

Preparing Preservice Teachers to be Agents of Social Justice: Examining the Effectiveness of Using Literature Circles in a Reading Methods Course

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Abstract

This study, rooted in the evaluation of a reading methods course, sought to determine the implications for preservice teachers (PSTs) who participated in literature circles that intentionally used multicultural literature to discuss social justice issues. Using an interpretative mixed-methods approach, we collected quantitative surveys and conducted individual interviews to determine the participants' perception of the effects that the implementation method (literature circles) and the curriculum content (multicultural texts) had on their knowledge and professional efficacy. The findings of this study suggest that the course, with an embedded literature circle component, is an essential aspect of the broader teacher development program. Encouraging social activism, promoting recreational reading, and improving PSTs' ability to facilitate literary discussions around issues of social justice increases their confidence and personal efficacy. Further longitudinal research should be conducted to determine the direct effects this would have on their ability to create change agents in their future classrooms.

Keywords: literature circles, HBCU, preservice teachers, social justice

Introduction

Education preparation programs at historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) emphasize the importance of performance excellence, due, in part, to the volume of Black professionals that they develop for the workforce. Black HBCU teacher candidates display a particular readiness for teaching in urban and diverse schools (Mawhinney et al., 2012). Studies suggest that Black preservice teachers (PSTs) attending HBCUs felt a sense of familial relation which enriched their college experiences, thereby impacting their future classrooms (Williams et al., 2009; Yates et al., 2008). Black PSTs graduating from HBCUs, equipped with the mentorship and connectedness that an HBCU education can provide, entering today's diverse classrooms are capable of having a positive effect on student achievement, particularly Black students.

Contrary to their HBCU training, however, new Black educators are often met with deficit perceptions of student achievement, especially in urban schools with Black students, when entering the workforce (Ford, 2012). Standardized achievement data in reading, writing, math, and science revealed that Black students scored lower than students from other racial groups nationally (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017). Additional reports indicated an overrepresentation of Black students in remedial and special education programs (Blanchett, 2006; Codrington & Fairchild, 2012).

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Some researchers correlate lower performance outcomes to the disproportionate use of exclusionary discipline techniques, like suspension and expulsion, when working with Black students (Hilberth & Slate, 2014), while others attribute it to the over-testing and under cultivation of the students (Toldson, 2012). Egalite and colleagues (2015) sought to examine the potential effect of race on achievement for students in grades three to ten, as assessed by the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT). Their findings suggest that Black teachers had positive effects on Black students in elementary grades. The positive effects and mentorship of Black PSTs from HBCUs may be attributed to their teacher education preparation program training.

To reach optimal student performance, educators must consider the structural (both physical and pedagogical) shortcomings of the present educational system, and teacher education programs must begin to address them. As reading helps people make sense of the world, literacy is essential to all content areas taught in K–12 schools. Thus, we postulate that innovations in the content and implementation of English and Language Arts (ELA) curricula are critical to the overall success of students, especially minoritized students. HBCU teacher education graduates have a unique potential to influence and implement new content and pedagogies. Through their pedagogical practices and their ability to be perceived as accessible role models, they can fill the gaps for the most vulnerable student populations (Irvine & Fenwick, 2011).

Theoretical Framework

The present study uses social identity theory to illustrate how PSTs' positionalities could affect the students they teach. Social identity theory states that "a social category (e.g., nationality, political affiliation, sports team) in which one falls, and to which one feels one belongs, provides a definition of who one is in terms of the defining characteristics of the category" (Hogg et al., 1995, p. 259). It is essential to note that for social identity theory to be applicable, PSTs must feel connected to that specific identity. It is assumed that Black students who attend an HBCU feel connected to their racial identity. Furthermore, through the organized curriculum and communal settings, HBCU students are taught cultural pride that they are expected to carry through their professional experiences. As predominately Black HBCU students, the PSTs in this study represent a distinct social category and provide unique perspectives that most educators (who are disproportionately young, White females) do not (Certo et al., 2010).

The disproportionality of White teachers in the U.S. is, arguably, explained by Ladson-Billings and Tate's (1995) critical race theory (CRT). According to Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995), racism is inextricably connected to American society. Furthermore, educational inequities are inevitable as long as people fail to address race and racism in the larger society directly (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995, p. 47). CRT states that race, class, and gender provide an advantage to White male citizens of European heritage and, consequently, provide a disadvantage those who do not share these demographics. The assumption that all students learn in a way that privileges White, middle-classed ways of knowing creates an incongruence between the home culture and the school culture of minoritized students (Au, 1998; Griffin & James, 2018).

Paris (2012) expanded upon Ladson-Billings' work with his development of culturally sustaining pedagogy (CSP), the explicit goal of which is to "support multilingual and multiculturalism in practice and perspective for students and teachers" (p. 59). Like Ladson-Billings and other practitioners, Paris recognized the inherently political nature of education and felt that cultural pluralism, or inviting different ways of knowing into the classroom, is "a part of the democratic project of schooling" (Paris, 2012, p. 53). As the demographics of American classrooms change, educators must prioritize the sustenance of varying cultures to avoid further marginalization of minoritized students. Teachers who develop multicultural awareness and teach toward social justice will be better equipped to educate diverse student populations (Kindle & Schmidt, 2011).

While CSP guides the instructional attitude of the educator, reader response theory focuses on the ability of literary works to elicit personal emotional responses from the reader (Burbank et al., 2010). According to Rosenblatt (1978), a text's meaning is derived from a transaction between the reader and the written word. During this transaction, the text is a stimulus for the reader who responds according to their feelings, connections, and memories. When implementing reader response theory, teachers are encouraged to validate students' points of view by asking questions like "How do you feel about...?" The present study uses reader response theory to evoke an emotional response from participants using texts based on relevant cultural issues.

The present study also uses critical literacy, which "provides a chance to show students what you value and whose lives you consider important enough to include in your curriculum" (Ryan & Hermann-Wilmarth, 2019, p. 313). While literacy assesses a student's ability to read and comprehend texts, critical literacy also instills the skills to "promote reflection, transformative change, and action," challenging the author's point of view (Norris et al., 2012, p., 59). Haddix and Price-Dennis (2013) conducted a study to determine effective methods to help PSTs introduce multicultural literature in their future classrooms. Participants read both *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* (Chbosky, 1999) and *Push* (Sapphire, 1997). Although both books discussed difficult topics, like crime, violence, drug use, sexual and physical abuse, *Perks* received more positive feedback from the participants. *Push* was perceived as inappropriate and too mature for use in K–12 classrooms. When the teacher educator identified the similarities in content, she also acknowledged that Charlie, the protagonist in *Perks*, was a middle-classed White male; The protagonist in *Push* was a poor, Black female. By reading and juxtaposing both texts, students were able to identify what points of view they were accustomed to encountering in curricula and their level of comfort with texts that speak from varied points of view (Haddix & Price-Dennis, 2013). Additionally, the researcher was able to demonstrate how to use scaffolding to change whose voices were usually legitimized in curricula (Haddix & Price-Dennis, 2013).

Literature Review

Multicultural Texts

Corporate textbooks in conjunction with mandated learning standards do not incorporate the needs of diverse learners (Camangian, 2013). The monotony of the curriculum content increases the difficulty for struggling readers and excludes readers who are not familiar with White, middle-classed, male experiences (Griffin & James, 2018). Minoritized children are often almost invisible. Thus, introducing multicultural texts into classrooms could benefit minoritized students. Suh and Hinton (2015) used multicultural texts in a study with minoritized PSTs to examine their personal responses to the text. They found that the participants engaged in discussions around the text that allowed them to share intimate cultural knowledge in the classroom, validating their ways of knowing.

Suh and Hinton (2015) also categorized participants as reading from insider or outsider perspectives, more commonly referred to as windows and mirrors. Books function as mirrors when students can see themselves represented in the text. By contrast, books serve as windows when students are not represented in the text. Polleck and Epstein (2015) conducted a study with five minoritized, female youth in a book club using multicultural texts. The students read four books, including *Memoirs of a Geisha* (Golden, 1997) and *Zami* (Lorde, 1982). The students, who were predominately Black and Latinx, analyzed the experiences of the Japanese protagonist through their windows, citing how her gendered experience differed from their gendered experiences due to race. When reading Caribbean American author Audre Lorde, one participant found that Lorde inspired her to relate more to her own Trinidadian and Kenyan heritage, and even began using her Kenyan name. Overall, participants found that the multicultural texts allowed the readers to make connections to themselves and their communities to uncover relevant issues (Polleck & Epstein, 2015).

Literature Circles

A critical factor in implementing multicultural texts is the continued discussion of content and contextual features of the books. In a qualitative study of PSTs and in-service teachers, Burbank et al. (2010) evaluated how a book club could contribute to teacher professional development. They found that the discussion-based format created a space where people could safely engage in reflecting on current practices, professional issues, and differing perspectives. Literature circles, like book clubs, create an environment for robust discussion that is not present in individualized reading or instruction. Although researchers use a variety of names to refer to the small literature discussion group, we refer to them as *literature circles* for continuity. Daniels (2001, 2002) described literature circles as small, student-led discussion groups in which members read the same book during the same period. Literature circles use strategies for building literacy at various grade levels, across varying abilities and diverse cultural backgrounds (Herrera & Kidwell, 2018).

The purpose of literature circles is to increase student engagement, understanding, and academic performance. Pittman and Honchell (2014) conducted a study to analyze the effects of literature circles on the reading interest and motivation of struggling readers. They found that approximately 70% of participants believed that discussion groups make reading more fun. Pittman and Honchell (2014) also found that the literature circles increased reading comprehension due to sharing experiences with others. Similarly, Certo et al. (2010) found that in a diverse population of elementary school students, half of the students read more after the implementation of literature circles. Most of the students also expressed an explicit preference for their literature circle book in comparison to their classroom reading (Certo et al., 2010).

For PSTs, literature circles are a learning-teaching method that help to develop the skills to facilitate conversations about social justice and to teach in a multicultural society. As teachers, the role of the PST will be that of facilitator, moderating the discussion and circulating among their student groups (Elhess & Egbert, 2015; Kim, 2017). Literature circles may include other roles like the discussion director, connector, vocabulary enricher, travel tracer, run-through summarizer, and hot seat (Certo et al., 2010). Herrera and Kidwell's (2018) roles incorporated technology, including a project manager (coordinating responsibilities), trend spotter (finds connections between the text and real-life), bias detective (questions the text), graphic designer (illustrates a character, characters, or scene from the text), tweeter (summarizes the text in under 140 characters), and investigative journalist (fact-checker). Through specific roles and responsibilities, literature circles grant students agency.

Preservice Teachers

PSTs can examine themselves and children's literature through multiple components of identity, including but not limited to, race, gender, and socioeconomic status. In a study with 14 PSTs, Wolfe (2010) found that, after instruction, PSTs were more willing to implement critical literacy and aspects of social justice in their first than in their second semester. As White PSTs attempting to teach White students, the participants may have encountered more resistance than PSTs teaching in more diverse populations. Norris et al. (2012) stated that it is difficult for PSTs to navigate the restrictions of the traditional or present curriculum while attempting to adopt critical literacy in their pedagogical practices. Their perceived failure in maintaining aspects of critical literacy demonstrates a need for teacher education programs to equip and support PSTs with the skills to handle opposition.

Fear of cultural differences has been a significant impediment in inculcating multicultural competencies in PSTs. Hunter (2010) found that both Black and White PSTs reported discomfort in discussing issues of race during picture book read-alouds. While White PSTs reported discomfort addressing race-related issues overall, Black PSTs reported discomfort leading literary discussion about race using picture books. Contrarily, according to Wall (2017), PSTs experienced decreased discomfort around multicultural issues after engagement with students. Using pre- and post-surveys

of 23 predominantly White PSTs and 41 diverse fourth-graders, Wall's (2017) findings revealed that PSTs saw less racial and cultural differences in their mostly minoritized students. This included less fear concerning language barrier(s) and higher expectations compared to their previous responses. One solution to the problem of PSTs' fear of racially-charged social discourse is to provide meaningful opportunities for PSTs to practice tackling social justice issues through literary dialogue during methods courses.

Globalization and diversity have called for a renewal within teacher educator preparation programs and K–12 classrooms. In order to engage in more meaningful, equitable teacher education, teacher educators must carefully examine how their identities show up in classrooms. Educator preparation programs need to be prepared to challenge the view that literature is a primarily European or White American enterprise and that history is the account from those groups' perspectives. In order to revolutionize these historically grounded racialized ideologies, teacher educators must commit themselves to advocacy by creating safe spaces for responsive, meaningful discussions about diverse topics that affect students they will one day teach. As researchers and, for the first author, also as a teacher educator, this meant digging into our own pedagogies and understandings—and the realization that those pedagogies are deeply grounded in identity, context, and social justice. Working from the understanding that teacher educator identity is shaped by background and belief system (Skerrett, 2011), the first author implemented literature circles into the curriculum with the purpose of exploring how the pedagogies, efficacy, and identities of PSTs intersect when multicultural, race-related texts are introduced into the curriculum.

There were three goals for implementing the literature circles as a method to discuss more difficult subjects: to teach PSTs to learn how to work with students from different cultural, racial, religious, and linguistic backgrounds, to apply culturally responsive pedagogic theory in real-life classrooms, and to foster a community of recreational readers. Literature circles allow people to engage in socially constructed, critical understandings of multicultural texts by working directly with peers in literary discussion groups and building community amongst themselves. During a time of rapidly changing classroom landscapes in the U.S., teacher education programs must consider public school curricular, pedagogic, and demographic intricacies.

The present research examines and seeks to determine the efficacy of incorporating multicultural texts into literature circles as determined by HBCU PSTs. More specifically, what contribution can an analysis of PSTs' discourse in literature circles make toward the creation of an analytic framework for addressing social justice issues using multicultural literature? What level of self-efficacy do PSTs experience in reflecting on their abilities to facilitate literary discussions about racial and social justice? Do PSTs believe that multicultural literature circles are effective ways to teach reading in the elementary classroom?

Method

Participants

A convenience sample of participants was selected from students enrolled in the RED3000 *Teaching Reading* course from 2014–2018. Of those participants, 88% were Black, 8% were Latinx, and 5% were White; 95% percent of participants were female, and the remaining 5% percent were male ($N = 60$; see Appendix A). Most participants were Elementary Education majors (89%); 11% were Early Childhood Education majors. Six participants were selected for further interview based upon their stated interest during the end of semester surveys.

Design

The present study was conducted at an HBCU College of Education (COE), located in the Southeast region of the U.S. The COE houses four departments (Educational Leadership and Counseling; Elementary Education; Health, Physical Education, and Recreation; and Secondary Education, Technology Education, and Foundations) with ten bachelor's degree programs, three master's degree programs, and one doctorate program. This COE was founded on four principles: commitment to social justice, collaboration and strategic partnerships, clinical practice, and integration of digital media. Like many other HBCUs, this institution was founded as a teacher's college, and its mission is to produce informed, proactive, competent, and reflective practitioners to serve in educational institutions. HBCUs are essential in educating first-generation college students (Toldson, 2016). Furthermore, this study presents a unique opportunity because over 90% of education majors at this university are first-generation, Black college students, differing from the predominately White, middle-class teaching force.

In RED3000 *Teaching Reading*, students investigate their social identities and their social identity formation to see how they “show up” in the classroom. This study examines RED3000 specifically because it is a required course for students matriculating through the university's Elementary and Early Childhood Education Programs. Since students typically take this course during their junior year, it is assumed that they have established a foundation of educational pedagogy. The course format includes lectures, discussions, and online components. Furthermore, this course was chosen due to the instructor's unwavering and perennial commitment to implementing the tenets of multicultural education and social justice using literature. The purpose of the course is to instruct teacher candidates on how to design a developmental reading program in the elementary school curriculum. Although the course employs a plethora of diverse experiences to cultivate PSTs' understanding of the cultural and theoretical foundations of reading instruction, we chose to narrow the focus to the literature circle component of the course for this study.

The course is taught by the first author, a faculty member who has earned a doctorate in reading education and is certified by the state department of education to teach reading for kindergarten through 12th grade students. The faculty member has six years of experience teaching K–6 students and 14 years of university teaching experience. This faculty member engages PSTs in an investigation of their understandings, attitudes, and assumptions of the modern multicultural reading classroom.

Data Collection

This research used a mixed-methods approach, employing quantitative data from survey responses and qualitative data from survey responses and follow-up interviews. To initiate the research project, the researcher examined four years of course data and general statistics in the RED3000 course. At the end of each semester represented, the students were contacted via email to evaluate their experiences. There was 100% participation ($N = 60$) on the initial survey responses. Using a loosely adapted 5-point Likert scale, students assessed their experiences with literature circles that contained multicultural literature (Ndemanu, 2012). This allowed the researcher to obtain data on their understanding of and engagement with multicultural literature and social justice in their future classrooms (McMillan & Hearn, 2009). The survey also included an optional open-ended response question, where students could continue in detail if desired. Students indicated their willingness to participate in follow-up interviews as a part of their survey. SurveyMonkey™ online software was used to assure the confidentiality of participants and the integrity of data (See Appendix B).

The first author conducted follow-up interviews with participants who indicated their willingness to elaborate on their survey responses. Participants were asked to provide more details on open-ended responses. The qualitative data served as a supplement to enhance the understandings of the survey

responses. They created a more comprehensive view of the course's social justice impact on the research participants.

Data Analysis

Quantitative methods used in this research included the collection and analysis of students' surveys. Data were analyzed using a simple frequency analysis in Excel. To analyze the qualitative data, we employed interpretative and qualitative methods to explore PSTs' perspectives about the literature circle experiences. The analysis incorporated critical race methodology in that the researchers focused on the discourse of "the racialized, gendered, and class experiences of people of color" (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 24). The participants' experiences and dialogue were critical to this study as the researchers used discourse analysis (Gee, 2014) to examine transcripts of interviews to legitimize their voices, narratives, and paradigms. After transcribing the interviews, the researchers began to code them. The first round of coding included open coding for the broad trends that could be used for categorizing. The first author then used axial coding to connect the themes identified in the interviews.

Findings

Literature Circles Experience

When assessing the PSTs' overall levels of satisfaction with literature circles, participants agreed that it was a pleasant experience. When responding to the prompt, "Participating in literature circles was a positive experience for me," over 90% of the students strongly agreed or agreed. Approximately 8% of participants stated that the experience was not favorable for them. In the follow-up interviews, one participant said,

I enjoyed reading the books. However, it is hard to find time to read for leisure when we have so many assignments due. The literature circle book and my texts for other classes [were] just too much.

Similarly, only approximately 20% of participants strongly agreed with the statement, "Participating in the literature circles did not feel like extra work; it was well integrated into the course."

Despite an overwhelming majority indicating a functional course integration, in a follow-up interview, one participant stated,

I found this activity to be a waste of time. I do not enjoy reading. I do it because I have to do it. The last book I read was in high school and I didn't enjoy it. Reading is just boring and I'm not good at it. [The instructor] did a good job of hyping us up and getting us excited about the books. My group members read the book. I only read the first few chapters.

The course instructor, the first author, was aware of the potential aversion to that additional reading outside of class. As a preemptive measure, and in maintaining the structure of literature circles, participants were allowed to decide the amount of reading they would complete within their groups. While it was not satisfactory for everyone, it did increase the PSTs' breadth of knowledge.

When prompted for their level of agreement with the statement, "Participating in literature circles increased my understanding of the social justice themes embedded in children's literature," over 90% of participants agreed or strongly agreed. Participants indicated in interviews that they made connections between the literature circle component and the course curricula. When prompted to respond to the statement, "My professor explained how participation in literature circles connected to social justice discussions and its importance to me as a teacher," over 60% of students strongly agreed, and an additional 28% of students agreed. Likewise, one of the most definite indications from the qualitative data was that the literature circle component seems to add support for their reading

instructional pedagogies. One student wrote, “This experience has truly opened my eyes to different ways of teaching reading, not just with textbooks, but with chapter books that are relevant to current events.”

Multiculturalism and Social Justice

Thirty percent of participants strongly agreed that “reading and discussing authentic literature in groups can shed light on issues regarding race, gender, language, and social class in America,” consistent with the current literature on diversifying classroom culture. An additional 65% of participants agreed with the previous statement. Most of the participants believed that the course exposed PSTs to diverse literature and its ability to promote social activism in the classroom, which is one of the course’s primary goals. Ninety-five percent of participants agreed that the literature circle component of the course was crucial in shaping their perspective on using literature in the classroom and how it can promote social justice. A few participants did not feel that literature circles enhanced their involvement in promoting social justice, as evidenced by this quote:

I just don’t really care about social justice. I mean, it’s not that I don’t care, but I’m not really interested in social justice. I don’t have time to read books other than my textbook. I might have liked it if I’d had time to read it. I know you will say “it’s only 40 pages,” but it’s also not always easy to find time after work and school to read for fun.

Time constraints, lack of empathy, and general disinterest were cited as contributing factors to negative feelings about literature circles’ impact.

One of the essential questions in the survey asked students to consider how, if at all, the literature circle component of the reading methods course helped them develop positive attitudes for working with diverse populations. Of the respondents, 30% of PSTs strongly agreed that the literature circle component had positively impacted them, and an additional 65% agreed with the statement. The 5% disagreement may be attributed to varying factors, such as student age, disinterest in reading, the subject matter of the texts, and lack of empathy. The 95% of the PSTs, who thought they benefited professionally from the literature circles, were encouraged by the “extra level of understanding” they developed as a result of reading the texts and reflecting on the themes. Interviews indicated that they felt the depth of discourse would be beneficial when working with students in their classrooms one day:

I believe I can do this—I mean conducting literature circles in my classroom one day. This seems like something students would really enjoy. I’m thankful that we did them in class first so that I’ll be comfortable running them in my own classroom.

Comfort

One of the general themes that also emerged during the analysis was self-efficacy or something we simply termed “comfort.” The narratives revealed that many of the PSTs had not previously read many of the texts, neither had they engaged in student-led, reflective conversations about them. But, at the end of semester evaluation, several PSTs expressed a level of comfort in discussing issues around racial tensions with elementary-aged children using specific texts. Of note, a majority of the PSTs identified as Black and, statistically speaking, are most often placed in Title I schools where most of the students are Black or Latinx. Responded one PST, “I don’t believe I would have a problem discussing current events with my students. No. The Black students, and even some White students, I worked with before are very honest and open about race.” PSTs revealed that their own community and educational backgrounds contributed to their comfort levels in working with and talking to students about race relations. One PST stated, however, that it would be “odd talking about race in a classroom where most of my students are White.”

Future Classrooms

Many of the narratives revealed a desire among PSTs to help future students understand the world in which they live by introducing students to multicultural texts and having conversations that deepen students' understandings. These conversations cultivated community among the PSTs in their class and could cultivate community in future classrooms. Several PSTs expressed the value of developing projects that coincided with the books. For example, one PST wrote,

I actually enjoyed coming up with a poem about the Black Panthers. It really helped me learn more about them. I honestly didn't know who the Black Panthers were before reading this book. You can learn a lot from children's literature.

Another student noted, "Our Miss Patty Cake activity was fun to develop. We presented it at a conference to classroom teachers, and they were very excited about participating. Some even said they would use it in their classrooms." The narratives revealed a focus on identifying ways in which PSTs could use extension activities, as well as social justice themes, to address community problems and develop students' interest in becoming part of the solution.

Limitations

While research is extensive on the value of using literature circles in elementary classrooms (Clarke & Holwadel, 2007; Daniels, 2002; Long & Gove, 2003), less is published about its benefit in teacher education courses, increasing the difficulty to secure more robust funding in this area. Some additional factors that impacted the study were a decrease in enrollment in the course between 2015 and 2018, limiting the number of respondents, and the size and variability of the literature circle groups. Furthermore, some of the responses of PSTs indicated their limited exposure to trade books and recreational reading, contributing to their decreased reading stamina and interest. While this project intended to expose students to a wide variety of children's literature, PSTs reported difficulty meeting course standards designed to coincide with state licensure examinations while also making time for the activities and readings associated with the course.

Implications

Although the research presented here is limited, it does suggest that the reading education course with an embedded literature circle component is advantageous for teacher development programs to serve diverse student populations better. Consistent with their own minoritized identities, the vast majority of PSTs had experience or interaction with working with a variety of cultures and students from low-income backgrounds before taking this course. During the course, they were able to develop less apprehension about their abilities to facilitate social activism and literary discussions using literature circles as a foundation.

Ideally, the literature circle component of the reading education methods course would increase the number of PSTs interested in teaching in diverse settings and prepare them to become culturally responsive teachers of reading in various settings (Gay, 2010). While the course demonstrably enhances PSTs' perceptions of their capacity for facilitating literature circles with multicultural texts, more research is necessary to determine the extent to which they will implement it. Without a longitudinal component, there is no way to tell if this is an unplanned consequence of PSTs' perceptions of themselves as service providers or a more substantial long-term commitment to social activism and equitable educational outcomes.

What is clear is that the literature circle component of the course connects PSTs, adds to their repertoire of educational experiences, and increases their knowledge of how literature can be used within the classroom to meet a variety of reading standards. PSTs in this study developed a more dynamic understanding of why some students enjoy reading and how to make book selection an

option for their students in future classrooms. It would be beneficial to have longitudinal research to examine PSTs' cultural competency skills beyond the course and into their teaching careers. PSTs also indicated an ability to make connections between the texts and the communities in which they teach, a fact that may be contributed mostly to the cultural makeup of the PSTs since they are predominately Black and first-generation students. As Black HBCU students, these PSTs can diversify the teaching force. Additionally, as they are most likely to work in "high-risk" schools with "underserved populations," it is essential that they are equipped with the skills necessary to perform and inform students. More long-term research is needed to understand better how PSTs view their own cultural identities and realities and how that manifests in the classroom.

Teacher educators need to understand the multifaceted issues that face PSTs as they become culturally responsive practitioners. Lack of reading skill and consistency were recurrent themes among those who had an aversion to reading for leisure, which could limit their scope in the classroom. Thus, students should be exposed to a variety of children's literature and textbooks throughout teacher preparation programs to benefit from the experience.

Conclusion

The goal of using literature circles in the reading methods undergraduate course was not merely to have PSTs read children's literature, but also to broaden their pedagogical knowledge of cross-curricular practices in elementary classrooms. PSTs were able to add to their breadth of knowledge about children's literature and social justice issues. In our current state of social and political unrest, it is increasingly important for teachers to be able to address social issues with students, especially in a way that empowers those populations that have been systemically and historically marginalized (Johnson, 2018). Data from class discussions revealed that PSTs started the literature circles with limited knowledge and numerous trepidations. Their apprehensions, subsided considerably as they gradually became more familiar with their groups, the texts, and the roles in which each of them partook in the literature circles, which is consistent with pre-existing data (Wall, 2017). Literature circles are one method to create more efficacious, confident teachers to diversify the workforce in the U.S. Future research should focus on longitudinal studies to determine the effects of literature circles in beginning teachers' classrooms.

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Appendix A

Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	Gender	Race/Ethnicity	Classification	Major	Interviewed
AE	Female	White	Junior	ECE	
AB	Female	Latinx	Junior	ECE	X
AJ	Female	Black	Senior	ECE	
AN	Female	Black	Junior	ECE	
AO	Female	Black	Junior	ECE	
AV	Female	Black	Junior	ECE	
BT	Female	Black	Junior	ECE	
AF	Female	White	Junior	EE	
AG	Female	White	Junior	EE	
AA	Male	Latinx	Junior	EE	
AC	Female	Latinx	Junior	EE	
AD	Female	Latinx	Junior	EE	X
AH	Male	Black	Junior	EE	
AI	Male	Black	Junior	EE	
AK	Female	Black	Junior	EE	X
AL	Female	Black	Junior	EE	
AM	Female	Black	Junior	EE	
AP	Female	Black	Junior	EE	
AQ	Female	Black	Junior	EE	
AR	Female	Black	Junior	EE	
AS	Female	Black	Junior	EE	
AT	Female	Black	Junior	EE	
AU	Female	Black	Junior	EE	
AW	Female	Black	Junior	EE	
AX	Female	Black	Junior	EE	
AY	Female	Black	Senior	EE	
AZ	Female	Black	Junior	EE	
BA	Female	Black	Junior	EE	
BB	Female	Black	Junior	EE	
BC	Female	Black	Junior	EE	

Appendix A (Continued)

Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	Gender	Race/Ethnicity	Classification	Major	Interviewed
BD	Female	Black	Junior	EE	
BE	Female	Black	Junior	EE	
BF	Female	Black	Junior	EE	
BG	Female	Black	Junior	EE	
BH	Female	Black	Junior	EE	
BI	Female	Black	Junior	EE	
BJ	Female	Black	Junior	EE	
BK	Female	Black	Junior	EE	
BL	Female	Black	Junior	EE	
BM	Female	Black	Junior	EE	
BN	Female	Black	Junior	EE	
BO	Female	Black	Junior	EE	
BP	Female	Black	Junior	EE	
BQ	Female	Black	Junior	EE	
BR	Female	Black	Junior	EE	
BS	Female	Black	Junior	EE	
BU	Female	Black	Junior	EE	
BV	Female	Black	Junior	EE	X
BW	Female	Black	Junior	EE	X
BX	Female	Black	Junior	EE	
BY	Female	Black	Junior	EE	
BZ	Female	Black	Junior	EE	
CA	Female	Black	Junior	EE	X
CB	Female	Black	Junior	EE	
CC	Female	Black	Junior	EE	
CD	Female	Black	Junior	EE	
CE	Female	Black	Junior	EE	
CF	Female	Black	Junior	EE	
CG	Female	Black	Junior	EE	
CH	Female	Black	Junior	EE	

ECE = Early Childhood Education; EE = Elementary Education

Appendix B

End-of-Course Survey RED3000 Teaching Reading

Race: Black|White|Latinx|Other

Sex: Male|Female|Other

Classification: Junior|Senior

Likert Scale Survey

5–Strongly Agree

4–Agree

3–Neither Agree nor Disagree

2–Disagree

1–Strongly Disagree

Participating in literature circles increased my understanding of the social justice themes embedded in children’s literature.

Participating in the literature circles did not feel like extra work; it was well integrated into the course.

My professor explained how participation in literature circles connected to social justice discussions and its importance to me as a teacher.

Reading and discussing authentic literature in groups can shed light on issues regarding race, gender, language, and social class in America.

Participating in literature circles was a positive experience for me.

Open-Ended Questions

Did participating in literature circles shift your perspective on using literature in the classroom to promote social justice? Why or why not?

Did participating in literature circles help you to develop more positive attitudes for teaching reading to more diverse populations of students? Why or why not?

What did you enjoy most about participating in literature circles?

What aspect of literature circles did you enjoy least?

Would you be willing to participate in a follow-up interview with the instructor?