

## **Beyond Apple Pies, Popsicles, and Patriotism: Leveraging Digital Literacy to Unpack Matters of Race, Power, and Privilege**

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**ABSTRACT:** It is important for all educators, but especially those working in P-12 systems, to not only be prepared to navigate the digital terrain but to do so while taking a critical stance and encouraging students to critically examine and confront injustice. To that end, this article spotlights the work being done in a literacy methods course for preservice teachers. Consideration is given to efforts to engage preservice teachers in the integration of information communication technologies (ICTs) in ways that develop critical consciousness while promoting social justice and equity.

**KEYWORDS:** Social justice, equity, digital literacy, educational technology, teacher education

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Students and teachers who sat in classrooms dreaming of spring break and preparing for the end of the 2019-2020 school year left buildings unsuspectingly that day in March. Teachers had no idea that they would be thrown into unfathomable teaching situations, and students were unaware that there would be no spring dance, no celebration for all the books they had read, no graduation, and no farewell to their teachers and friends. Ready or not, coerced by the pandemic, teachers and students alike, as well as people in most every industry, had no choice but to reconsider the opportunities and risks of using information communication technologies (ICTs). In-person learning ended abruptly, leaving school leaders and teachers to rapidly transition to some form of remote learning. The ultimate goal was to maintain some semblance of learning continuity in the midst of a school year that was far from normal.

Educators worked tirelessly throughout the summer to prepare for the next school year. Inevitably, discussions centered on alternatives to in-person learning, including hybrid arrangements in addition to fully virtual options. As educators at all levels tasked themselves with becoming more adept at countless digital tools that would facilitate virtual teaching and learning, the pandemic raged on,

unleashing mass casualties across the globe. Meanwhile, floodlights shined light on the race-based disparities in deaths from the pandemic on top of the barrage of viral videos chronicling the violence against and deaths of people of color. The situations cross-pollinated as voices calling for justice reached a crescendo, amplifying the importance of exploring the complexities and potential pitfalls of literacy teaching and learning while also using a lens of equity and social justice and responding to the necessity for students and educators to navigate digital environments.

In the United States, children may begin school as early as age 3. Classes for three- and four-year-olds are referred to as preschool or prekindergarten (Pre-K for short). Even at this young age, students are exposed to educational uses for ICTs. As such, it is important for all educators, but especially those working in Pre-K through 12 (identified as P-12 henceforth) systems, to not only be prepared to navigate the digital terrain but to do so while taking a critical stance and encouraging students to critically examine and confront injustice. In calling attention to the multiple forms of oppression, Freire (1970, 2000, 2005) urged members of society to develop “conscientização” or critical consciousness as demonstrated by one’s ability to identify oppression and take actions to dismantle contributory factors. Of course, how teachers engage younger students with these concepts will appear quite different than engagement with and by older students.

This article is autoethnographic in that it spotlights the work being done in a literacy methods course for preservice teachers. Specifically, consideration is given to my efforts to engage preservice teachers in utilizing ICTs in ways that develop critical consciousness while promoting social justice and equity. The course explores the variables that affect literacy development of students in middle school. It is the third course in a four-course sequence that focuses on understanding the reading and writing process; the content of literacy instruction; and scientifically-based literacy research, methods, and materials used in balanced literacy instruction and assessment. Preservice teachers who are admitted to the teacher education program as elementary education majors take this course the semester before completing the program. Within the course, the students and I consider language and literacy demands in the content areas, needs of culturally and linguistically diverse adolescent learners, and the identification of adolescents who have literacy challenges. The preservice teachers are introduced to Bourdieu’s notion of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 2006; Bourdieu et al., 1990) and encouraged to embrace their future students’ funds of knowledge (González et al., 2005) to help create rich literacy and learning experiences in the classroom. As the instructor of the course, I have designed the course and assignments to not only provide preservice teachers with a solid instructional foundation for literacy teaching, but to raise awareness and competency in culturally responsive teaching (Ladson-Billings, 2014) and culturally sustaining practices (Paris & Alim, 2014, 2017).

To that end, what follows is a discussion regarding the importance of integrating ICTs in educational settings and the implications for educators who lack the requisite skills. I argue that teacher educators and teachers alike must foster

the development of digital literacy skills while also promoting social justice and equity. Throughout the paper, I drift between using the pronouns I and we. This is done to distinguish moments in which divorcing my students from a description would do a disservice by decreasing the saliency of their involvement and as an indication that it is a class discussion or activity rather than a lecture. At other times, it is valuable for readers to understand how I am instructing and guiding students throughout this process. As part of this guidance, I draw attention to events depicting human rights violations that have been broadcast in the media. I argue that the need for P-12 educators to teach critical literacy skills to students who, often, are inadvertent consumers. P-12 educators must possess the competencies to transfer this knowledge to their students. Finally, I describe projects that encourage preservice teachers to critically examine issues of race, language, power, and privilege. The paper culminates with a call for teacher education programs to better prepare preservice teachers for the demands of utilizing ICTs in the aforementioned inquiries.

### **The Impact of Educational Technology**

Technological advances have permanently altered the ways in which we communicate, teach, and learn, and have effectively become part of our daily lives. As such, literacy has been redefined as traditional literacy practices are incorporated within the requisite literacy skills of ICTs and technologies. Consequently, scholars emphasize the importance of producing educators that are technically literate and further assert the need to use technology to strengthen the connection between theory and practice (Castellví et al., 2020; Gomez et al., 2008; Rosaen & Terpstra, 2012; Tondeur et al., 2019). This places a level of responsibility on teacher education programs.

There is a growing body of work that examines technology integration from educators' perspectives. Much of the research focuses on teacher dispositions and the conditions that make it possible or impossible for transformative technology integration to take place (Regan et al., 2019; Roblin et al., 2018). However, educators consistently identify time, access, training, openness to change, along with support and knowledge as factors impacting technology integration (Hutchison, 2012). Teachers are more likely to use technology that they have been trained to use, especially if there is continued support. Ritzhaupt et al. (2012) reported a strong, positive correlation between teachers' general use of technology and their level of education. Further, teachers' general use of technology was found to be a predictor of the breadth and depth of classroom technology integration and had an impact on students' use of technology within school settings (Ritzhaupt et al., 2012). Teachers who used any degree of technology personally were more likely to use ICTs in the classroom and more inclined to have their students use ICTs.

All the deterrents to technology integration identified by Hutchison (2012) were upended in spring 2020, when educators were forced to dive into virtual

teaching as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Not only were educators thrust into an emergency situation in which the modality of their classes changed drastically, that change necessitated the use of unfamiliar digital tools. An unexpected shift to virtual teaching and learning during a crisis is unique (Bozkurt et al., 2020) in that the onus is placed upon teachers to have the requisite skills to quickly adapt traditional classroom practices using digital technologies. In many instances, teachers lack the knowledge and skills to make such a drastic shift (Gudmundsdottir & Hathoway, 2020). Albeit horrible, the pandemic ushered in an esprit de corps amongst P-12 educators. Minus time, access, training, or ongoing support, educators formed and met in online learning communities to acquire the skills needed to meet the challenges of teaching virtually. I learned through experience and the stories of my students and colleagues that P-12 teachers used Facebook Live and YouTube to host free live workshops to help colleagues acquire the skills needed to be successful in this new virtual world of teaching. To be clear, these were not teacher trainers and they did not get compensated for taking on these duties. These were extraordinary self-trained P-12 teachers who saw a need and decided to assist colleagues. The use of ICTs and digital literacy practices made their way into even the most technology-resistant educator's classroom. Through the melding of multiple ways of being literate, ordinary citizens, teachers, and students have been able to participate in global conversations, the magnitude of which has never been seen before.

### **ICTs in Teacher Education**

The magnitude and impact of ICTs on teaching and learning are further evidenced when one explores the range of possible uses in the academe. Many instructors in higher education rely on some form of ICT to enhance lectures and presentations. In addition, there is the use of electronic course management systems to maintain course records, software, and equipment for conducting research, as well as industry-specific technologies aimed at preparing preservice teachers. Depending upon the goals of a particular course, one may see technology use that closely mirrors that of P-12 educators. However, there should also be marked differences in how technologies are integrated and explored as universities prepare students to enter the workforce. Valverde-Berrocoso et al. (2021) note that technology use, exploration, and preparation should take on great significance in teacher education. In addition, there should be an emphasis on the pedagogy of online teaching (Christensen & Alexander, 2020).

As practicing P-12 teachers attempt to integrate technology to support student learning, they are beckoning for a new generation of teachers who are prepared to enter the classroom with the mindset, experiences, knowledge, and motivation necessary to further use technology to transform teaching and learning. It is possible that, even when preservice teachers see how practicing P-12 teachers and professors use or introduce technology, they may still have difficulty translating that information into practice within P-12 classrooms. It is essential to

not only expose preservice teachers to new ways of knowing, doing, and being, but also to design explorations that demonstrate “turn-key” strategies and assignments for integrating technology and those that can be taken and used immediately.

### **A Closer Look at the Digital Divide**

In recent years, there has been much discussion about the “digital divide,” who it affects, and how to resolve dilemmas stemming from its existence. The digital divide has been characterized by “persistent gaps between developed and developing nations, as well as gaps domestically along socioeconomic, geographic, educational, racial, and gender lines” (Epstein et al., 2011, p. 92), without much consideration being given to situations such as those that surfaced during the pandemic, in which Internet speed presented challenges (Lai & Widmar, 2021). Consequently, researchers question the inclusivity of this broad definition and note that the “digital divide’ not only covers different kinds of disparities with different kinds of consequences, it also obscures the variety of ideas about the nature of the problem itself and the manner in which it should be resolved” (Epstein et al., 2011, p. 92). Generally, one thinks of students and their families when considering the digital divide. This has been evident throughout the pandemic. However, the pandemic exposed that many educators are also impacted by the digital divide. I agree with many scholars that the digital divide can be viewed in terms of access (the haves vs. have nots); however, we also must take into account various skill levels (the know hows vs. know nots). It is indeed necessary to address both concerns if the digital divide is to be lessened or eliminated. Reexamining the issue from this perspective, one must also acknowledge that previous discussions failed to take into account those who have both the means and access to technology, but lack the knowledge to fully participate in its use. Many educators and students fall into this last category.

Prensky (2001) introduced the idea of digital natives and digital immigrants. These conceptions begin with the premise that there are people who have only known a world in which ICTs exist while there are others who have watched the rapid evolution of technology over time. Thinking follows that, for individuals who are immersed in technology from birth, the exposure facilitates a level of comfort and knowledge that allows users to navigate digital terrains effortlessly, thus making them digital natives. The author further posits that digital immigrants’ lack of exposure and limited use of technology contributes to resistance and trepidation surrounding technology. Rather than wholesale ascription of individuals into one camp or the other, Wang et al. (2013) proposed a model of digital fluency in which individuals fall along a continuum that ranges from digital native through digital immigrant; thus, deconstructing the previous binary thinking.

I contend that the earlier conception of people’s interactions with technology persists and offers a troubling dichotomy that contributes to a digital divide in ways that a) are not acknowledged or accounted for when discussing the digital divide,

and b) disadvantage students as educators preemptively presume a level of technological acumen that may or may not exist. This view can work to limit understanding of who students are, what they know, and how educators might best create opportunities to challenge students and allow room for growth using ICTs. Those involved in teacher education must find ways to traverse this plane to orchestrate experiences for assumed digital natives and digital immigrants alike that increase levels of digital literacy while also modeling and immersing students in methods for using technologies that transform teaching and learning.

Globally, the reality exists that there are schools and communities with limited access or no access to the Internet and ICTs. This fact must not go unstated or be understated. Epstein et al.'s (2011) appraisal that the various disparities call for different resolutions seems accurate. In the U.S., many school districts have made efforts to provide Internet access for students even when those with access did not have the bandwidth to meet the demands for remote teaching, learning, and working (Lai & Widmar, 2021). Admittedly, how to bring the virtual world to the front doors of those who lack access is an issue that requires consideration far beyond the scope of the current discussion. Nevertheless, it seems ill-conceived to assume that simply providing access in terms of infrastructure and equipment will solve the problem. When looking at the digital divide in terms of access or skill, I argue that those are two sides of the same coin. A person, in this case an educator, who lacks the requisite skills ultimately lacks access (by way of knowledge) to ICTs. How might this technological illiteracy impact such a person's teaching and learning?

Selwyn (2013) contends that there is no wholesale advantage to engagement with digital education. The author acknowledges that there may be greater benefit for people who are disadvantaged, but argues that evidence is lacking in support of the power of ICTs to democratize education. Instead, Selwyn asserts that digital technology tends to reinforce the "Matthew Effect" in that it predominantly helps those students who are already doing well. This argument seems to be akin to saying that, because students do not have books at home, we should not teach them to read or require that they read in school because, even though they are reading, they will not be able to catch up to those who have been reading longer. Such thinking further contributes to what I have termed the "Matthew E-ffect" (Shelby-Caffey et al., 2014) in which students (or anyone) with limited technology access and know-how are less interested and thus less inclined to use technology. What would seem most appropriate in such instances is to provide such students with engaging uses for technology that will increase skill level as well as interest. This argument highlights the necessity of involving preservice educators in uses of ICTs that are engaging, easily transferable, and designed to transform teaching and learning. What follows next is a description of several activities that meet the forementioned criteria while also prompting preservice teachers to grapple with issues of social justice and equity.



## Digital Divide Meets Racial Divide

Educators often struggle with acknowledging the underlying role of race within the educational system. Consistent with this denial, there is a tendency to believe that race has no influence on or place in teaching and learning. Yet, no credence is given to students' lived experiences or the perpetual, unquestioned normalization of whiteness. Moreover, it is commonplace to doubt the experiences of others while maligning their character. Correspondingly, there are people who view diversity as a threat (Bell & Hartmann, 2007; Osborn et al., 2020), as evidenced by viral videos exposing the many instances in which people of color are threatened, assaulted, and criminalized for participating in everyday activities.

The P-12 teaching force in the U.S. remains primarily female and overwhelmingly white (Will, 2020). My work with educators reveals a tendency for many white teacher educators at universities, as well as P-12 in-service teachers and preservice teachers who are being apprenticed, to resist efforts to sensitize them to matters of diversity. Instead, focus is placed on their desire to maintain a seemingly race-neutral curriculum while participating in acts of resistance that inevitably further silence and marginalize minorities. While teacher educators are responsible for teaching university classes, P-12 in-service teachers spend more contact hours apprenticing the next generation of teachers. The amount of time preservice teachers spend learning from in-service teachers, coupled with the tendency for preservice teachers to emulate the practices of the teachers responsible for apprenticing them (Jeffrey & Suzanne, 2012), and a probable cultural mismatch (Ladson-Billings, 2005), signals the importance of employing efforts to dismantle the historical privileging of particular interests over others that occurs in many classrooms. In addition, the need to create such contexts exists within both teacher education programs and P-12 settings that intentionally address the "demographic and cultural mismatch that makes it difficult for teachers to be successful with P-12 students and makes it difficult for teacher educators to be successful with prospective students" (Ladson-Billings, 2005, p. 229). Emphasis must be placed on developing the critical literacy capacities of both preservice and in-service teachers and designing courses and projects that prepare preservice and in-service teachers to "recognize, name, and combat inequity in schools and society" (Spalding et al., 2010, p. 191) while disrupting white narratives that dominate educational spaces (Aronson et al., 2020). Educators must move beyond literacy discussions centered on apple pies, popsicles, and patriotism (the American niceties of texts) and actually leverage literacy instruction to unpack matters of race, power, and privilege. Vasquez (2014) encourages an approach to critical literacy that calls for individuals to examine topics or issues in multiple ways by analyzing them and making recommendations as to how they might be changed or improved.

In the midst of the pandemic, tensions escalated as evidence surfaced of the senseless killings of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd. Though these were not the first instances of police brutality and harm enacted upon African Americans to occur during my tenure as a faculty member, each

incident solidified my resolve to engage preservice teachers in difficult conversations while challenging them to advocate for social justice and equity. Further, given that many P-12 schools were still meeting virtually, it was imperative that the preservice teachers' introduction to and use of educational ICTs both mirror and serve as examples of how ICTs might be used in elementary classrooms.

### **Digital Literacy, Social Justice, and Equity in Practice**

The case that follows is autoethnographic and relies upon personal narratives (Haden & Hoffman, 2013) to frame my experiences with preservice teachers at a predominantly white university in the U.S. As a reflective practitioner, I regularly make a note of interactions with students and colleagues. Therefore, data consisted of personal reflective notes taken after each class session. Data were collected in two sections of an undergraduate literacy methods course during the pandemic. Of the 21 students, 86% were white and 14% were black. Due to the pandemic, both sections were taught completely online via Zoom, though this was not my first experience with teaching the course remotely. This work focuses on my experiences as the instructor of the course and draws from reflective notes that I maintained throughout the course.

#### **Preparation**

Prior to delving heavily into course content, preservice teachers were introduced to Google Slides and to the concept of creating a Bitmoji classroom. Bitmoji classrooms were created by transforming Google Slides into virtual replicas of classrooms and adding one's Bitmoji avatar to the room. It was crucial to me that student endeavors in the course not only indicate their understanding of the content, but also position them to transfer the use of ICTs to their future classrooms. Therefore, during the summer of 2020, I embedded myself within multiple P-12 virtual learning communities. These teacher-created, teacher-led virtual learning communities developed spontaneously as a way for educators globally to connect during the pandemic. They provided just in time training via Facebook, Youtube, and Zoom on technical aspects of remote teaching. While participating, I learned that teachers were incorporating their Snapchat avatars into Google Slides and using them to create and present content in their Google Classrooms. The virtual spaces came to be known as Bitmoji classrooms. These spaces allowed teachers another layer of engagement with students who, just like them, were unexpectedly thrown into virtual classrooms. The classrooms were virtual representations of actual classroom spaces, complete with signage, bookshelves, seating, a teacher's desk, and whiteboard. Each teacher's classroom was unique and there were lots of classrooms devoted to specific themes.



Teachers were proud to show and share their work (see <https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/13BfvQdPFcAJbdWG2iJPGK96kfBG07lux/copy?usp=sharing&oid=110998302145975790458&rtopof=true&sd=true>). From what I gathered, designing Bitmoji classrooms gave teachers some level of control over an otherwise out of control situation. Not only did the preservice teachers in my class spend time exploring Bitmoji classrooms and creating their own, I modeled the use of these virtual spaces throughout the semester as I presented during each class session using my Bitmoji classroom. Students' Bitmoji classrooms served as the launching pad for each of the projects that follow; projects were designed to build upon one another.

### **Multicultural Author Study**

Each semester, I introduce students to the work of a different multicultural author whose work centers on their own community. For the purposes of the assignment, "multicultural literature" was defined broadly as books/texts written by and about Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC), as well other representations of diversity including religion, ability, and LGTQI+ status (Cooperative Children's Book Center, n.d.). I read aloud from these works over the course of a semester. One semester, for example, I shared excerpts from Jewell Parker Rhodes' *Ghost Boys* and followed the read aloud with a discussion about the text. The fictional story takes readers on a journey that follows the trial of a white police officer accused of killing a twelve-year-old African American male. The author attempts to show the impact of the young boy's death on his family and friends, as well as on the police officer and his family. The read aloud was designed to introduce the preservice teachers to authors they have likely never encountered and to provide a safe space where they could critically examine societal issues. It also offers an example of the kinds of topics that I expect the preservice teachers to grapple with as part of their assignments in the course. Further, I chose texts whose themes/topics mirrored modern day events, and that might move my students out of their comfort zone and provide a window through which they could catch a glimpse of people with lives and experiences dissimilar to their own.

Groundwork for the projects included a discussion centered on the social and cultural aspects of teaching students to read. I facilitated conversations about code switching and led the preservice teachers in examining their own biases. Students interrogated the concept of codeswitching as I worked to dismantle the notion of "proper English," replacing the term with "standard English." I challenged students by having them complete the *Common Beliefs Survey* (Teaching Tolerance, n.d.) before placing them in virtual breakout rooms to discuss their responses first with a partner, followed by a small group, then with the entire class. In my

attempt to ensure that those who have been previously disadvantaged by schooling receive quality education, [I] also want those in the mainstream

to develop the kinds of skills that will allow them to critique the very basis of their privilege and advantage. (Ladson-Billings, 2014, p. 83)

This activity worked to uncover the preservice teachers' personal beliefs about racial and ethnic diversity while examining how holding such beliefs could negatively impact their future students. Among other things, I worked with the students to dispel the notion of color blindness and delve into the impact of poverty on communities of color and its influence on the achievement gap. Students expressed concern about the possibility of talking about race and the impact of bias with colleagues in the future. Admittedly, these are tough conversations to have in-person and our discussions were made more difficult by the distance of being online. However, it was important to show the preservice teachers that advocating for those who have been marginalized can and should be done, even in virtual spaces. The topics and issues raised during our reading of *Ghost Boys* provided an opportunity for me to incorporate other videos, news clippings, and stories that echoed occurrences in the text while also modeling how they might do the same in their own classroom.

As the course progressed, our discussions turned toward the need for the literature in students' future classrooms to reflect the diversity present within the world, regardless of the environment in which they might find themselves teaching. As future educators, it is important that they seek out and utilize texts by and about diverse groups of people. Students should be exposed to positive images of the multitude of cultural and ethnic groups, as well as other diverse populations represented within the world. The Multicultural Author Study assignment provided an opportunity for the preservice teachers to explore books/texts written by a multicultural young adult author whose work explored societal issues and highlighted some aspect of the author's own culture. The authenticity of this work required that each chosen author be a member of the multicultural community about which they wrote. In some instances, my students selected multicultural authors whose work spoke to a personal bias that they identified when working through the *Common Beliefs Survey* activity. Other students picked an author they were unfamiliar with but whose work interested them.

The preservice teachers in my literacy methods course created a multimodal, interactive lesson using Blendspace (<https://www.blendspace.com/lessons>). This free site allows individuals to create multimedia lessons that can include text, video, images, and documents. It is also possible to build an interaction by inserting questions for viewers to answer. The preservice teachers designed their lesson with middle school students in mind; lessons explored the life, works, and accomplishments of a young adult author. It was essential for the author's work to present multiple opportunities to examine the systemic nature of power and privilege. The project culminated with a virtual presentation in which each preservice teacher introduced classmates to their chosen author using their Blendspace creation as a display. Each presentation also included a YouTube video of the preservice teacher reading an excerpt from one of the author's texts.

Many of the preservice teachers seemed to select multicultural authors whose work resonated with them in particular ways. One preservice teacher who

identified as non-binary explored the work of Julian Winters, an African American author who centers the stories of LGBTQ characters in his work. The student stated that, though they had not shared their status with others, they appreciated being able to explore the topic in class. One student explained how an author's work was used to initiate conversations about treatment and judgement of people who are considered "different." Another explored the work of Cynthia Kadohata, a Japanese American young adult author who has written books about WWII from the perspective of Japanese characters. An African American preservice teacher chose to focus on the work of Nikki Grimes and her themes of discrimination and loss. She concluded that sharing such stories with her future students might create a space where students felt safe to discuss connections to their own lives. Finally, another preservice teacher selected Angie Thomas and read aloud from her bestseller, *The Hate You Give*. This preservice teacher connected parts of the story to an incident that occurred on our university campus and raised poignant questions about the right to protest and athletes using their voices for social change.

### **The Critical Literacy Pathfinder**

In further acknowledging that schools do not exist in a vacuum, are not apolitical, and are not always safe places for students (though they absolutely should be), I continued to focus on taking actions to educate students about acknowledging and confronting bias. The preservice teachers in my class are encouraged to build their classroom libraries with an eye on critical literacy and shedding deficit perspectives (Dharamshi, 2018; Iyer & Ramachandran, 2020). In doing so, they are instructed to move beyond their classroom library and identify supplemental multimedia resources that draw attention to power and privilege. The Pathfinder project draws upon McLaughlin's and DeVogd's (2004) conception of critical literacy that "focuses on issues of power, reflection, transformation, and ACTION" (p. 52). The purpose of this project was for the preservice teachers to design a safe virtual space in which they could lead middle level students in developing a critical lens to explore a commonly held idea, opinion, stereotype, or issue related to racism, discrimination, disparities, oppression, erasure, bias, or abuse of human rights.

The preservice teachers were charged with unearthing counterstories aimed at giving voice to those who have historically been degraded, erased, or silenced. For instance, if students chose to focus on problems between police and communities of color, they had to locate sources that gave voice to the communities of color. I urged the students to problematize the issue and examine it from a historical perspective with a keen eye on discovering how and where biases crept in and how they may have contributed to the marginalized group being disenfranchised. The goal was to demonstrate how having a particular bias or holding a prejudicial stance harms everyone, not just those who have been marginalized. Students were encouraged to consider issues of human rights as

well as topics that have garnered media attention. The resulting projects included an abundance of multi-genre, multi-modal resources (a total of 15 resources online and off) that could be used to educate readers/viewers while empowering, uplifting, positively portraying, and showcasing voices of “communities who have been and continue to be damaged and erased through schooling” (Paris & Alim, 2017, p. 1) and society.

I pressed the preservice teachers to be intentional in discussing the topic’s direct impact and connection to P-12 students and teachers. The goal was not only to expose the issue by locating evidence that directly refuted bias, but to also provide counterstories of those being harmed because of the issue. Further, the preservice teachers had to take action. They were responsible for developing a personal action plan that “...requires that they support young people in sustaining the cultural and linguistic competence of their communities while simultaneously offering access to dominant cultural competence” (Paris, 2012, p. 95). In making this action plan, each teacher candidate identified clear steps in moving forward to actively change or abandon the bias/belief. It was crucial that they draw a personal connection by explaining specific actions that they themselves, their future students, colleagues, and other members of society could take to combat this bias and actively support those who have been marginalized and harmed as a result of it.

This project allowed each of the preservice teachers an opportunity to contribute to a curated list of resources on a multitude of social justice topics. In examining the massacre and displacement of Native Americans, one student explored the tales that elementary students in the U.S. are often told in schools about the “discovery” of America and about the first Thanksgiving. She vowed to educate students and future colleagues about the realities of colonization and to promote Indigenous Peoples’ Day. A different student focused on bilingual education and connected it to the ongoing immigration debate in the U.S. She pulled in young adult literature such as Pam Muñoz Ryan’s *Esperanza Rising* and planned to engage her students in discussions about the difficulties of learning another language. Finally, another student delved into the immigration debate, carefully selecting resources that told the stories of immigrants. This student pledged to educate his future students about the perils that many immigrants face in their attempts to come to America. Overall, these explorations positioned the preservice teachers to advocate for their future students and to enact culturally sustaining practices in their future classrooms.

### Looking Ahead

The mismatch between the education received in teacher education programs and the realities of being in a P-12 classroom are well documented (Maheady et al., 2014; Sleeter & Owuor, 2011). There is also evidence that field experiences and student teaching have an impact on preservice teachers’ practices; working in tandem to steer teachers toward a more traditional,

conservative teaching stance that does not lend itself to a critical understanding of inequity in the classroom (Jeffrey & Suzanne, 2012). It then stands that emphasis must be placed on developing preservice teachers' critical literacy capacities and their propensity to embrace critical pedagogy. Given the multitude of opinions and misinformation ever-present on the Internet, preservice teachers must be trained as critical consumers prepared to guide their students toward the same critical eye on education. Teaching this mindset necessitates that preservice teachers be given opportunities to challenge commonly held beliefs that might impact their work with future students and colleagues. Further, it is imperative that teachers, teacher educators, and preservice teachers be able to interrogate texts, beliefs, policies, and practices that privilege some while silencing and marginalizing others.

Proponents of critical pedagogy (Giroux, 2011) claim that teacher education programs do a disservice and continue to be gatekeepers of teaching methods that promote diluted societal truths, contradictions, and negations, which ultimately promote injustice in our classrooms and society. Teacher educators and P-12 educators must be more than mere providers of textbook facts; rather, they must help students develop critical consciousness. Educators must be willing to employ practices that disrupt the commonplace and examine multiple viewpoints while highlighting sociopolitical issues (Lewison et al., 2015). Likewise, it is important to engage students at all levels in doing the same. Working as a teacher educator provides an opportunity for modeling as well as equipping preservice teachers with the requisite skills. Still, there are questions regarding how best to increase preservice teachers' capacity for critical literacy and critical pedagogy in a supportive environment while concentrating efforts on authentic, content-based tasks with adequate time for exploration.

### **The Imperative for Teacher Education**

Blankenship (2011) spoke of his experiences using Skype to guest lecture to an undergraduate class several states away from his university. Skyping with students thousands of miles away seemed innovative at the time. However, Blankenship noted that Skype and similar platforms were becoming commonplace given the changing landscape of social media use in higher education. We now understand that, not only can this type of teaching be done, but that it should be done to enrich learning experience for students. However, using Zoom or other video conferencing tools is but one of the myriad opportunities for using ICTs in the classroom. It is crucial that teachers have a firm grasp on ICTs. This requires a minimal level of digital literacy and technical acuity. The use of ICTs provides a rich terrain for involving students of all ages in social justice work. Let us not throw away the many examples of enriching means by which one can incorporate ICTs that were revealed by the pandemic.

The year 2020 taught us all that, even in the midst of a pandemic, justice and equity matter. Black lives matter! Technology matters. There is a link between critical literacy, critical pedagogy, and social justice. The events of 2020 provided

fertile ground for educators to incorporate social justice matters into lessons. Likewise, educators at all levels have successfully employed ICTs while teaching virtually. If one can concede that any use of ICTs requires digital literacy skills that preservice teachers may be lacking, then what becomes evident is that teacher education programs are vital to the mission.

Discussions surrounding digital or new literacies, social justice, and equity should not occur in isolation. It is necessary for such discussions to become part of the overall discourse and to be coupled with content-based learning that illustrates how ICTs can be used to advocate for social justice and equity. Such efforts should not be relegated to a single course but shared amongst content courses within a teacher education program. We must move beyond general discussions of digital literacy practices, social justice, and equity, and instead have them become a way of being within teacher education that integrates identities as described by Gee (1996, 2000), who acknowledges the range of descriptions for identity in the existent literature and defines identity as “being recognized as a certain ‘kind of person,’ in a given context... all people have multiple identities... connected to their performances in society” (Gee, 2000, p. 99).

With this information, it becomes important to prepare teacher educators for performances specific to the role of training future teachers by including activities, projects, and explorations that replicate the myriad ways that P-12 teachers can enhance teaching and learning by capitalizing on the power of ICTs in exposing inequities and promoting social justice and equity. The hope is that this exposure to educational uses for ICTs will create a mindset that makes both preservice and, thus, in-service teachers more amenable to incorporating technology into their classrooms in ways that interrogate inequities and foster advocacy in and for marginalized populations. It is time to move beyond discussions of all things “as American as apple pie,” the pleasantries of kids being able to enjoy popsicles while playing outside, and the hurrahs of patriotism. We must acknowledge that, for many marginalized people in America and society as a whole, life is vastly different than what is considered the standard or the mainstream. It is wholly possible to foster the development of digital literacy skills while also promoting social justice and equity. This is the clarion call that we must answer as teacher educators.

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