standards for the Preparation of Literacy Professionals 2017* and set forth the criteria for developing and evaluating preparation programs for literacy professionals. Specifically, the diversity and equity standards require reading teachers and specialists to "demonstrate knowledge of research, relevant theories, pedagogies, essential concepts of diversity and equity" along with creating classrooms that are "inclusive and affirming." Research and theory on multicultural literature (Banks, 2016, 2002; Harris, 2003; Norton, 2013; Bishop, 2003) calls for the confrontation of the inequities of marginalized students in our schools. Multicultural literature offers opportunities to critically explore diverse values, attitudes, and points of view and allows teachers to deeply consider the students they teach and support their understanding of the world around them. This diverse literature could thus support reading teachers and specialists in developing a stance that calls on a commitment to critical perspectives around reading instruction and deep reflection.

When considering online discussions, Putman et al. (2012) broadly define a teaching stance as those "characteristic attitudes and behaviors" that students exhibit in their posts. The development of structured asynchronous online discussions (SAOD) could enable reading teachers and specialists to assume a teaching stance committed to addressing the growing diversity in their classrooms and the world. SAODs ask students to move beyond the passivity that can be present in online learning. SAODs can evoke a level of engagement that makes it possible to not only develop inservice reading teachers' multicultural literature knowledge but also their stance towards the potential of the literature. In this way, by their very nature SAODs foster elevated levels of interaction with content (Yang, 2008).

To better prepare reading teachers and specialists, this study investigated the use of SAODs in an online graduate course for reading specialists and reading practitioners to foster their deeper understandings of multicultural literature and its transformative potential in relation to perspectives and practices. The specific questions that guided our study: 1) What are participants' understandings of tough topics related to multicultural literature demonstrated in SAODs, and how do these understandings evolve? and 2) How do SAODs on tough topics related to multicultural literature impact participants' teaching stance?

Theoretical Framework

Multicultural literature emerges from multicultural education that requires educators to challenge the inequities marginalizing students' experience in schools (Banks, 2002; Harris, 2003; Norton, 2013; Bishop, 2003). This study is grounded in critical multiculturalism, critical literacy, and social constructivist theories (Freire, 1970; Morris, 2011; Vygotsky, 1978, 1986).

Critical Multiculturalism

May (2009) suggests that critical multiculturalism provides a way forward in work towards inclusivity and democracy in education. Critical multiculturalism combines "both structural and culturalist concerns—linking culture to power and multiculturalism to antiracism—in its advocacy of greater politics of recognition and representation within education and the wider public sphere" (p. 45). Its goal "is not to reverse the margins and centers of power but to displace their founding binarisms and dependent hierarchies" (p. 150). In this way multiculturalism moves beyond the study of groups and cultural practices to include deep examination of history itself. As a theoretical framing for this study, critical multiculturalism provides the lens for the pedagogical implications around the use of multicultural literature and its capacity to inform one's teaching stance. Specifically, it guided us to design SAOD questions and/or prompts focusing on eliciting participants' understanding of culture and structures in society through discussing multicultural literature and its related readings. Besides this understanding, the SAODs also required participants to share their teaching practice and attitudes towards using multicultural literature, which allowed us to examine their teaching stance. When analyzing the small group and whole class SAOD data, critical multiculturalism enabled us to focus on the participants' cultural and structural concerns and advocacy for diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Critical Literacy

Critical literacy challenges the notion that education is politically neutral and aims to critique and transform dominant ideologies, cultures, institutions and political systems. As a pedagogical approach, it focuses on the uses of literacy for social justice. Morris (2011) asserts that critical literacy encourages classrooms to examine the power relationships found in language use. Freire (1970) points out that within critical literacy, students must look at text through a critical lens that challenges social norms and questions what may have influenced the author. In this way critical literacy can grow out of the consciousness of learners and give voice to their questions and wonderings while providing a space to look at their own position in an educational and political system. Critical literacy, thereby, is a means to become subjects in history rather than objects through readings that are explicit examinations of social, political, and cultural expressions, ideas, values and norms. In this study, the SAODs were designed for participants to critically examine their own position and the provocative ideas such as diversity, equity, and inclusion present in both their own posts and the course texts including multicultural picture books and novels, and book chapters and journal articles related to multicultural literature. In the data analysis we specifically looked for participants' critical examination of their own positions and the provocative ideas.

Social Constructivist Theories

Vygotsky's social constructivist theories (1978, 1986) situate the fundamental role of social interaction in the development of cognition and learning. Within constructivist learning theories, Freire (1970) directs thinking about teaching and learning to be considered as processes of problem-posing wherein classrooms exist as dialogic spaces for mutual learning obtained through conversation, questioning, and deconstructing interpretations. Engaging in critical dialogue in the online course interpretive community is presented through "technologies or print and other media of communication to analyze, critique, and transform the norms, rule systems, and practices governing the social fields of everyday life" (Luke, 2012, p. 19).

While the online environment presents itself as a space to consider how students can critically examine and consider alternative viewpoints, multicultural literature has the power to enlighten, alter perceptions and extend thinking. When students are required to engage in conversations through course requirements, writing for this audience and receiving responses can have significant and positive effects (Windschitl, 1998). Beach and Lundell (1998) stated that anticipating a reply in an online discussion is similar to Bakhtin's (1981) concept of answerability, in which every utterance has the potential to generate a critical response. The online environment is conducive to an interactive collaboration, when the instructor acts as a facilitator for learning to occur (Palloff & Pratt, 2001). Social constructivism is central to this study as our design of SAODs emphasized dialogue as a vehicle for knowledge development. Further, as Mbati (2012) stated, inherent to SAODs are the ways that learning occurs through the socially constructed collaborative interactions that take place among peers. When analyzing the SAODs, we also specifically examined the understanding and teaching stance that were constructed in their social interactions on multicultural literature and its usage in practice.

Review of Literature

Researchers have studied either structured asynchronous online discussions (SAODs) in supporting student learning or multicultural literature and its transformative potentials. Uniquely, this study examined how SAODs fostered in-service reading teachers' understanding of multicultural literature and how this understanding impacted their teaching stance to embrace the transformative potential of multicultural literature to promote diversity and equity in classrooms and schools.

Structured vs Unstructured Asynchronous Online Discussion

In online courses asynchronous discussion has been widely used due to its flexibility and effectiveness in facilitating student participation, interaction, and learning (e.g. Guo et al., 2019; Kimbrel, 2020; Milman, 2017; Tibi, 2018). Some researchers have found that asynchronous online discussion (AOD) supports active learning and higher-order thinking as it can provide more thinking time and is potentially less stressful for students to share their thoughts and opinions than face-to-face interaction (Douglas et al., 2020; Hew et al., 2010; Yilmaz & Karaoglan Yilmaz, 2019). Also, Murphy and Coleman (2004) state that AODs allow generally introverted students to participate in discussions.

AODs can be structured and unstructured (Salter & Conneely, 2015; Tibi, 2018; Yang et al., 2008). An unstructured AOD does not post planned discussion topics or rules for interaction and collaboration among participants; rather, it is often used to obtain answers and feedback from participants. In contrast, a structured AOD (SAOD) provides well-designed and planned discussion activities with specific topics and goals, and has clear interaction and collaboration rules (Kimbrel, 2020; Milman, 2017; Salter & Conneely, 2015; Tibi, 2018). SAODs can be presented in thematic discussions—based on a theme, topic, or issue—often facilitated by the instructor or a graduate assistant (Andersen, 2009). In multicultural discussions, themes, topics or issues usually center on race, class, sexuality, gender, culture, language, age, ability, and other sociopolitical issues (Merryfield, 2003; Nieto & Bode, 2008; Wassell & Crouch, 2008). The existing empirical literature on SAODs addresses their efficacy in fostering engagement and critical thinking; yet, it is limited to either pre-service teachers or general multicultural education. For example, scholars such as Wassell & Crouch (2008) focus on pre-service teachers while Merryfield's (2003) research with graduate students, although online, examines general multicultural education. Much can be

learned from examining the impact of SAODs on in-service teachers' understanding of multicultural literature and its impact on their teaching stance. This study addresses these limitations by using the SAOD design to examine in-service reading teachers' discussions on tough topics related to multicultural literature.

Effectiveness of SAOD

Many researchers have found that SAODs are more effective than unstructured discussions in acquiring knowledge, developing critical thinking and collaborative skills, and engaging students (e.g. Kimbrel, 2020; Milman, 2017; Salter & Conneely, 2015; Tibi, 2018) However, little research has investigated the use of SAOD in teacher education, not to mention in multicultural literature courses.

Chadwick and Ralston (2010) studied students' perspective-taking by content analyzing 56 communication and consulting undergraduate students' messages on web-based discussion boards. They found that although perspective-taking increased in both structured and unstructured discussions, the level of perspective-taking in structured discussions was significantly correlated with learning. The results suggest a relationship between use of higher order perspective-taking and learning, particularly in structured discussions.

Similarly, Salter and Conneely (2015) analyzed 97 psychology undergrad students' responses to structured and unstructured discussion forums to determine impact on student engagement. They found that although students responded positively to both forums, structured forums were generally perceived to be more engaging. This is consistent with Yang's (2008) finding that in SAODs students, they "demonstrated very high levels of interaction" (p. 261). During focused tasks, students must actively read and respond to other members' posts rather than passively viewing posts after they composed and posted their initial posts.

Tibi (2018) investigated the attitudes and opinions of 52 computer science pre-service teachers towards structured and unstructured discussion forums in two fully online computer science courses, one experimental group in a structured discussion forum and one control group in an unstructured discussion forum in Israel. Analysis of the questionnaire consisting of closed and open-ended questions revealed that the attitudes and responses of students in the structured discussion forum were significantly more positive towards the use of discussion forums compared to those of students in the unstructured discussion forum.

Kimbrel (2020) employed a quasi-experimental, nonequivalent group design to examine students' perception of asynchronous discussion before and after applying a structured discussion protocol that included a clear statement of purpose, directions for participation, and a grading rubric. Students were in a community engagement course seeking an initial school leadership certificate. Results indicated that student perception and satisfaction level of online asynchronous discussions improved when a structure was included.

When considering the effectiveness of SAOD, the aforementioned research indicates that students value SAODs as opposed to discussions that have less structure for providing response. Studies conducted with both undergraduate and graduate students suggest that SAODs promote high levels of engagement. Yet, none of these studies examined students in teacher education programs, not to mention in-service reading teachers. As SAOD has shown effectiveness in supporting students' learning, this study investigated how it could be used to foster in-service reading teachers' deeper understandings of multicultural literature related to classroom practices.

Multicultural Literature

Multicultural literature is "literature about racial or ethnic groups that are culturally and socially different from the White Anglo-Saxon majority in the United States, whose largely middle-class values and customs are most represented in American literature" (Norton & Norton, 2003, p. 457). Among scholars positing a broader view of diverse literature, Hermann-Wilmarth (2007) suggests that views expand further than race, ethnicity, and language to include physical/mental ability, socioeconomic status, language variations, religion, family structures and sexual and gender identity. According to Bishop (2016) "…diverse literature can also offer opportunities both to expand literary understandings and to encourage critical examination of issues that plague our democracy, such as inequities tied to race, gender, income, and disability" (p. 120).

Multicultural literature is by nature rich in cultural detail, authentic in language and location, accurate in representing the history and values of diverse peoples and focuses on countering stereotypes and fulfilling quotas (Norton, 2013; Yokata, 2009). Thus, this literature has the ability to change the way students look at the world by offering new perspectives, to promote and/or develop appreciation for those different than one self, and to give rise to critical inquiry and provide enjoyment and illuminate the human experience (Nieto, 2008). Thereby, it becomes critical for teachers across the grades to explore the benefits of multicultural literature in the classroom and the ways in which it "…offers teachers and students a more realistic reflection of society, history, education, and schools in the United States" (Boyd, 2003, p. 461).

Hinton (2007) explored the pedagogical challenges present in an online multicultural education graduate course. His work found a continued need for performance-based outcomes such as lesson planning and/or portfolio content. More recent research, Chen et al. (2020), focused on an international online multicultural counseling course working to foster critical spaces where students actively deconstruct their own socially constructed knowledge, beliefs, and biases about difference. The study concluded that based on the complex nature of teaching the course online, it is important for "educators to thoroughly think through the varying foundational components, including structure, content, pedagogy, and the various challenges that can arise in virtual classrooms" (p. 129). However, these empirical studies focused on online courses in either general multicultural education or multicultural counseling, and none examined in-service reading teachers' perceptions of multicultural literature. In this study, the use of SAODs for in-service reading teachers to respond to multicultural literature acknowledged these gaps as they enabled the examination of in-service reading teachers' discussions on multicultural literature and its usage in practice in an online setting.

Transformative Potential of Multicultural Literature

Multiple studies addressing the transformative potential of multicultural literature are based on classroom research. Using her own second grade classroom, Osorio (2018) discussed the importance of teachers connecting with the increased cultural and linguistic student diversity in twenty-first century classrooms and found multicultural literature to be one such way to do so. Going beyond the notion of "windows and mirrors," Osorio, suggested that multicultural literature must be used as a tool to: "a) promote or develop an appreciation for diversity, (b) honor students' voices, (c) connect to students' rich linguistic and cultural backgrounds, and (d) promote critical consciousness" (p. 51). Moller (2012) documented a transformative teaching and learning experience based on a fourth-grade multicultural literature discussion. Moller argued that teachers and students must examine systemic issues in cultural readings that may cause discord as a process

for reflection. She emphasized the importance of teachers knowing history, literature, students and self in work towards educational change.

In teacher preparation, Howlett et al. (2017) examined the infusion of multicultural literature at the undergraduate and graduate level as a strategy for supporting candidates to meet the needs of a society rapidly growing in its diversity. Drawing on Banks (2016), the study included a focus on the transformative potential of multicultural literature and reported that exposure and modeling of high quality literature had major significance. They suggested that the transformative potential of multicultural literature exists when students are encouraged to examine and re-examine their stance on culture and difference in classrooms. However, there remains a need to examine the transformative potential of using multicultural literature with in-service reading teachers in an online learning environment.

The review of relevant literature related to structured versus unstructured asynchronous online discussions, the effectiveness of structured asynchronous online discussions (SAODs), multicultural literature and its transformative potential mutually upholds responding to the guiding research questions as well as the significance of this study. Each area contributes to the examination of SAODs relevant to students' understanding of tough topics found in multicultural literature and its impact on students' teaching stance. The literature review affirms how SAODs strengthen perspective-taking and open spaces for the range of tough topics found in multicultural literature to be explored. It also points to the need for both quantitative and qualitative studies that address the transformative possibilities of multicultural literature for in-service reading teachers in courses delivered online. However, the reviewed literature did not address in-service reading teachers' response to multicultural literature and reflection on its usage in teaching practice. This study addresses these limitations by using the SAOD design to examine in-service reading teachers' understandings of multicultural literature and the transformative potential of using multicultural literature in an online learning environment.

Methodology

To analyze the SAODs, this study employed a critical content analysis (CCA) research design that "prioritizes a critical lens" (Johnson et al., 2016, p. 5).

Participants

Participants included 29 students enrolled in two sections, 13 in one section and 16 in another, of an online graduate multicultural literature course that the two researchers taught in a nationally accredited MA in Reading program at a northeastern suburban public university in the USA. Mixed in the two sections, 17 participants were in the reading specialist track, and 12 were in the reading practitioner track. All 29 participants, 25 White females, one Hispanic female, and one African American male, had at least two years of classroom teaching experience in local K–12 schools, and most had taught for 3 to 10 years. With two teaching English language arts in high school and two in middle school, all the other 25 participants were K–5 classroom teachers. Pseudonyms for the participants are used throughout the paper.

The strengths of these participants are that they all had teaching experience and were K–12 in-service teachers teaching English language arts, which allowed them to share their understanding and teaching stance in reading practice across grade levels, addressing the focus of this study. Participants, self-identified male and female, came from various ethnical/racial backgrounds and thus provided a comparatively diverse representation. However, there are also some limitations. The enthic/racial and gender make-ups of the participants are not diverse enough, which also

mirrors the current teacher workforce in the U.S. (Taie & Goldring, 2020). Meanwhile, the number of participants was small and most students were from the same region. However, this is a qualitative study and this focus group allowed us to answer the "hows" and "whys" and enabled a deeper understanding of reading teachers and specialists' understanding and teaching stance in relation to multicultural literature through SAODs.

Context and Procedures

The aforementioned MA in Reading program has offered online courses since 2008. Fully online via Canvas, the course on using multicultural literature in the K–12 classroom, the focus of this study, was designed to prepare candidates theoretically and pedagogically to use multicultural literature in K–12 reading and writing classrooms. It is an eight-week accelerated course covering the same content with the same expectations as a traditional face-to-face 15-week regular semester course does. When taking this course, candidates have completed courses equipping them with literacy foundations and evidence-based practices.

In this study, SAOD as a tool was used to facilitate student learning. SAODs are more effective in acquiring knowledge, developing critical thinking and collaborative skills, and engaging students as they are well-designed and planned discussion activities with specific topics and goals, and have clear interaction and collaboration rules (e.g. Kimbrel, 2020; Milman, 2017; Salter & Conneely, 2015; Tibi, 2018). SAODs can be presented in thematic discussions and facilitated by the instructor (Andersen, 2009). Guided by the aforementioned theories of critical multiculturalism, critical literacy, and social constructivist theories (Freire, 1970; Morris, 2011; Vygotsky, 1978, 1986), SAODs in this study addressed themes, topics or issues on race, class, sexuality, gender, culture, language, age, ability, and other sociopolitical issues (Merryfield, 2003; Nieto & Bode, 2008; Wasell & Crouch, 2008). These SAODs allowed participants to have dialogues on their understanding of multicultural literature, its pedagogical implications, and its impact on one's teaching stance. Participants thus constructed learning together through SAODs (Mbati, 2012).

For the first six weeks, every week, participants read articles and Norton's (2013) text chapter by chapter, listened to the professor's lectures, and watched videos. Based on the knowledge gleaned from these activities, they posted their understandings, reflections, and thoughts on the SAOD boards and responded to each other's posts. During the last two weeks, they presented mini-lessons, shared reflections, and discussed implications on the SAOD boards. Throughout the course, they explored multicultural literature addressing African American, Native American, Asian American, Middle Eastern, Jewish, LGBTQ+, and special needs cultures.

The SAODs were for both the whole class and small groups. One example of whole class SAOD is:

> DQ 1. Create your initial post on the DQ 1 Discussion Board in response to the following questions: After listening to Lecture 1, reading the Norton text, and reading the article; answer the following question on the DQ1 discussion board:
> - Is the term multicultural literature valuable in the instruction of diverse literature?
> - In your response be sure to cite evidence from the Bishop article, Chapter 1 of the Norton text, and learning from Lecture 1.
>
> Return to the board and read over the posts of your fellow classmates. Choose at least one classmate and create a post responding to his/her initial post.

Participants also joined two small group SAODs. One group was based on an assignment to develop a multicultural themed text set weaving together multicultural texts to engage students with big ideas and/or concepts and delivered in a voiceover PowerPoint. After presenting their text

sets on a SAOD board, they used a rubric to evaluate their group members' presentations and followed up with their own reflections and responses to peer evaluations. As directed, their evaluation and comments to peers must be detailed and specific, avoiding general and vague comments, and their reply to peer evaluations must discuss how the group's evaluation helped to modify their thinking about teaching multicultural literature. Another SAOD was on a mini-lesson demonstration as part of an author study project. After posting their video of a lesson demonstration, they evaluated group members' lessons based on a rubric and responded to evaluation comments from their group members.

The context for this study allowed the researchers to conduct an in-depth examination of how in-service reading teachers' understanding of multicultural literature and teaching stance evolved through carefully structured SAODs. However, since the study was conducted in a suburban public 4-year higher education institution in the northeastern region of the USA, findings from this study might not be transferable to other contexts such as urban institutions or other regions.

Data Sources and Analysis

Our research questions explored how participants' understandings of multicultural literature and teaching stance evolved through both whole class and small group SAODs. Data sources included 16 whole class and small group SAODs (we only report on the SAODs and not the other course assignments/posts) throughout the eight-week course. The first three whole class SAODs focused on participants' initial definitions of multicultural literature, understandings of issues related to multicultural literature such as various types of diversity, equity, and inclusion in the school setting and wider society, and perceptions of using multicultural literature in teaching practice. The last three whole class SAODs were a looking-back-and-looking-forward revisit of the first three SAODs. We intended to see how their definitions, understandings, and teaching stances changed from the beginning of the course. The other eight whole class SAODs stressed participants' understanding and reflections of multicultural literature addressing African American, Native American, Asian American, Middle Eastern, Jewish, LGBTQ+, and special needs cultures. These SAODs also allowed participants to have dialogues on authentication of multicultural literature on each culture, its pedagogical implications, and impact on one's teaching stance. Two small group SAODs were also examined. One was about participants' reflections on a multicultural themed text set weaving together multicultural texts to engage their students with big ideas and/or concepts. They were also expected to evaluate their peers' text sets with detailed and specific comments and then to respond to peer evaluations discussing how the group's evaluation helped to modify their thinking about teaching multicultural literature. The other small group SAOD was reflections on a mini-lesson demonstration and responses to their peer evaluations. Participants' initial posts and their responses to classmates in these 16 SAODs enabled us to examine their understanding of multicultural literature and its impact on their teaching stance.

We sought to answer our research questions by utilizing open coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1987), an inductive process that allowed for patterns and themes to emerge and for the voices of participants to be heard in the most forthright manner. Based on a naturalistic method (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), throughout the analysis process we focused on content in posts that represented new knowledge around multicultural literature and how it was informing participants' teaching stance. This analysis drew on principles found in our theoretical frameworks including critical multiculturalism (May, 2009) that examine culture and structures in society, critical literacy (Freire, 1970; Morris, 2011) that aims to transform dominant ideologies, cultures, institutions and political systems, and social constructivism (Bakhtin, 1981; Freire, 1970; Vygotsky, 1978, 1986) that

emphasizes social interaction, problem-posing and dialogic spaces. Specifically, for the 14 whole class SAODs we coded participants' understanding of multicultural literature, its usage in the classroom, broadened understanding of culture, pedagogical implications, and teaching stance-behavior and attitudes. For the two small group SAODs, we coded understanding of multicultural literature and teaching multicultural literature. During analysis we critically read and reread the SAOD data looking for patterns and themes on how SAODs fostered participants' understanding of tough topics related to multicultural literature, and a teaching stance that embraces the transformative potential of multicultural literature.

Findings

Through the critical analysis of participants' SAODS, findings indicate that SAOD as an evidence-based practice supported participants in developing deeper and expanded understanding of multicultural literature, themselves and others as cultural beings, and a teaching stance that acknowledges and values diversity in practice to create and advocate for inclusive and affirming classroom and school environments.

Deepened and Expanded Understanding of Multicultural Literature

SAODs demonstrated participants' evolving and expanded understanding of multicultural literature. They recognized essential concepts in multicultural literature, and positioned and repositioned themselves and practices alongside multi-cultures.

Recognizing essential concepts of diversity and equity. The lectures, articles, chapters and reading each other's posts provided a basis for SAODs in which participants recognized essential concepts of diversity and equity in multicultural literature. In SAOD-DQ1, participants were instructed to build a definition of multicultural literature after completing the before part of an anticipation guide with ten statements. After completing multiple readings, they were directed to read classmates' initial posts, revisit the ten statements, and change or modify their earlier definitions including rationales. Rachel, a female seasoned elementary school teacher, started to understand and recognize various aspects of diversity and equity related to multicultural literature. Before reading Bishop's (1997), she thought she had "valuable multicultural literature" in her classroom library. However, the article made her realize that she needs to reevaluate the texts she selected for her students: "…just because books have characters of a different race does not make them "multicultural." …it is so important to make sure they are free from bias or stereotype." She related to Michelle's post: "…equity and social justice are key components in multicultural instruction (Gorski and Swalwell, 2015). This cannot be obtained if the "multicultural literature" we use is filled with bias and stereotypes."

After responding, students shared revised understandings of cultural diversity and equity. Dannielle realized that "acknowledging culture is more than just hanging up flags, reading special books during Black History Month, or having culture festivals." This was echoed by Sam, " I no longer agree that America acknowledges its cultural diversity; at least, not comprehensively, and especially not in many school districts." Sam explained that "the superficial attempts at acknowledging cultural diversity…serve as a thin veil to mask the alienation and separation." Michelle indicated "that it is easy to be deceived by a school's attempts at addressing its cultural diversity such as lining the hallways with different country's flags or student created posters." Kelley confessed that "I'll admit to initially connecting multiculturalism to celebrating diversity". She called for action: "For multicultural education to be meaningful and valuable, we have to do more than acknowledge different cultures, but rather get to the heart of inequity surrounding

differences in our world (be that the small microcosm of a school building, an entire town/city, or an entire nation)."

In SAOD-DQ2 participants were instructed to explain how and why their definition of multicultural literature changed after revisiting Bishop (1997) and reading classmates' initial definitions. Joel "realized'' that her definition "does not properly present the equity and social justice aspects of multicultural literature" and "my mention of the viewpoint of the author may not always be accurate." She indicated that "an individual can write multicultural literature about culture that may not be their own, or may be adjacent to their own." As a result, she modified her definition as follows: "Multicultural literature is literature that accurately portrays aspects of diverse cultures in a manner that demonstrates principals (sic) of equity and social justice and encourages a positive image and appreciation of the culture." Elena became aware that her original definition "lacked the importance of establishing empathy toward topics that may be unfamiliar." She responded that the readings and lecture enhanced her perspective and allowed her to "understand the importance of including diverse topics that are both relatable and new to students; this will allow them to feel a sense of pride in all that they read and write." These posts point to participants' evolving understandings of multicultural literature.

Transformed Teaching Stance

The evolving understanding of multicultural literature has transformed participants' teaching stance in several ways. They engaged in the active process of taking a stance by positioning and repositioning themselves and their practice alongside multi-cultures. Their understanding of themselves and others as cultural beings indicated their attitudes towards racial injustice and thereby indicated a teaching stance. Finally, participants demonstrated their teaching stance and ability in implementing instruction that is culturally responsive while acknowledging and valuing the diversity in their school and in society to create and advocate for inclusive and affirming classroom and school environments.

Positioning and repositioning self and practice alongside multi-cultures. In their SAODs, participants positioned and repositioned themselves and practices alongside differing cultures in the texts and embraced the transformative potential of multicultural literature. The idea of positioning and repositioning represents the active process of taking a stance as a stance requires movement and commitment. Further, when students positioned themselves next to a cultural group such as Asians/Asian Americans and Middle Eastern populations in their discussion, they were also indicating their commitment to advocate for the group's presence in literacy instruction. Below we describe two examples: 1) alongside Asian/Asian American literature, and 2) alongside Middle Eastern literature.

Alongside Asian/Asian American Literature. SAOD 8 (DQ 8), a group discussion in which participants posted how readings on Asian/Asian American literature broadened understanding of the literature, and raised questions about its use in the classroom. This was followed by individuals responding to other group posts.

In her group, Olivia positioned herself alongside issues of authenticity related to Asian/Asian American literature by discussing the role of teacher [herself] in ensuring that authentic Asian and Asian American literature is used in the classroom. After their assigned reading, she came to realize that "there is a lack of multicultural texts that deal with contemporary Asian culture, instead presenting such cultures as "ancient" (Yokota, p. 327)." She argued that "Asian culture is prevalent throughout the world today, and students should be exposed to accurate depictions." Being aware that "this can be difficult for teachers to identify," she proposed the solution to "educating

ourselves and putting in the background work to ensure that the appropriate texts are being used and in providing context when inaccuracies are presented in texts, or in other media (i.e. Disney films, etc.)."

In another group after reading a different assigned article, Sherry similarly positioned herself by noting, "Especially as a teacher of some of the youngest of students, it's helpful to know that even just by beginning to introduce them to authentic images and language of a culture that some of the stereotypes are already being broken down." She was impressed with "how many of the goals that we have set to achieve in implementing multicultural literature can be accomplished simply by making this type of literature available to our students." She believed "that will really work to create a fair and tolerant generation."

Another group post shows the positioning process through the lens of diversity and equity:

> After reading and reflecting on your post, I too realize that using Yeh-Shen each year with my fourth-graders does not accurately depict Asian culture. While it is wonderful to use paired texts to compare and contrast Yeh-Shen to Cinderella, the story does not contain any historical or contemporary connections to Asian-American literature. *In retrospect, this story could be used as a springboard to peak student interest and create future lessons tailored toward a better understanding of the Asian culture. Stories in which unfamiliar cultures are explored should be used to promote research and gain new insight!*

Alongside Middle Eastern Literature. Similarly, in SAOD 9 participants used the chapter on Middle Eastern literature to answer the question: "In what ways can the use of Middle Eastern literature combat prejudice of people with Muslim or Middle Eastern backgrounds?" Group 3 pointed out that according to Norton (2013), "One of the reasons that stereotypes about the Middle East occur is due to the lack of books available that include Middle Eastern American characters." They quoted the chapter with, "...Middle East collections in most libraries are informational books about the geography and the people" (p. 286). They argued that "while it is true that much of Middle Eastern literature is informational, it is important for students to read these text(s) to learn more about the culture." They stated that in their role as teachers "it is important to choose appropriate text(s) that do not include common stereotypes" such as "depicting similar appearances, cruel and ignorant personalities, inaccuracies in clothing, and people that are overall violent in nature."

Group 1 drew on the course text stating, "Through the use of Middle Eastern literature, prejudice of people with Muslim or Middle Eastern backgrounds can be combated." They shared that "Often, people of Middle Eastern decent (descent), are negatively stigmatized as hostile and violent "and there is an image of Arabs as brutal terrorists." (Norton, 2013, p. 286) They realized that "it would be unfair for today's students to grow up believing in this stereotype; which is why the presence of Middle Eastern literature must be prevalent and utilized effectively in education." They argued that "By incorporating Middle Eastern stories with positive, enriching themes and messages, we can teach students to appreciate and understand this vastly underrepresented culture." They believed that "Students must learn to formulate their own opinions'' through "a wide variety of multicultural literature that all children can learn to embrace cultural differences and similarities." As educators, "it is vital to incorporate Middle Eastern literature into the curriculum. In doing so, not only will students learn to understand the culture, they will connect with memorable, positive characters that can shape a new, more understanding generation."

The aforementioned groups realized the lack of quality Middle Eastern multicultural literature and the pervasive stereotypes around those who are Middle Eastern or Muslims in this country. They positioned and repositioned practice alongside Middle Eastern literature. In an individual

response, Lillian agreed that teachers play a role in helping students formulate opinions about different cultures, while raising concerns about censorship: "…about parents disapproving of the use of a book about Islam. Censorship of certain cultural texts keeps students from formulating their own opinions. It does nothing for breaking the stereotypes."

These responses indicate the ways students were going deeper in considering how diversity and equity relates to teaching. Comments suggest an active teaching stance open to the transformative nature of multicultural literature. The students positioned themselves alongside the principles of equity and diversity that guide understanding the potential of multicultural literature beyond those surface level things that impede work devoted to promoting equity. Embedded in their discussion is Nieto's (2008) emphasis on multiculturalism to change the way of looking at the world while promoting an appreciation for those different from oneself.

Understanding of self and others as cultural beings. As noted earlier, a teaching stance can be evidenced in attitudes and behaviors that students exhibit in their posts. Through SAODs, participants' understanding of themselves and others as cultural beings emerged when using Langer's (1990) model in response to *Whitewash* (Shange, 1997). SAODs indicated participants' attitudes towards racial injustice and thereby indicated a teaching stance. Stepping out of the book, Stephanie made personal connections to interracial marriage and gender identity in her family:

> I was being treated differently due to association with homosexual and transgender people. "Friends" wouldn't sleep over because there was someone who was "gay" who lived in my household and others felt that if my family members were homosexual, than (then) I must be "gay" too. We are similar in that things we cannot control such as how family chooses to identify or the color of our skin determined the way people viewed us.

In another personal story, Sophia, a White mother, shared her struggles with raising a Black child in America. She wrote, "I did not get through this story without being very upset and crying." Having a Black toddler son made her realize that "being Black in America is a scary thing… and (when he grows up, he) could potentially face similar situations as the book characters faced." As a White mother raising a Black child, "the family dynamics differ…and this is something that Black people live with daily… theme of this book clearly relates to the personal effect on racism and struggle for equality."

The responses to *Whitewash* are among the most personal of all SAODs. Students connected in personal ways to self, others and the main characters. The discussions reflect how evocations are influenced by experiences and the role multicultural literature can play in examining ourselves and others.

In SAOD 6, participants discussed learning about Native American literature and/or questions raised about its usage in the classroom based on readings. They were required to post their own understanding, read over the posts of their fellow classmates, and respond to at least one of them. Students came to critical understandings of others as cultural beings and discussed their behaviors in relationship to this knowledge representing transformation in their teaching stance. Taylor "was saddened to come to the same realization" as another student that "it is almost frightening how limited the number of books pertaining to authentic Native American culture there is out there! No wonder so many stereotypes and misconceptions exist!" She wondered "how much pop culture and movies like Pocahontas play in these misconceptions" and looked forward to "adding more Native American literature into my classroom to put an end to these stereotypes."

In her post, Michelle wondered "how we can come together as professionals to ensure curriculum throughout the country includes appropriate education of cultures? Brooke added, "This makes me think of the bias of which our Social Studies/History textbooks are written."

Allison reflected on her own practice: "Do I add to these misunderstandings and stereotypical ways of thinking? How does my teaching impact these views?"

These SAODs demonstrated participants' critical understanding of themselves and others as cultural beings both within and outside of the school community. This understanding evolved throughout the course and finally in their teaching stance discussions and lessons.

Ability in Creating Inclusive and Affirmative Environments

Through SAODs on the presentation of their mini-lessons and sharing of their applications, participants demonstrated their teaching stance and ability in designing and implementing instruction that is culturally responsive while acknowledging and valuing the diversity in their school and in society to create and advocate for inclusive and affirming classroom and school environments. Two small group SAODs showed examples of these results.

In one small group SAOD, participants evaluated each other's voiceover presentations of a multicultural themed text set using a rubric and then responded to the evaluations. Jillian, who was a novice classroom teacher, with the help of her classmate—an experienced teacher, came to realize how multicultural literature could be seamlessly integrated into her instruction to meet the curriculum requirements while acknowledging and valuing diversity in her classroom and school at the same time:

> I have come to realize how easy it is to incorporate multicultural literature into the curriculum. To be perfectly honest, I … have put a lot of pressure on myself to carry out the rigid curriculum to the best of my ability, which really does not mention the use of multicultural texts. However, as you mentioned in your evaluation...Multicultural literature in the classroom does not have to be an "in addition to" activity; they are great to use as a discussion tool or to teach a universal theme, all the while helping students to develop empathy and appreciation.

Erin further planned to reach out to other teachers in her school to embrace diversity in her community through the meaningful use of multicultural literature:

> ...after having read your evaluation of my text set and the suggestion that geography could also be incorporated by researching the different locations of the native foods, to go along with the other curricular areas…I began to think about all the different ways multicultural text can be incorporated into a curriculum. Yet, in my district if there is a multicultural text used, it is merely coincidence, very rarely is a multicultural text used with purpose and intention. Though after creating an annotated bibliography set on immigration and this set on how different cultural foods can bring people together, I think I will talk to my Social Studies teaching partner about how to incorporate more of this literature into our lessons next year.

This type of collaboration with colleagues in creating inclusive and affirmative environments was echoed by Sara. She questioned why multicultural literature was not used often in school, "With so many avenues of use, it is a wonder why multicultural literature is not used more often..."

In another small group SAOD participants demonstrated ability in designing and implementing instruction that fosters empathy and inclusiveness. Sophia used a multicultural text in her class to teach point of view. C. J. commented that he liked how Sophia had her students "rewriting (rewrite) a(n) excerpt of the book from a different point of view, which I think ties in great with the conversation you had just had with them about how a different point of view could of (have) completely changed the meaning of the book."

Discussions

Findings from the study clearly answered each of our research questions on the ways SAODs foster in-service reading teachers and specialists' understanding of multicultural literature and their teaching stance. These findings also contribute to the existing literature theoretically and practically. From these findings, several directions for future studies emerged.

Evolving Understanding of Multicultural Literature

In our work to better prepare reading teachers and specialist for the growing diversity in classrooms and the challenging issues around race, ethnicity, equity and social justice this nation continues to face, SAOD presents as a viable mechanism. SAODs demonstrated that participants' understanding of multicultural literature evolved through discussing readings and lectures, reflecting on personal experience and teaching practice, and interacting with their peers. In the beginning of the course, SAODs revealed that participants had little to no formal background knowledge on multicultural literature. Gradually they began to recognize essential concepts of diversity and equity related to multicultural literature and started to position themselves in new relationships with many of these texts. These findings resonate and extend critical multiculturalism's (May, 2009) examination of culture and structures in society, and social constructivism's (Bakhtin, 1981; Freire, 1970; Vygotsky, 1978, 1986) emphasis on social interaction, problem-posing and dialogic spaces in SAODs. Further, this study makes a significant contribution to the existing literature recognizing the importance of the foundational components necessary for in-service reading teachers to gain knowledge about the potential of multicultural literature in an online setting.

Transformed Teaching Stance

The evolving understanding of multicultural literature has transformed participants' teaching stance. Examining their teaching practice, participants realized their lack of multicultural literature usage in class and school settings and they started to position and reposition themselves and practices alongside multi-cultures. Consequently, they started to reach out to work with their colleagues to create "inclusive and affirmative" environments (ILA, 2017). This advocacy is exactly what multicultural literature theorists and researchers (Banks, 2002; Harris, 2003; Louie, 2006; Norton, 2013; Bishop, 2003) call for. The findings support critical literacy's (Freire, 1970; Morris, 2011) aim to transform dominant ideologies, cultures, institutions and political systems.

SAODs enabled participants to become more reflective about themselves, the children in their classrooms, and others as cultural beings. Powerful examples of evocations that pointed to participants as cultural beings emerged when they were able to make strong personal connections. They recognized themes and values related to ethnic groups presented in the texts and started to reflect on their own experiences and the world. One needs to be cautious when addressing diversity as it involves such a variety of facets (Howlett et al., 2017; Merryfield, 2003; Osorio, 2018; Wasell & Crouch, 2008). It is also very complex as demonstrated in the findings, for example, White students might have multicultural/multiracial families.

Providing a space for students to freely and fully express their thoughts on authenticating multicultural literature, SAODs revealed that authentication was enormously complex as participants found ways to negotiate what Grobman (2007) describes as "pushing against tendencies to homogenize texts by writers of color... to present and speak openly about cultural differences without essentializing or perpetuating stereotypes." (p. 31). This is likely a result of

the tendency to examine texts through one's own lens. However, SAODs served as a vehicle for the in-service reading teachers to reposition themselves in relationship to the multiple ethnicities and themes presented in the multicultural literature they read. This diverse literature thus supported reading teachers and specialists in developing a stance that calls on a commitment to critical perspectives around reading instruction and deep reflection.

Significance of SAODs

As illustrated in the findings, SAODs provided a forum for in-service reading teachers to collaborate and construct understandings through dialogues on provocative topics. This confirmed what other researchers have found (Chadwick & Ralston, 2010; Kimbrel, 2020; Milman; 2017; Salter & Conneely, 2015; Tibi, 2018) that SAODs supported students in developing critical thinking and collaborative skills, taking different perspectives, and engaging in learning. The findings also resonate Merryfield's (2001) results that when participating in SAODs on tough topics, students were open, frank, expansive, curious, and confessional in their willingness to share and discuss prickly issues related to diversity and equity. High level interaction was demonstrated in SAODs (Yang, 2008). Their discussion posts were thoughtful and detailed, consistent to Merryfield's (2003) findings. More importantly, this study addresses the limitations of the reviewed literature by showcasing that SAODs are effective in fostering in-service reading teachers' deeper understandings of multicultural literature and its usage and the transformative potential of multicultural literature in an online learning environment.

Future Studies

Several directions for future studies emerged from the findings. This is a qualitative study focusing on a specific group of graduate students. Future studies could use quantitative methods or a mixed methodology to examine the transformative possibilities of multicultural literature for in-service reading teachers in courses delivered online. Besides in-service reading teachers, future studies might investigate other groups such as pre-service English language arts teachers' perceptions on multicultural literature through SAODs. Also, this study was conducted in a suburban setting in one region. Future studies can examine other contexts such as urban settings and/or other regions; results might be different as participants' diverse backgrounds could impact their understanding of multicultural literature and its usage in teaching practice. Finally, besides SAODs, future studies might observe participants' practice in classroom and school settings to gain a better understanding of how they actually implement what they learn about multicultural literature and its transformative potential. Researchers could also interview participants to learn more about their decision-making process when completing SAODs related to multicultural literature and its transformative potential.

Conclusion and Implications

This study revealed that SAODs effectively fostered in-service reading teachers and specialists' understanding of multicultural literature and provided a space for transforming their teaching stance to support addressing diversity and equity in K-12 classrooms. SAOD as an evidence-based practice supported in-service reading teachers and specialists' evolving understanding of multicultural literature and during the course they became aware of essential concepts related to multicultural literature. Additionally, they developed a deeper understanding of themselves and

others as cultural beings and asserted a teaching stance that acknowledges and values diversity in practice to create and advocate for inclusive and affirming classroom and school environments.

The study thereby has implications for literacy teacher educators and researchers who use multicultural literature to address diversity and equity by looking closely at those traditionally absent or marginalized in texts for young readers. As the nation's K–12 classrooms continue to become increasingly diverse and the prevalence of online course delivery in higher education continues, this study is significant in using SAODs as a tool in an online graduate literacy course to facilitate and critically examine "differences and relationality" that encouraged students to actively cross borders within and outside of their readings of multicultural text (Grobman, 2007). Authenticating multicultural literature is a complex process, yet achievable through guidance.

Discussing multicultural literature through SAODs is effective in broadening in-service reading teachers' understanding of multicultural literature and themselves and others as cultural beings and consequently transforming their teaching stance. The study furthers literacy teacher educators' understanding of ways to deliver an online course in multicultural literature and how carefully structured discussion is a viable mode of delivery. Effective SAOD assignments need to be thoughtfully designed and organized to allow for active and meaningful interactions. Directions must be clear and tasks should be complex enough as stated by Milman (2017). Carefully crafted SAODs provide a sense of answerability, in which every utterance has the potential to generate a critical response (Bakhtin, 1981) related to multicultural literature and its transformative potential.

Engaging with multicultural literature has the potential for significant social and cultural outcomes thus deeming it highly significant that policymakers attend to this topic and teachers develop a knowledge-base in this area. Therefore, curricula on multicultural literature should be in place. School administrators should support this effort by providing in-service teachers with ongoing professional development opportunities, in person and/or online, to help them understand multicultural literature and its potential. The multicultural literature course should also be included in both pre- and in-service teacher education programs, in person and/or online, for not only reading education majors but for all education majors.

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