

## Teacher Candidates Dismantling Racism, One Book Study at a Time

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### Abstract

Starting in fall of 2020, two faculty created and facilitated a book study with teacher candidates the semester before they entered student teaching. They read *This Book is Anti-Racist* by Tiffany Jewell and viewed the content through their own personal journey lenses and also applied the ideas to how they hope to bring anti-racism and multiculturalism into their teaching practice. In the spring of 2022, they conducted a pilot study to gauge the effectiveness in increasing teacher candidates' confidence in bringing anti-racism and cultural responsiveness to their teaching. Their initial findings showed promising results with a small sample size. They have progressed to over tripling their sample size during the fall 2022 semester with the hypothesis of seeing the promising pilot results further confirmed. This study has inspired ideas for future study and considerations for programmatic improvements, all with making anti-racism the norm for the teaching profession.

*Keywords:* anti-racism, biases, critical race theory

In the late summer of 2020, colleagues from the Elementary and Early Childhood Education Department at Bridgewater State University in Bridgewater, MA came together for a virtual meeting to discuss shared concerns about how to improve addressing racial equity and social justice in licensure programming. The department formed the “Anti-Racism Matters Committee” (ARM) which focuses on supporting both faculty and students in their racial learning journeys. ARM works to offer professional development for faculty at department meetings, a yearly retreat, and via a yearly summer book club. In addition, ARM provides guest speakers events that are open to both students and teachers that focus on anti-racism. After the

initial ARM meeting, two colleagues collaborated on an idea that is showing to be consistently effective.

The two researchers are two faculty members who care deeply about teacher candidates fostering ant-racist ideals, implementing culturally responsive pedagogy, and improving their equity lenses both professionally and personally. Since the researchers view multiculturalism as an important component of being antiracist, and antiracism is a necessary part of multiculturalism, those terms are used interchangeably throughout this article. Dr. Correia's area of expertise is in literacy and had experience with effective book studies in learning about various topics, including anti-racism. Dr. Boivin's specialization is in anti-racist teaching and multicultural understandings and is familiar with facilitating programming on these topics in an inviting, safe learning environment. Together, they forged a partnership, with the support of their department chair, to create and implement a book study focused on anti-racism.

Book clubs are often used with practicing and pre-service teachers as a means of professional development. Book studies provide an opportunity for teachers to examine their knowledge, beliefs and practices through considering different perspectives (George, 2002). In a study of book clubs as professional development for both preservice and practicing teachers, Burbank et al.(2010) found that preservice teachers reported that the book clubs were "critical to their development as educators" (p.61) and that the conversations in book clubs provided these novice educators with awareness of the platforms needed for systemic change. We believe our antiracist book club is an effective approach to striving for inclusive excellence, engaging in personal reflection, and building a much-needed community of support.

This book study was a non-credit addition to the coursework that elementary and early childhood teacher candidates took in addition to their courses that are required the semester before student teaching (first half of their senior year).

Students were placed in a cohort of anywhere from 10-22 students (pending enrollment each semester) called the “Block.” They take five methods courses over the semester, all with the same group of peers. For their classes, they teach small groups and whole classes at a mixture of clinical field placement sites. The workload and schedule are demanding but serves as a prerequisite to the demands for student teaching the subsequent semester.

During the fall 2020 semester, the Dr. Correia and Dr. Boivin implemented their book study with these students for the first time. Using *This Book is Anti-Racist* by Tiffany Jewell, they offered four asynchronous discussions on their LMS (BlackBoard) each of which aligned with the four sections of the book. The questions offered the teacher candidates opportunities to reflect on their personal journeys addressing unconscious biases, but also tied this work to their professional roles as educators. They made their answers as long as they choose, but we explicitly articulated that we are looking for thoughtfulness in their replies, which aligns with the discussion norms we established at the start of the book study. The discussion norms included ideas like determining when to “call out” versus “call in,” (Diangelo, 2018) assume best intentions, and avoid generalizations. Students were then asked to thoughtfully respond to two peers.

Here is an example of a discussion prompt that we used for the second of the four sections, which were geared toward personal development and professional development (through the eyes of a classroom teacher):

- 1.) This section of the book truly illuminates the deep-rooted racism the US has that has been present since the conception of the nation. Can you think of something you learned about in school that ignored racism, but rather glorified our nation's past? For example, was there a historical figure that you were taught was incredible for numerous reasons and later found out had a past of racist actions? Did he/she perpetuate the oppression of People of Color?
- 2.) Explain how uncovering these "truths" will impact your teaching. How will you ensure that you aren't ignoring the ugly past?
- 3.) How will you "decolonize" your classroom?
- 4.) What is something new you learned in the second section? Be as specific as possible and explain the impact that this new information/insight had on you.
- 5.) What activity, reflection prompt, or metaphor/description challenged your thinking or understanding? Was there anything that made you "dig deeper" than you have in the past? Explain.

In addition to these asynchronous discussions, we offer three synchronous meetings. The first took place at their Block orientation at the start of the semester (typically in-person). We went over the book study expectations, logistics, schedule, and emphasize how important this work is to becoming an educator. The second meeting took place half-way through the semester via Zoom to allow students to go home after a long teaching day and be in a space that makes them feel comfortable when tackling challenging topics and uncomfortable conversations. Dr. Correia and Dr. Boivin opened the session with sharing that it is a time and space to discuss anti-racist education, equity, and related topics in a way that helps them process, plan and reflect. Typically, the teacher candidates have experiences and questions that they need to share and Dr.

Correia and Dr. Boivin do not need to use the premade prompts that they have ready just in case. In the fall of 2022, the second synchronous session was a bit different by having a guest speaker, a school administrator of color from a nearby school district, facilitate the session with prompts that pushed teacher candidates' understanding past the text and even challenged some of the text to enhance their critical lenses.

We first conducted this study as a pilot in the spring 2022 semester and had 16 teacher candidates respond. The initial findings revealed that overwhelmingly, students' confidence about integrating anti-racism and multiculturalism into their teaching practice increased over the course of the semester. In the fall 2022 semester, enrollment was much higher, and we will be fortunate enough to analyze results for 57 teacher candidates. The next section delineates the study methodology.

### **Methods**

This section describes the study methodology, including the guiding research questions, the data collection procedures, and data analysis procedures. Prior to unpacking the data collection and analysis procedures, it is necessary to understand the underlying theoretical framework for this study: Critical Race Theory.

Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw is the “mother” of Critical Race Theory (CRT) as a UCLA Law School Professor. In essence, CRT affirms that race was created by society and systemic racism is built into the foundational structures of this nation. Crenshaw contends that CRT is more of an action than a thing, meaning that CRT is a way of seeing the world and challenging norms. CRT allows us to notice race and racism, where we may not have noticed it before. She adds that CRT utilized peoples' lived experiences of racism in a serious way, along with social and historical reality “to explain how racism operates in American law and culture, toward the

end of eliminating the harmful effects of racism and bringing about a just and healthy world for all” (Crenshaw as cited in Fortin, 2021). In the context of this study, noticing that every aspect of the teaching profession can be related to race and racism allows us as researchers and educator preparation faculty, to seriously consider how every action these future teachers take can help either perpetuate systemic racism, or dismantle it. Viewing antiracism through personal and professional lenses, as this book study encouraged, heightened students’ awareness that race is embedded in society at every level. The instrument we utilized in this study exemplifies that viewpoint.

Two guiding research questions were the focus for this study.

- 1.) Does participation in an anti-racist book club increase the value that pre-service teachers place on anti-racism work personally, professionally, or both?
- 2.) What is the multicultural proficiency of pre-service teachers before and after completing an anti-racist book club and online learning community?

To help answer these guiding research questions, the teacher candidates were administered a survey before and after participation in the book study. The survey was adapted from the Multicultural Efficacy Scale (Guyton & Wesche, 2005). Our survey instrument measured teacher candidates’ attitudes towards multicultural beliefs and practices, but also their perceptions about whether they can effectively implement these practices as future educators. The complete survey can be found in Appendix A, but a few examples of survey items aimed at efficacy are included below:

I can help students view history and current events from diverse perspectives.

I can plan instructional activities to reduce prejudice toward diverse groups.

I can help students work through problem situations caused by stereotypical and/or prejudicial attitudes.

There was a total of twenty items with the following Likert scale response options for each item:

I do not believe I could do this very well.

I could do this, but it would be difficult for me.

I could do this reasonably well if I had time to prepare.

I am confident that this would be easy for me to do.

The pre-service teachers took the survey on Qualtrics in the first week of the spring 2022 semester during the book club introductory meeting and then the post-survey about 14 weeks later during the final synchronous book club session. This first round of data collection using the survey instrument served as a pilot since our N was small, at 16 students. In the fall semester of the same year, we had 56 teacher candidates participate in the survey and book study. We anticipate analyzing that data soon to confirm or reject any initial trends that were derived from the pilot.

The quantitative data resulting from the survey responses were analyzed to determine levels of confidence increase from pre to post measures on each survey item. Data were also examined for emergent themes. These themes were then validated across the data. The pilot survey results were carefully analyzed to determine any trends in the data. Those trends are presented in the findings and results section below.

### **Results and Findings**

This section describes the study results and findings. Careful analysis of the data revealed promising results that showed overall, teacher candidates had developed increased confidence in

their ability to bring anti-racism and cultural responsiveness to their teaching. Further analysis revealed that their responses and levels of growth in confidence fell into three distinct categories.

### **Category 1: Most Confidence**

The first category consisted of items showing *notable confidence increases*, with zero participants reporting, “could not do this very well” and fewer than three participants reporting, “I could do this, but it would be difficult for me” in the post-survey. Fourteen of the 20 items fell into this category of notable confidence increase from pre to post survey.

A few sample items that fell within this category include:

I can identify cultural biases in commercial materials used in teaching.

I can help students take on the perspective of ethnic and cultural groups different from their own.

I can help students view history and current events from diverse perspectives.

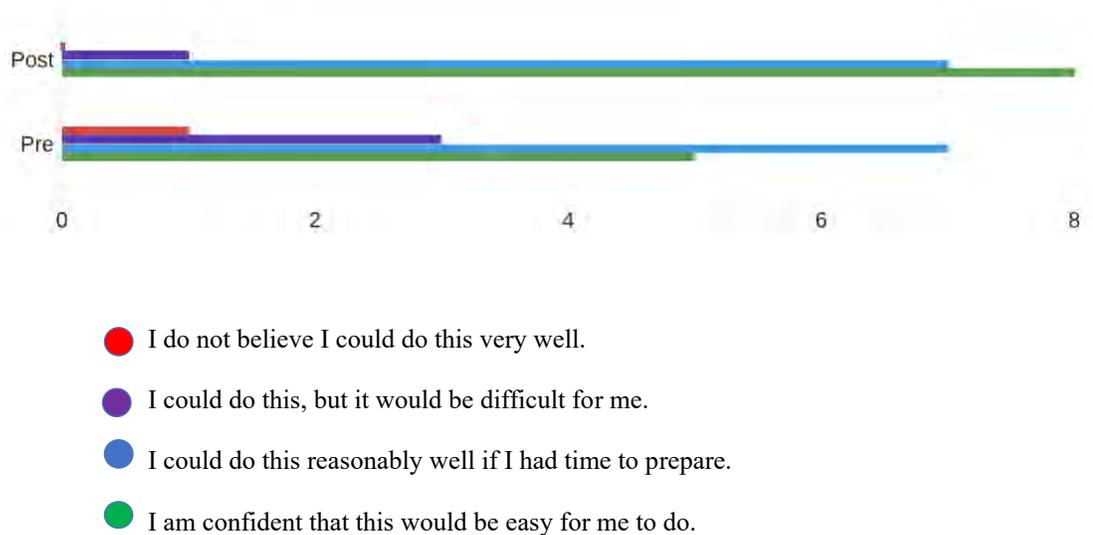
I can develop activities that increase the self-confidence of diverse students.

An example with a data graph is provided in Figure 1 of an item that is of particular interest to us as teacher educators and is an important part of the development of our teacher candidates. Participants reported high levels of confidence in being able to analyze instructional materials for stereotypical content. This is an aspect we discuss often in our courses and put into practice within our own teaching and choice of materials.

**Figure 1**

*Example of Survey Item in Category 1 Showing Notable Confidence Increases*

Q5- I can analyze instructional materials for potential stereotypical and/or prejudicial content.



Further analysis of all the items that fall in category one point to a broader theme of teacher candidates' increased confidence in being able to critically evaluate curriculum materials for bias and using and adapting instructional methods that align with meeting the needs of learners from diverse backgrounds. Being critical of the disciplinary texts, read aloud books, audio-visuals and other curriculum instructional materials is an essential aspect to creating more inclusive classrooms and developing multicultural proficiency. In addition, reducing prejudice towards diverse groups and helping students view history from diverse perspectives was a repeated trend with noteworthy changes in confidence level.

**Category 2: Moderately Increased Confidence**

The second category consisted of items showing *some confidence increases*, but still three to five participants reporting, "I could do this, but it would be difficult for me" in the post-survey. Four of the 20 items fell into this category of showing some confidence increase from pre to post.

The four items that fell within this category include:

I can provide instructional activities to help students to develop strategies for dealing with racial confrontations.

I can develop instructional methods that dispel myths about diverse groups.

I can provide instruction showing how prejudice affects individuals.

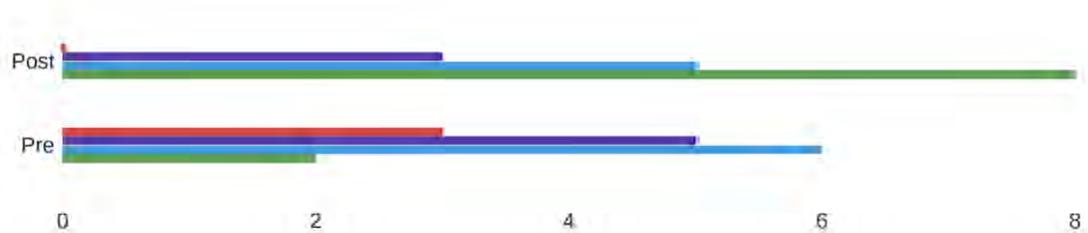
I can help students work through problem situations caused by stereotypical and/or prejudicial attitudes.

An example with a data graph is provided in Figure 2. In the pre-survey, eight participants responded affirmatively to item nine that they could do this reasonably well or easily. On the post-survey, that number increased to 13 out of 16 respondents, with only three reporting, “I could do this, but it would be difficult for me.”

### Figure 2

*Example of Survey Item in Category 2 Showing Some Confidence Increases*

Q9- I can provide instruction showing how prejudice affects individuals.



- I do not believe I could do this very well.
- I could do this but it would be difficult for me.
- I could do this reasonable well if I had time to prepare.
- I am confident that this would be easy for me to do.

Further interpretation of the four items that fall in category two point to a broader theme of teacher candidates' showing more hesitation when it comes to dealing with delicate issues that

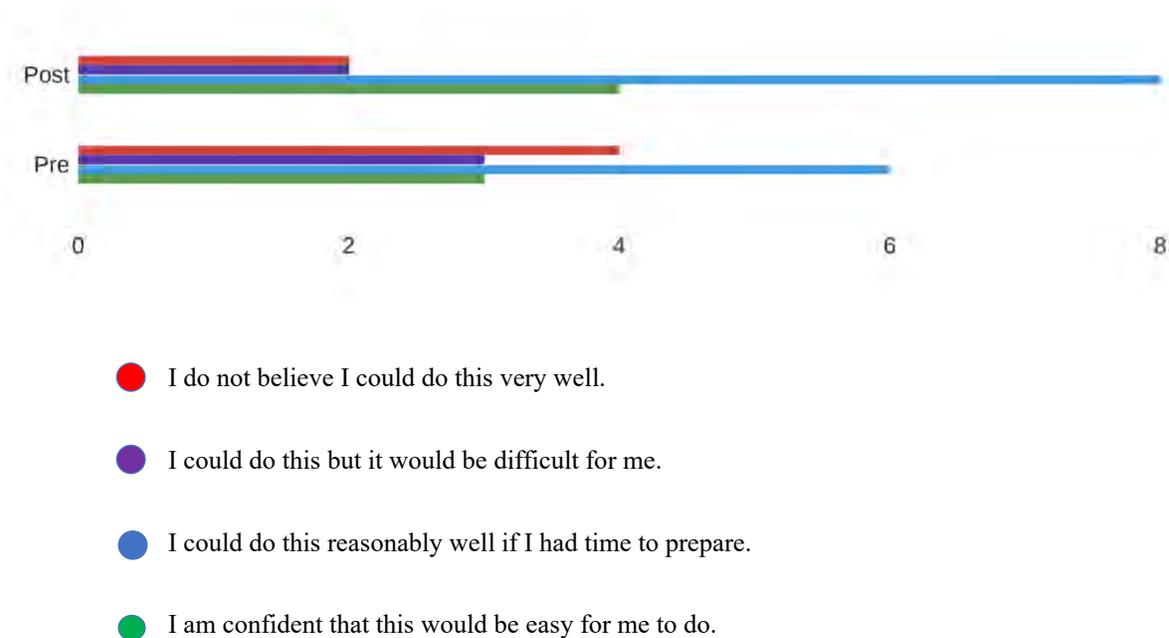
require careful forethought and self- reflection, like in helping students deal with racial confrontations and working through related problems. Additionally, their affirmative response to preparing instructional activities and developing methods for these difficult conversations showed increased confidence with the need for more time to prepare.

### **Category 3: Least Growth in Confidence**

The third category consisted of only one item: *I can help students to examine their own prejudices*. As you can see in Figure 3, there was a slight increase in confidence levels (but less than in category 2). In the post-survey, half of the respondents (eight) noted that they could do this reasonably well if they had time to prepare, which was an increase from six in the pre-survey. But the response of, “I am confident this would be easy for me to do” only showed a slight increase (1 student) while the numbers on the lower two choices of the Likert scale decreased, there were still four students reporting this would be difficult or they did not believe they could do this very well.

**Figure 3***Survey Item in Category 3 Showing Slight Confidence Increase*

Q6- I can help students to examine their own prejudices.



After reviewing this item in category three it could also fit into the theme found for category two related to hesitation when it comes to having difficult conversations and doing the hard work of engaging in self-reflection around bias or helping their students to engage in this same exercise. Being comfortable enough to notice and name our own prejudices is one thing, but then to also lead students through that same process is another area these teacher candidates feel like they could do but not as easily as some of the other tasks represented on the survey.

Finally, there was one item that was an outlier to our data. The statement was: *I can identify school practices that may harm diverse students*. The reason we labeled this an outlier is that in the pre-survey data there were zero participants responding in the bottom two Likert scale choices showing no confidence in being able to do this. However, in the post-survey, there was

one participant reporting they do not believe they could do this very well. We are unsure as to whether this was a user error when taking the survey or a change of thinking.

### **Discussion**

This section delineates the implications of the findings from this study, along with ideas for how we will use these findings for improving our programming. Overall, the findings show that confidence for teacher candidates when addressing race and diversity in the classroom increased substantially from before the book study to after. The majority of survey items fell into category one showing notable increases in confidence level.

An evident trend in responses was that time for preparation was a precursor to these teacher candidates feeling able to confidently support a racially inclusive learning environment. While they feel confident in their understanding and efficacy, they realize it will take time and attention to do instructional planning that demonstrates cultural proficiency and promotes equity amongst their students. The results also point to needing more time to address situations involving racial or prejudicial conflict in a meaningful way. More practical approaches such as role playing, case studies, and specific instructional planning around these topics may be needed in our teacher preparation courses so that pre-service teachers feel more confident. Opportunities for teacher candidates to ask related questions to supervising teachers at pre-practicum placements should also be considered.

Preparing instructional activities to reduce prejudice showed the most growth and increase in confidence, but not when it comes to the prejudices, they, themselves, hold. An implication for our programs from this finding is the need for increased opportunities for specific activities with reflection around teacher candidates examining their own biases and supporting one another in this work. Helping their future students examine their own prejudices also posed

the most challenges still. Suggestions for how to seek support in school systems for difficult conversations/topics with students is a topic that needs to be addressed in our work as teacher educators and researchers.

Another take-away from this research that will inform our teaching and book study is preparing our teacher candidates to have approachable ways to talk with colleagues and administrators about anti-racism/bias and areas of improvement needed. Often, new teachers feel as though their critiques should not be voiced or that their suggestions for change will go unheard. However, when it comes to the critical work of anti-racism and multicultural proficiency, we want our students to be confident and courageous in doing what's best for their students. Inviting administrators to offer advice in this regard may be a practical approach to helping our students feel empowered.

### **Conclusion**

This section explores ideas for future research and other considerations baked on this study. Since this study was conducted the semester before student teaching, which is teacher candidates' second-to-last semester before graduating and entering the field full-time, we wonder if the results would be similar if the book study took place earlier in the program. Future research could also investigate students' plans and motivations to continue committing themselves to anti-racist learning and work, both personally and professionally. Moving forward, a recommendation to anyone thinking of implementing a similar book study into their programming should consider having similar offerings with credit attached. This book study did not supply the teacher candidates nor the faculty facilitating it with credit. Having this work integrated into credited coursework is a more ideal approach. In addition, as two white women facilitating this book study, Dr. Corriea and Dr. Boivin openly recognized their limitations as lacking lived

experiences facing racism, which made it more so important to bring in voices of color to elevate in this work.

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**Appendix A:****Instrument Items:**

To the best of your knowledge, self-assess your own ability to do the various items listed below. Many of the items refer to you as a teacher candidate. Please consider the teaching you will be undertaking now or in the future as a leader in Elementary Education.

1. Name:
2. I can provide instructional activities to help students to develop strategies for dealing with racial confrontations.
3. I can adapt instructional methods to meet the needs of learners from diverse groups.
4. I can develop materials appropriate for the multicultural classroom.
5. I can develop instructional methods that dispel myths about diverse groups.
6. I can analyze instructional materials for potential stereotypical and/or prejudicial content.
7. I can help students to examine their own prejudices.
8. I can present diverse groups in our society in a manner that will build mutual respect.
9. I can develop activities that increase the self-confidence of diverse students.
10. I can provide instruction showing how prejudice affects individuals.
11. I can plan instructional activities to reduce prejudice toward diverse groups.
12. I can identify cultural biases in commercial materials used in teaching.
13. I can help students work through problem situations caused by stereotypical and/or prejudicial attitudes.
14. I can get students from diverse groups to work together.
15. I can identify school practices that may harm diverse students.
16. I can identify solutions to problems that may arise as the result of diversity.

17. I can identify the societal forces which influence opportunities for diverse people.
18. I can identify ways in which various groups contribute to our pluralistic society.
19. I can help students take on the perspective of ethnic and cultural groups different from their own.
20. I can help students view history and current events from diverse perspectives.
21. I can involve students in making decisions and clarifying their values regarding multicultural issues.