DE GRUYTER MOUTON

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Emotions, positive comparisons, and unexamined assumptions in novice U.S. teachers' perspectives on English learners

Abstract: This article focuses on a study of the decision-making and patterns of discourse of 21 novice teachers as they engaged with, reflected on, and discussed school-based scenarios about English learners. Employing qualitative content analysis, researchers explore patterns related to intention, bias, and criticality in participants' discourse. Participants avoided engaging with scenarios where solutions could not be enacted solely within their classroom, expressing hesitation about being disruptive to the school ecosystem and fear of conflict with colleagues, superiors, or parents. They focused on immediate solutions but rarely endeavored to identify the underlying assumptions that compelled characters to act in biased ways. While participants expressed awareness of their own privileged social positionings, they often struggled to connect their social identities to the underlying assumptions that informed their reactions to the scenarios. Notably, participants often used language that exonerated them from the judgment being cast on a character. Additionally, participants repeatedly racialized social identities unrelated to race and expressed distrust of students speaking a language they could not understand. These findings offer insight regarding novice teachers' intentions and (mis)understandings when working with English learners and offer important implications for teacher educators' as they prepare pre-service teachers to respond to such learners.

Keywords: critical literacy; culturally responsive pedagogy; English learners; teacher education

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1 Introduction

The United States (U.S.) student population is more diverse than ever (Carrillo 2022), yet the corpus of educators continues to be comprised of monolingual, middle-class white women who are often ill-prepared to support culturally and linguistically diverse classrooms (Garcia et al. 2010; National Center for Education Statistics 2022a). This disparity coupled with increasingly polarized national discourse on issues that interest a diverse student body (e.g. anti-Black racism, anti-immigrant views, anti-semitism, Islamophobia, LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning, and more) identities and patriarchal understandings of traditional gender roles), bears psychological and educational consequences for students with marginalized social identities (Mutz 2018; Public Religion Research Institute 2023). The last several years have been particularly marked by anti-immigrant sentiment and linguistic discrimination, be it rolled back protections for migrants and asylum seekers (National Immigrant Justice Center 2020), anti-Asian racism during the COVID-19 pandemic (Huang et al. 2023), or unprovoked attacks on people speaking a language other than English (e.g. Cross 2019; Marcelo 2020).

While there is an ever-growing body of literature focusing on preparing teachers to work with diverse learners, more research examining teacher perceptions of language learners and L2 users is still needed (Allexsaht-Snider et al. 2013; Blanchard and Muller 2015). This study strives to meet this need by examining the decision-making and patterns of discourse of 21 novice teachers as they engaged with, reflected on, and discussed school-based scenarios about English learners (ELs). This examination provides insight regarding teachers' intentions and (mis)understandings when working with ELs that can help educate teachers to respond to such learners.

2 Literature review

Below we review what is known about teachers' knowledge of and perspectives about linguistically diverse students; the importance of deepening our collective understanding of teachers' knowledge and perspectives; and what extant research tells us about the challenges of preparing teachers with critical sociocultural knowledge.

2.1 Preservice and inservice teacher perspectives on ELs

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2022b), ELs accounted for 5.1 million students during the 2019–2020 school year. And while some ELs are immigrants and newcomers to the country, the majority of ELs enrolled in U.S. schools are native citizens (Zong and Batalova 2015). Research has suggested that

teachers' negative perceptions of ELs impact teachers' ability to meet students' needs (Pettit 2011) and the quality of literacy instruction that students receive (McWayne et al. 2012). Earlier work has revealed that preservice teachers often feel unprepared to teach culturally diverse students (Kolano and King 2015). They may describe themselves as "colorblind" (i.e. someone who does not see skin color or race) and instead link low student achievement to cultural deficit models, believing that deficiencies in home environments are the reason for a learner's poor school performance (Nieto and Bode 2012).

While teachers' perceptions of students' knowledge and academic abilities tend to be fairly accurate (Jussim and Harber 2005; Ready and Wright 2011), accuracy is lower and bias is often higher when teachers do not share the same background characteristics of students and when students are from marginalized groups (McKown and Weinstein 2008; Ready and Wright 2011). Research suggests that teachers do tend to have lower expectations for ELs (Katz 1999; Walker et al. 2004) and have different expectations based on certain characteristics of the population. For example, Ready and Wright (2011) found that teachers often underestimated academic abilities of students who did not speak English at home.

How teachers position themselves as educators is a crucial component of how they view and interact with culturally and linguistically diverse students. For example, Yoon (2008) found that teachers who viewed their role as one where they are responsible for helping *all* learners often have more inclusive teaching practices and welcome ELs in the classroom. Conversely, educators who view themselves in more rigid, one-dimensional roles (e.g. general education teacher or content specific teacher), may not change instructional practices to accommodate students' language learning needs.

Guler (2020) asserted that there were four common issues among educators with negative perceptions of ELs: (1) lack of appropriate amount of time to help ELs or address all their needs; (2) limited training on how to work with ELs; (3) improper instructional materials; and (4) lack of knowledge about language learning and language acquisition. Even amongst teachers with positive perceptions of ELs, there was often frustration and anxiety (O'Brien 2011). Addressing these issues is urgent, as ELs are the fastest-growing group of students in grades K-12 (National Education Association 2020) and linguistic oppression in the classroom is associated with trauma responses in children (Klingner et al. 2006; Sangalang et al. 2019).

2.2 Preparing teachers with critical sociocultural knowledge

We define criticality as the ability to understand how power, oppression, and privilege manifest in daily lives and texts. It requires a suspension of self – of one's ways

of seeing, being, and reading the world – to consider the ideologies and perspectives of those with different social identities (Muhammad 2018). Critical teachers understand the historical, institutional, and structural elements that maintain oppression. They hone their tools for disrupting and dismantling inequitable practices and systems to ultimately transform the world for the better (Ginwright and James 2002).

Our aspirations to prepare critical, socioculturally informed educators align with Brown's (2013) framework of *humanizing critical sociocultural knowledge.* As outlined by Brown (2013), sociocultural knowledge refers to social, cultural, economic, political, and historical knowledge about schools and society. Being critical of such knowledge includes acting flexibly across contexts, acknowledging what students bring to school, and interrogating and disrupting inequalities and deficit discourses within and beyond the curriculum.

Looking across literature on multicultural education (Banks 1994), culturally relevant pedagogies (Ladson-Billings 1995), culturally responsive teaching (Gay 2002), funds of knowledge (Moll et al. 1992), critical literacy (Freire 1974; Janks 2010; Luke 2012), cultural sustaining pedagogies (Harman and Burke 2020; Paris and Alim 2014), critical language pedagogies (Baker-Bell 2020; Gebhard 2019), and racial literacies (Price-Dennis and Sealey-Ruiz 2021), we can glean practices that build teachers' critical sociocultural knowledge (Mosley Wetzel et al. 2019). Common practices include:
– Having teachers examining one's own identities and subsequent life experiences,
– Having imagined experiences regarding students (e.g. teaching hypothetical lessons or hypothesizing responses to a variety of scenarios),
– Reading and discussing professional resources,
– Reading and discussing diverse children's or adolescents' literature,
– Exploring inequalities through inquiry,
– Working with students directly to learn about their backgrounds, and
– Studying language enactments through research methods like discourse analysis.

Scholars agree that the above practices cannot be standalone experiences or ones that take place in only one teacher education course as teachers need to engage multiple experiences across contexts to grow in their critical sociocultural knowledge (Carter Andrews 2021; Ticknor et al. 2020).

Researchers highlighted effective practices in preparing teachers with critical sociocultural knowledge. For instance, Vaughn and Kuby (2019) found through autoethnography, teachers examined their histories, beliefs, experiences, and, as a result, their privilege. Rymes (2002: 447) found that preservice teachers benefit from pedagogy "that emphasizes learner agency but also encourages an understanding of

the situated, historical, and linguistic limitations and affordances" as a framework to interpret their teaching experiences. Ticknor et al. (2020) acknowledged that modeling lessons for teachers, and having teachers reflect on the lessons, helped teachers think about new possibilities for teaching about cultural awareness and affirming students' lived experiences, some teachers seemed ready to enact what they learned. Skerrett et al. (2015) reported online discussions about professional texts built teachers' knowledge of sociocultural influences on learning. Chisholm et al. (2019) suggested participation in critical literature circles served as an opportunity for teachers to engage in critical talk. Simon (2015) found critical inquiry built solidarity among teachers and helped them to mobilize to change inequitable school norms. Souto-Manning and Price-Dennis (2012) highlighted the way teachers were able to draw on students' linguistic resources in the classroom through play. Multiple studies have found that discourse analysis and other functional language analytical tools helps teachers to think more deeply about their practices beyond the local level (Achugar et al. 2007; Aguirre-Muñoz et al. 2008; Fenwick et al. 2014; Gebhard et al. 2011; Vetter et al. 2018).

Despite efforts to engage teachers in practices to build their critical sociocultural knowledge some barriers persist: neutrality, deficit thinking, refusal, and avoidance. Mosley Wetzel et al. (2019) review highlighted a "universality" among teachers. When examining oneself and experiences, teachers often saw themselves as similar as those from other cultures. Similarly, Chisholm et al. (2019) found teachers, in response to students' writing, responded in "neutral" ways. Even in imagined experiences, teachers were likely to take up teaching practices that allowed them to take a neutral stance (Dávila and Barnes 2017). Mosley Wetzel (2020: 309) attributed this to "pervasive tendency to identify universality in US culture and schooling".

When engaged in practices to build sociocultural knowledge, teachers often used deficit discourses, reifying the very language such practices set out to disrupt (Cook et al. 2022). Teachers drew on deficit discourses when discussing differences between themselves and students (e.g. Monroe and Ruan 2018). When reading literature about cultures unlike their own, teachers participated in "othering" cultures (Hammett and Bainbridge 2009).

Some findings suggest teachers were resistant to drawing on students' backgrounds altogether (Mosley Wetzel et al. 2019). Teachers imagined institutional barriers they might encounter, and, therefore, refused to take up culturally relevant resources and teaching practices. Some teachers denied forms of discrimination in education (Skerrett et al. 2015). Even when teachers engaged in culturally relevant practices in their coursework, they did not always when they moved into teaching because of institutional constraints (Coulter et al. 2007).

Most recently, Cook et al. (2022) found that when engaged in critical conversations, teachers often try to avoid controversy through surface-level talk that they refer to as "protective talk" as a way of "shielding". Their analysis found shielding behaviors included interpreting, posing questions, and drawing on personal experiences. Cook et al. (2022: 4) suggested, "using protective talk moves to shield oneself from creating discomfort in a community of peers is a symptom of educational niceness and whiteness and thwarts attempts of educating toward social justice". Mosley Wetzel (2020) also recognized it may be difficult for teachers to embrace and address inequities in schools because of how whiteness is normalized in society.

This review of literature provides insights into effective practices that help build teachers' critical sociocultural knowledge, barriers that persist and why, whiteness, and niceness. We, however, do not know what topics teachers are likely or not to shield themselves from and why. Such information may help to educate teachers to work with culturally and linguistically diverse students. In this study we ask: How do novice teachers' responses to school-based scenarios reflect their perspectives on ELs?

3 Research design

3.1 Research context

This study occurred in a graduate course that is offered as part of a Master of Science in Education (M.S.Ed.) at a medium sized comprehensive college in the Northeast U.S. The program is fully online and asynchronous. It focuses on preparing literacy teachers who understand the role of literacy in an equitable society. The course in which this study was situated is required for all graduates and foregrounds culturally sustaining and critical literacy pedagogies. Each week of the course, students were assigned readings focused on different social identity markers, or markers that inform an individual's perceived membership in a social category (e.g. dis/ability, socio-economic status, language, religion). To complement assigned theoretical readings and reinforce theory to praxis connections, students were prompted to select from a range of scripted scenarios related to educational (in)equality written by Gorski and Pothini (2018) and then discuss their response with a small group of peers via an online forum. Students were asked to justify their choice, including identifying whether or how the scenario connected to their own social identities, to consider their potential biases and those of the characters, to try on multiple perspectives, and to brainstorm equitable outcomes.

3.2 Participants

Students in two sections of the graduate course (n = 43) were solicited to have their data collected; 21 consented. Brittany Adams (the first author) was the instructor for the course under study. She did not solicit participants until after final grades were posted at the conclusion of the semester. This was done to mitigate pressure that students might feel to consent to the study to please their instructor.

According to self-reported demographic data (see Table 1),[1] all 21 participants were women, native English speakers, and born in the U.S. Seventeen participants identified as white, three identified as white and Jewish, and one identified as Black and Haitian. All participants were 25 years of age or younger and their classroom teaching experience ranged from zero to three years. This participant pool is consistent with enrollment demographic data for teacher preparation programs at

Table 1: Participant demographic data.

Name	Pronouns	Race/ethnicity	Language(s)	National origin
Delilah	She/her	White	English	United States
Desirae	She/her	White	English	United States
Madelyn	She/her	White	English	United States
Miranda	She/her	White	English	United States
Leah	She/her	White	English	United States
Rachel	She/her	White	English	United States
Holly	She/her	White	English	United States
Caitlin	She/her	White	English	United States
Ivy	She/her	White	English	United States
Jordan	She/her	White/Jewish	English	United States
Avery	She/her	White	English	United States
Grace	She/her	White	English	United States
Josie	She/her	White/Jewish	English	United States
Nina	She/her	White	English	United States
Allison	She/her	White	English	United States
Simone	She/her	Black/Haitian	English	United States
Natasha	She/her	White	English	United States
Naomi	She/her	White	English	United States
Lexie	She/her	White	English	United States
Amelia	She/her	White	English	United States
Emily	She/her	White/Jewish	English	United States

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1 Note that participant names in Table 1 are pseudonyms.

the university and with national data on K-12 educators (National Center for Education Statistics 2022a).

3.3 Methods

This qualitative case study was grounded in the constructivist research paradigm. Case studies are unique in that they are less of a methodological choice than "a choice of what is to be studied" (Stake 2005: 443). The *what* of a case study must be an intrinsically bounded system (Yin 2014). The graduate course functions as the bounded system, given that our interests relate to effective approaches to preparing socioculturally informed teachers. Our research is driven by the aforementioned question. Therefore, we engaged in qualitative content analysis (Schreier 2012) of participants' forum posts. This is an appropriate methodological approach given that we sought to identify patterns of discourse that would help us understand the intentions of both individuals and the larger participant pool, especially as they related to bias and criticality.

3.4 Researcher positionalities

Three of the four researchers involved in this study, Brittany, Elizabeth, and Tess, are white cisgender women who are U.S. citizens and speak English as their first language. One researcher, Sunny, is an Asian cisgender woman who immigrated to the U.S. at the age of 13. Her first language is Chinese. We recognize that developing critical sociocultural knowledge within our students and ourselves is an ongoing process. We believe that engaging with critical texts and reading through a critical lens (Skerrett et al. 2015) is an essential instructional step toward effectively 'reading the world,' or understanding the systems of power operating in texts and using that understanding to disrupt and empower (Freire and Macedo 1987). We believe that reading the world is a social imperative necessitated by a current climate of regressive politics that sustain and reproduce inequities for minoritized students and result in opportunity and outcome discrepancies (Barton and Tan 2020).

3.5 Data sources and analysis

This study examined participants' forum data on one topic: language. This topic was selected because it occurred several weeks into the semester, after students had been

through a few rounds of reading and responding to scenarios and norms were established.

The unit of analysis was a participants' complete post to the online forum, yielding 21 units. To establish our coding frame (Schreier 2012), we first identified our broad coding dimensions directly related to our research questions: scenario selection, justification, and perspectives. We then identified some inductive subcategories within each broad dimension based on what we expected to find in the data (e.g. How does the scenario relate to the participant? What solution(s) does the participant suggest?). We left space during our pilot coding to allow inductive subcategories to emerge.

For inter-coder reliability and to test the coding frame, the research team pilot coded several data units as a whole group. Once we were confident in our consistency and the coding frame, pairs of researchers coded separately and met to negotiate and confirm interpretations. Afterward, the entire research team met to review initial codes and discuss contested interpretations. We then began collapsing codes per subcategory (e.g. intention, bias, criticality, solution) into meaningful patterns and writing descriptive memos to identify typologies and outliers within each selected scenario.

4 Findings

The findings below explore participants' decision-making and patterns present in their discourse as they engaged with, reflected on, and discussed school-based scenarios about language learners (see Table 2 for selection overview). We intentionally organized the findings by scenario to contextualize participant data. In the discussion that follows, we draw conclusions about their decisions and patterns, and we provide implications for practice and research.

Table 2: Scenario selection overview.

Language scenarios	How often selected
English-only policy	11
Student translator	7
Family night	2
Testing task force	1

4.1 An English-only policy

More than half of the participants chose to discuss a scenario about implementing an English-only policy in the classroom (n = 11). In this scenario, a teaching faculty meeting devolves into complaints about students' use of languages other than English in the classroom. Several teachers complain that home language use is distracting to other learners and potentially inappropriate because teachers cannot know what students are saying. One teacher blames the parents of such children, accusing them of not prioritizing learning English. Other teachers defend the importance of home languages for learning. The principal suggests that the school implement an English-only policy during classroom time and proposes brainstorming ways to address noncompliance.

A few participants were motivated to discuss this scenario because they worked with a high number of ELs. Jordan wrote, "I work in a district where most of the students speak Spanish and many are English Language Learners", while Allison shared, "I only speak English, and this is the opposite for a majority of my class". Notably, these participants consistently positioned their own practice with ELs in a positive light, such as Allison's comment, "I personally do not have a problem with my students speaking their home language in my classroom, but I have colleagues who do". Other participants reported limited experience with ELs and wished to discuss the scenario so that they might be better prepared to respond to such a situation in the future. As Caroline put it, "Unfortunately, this may be something I encounter in the district I am currently employed in".

Most of the participants wrote in opposition to an English-only classroom policy. Several expressed concerns about the "alarmingly harmful policy". The same participants frequently identified myriad ways in which ELs benefit from speaking their native language in the classroom, such as "feeling accepted", "motivation to learn", scaffolding, "understanding of new concepts", and strengthening "home and community connections". Caitlin said, "It's the teacher's responsibility to scaffold students using their native language […] There are numerous strategies out there and services that can be provided in order to help. An English-only policy is a lazy solution". Simone reminded her peers that marginalized social identities don't exist in isolation and that ELs may be experiencing other hardships. She shared a story about her cousin who came to stay with Simone's family in the U.S. when an earthquake struck Haiti. She posited that "an English-only policy would have been an additional stressor on top of the trauma from the earthquake". Madelyn interpreted the decision as, "stripping ELL students of their freedom", while Natasha felt that the teachers in favor of an English-only policy were demonstrating a bias for English-speaking students by characterizing ELs speaking their home language as a distraction for other learners.

Other participants were reluctant to condemn the teachers' behavior in the scenario, arguing that "teaching ELL students can pose some challenges". Caroline stated, "I work in 5th grade, and I can see how not knowing what students are saying would be more concerning in the older grades. It can be uncomfortable to have to trust a student to translate when you don't actually know what they are saying". Allison shared, "I do agree that many of my lower performing students do not have the same support at home and language is definitely a barrier". Lexie believed some burden of learning should fall to parents and caregivers. She wrote, "I tend to agree that parents should learn the language themselves to help the children at home". However, Lexie subsequently wrote, "I have never been in a situation where my language is the minority. I cannot begin to imagine what it is like, and am not qualified to comment".

A pattern that emerged was the use of emotive language or descriptions of participants' emotional responses when reading the scenario, such as "this pulled at my heartstrings", "this really upset me", and "I was shocked". Allison diverged from her peers to discuss her discomfort with discourse focused on developing a teaching force that better reflects the diversity of learners. She wrote:

> We hear frequently that students should be taught by people who look like them and speak like them and this can be discouraging as a passionate white educator working in a district where students' home life, language, and social identities look very different than mine. I feel so strongly about celebrating my students' cultures […] We should really be asking if the language policy is responsive for both students AND teachers?

Some participants seemed to assume that language differences were innately tied with other marginalized social identities, specifically race. This seemingly subconscious association recurred in the data, such as with Allison's question, "How can I adjust my instruction for my students who look very different from me?" The provided scenario did not describe how any of the teachers or students looked, yet Allison's question focused on visual markers of difference rather than the described social identity.

4.2 Student translator

Most of the remaining participants (n = 7) chose to discuss a scenario where the teacher asked a student's sister to interpret while he spoke to their mother. In this scenario, a teacher flags down the mother of a student, Maria, as she is picking up her children at the end of the day. Because Maria's mother is still learning English, the teacher asks Maria's sister, Marcella, to translate for him. He does not trust Maria to accurately translate, given that he wishes to discuss her behavior in class. As the

conversation concludes, the teacher praises Marcella for her excellent English and translation skills, leaving Maria and her mother uncomfortable.

A few participants recalled a similar experience. Delilah commented, "As one of six children, I felt it was highly inappropriate to have Maria's sister translate for a discussion with her mother about Maria's behavior". Miranda shared how she committed a similar misstep as a substitute teacher and felt guilty for asking one student to translate for another. Other participants chose this scenario because they exclusively spoke English and wanted to reflect on how they would behave were they in the teacher's position.

Participants were unified in their censure of the teacher's decision to ask a sibling to translate. Delilah observed, "When two siblings in a family have different experiences at school and relationships with teachers, putting the one who appears to have an easier time at school in that sort of powerful position over the other seems like an easy way to build resentment between the sisters […]?" Participants pointed out that schools and districts provide various services for communicating with caregivers who do not speak English. Amelia argued for "a formal meeting with an interpreter", Josie echoed that the teacher should have "requested a translator to be present during the meeting", and Miranda proposed "emailing Maria's mother in her native language about his concerns and offering a translator for discussing the matter in person". Grace was the only participant who noted the lack of a preexisting teacher-family relationship as a potential problem. She wrote, "I would have ensured a relationship with Maria and her family that included positive meetings with the family where the topic of discussion was not only negative".

This scenario stirred up discussion about trusting students to accurately translate information. As with the previous scenario, some felt wariness was only natural, such as with Avery's statement, "I get the thought process behind thinking that Maria might not tell the truth when interpreting based on the conversation that was going to be had". Rachel offered up a classroom anecdote in support of her distrust of student translation, saying:

> I have a student in my fifth-grade classroom who is the only member of his family who speaks English. I sent a note home with this student asking the parents if they wanted to have a parent-teacher conference. He told me that his parents were not interested, and I had no reason not to believe him. However, his parents actually ended up going into the main office to ask for a conference in the middle of the school day, which was very disruptive. They do not have an email address or phone number listed in our database, so sending notes home is genuinely the only way I can communicate with them. This student has trouble with organization, so I feel as though the things that are supposed to make it home don't always end up doing so. And I worry, like in this case and my personal experience, of the potential of my message being translated the wrong way on purpose.

When a participant asked, "What made Mr. Clark think that Marcella would not lie as well?" other participants suggested that Mr. Clark trusted Marcella more than her sister because she spoke more proficient English and performed better in school. Delilah posited that, "by complimenting Marcella on her English in front of Maria and her mother, Mr. Clark might have insulted them by suggesting that Marcella's English skills made her superior to them in some way". Amelia also felt that "Mr. Clark telling Marcella that her English was 'wonderful' seemed to be an unintended microaggression".

As with the last scenario, participants shared their emotional response to the scenario. Grace commented, "This scenario stood out to me because of how shocking it was," and Josie wrote, "This shocked me while reading". We also continued to observe participants racializing differences in language. As part of her selection justification, Rachel shared, "I grew up going to school with predominantly white students where we all spoke English". This phrasing seems to, perhaps unintentionally, associate English with whiteness, even though many white-presenting people do not speak English and many non-white people do.

4.3 Family night and testing task force

The remaining participants (n = 3) were split between the two other provided scenarios, with two selecting a scenario about a "family night" event and one opting to discuss a scenario about a school task force. In the family night scenario, a school hosts an event for the parents and caregivers of ELs and sends home flyers in several languages. At the event, the teachers notice that not many families arrive at the start of the event but begin to trickle in as the first presenters are speaking. Most families remain standing in the back of the room, chatting together and disregarding the presentations. At the end of the event, the teachers express frustration at the perceived disinterest of many EL families.

In the task force scenario, a bilingual teacher attends the first meeting of a new task force focused on raising the standardized assessment test scores of ELs. The teacher notices that only one parent is present at the meeting and suggests to school leadership that more parents be involved. She is assured that all parents were provided with information about the meeting and suggests that she speak on their behalf, which makes her uncomfortable.

All three of the participants who selected these scenarios reported similar experiences. Nina described how she works with a high number of Spanish-speaking children and has experienced cultural conflicts with the children's' parents and caregivers. Naomi chose to discuss the task force scenario because she was working

in a district receiving "pressure from the state about raising low test scores, which in turn puts a lot of that pressure on the teachers".

The participants who selected the family night scenario seemed to want to give the non-English-speaking families in the scenario the benefit of the doubt that there were understandable reasons for their lateness and perceived recalcitrance to participate. Desirae speculated that attending families "probably did not understand the speaker, so instead of sitting in silence, they opted to engage with one another instead". She also wondered if perhaps the families "felt embarrassed by their lack of participation prior to this event". Nina took up a less deficit-oriented lens, suspecting that the tension was the result of a difference in culture – namely, that different cultures perceive time differently. She shared, "I would have students walk into my classroom 10–15 min late every week and I could not understand why. I finally worked up the courage to have a conversation with the parents and they told me that in their culture it is not a big deal to be a few minutes late".

The sole participant who chose to discuss the task force scenario, Naomi, wished to shift the blame of poor test scores off ELs. She wrote, "I remember how hard the language on state tests was for me, a native English speaker. The language used is way above grade level! I can only imagine how students who are learning English as an additional language must feel when trying to take those tests". Naomi was distracted from the intended focus of the scenario because she felt the story was unrealistic: "The state threatened to 'intervene' if the test scores were not raised? Test scores are a big topic in my school district, but I have never heard of the state intervening. What does that even mean?"

5 Discussion

In this section, we expound on some of the impressions we took away from the findings. First, we discuss how participant scenario choices potentially reveal the outer limits of their understanding of the role of teachers, then we discuss perceived impediments to participant criticality.

5.1 Low risk, high agency

We were intrigued by the scenarios that participants did and did not choose to discuss. Their choices shed light on what the participants knew and thought about ELs as well as what they were resistant to discussing. Participants were most likely to

discuss the English-only scenario and we suspect that this is because, from among the scenarios they were provided, it seemed to offer the least risk to participants.

We found that for the English-only scenario most participants positioned students' native language in a positive light and opposed such a policy. However, the solutions participants presented were limited. The participants fell short of discussing strategies or services to support students. We also noticed that the solutions offered by participants could nearly always be enacted in the classroom without much additional knowledge or support from school personnel, caregivers, or community resources. This led us to wonder whether participants perceived their teacher roles as limited to their classroom, rather than as one part of a complex system. This could be due to their novice status and potentially reveals a limitation of teacher education programs.

Many participants admitted having limited personal and teaching experiences with ELs, and perhaps this limited what they were able to bring to this scenario (Guler 2020). For example, some participants were reluctant to condemn an English-only policy and in doing so, they took up deficit discourses. Such discourse positioned students as "lower" and caregivers as not being able to offer "the same support". With participants most likely choosing scenarios that were in the context of the classroom, and could be "solved" within the classroom walls, we wonder if they are aware of the additional resources available for educating students, particularly ELs. And if they are, do they see such supports (e.g. administrators, caregivers, community organizations) as allies in educating *all* students?

The experienced teachers in the participant pool were more likely to select one of the less frequently discussed scenarios, such as the student translator scenario (n = 7). Perhaps, not surprisingly, these participants shared solutions drawing on school and district resources. Notably, one participant mentioned the importance of preexisting home-school connections. The participant, Grace, positioned families as assets to student learning and school success. The more experienced teachers also presented solutions that went beyond their immediate classroom contexts, suggesting greater understanding of the collaborative nature of teaching to meet the needs of students.

Consistent with their preference for scenarios they could solve within their classroom; participants largely avoided the scenarios related to family involvement and district-level challenges. We assert solutions for these scenarios may have centered on caregiver or family advocacy, and given the participants' limited life and teaching experiences, perhaps they avoided these scenarios in favor of ones they were more confident in substantiating their responses with their emotions and background knowledge.

5.2 Emotions, positive comparisons, and unexamined assumptions

Unsurprisingly, we encountered some of the same persistent barriers to critical sociocultural knowledge development outlined in the literature (Mosley Wetzel et al. 2019). We noticed that participants would sometimes respond neutrally, while others engaged in overtly deficit discourses (Chisholm et al. 2019; Mosley Wetzel et al. 2019). Participants seemed to engage in "protective talk" as a way of "shielding" from difficult conversations (Cook et al. 2022: 6). Participants' shielding behaviors included interpreting, asking questions, and drawing on personal experiences – behaviors that are not inherently bad, but often weaponized to avoid critical conversation. Below we discuss the themes of participants' discourses that add nuances to the existing literature on shielding, particularly related to their sharing of personal experiences. Their experiences were tied to the context of the classroom and immediate solutions and demonstrated limited sociocultural understanding, particularly of their own privilege.

We observed that participants often used emotive language to discuss the scenarios, and we theorize that this extends Cook et al. (2022) notions of "protective talk" or "shielding". For instance, participants used the word "shocked" to describe their emotions in response to the English-only and translator scenarios. For the former, participants shared sympathy. For the latter scenario, participants expressed frustration. We wondered if participants were truly emotional, or if it was a way to perform empathy in response to the scenarios and, in so doing, avoid analysis.

Consistent with "shielding" (Cook et al. 2022), overwhelmingly (n = 35), participants chose to discuss scenarios where they connected personal experiences with similar situations. These experiences almost always cast them in a positive light. Arguably, emoting and connecting cannot be perceived as the "wrong" answer in a graded assignment because it is based on individuals' lived experiences. However, such language positioned their experiences as the norm, and others' (e.g. students', colleagues') experiences as marked. While making personal connections is an essential step in developing a critical stance, what learners do with those connections (e.g. reflecting on the systems of power at play in their experiences) can stall or propel their critical growth (Adams et al. 2022).

The data did offer evidence of participants' trying on or taking up critical perspectives as they reflected on their chosen scenarios. Several participants pushed back against the teachers' perspectives in the English-only policy scenario, arguing that such policies are isolating for students, interfere with their learning, damage school-home relationships, and even "strips their freedoms". Some participants were able to explicitly identify or at least speculate about biases that might be driving the

teachers' behavior. For example, Avery expressed that the teacher in the student translator scenario displayed unsubtle distrust of his EL student. Some participants offered effective counternarratives to trouble characters' assumptions, including Nina's experience confronting Latine families about timeliness.

Many participants also attempted to reflect on their own privileged positioning, but struggled to connect their social identities to the underlying assumptions that informed their own reactions to the scenarios. As with their selection justifications, they often used language that exonerated them from the judgment being cast on the character. The solutions proposed by participants most often focused on the immediate (e.g. writing out names phonetically), but rarely identified the underlying assumptions that compelled characters to act in biased ways. They also frequently maintained a singular focus on the social identity under examination rather than taking an intersectional perspective on the scenarios. For example, in scenarios where language was a barrier to family communication, participants focused exclusively on the need for translation but failed to acknowledge that language might not be the only barrier. Not all parents will understand how U.S. schooling functions, even if information is translated into their native language. It is not only language that might impede family's understanding of schooling; there might be other cultural factors (e.g. Kohnen and Adams 2019).

We suspect that these patterns speak to their limited awareness of or ability to read the systems of power operating in these scenarios. Overall, participants' nascent criticality seemed to be hampered by persistent binary and/or absolutist perspectives within their expressed sociocultural knowledge. And the way that participants, seemingly obliviously, continued to racialize social identities, unrelated to race, reflects the racial paradigm that dominates social justice discourse in the U.S. (Martín Alcoff 2006).

6 Conclusions

This study focused on how novice teachers in a graduate literacy course responded to scenarios focused on inequitable school experiences of ELs students. The notable findings of this study – that teachers can recognize bias as singular incidents but are not yet able to recognize the larger systems of oppression at play, that teachers' commitment to multicultural inclusion belies their understanding of inequity, that teachers harbor persistent deficit perspectives about students that seem 'other,' that teachers continue to racialize social identities unrelated to race – move the field forward by offering specific insight about teacher beliefs about ELs. These findings offer important implications for teacher educators as we renew our efforts to equip

teachers to be critical, reflective educators who can leverage their sociocultural knowledge toward the benefit of all learners.

This study demonstrates how 21 novice teachers in the U.S. endeavored to considerately grapple with sociocultural circumstances related to ELs and their families. However, a lack of cultural awareness and critical sociocultural knowledge continue to impact the effectiveness and implementation of culturally responsive pedagogies in diverse classrooms. Teachers who engage in critical conversations and self-reexamination of personal beliefs, practices, and experiences do gain understanding about different perspectives (Cook et al. 2022), but developing one's critical perspective is a long-term endeavor (Adams 2020). The findings reveal that participants continued to view language as a barrier that hinders school-family engagement and communication. Teachers and teacher educators, in the U.S. and beyond, need to remember that EL student populations are multicultural and varied in schooling experiences. To support ELs, their unique linguistic and cultural backgrounds must not be considered deficits. As marginalized students are often viewed as lacking understanding and knowledge, it is important to recognize and build on students' funds of knowledge. Teachers can utilize community, district, and school resources to engage with students and families and provide insights into students' cultural practices. Participants may have benefitted from more modeling and extended reflection about the scenarios (Ticknor et al. 2020) to consider new possibilities for their own teaching of marginalized students and families.

Participants' limited teaching experiences seemed to impact their self-efficacy with respect to navigating situations involving students' caregivers or families and school leaders. We surmise that this lack of knowledge and experience contributed to hesitation or fear about addressing school-wide related issues and concerns. To mitigate this, teacher education programs need to provide teacher candidates with authentic opportunities to gain experiences, such as analyzing school policy and practicing collaborative experiences with school leaders. Perhaps, then, teachers may have a sense of the networks that can support their teaching and community outreach. In literacy programs like the one in this study, teachers are being taught to be literacy specialists, and subsequently literacy coaches, taking on leadership roles in schools. Thus, it is especially important for them to have a sense of agency to be ready to advocate for the needs of students and families.

There are limitations to this study. Participants engaged with, reflected on, and discussed school-based scenarios as part of graded assignments for a class. It is possible that participants thought there were more favorable responses or solutions to the scenarios and offered those in an effort to be right and/or to earn a respectable grade, even if those responses or solutions did not reflect their sincere thoughts or feelings. This dovetails with some of our wonderings about participants possibly performing as "good" students or "nice" teachers, identities often taken up by white,

middle class cisgender women (Wegwert and Charles 2019). We recognize it may have been more difficult for participants to be radically vulnerable in an asynchronous online discussion setting. Participants committed their perspectives to print, and these were surveyed by their peers and course instructor. This may have impacted what they ultimately choose to discuss or not. Further, our interpretations of their perspectives are limited by our own background and experiences. Future research could examine how modifications to the model described in this paper could impact findings. In other words, research should test the implications for practice and see if shifts are made in the types of conversations teachers are willing to engage in and why. The U.S. Census Bureau (2015) projected that by 2044, racial minorities will surpass the white population, highlighting a major discrepancy between the K-12 teacher workforce and the students they serve. This is particularly problematic as previous research has shown a lack of cultural competence among teachers (Ladson-Billings 2017; Milner 2017). In the future, research addressing teachers' perspectives on ELs should include more diverse participants to reflect the culture, race, and ethnicity addressed in the given scenarios. Seeking input from diverse teachers is critical because without doing so, researchers risk creating their own ideas about under-represented groups.

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