Developing Preservice Teachers' Critical Consciousness and Understanding of Community Contexts

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Abstract: As calls are being made to strengthen and expand clinical preparation within teacher education (AACTE, 2018; Darling-Hammond, 2014) and to explore the clinical space as a vital site for exploring and addressing issues of social justice (Jacobs & Casciola, 2016; Mills & Ballantyne, 2016), it is important for teacher education programs to consider how they both pursue these goals and create sustainable relationships with P-12 schools. As equity-oriented teacher educators teaching courses on-site at a professional development school, we position our work at the intersection of social justice teacher education, clinically rich experiences, and mutually beneficial partnerships with professional development schools. In this article, we describe how we designed our course and its engagement at a PDS to help our teacher candidates develop critical consciousness and asset-based orientations towards young adolescents and communities

KEYWORDS: Clinical practice, equity, Professional Development Schools; social justice; teacher candidates; teacher education

NAPDS NINE ESSENTIALS ADDRESSED:

1. A comprehensive mission that is broader in its outreach and scope than the mission of any partner and that furthers the education profession and its responsibility to advance equity within schools and, by potential extension, the broader community;
2. A school–university culture committed to the preparation of future educators that embraces their active engagement in the school community;
3. Ongoing and reciprocal professional development for all participants guided by need;
4. A shared commitment to innovative and reflective practice by all participants;

The Need for Equity Orientations in Teacher Education

Increasingly, teacher educators assert that preservice teachers should not be positioned as a classroom teacher until they have developed an affirming, complex view of communities and students (Ladson-Billings, 2011; Milner, 2015). Developing this affirming stance is an intricate process which requires teacher education programs to simultaneously engage PSTs in interrogating their own sociocultural backgrounds and beliefs, recognizing systems that perpetuate inequities in society and schools, and building relationships based in authentic care (Valenzuela, 1999) with children and communities.

Given the dramatic divide between the predominant demographic makeup of preservice teachers and the students they will likely teach, it is imperative that teacher preparation intentionally focuses on enhancing preservice teachers' awareness of the ideologies that inform their worldviews. The current cultural moment further exacerbates this need, as deepened divisions across the United States have led to a significant increase in hate crimes in schools (Andrews et al., 2017; Costello, 2016). Further, evidence suggests that the disproportionate rates of discipline for Black students in schools across the United States is influenced by educators' implicit bias and subjective judgments about what appropriate behavior looks like (Okonofua & Eberhardt, 2015; Skiba et al., 2002). Because White teachers often recognize their whiteness as normative, rather than as a cultural identity, many develop deficit views of students who they see as different from themselves, frequently characterizing these students as incapable, unaware, or uncaring (Sleeter, 2008; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). While this normative way of imagining schools is rooted in whiteness, the dominance of white cultural norms in educational spaces means that teachers of color are not immune to these biases as well (Gilliam et al., 2016). Thus, it is essential for preservice teacher education programs provide opportunities for preservice teachers to consider their own status as cultural beings through critical reflections (Milner, 2015) or autobiographies (Cochran-Smith, 2004; Galman et al., 2010) that require them to critically analyze how their cultural experiences influence the ways they view and perceive students, schools, and the world around them.

Beyond interrogating preservice teachers' backgrounds and beliefs, equity-oriented teacher education programs must also draw attention to the ways in which educational systems too often perpetuate historical and structural inequities. This is particularly important given the way schools and teachers are entwined in these systems (Kumashiro, 2015). Beyond conventional reading assignments, several teacher educators in recent years have written about innovative practices in their own teacher education programs aimed at exposing these historic inequities, including interaction with teacher activists (Solic & Riley, 2019), critical conversations with other preservice teachers with different backgrounds (Damrow & Sweeney, 2019), and critical discourse analyses to deconstruct power structures in the classroom (Land, 2018). In addition to raising preservice teachers' awareness about societal structures, it is also necessary for future teachers to have field experiences in high-needs contexts and with diverse populations (Anderson & Stillman, 2013). In order to disrupt deficit thinking and to avoid perpetuating harmful narratives about the "other," clinical experiences in high-needs schools must be scaffolded carefully and coupled with critical reflection (Anderson & Stillman, 2013; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Taken together, these components of equity-focused teacher education work to facilitate the development of critical consciousness through praxis (Freire, 1970).

In this paper we share how we partnered with a Title I professional development school in multiple, intentional ways to support preservice teachers' ability to bridge theory and practice as they considered the complex systems and relationships extant within the school community. Meanwhile, PSTs also completed readings and activities that illustrated the social and historical embeddedness of those ecologies. By simultaneously engaging with children and recognizing their many strengths and assets, PSTs were able to challenge stereotypes which are so often attached to members of historically marginalized communities as a result of legacies of oppression. Further, they began to consider how they, as future teachers, could teach boldly and contribute to a more equitable world.

Context

We designed the structures and assignments discussed in this paper as part of a concerted effort to forge a mutually beneficial partnership between a teacher education course we taught in Fall 2018 at a local middle school. We sought to build preservice teachers' asset orientations and critical consciousness while simultaneously providing meaningful contributions to the middle school students, faculty, and staff.

Partnership with Pine View Middle School

This work is situated in a partnership between the college of education at a large, public, southeastern university and the school district in which that university is located. Specifically, we taught this course on-site at Pine View Middle School (pseudonym), a professional development school where Amy served as a professor-in-residence. Her position as a boundary-spanning teacher educator (AACTE, 2018) with deep knowledge of the school and existing relationships with its faculty afforded us as instructors access to explore how the school could be a site for our preservice teachers' learning.

Pine View Middle School prides itself on its award-winning sustainability program, the band's superior ratings, social studies and science fair state-level winners, and a host of athletic accolades. The school's achievements reflect the diversity of student talent, despite the fact that the county in which Pine View resides has the highest poverty rate in our state, and the fifth highest rate in the nation. Racially, Pine View's school population is 47% Black, 38% White, 12% Hispanic, and 7% other. These statistics alone too often invite a deficit discourse about the county and its public schools. As most of our preservice teachers come from White and middle-class backgrounds, we intentionally scaffolded their experiences at the middle school so that they could develop relationships and adopt affirming stances about Pine View students, while also raising their awareness of the systems that affect students and families in the district.

Equity-focused On-site Course

Here we describe a course both of us taught in Fall 2018 on-site at Pine View Middle School, the first of four required courses for middle grades education majors in our two-year program. Students move through these courses in a cohort-model and typically instructors loop with the cohort so that they teach each of these four courses to the same group of students. Although we were instructors of record for two different sections of the course, we collaboratively planned the course and often co-taught together. The participants for this research include 32 preservice teachers composed of 25 students pursuing their bachelor's degree and 7

students pursuing their Master's of Arts in Teaching. Reflecting the demographics of preservice teachers nationally, 26 of the participants were White, 3 were Black, 1 was Asian-American, and 2 were of mixed ethnicity. The majority of students identified as Protestant and middle class.

Course Description

Equity-oriented work is the cornerstone of our Middle Grades Education program. At the beginning of the program, preservice teachers sign a statement of commitment, which includes "taking a critical inquiry stance by questioning the world as it is and how it could be different with a commitment to action towards social justice and equity" and "seeing people, organizations, communities, cultures, and systems as assets." While this focus on equity weaves through the entire two-year program, it is given particular priority in the first course, *Community Contexts in Middle Grades Education*. Written about elsewhere (Hughes et al., 2016), this course aimed for PSTs (1) to recognize the role their own cultural and historical backgrounds play in their perceptions and thinking about children and schools, (2) to understand that as teachers they are embedded in a larger network of systems, many of which perpetuate racist, sexist, classist, homophobic, or ableist thinking and practice, and (3) to consider what actions they can take to cultivate and sustain a more equitable world. Using an ecological approach (Broffenbrenner, 1994; Weiner, 2006), the course encouraged PSTs to resist deficit discourses that place blame on individual students and communities for the so-called achievement gap and discipline disproportionality, and rather to consider how micro and macro systems impact students' schooling and outcomes.

We designed experiences during the course that simultaneously engaged PSTs in considering their own sociocultural backgrounds, the intersection of those backgrounds with legacies of privilege and oppression, and the positioning of young adolescents in multiple, intersecting systems that perpetuate privilege and oppression. Preservice teachers interacted with a variety of texts including the nonfiction book *Outliers* (Gladwell, 2008), young adult novels including *The Hate U Give* (Thomas, 2017), and the documentary *13th* (DuVernay, 2016). These texts provided a foundation for understanding the myth of meritocracy and the ways in which historical legacies are still acting in the present. Additionally, PSTs thought critically about their own sociocultural backgrounds by sharing "culture bags" that included artifacts that represented their identities and by writing autobiographical narratives, which connected their familial and cultural resources with their educational experiences. Before they began interacting with middle school students, PSTs also considered the "danger of the single story" (Adichie, 2009) as well as the role of asset and deficit narratives in the framing of students' contexts and behaviors (Weiner, 2006). We designed the curriculum as a foundation for the preservice teachers' experiences with young adolescents at Pine View Middle School.

Course Engagement with Pine View Middle School

Prior to the start of the course, we collaborated with the principal to determine how the on-site course could be mutually beneficial. We shared our course goals for *Community Contexts in Middle Grades Education* and discussed how our PSTs could both learn from the Pine View community, as well as give back to it. To facilitate this partnership, we designed two structures: Eagle Hours and 7th Grade Buddies.

In order to learn more about the young adolescents at Pine View Middle School and the ecology of the school itself, throughout the semester PSTs each completed at least four service-learning hours, or "Eagle Hours" named in honor of the school's mascot. From chaperoning school dances to babysitting during parent-teacher conferences and assisting in the media center, PSTs got an authentic glimpse into the lives of students and their school community. When logging their Eagle Hours, students were prompted to identify assets they noticed in their interactions and observations of youth, families, and the school community. Eagle Hours provided important insight into young adolescents not just as students but also as young people who are dynamic and engaged in community. In return, the school benefitted from the nearly 150 volunteer hours.

In another intentional move to help develop PSTs' asset-oriented thinking about young adolescents, we developed the 7th Grade Buddies activity. Each week, PSTs worked with the same small group of students in their Math or Science classrooms. While teachers enthusiastically collaborated with our class because they wanted their students to benefit from having more adults working with them, we as university instructors designed the opportunity so that PSTs would have ongoing relationships with Pine View students. After working with students each week, PSTs provided comprehensive, individualized feedback on student progress to the teachers, including an interesting thing they learned about each student that week, as well as an academic asset of each student. These opportunities to engage with the community provided a space for PSTs to recognize the complexity of students and their embeddedness within broader systems acting in both schools and society more broadly.

Methods of Analysis and Data Collection

To learn how the course texts, activities, and engagement at Pine View Middle School influenced the preservice teachers' critical consciousness and asset-orientations, we analyzed assignments from across both that first semester and future semesters to select data sources. The data sources included logs in which PSTs wrote about Eagle Hours and 7th Grade Buddies, final projects from the course; course feedback surveys; and reflections on their learning at Pine View that were written during later semesters in the program after they had experienced field placements in other settings.

We analyzed the data by engaging in multiple rounds of coding (LeCompte, 2000). In the first round of coding, both researchers coded the same subset of data using eight codes developed deductively based on the core concepts explored in this paper. After reaching consistency between the two researchers, we then refined our codebook by combining several codes into broader codes. For instance, we combined the codes "students' assets" and "community/family assets" into one code "student/school/community assets," and "teacher/school assets" and "clinical spaces/learning in a PDS" into the code "learning in a PDS/teacher/school assets." We then coded the remainder of the data. Next, we compiled the relevant excerpts of data associated with each code into a master spreadsheet. We read and analyzed this spreadsheet to consider major themes or dissonances that emerged across the data. The results of this analysis will be expanded upon in the following section.

Developing an Equity Lens in the Context of a PDS

We begin this section by discussing the elements of the course that preservice teachers described as important in developing their understanding of social justice-oriented teaching. Next, we situate this learning within the context of Pine View Middle School, which provided an authentic grounding for PSTs as they developed asset-orientations towards young adolescents and families and also began to interact with young adolescents and community members. This section concludes with PSTs' reflections on how they planned to act upon their budding critical consciousness to contribute to a more equitable world.

Practicing Intellectual Humility

Vulnerability lies at the heart of learning. This can certainly be the case when gaining critical consciousness, as one faces realities about each individual's role in the complicated and often unjust ways in which the world operates. Thus, we began the course by attempting to build a trusting learning community where students would feel comfortable as vulnerable learners. To provide a shared foundation for how the class would collectively engage with social justice concepts, we started our course by reading Sensoy and DiAngelo's (2017) "Principles for Constructive Engagement," a set of norms which lay out commitments for participating in social justice learning in an educative space. Throughout the semester students repeatedly called upon the principle, "You don't know what you don't know: Strive for intellectual humility" (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017, p. 166) to acknowledge their lack of awareness about some societal inequities and to humble themselves to learn more.

These principles also pushed students to see beyond their own personal, anecdotal experiences and to look instead for societal patterns. One student explained his progress in being open to learning:

> At the start of the course, I learned how to break down my own defensive reactions and anecdotal experiences in order to learn something new about an opposing view. When I allowed myself to do this, the rest of course, I soaked in as much information as I could about being a social justice-oriented teacher.

Our work with the principles helped to disarm the initial resistance he may have had as he encountered new learning about inequities. Another student reflected on how her own positionality affected her narrow understandings about the world, writing, "I have [humbled] myself at what little I know about others due to my experiences and taken that knowledge to learn and grow into a better person." She, like many others in the class, demonstrated brave willingness to practice intellectual humility in her personal growth. We argue that beginning our course with these principles, which position all people as learners and all knowledge as partial, was a key step to facilitating critical consciousness during the course. Next, we share how the preservice teachers responded as they learned about oppressive structures and policies that perpetuate inequities.

Recognizing Systems at Work in Education

Throughout the course, students examined the ways that schools are situated in a larger network of systems, many of which perpetuate oppressive thinking and practice. This started with an interrogation of ideologies that perpetuate systemic oppression such as the myth of meritocracy, the bedrock of the American Dream. Students read *Outliers* (Gladwell, 2008),

which helped them begin to deconstruct the notion that success is the result of hard work. One student shared, "I realized through this how economically privileged I have always been because of the accumulated advantage I have through my parent's wealth." Statements such as this illustrate that this text helped students realize that individuals' wealth and advantage intersect with systems of race, privilege and oppression.

It was critical for students to personalize their learning and to inquire into the ways their own historic legacy connects to larger systems. Therefore, they critically examined their own educational opportunities and outcomes in an autobiographical narrative assignment that required them to use concepts such as *meritocracy, accumulated advantage, hidden advantage, and cultural legacy* to explain how their educational resources are part of larger societal systems and patterns. As one student shared, writing through this framework "allowed me to look in at who I really am and notice all of the advantages I had never thought about or realized I had before." We organized the class so that this work of analyzing one's own positionality within networks of power, advantage, and oppression occurred prior to PSTs interactions with Pine View students. Complicating their own stories about education, merit, and success and set the stage for PSTs to be able to view young adolescents as individuals equally involved in complex, generation-spanning narratives.

We next turned to young adult literature as a vehicle for exposing how young adolescents and their communities are affected by systems of power. We invited the media specialist at Pine View Middle School, to speak with our students about the importance of young adolescent literature in all classrooms. She shared with students that books could be mirrors, windows, or doors that allow us to understand others' experiences. With this in mind, the PSTs read *The Hate U Give* (Johnson, 2017), which details a Black teenage girl's experience when her best friend is shot by a police officer because the officer mistook a hairbrush for a gun. This book allowed PSTs to explore issues of race, class, power, and criminal (in)justice through the eyes of Starr, the narrator who readers immediately loved. In class, some Black students shared that they identified with the characters' issues, specifically with the different behaviors Starr felt she had to enact in her mostly White private school and her mostly Black neighborhood. Meanwhile, many of our White students shared that this was the first time that they understood the gravity of the "Black Lives Matter" movement. One White student shared with her small group that she comes from a small town where "Back the Blue" signs line the streets, which she had always supported. But after reading *The Hate U Give*, she reconsidered how the presence of those signs likely feels to Black citizens who time and time again experience the pain of hearing about another murder of an innocent person by the police.

Using a young adult novel helped to humanize racial injustice for many of our students, one of whom said that she "found T*he Hate U Give* to be impactful because it really opened my eyes to how much implicit bias (and outright bias) there is in the world." Although news stories about racial profiling and police shootings of Black and Brown men and women surround us, some students admitted in class discussions that they had the privilege of having blinders on and had not paid attention to racial injustice because their Whiteness protected them from having to think about it.

To connect the issues raised in *The Hate U Give* to policies that uphold systemic racism in the U.S., students watched the documentary *13th* (Duvernay, 2016) which chronicles various policies that have exploited and oppressed Black citizens since the abolition of slavery. From the

discriminatory laws related to the 'crack epidemic' of the 1980s to mass incarceration, the film traces legacies of systemic racism in the United States through the present day. In her weekly reflection, one White student shared, "*13th* was eye-opening. It was important for me to learn that many people are still being oppressed in ways similar to slavery." Others tied the movie to the school-to-prison pipeline and the criminalization of Black students' behaviors. Another White student wrote:

> The *13th* documentary and *The Hate U Give*…helped me to see just how screwed up the system is, and how oppression starts from the time African Americans are children. Now, when I hear deficit thinking comments about students, or teachers complaining about "that kid," I think twice about how that thinking can lead to severe punishment of students of color, which leads them to even more punishment in their adulthood through the school to prison pipeline.

This student demonstrated that once we see inequities, we can't unsee them. With her 'blinders' removed, she was learning to view the world through an equity lens. Another student noted that she is also now seeing how many systems work together to maintain power for some and oppress others: "This documentary demonstrated how major corporations play a role in mass incarceration [and] made me realize how important it is to consider that we are always participating in a network of systems." The sweeping historical scope of *13th* was significantly educative for preservice teachers as they found narratives and vocabularies to contextualize modern-day issues in schools and society at large.

This was true, as well, for some Black preservice teachers who prior to watching the film experienced the effects of racism, but had lacked knowledge about the particular histories of systemic racism. After watching *13th*, one Black student wrote about how this film affected him the first time he saw it:

> Before watching this documentary, I would often wonder if the oppression of black people was just something we referred to when we needed an excuse for things not turning out in our favor. I started to believe that all black people could easily rise above the oppression in America and be seen just as important as the majority. I would frequently insist that we, as black people, stop feeling sorry for ourselves and begin to work harder to get what we deserve-- equality. Suddenly, I realized that I too, fell into the notion that we should just overlook injustices in America to unify our nation.

This preservice teacher's honest reflection about how he internalized the "pick yourself up from your bootstraps" mentality and his ignorance about systemic racism underscores the necessity for teacher educators to attend to the critical consciousness of all students. Other Black preservice teachers shared that while their own lived experience included regularly experiencing the effects of racism, the film helped them understand the policies and the people behind the policies that have actively worked to oppress Black people in the U.S.

After reading *The Hate U Give* and viewing *13th* as a class, students chose a young adult novel to read in book clubs. The book choices illustrated the importance of taking an intersectional approach to understanding young adolescents' identities and how they are impacted by the confluence of gender, race, class, ability, sexual orientation, gender expression, citizenship status, and religion. A large group of PSTs selected *The 57 Bus* (Slater, 2017), a true story about a White, gender nonconforming high school student who was attacked on a city bus by a Black young man in Oakland, California. Some of our students shared their discomfort with

they/them pronouns and a few questioned how they would react if they had a gender nonconforming student. To our surprise, later in the semester, 12 of the 33 students chose to explore issues related to LGBTQ youth in order to be better prepared to support them in their future classrooms. One student explained that she wanted to learn more about transgender youth because, "We, as human beings, like to make assumptions and give opinions on topics we don't have much knowledge on." This assertion connects back to our framing of the course in the Principles for Constructive Engagement (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017) and the acknowledgement that "we don't know what we don't know." Incorporating multiple texts, which demonstrated the intersection of larger, systemic issues as they connect to the lives of individuals, provided our students with a basic framework for considering how their own lives intertwine with social narratives and how young adolescents' experiences are influenced by societal conditions.

Considering the Impact of Educators' Personal Beliefs

Beyond examining social patterns, it was essential for our students to understand how their own beliefs impact students. We rooted our instruction around personal beliefs in the ideas of asset and deficit thinking (Weiner, 2006), given that one of our program's core commitments is to see students, families, and communities from an asset-based orientation. Through guest speakers, readings, and personal reflection we worked with students throughout the semester to help them recognize and reframe their own deficit thinking, as well as implicit bias.

Through our school-university partnership, we had a relationship with the school district's director of student support services, Dr. Carter, who we invited to speak with our students about resisting deficit thinking. A former social worker, she spoke highly of the power of home visits. She then shared a drawing of a family's apartment and asked students to describe what they saw. All of the students' comments were negative: *Baby crying and left unattended in the crib. Open pizza box laying around. Iron left on.* Dr. Carter explained that, in fact, this image depicts the night that a single mother found out she got a new job. She had ordered pizza to celebrate and was taking a rest from ironing her outfit for work the next day, and put the baby in his crib to keep him safe since the iron was still plugged in. Students were awestruck. Their interpretations were riddled with deficit thinking as they assumed the worst of this mother.

This image and their innate reaction to it made a significant impact on students who suddenly understood how deficit thinking is ingrained in their ways of viewing the world. One wrote:

> This was extremely eye-opening to me, because I hadn't realized how bad my deficit thinking was. I assumed the worst about everything in the picture, without considering the "why" or the "but" behind any of it. We also touched on this a lot this semester as we entered our placements…I've become so aware of my thinking and I have genuinely tried to be more positive and open-minded and it's been a really great experience for me.

Another student shared this sentiment and admitted, "It sometimes is so easy for me to automatically think negatively about others, and I think that is the case for everyone. We all naturally tend to think badly about others." After engaging in this activity with Dr. Carter, students vowed to make a conscious effort to combat their own deficit thinking and to recognize it in others.

In order for the preservice teachers to see the connection between educators' beliefs and their treatment of children, we next examined implicit bias and its effects in schools. Students

delved into understanding the role of implicit bias in the disproportionate rates of discipline experienced by Black and Brown students in U.S. schools. We shared research indicating that implicit bias starts impacting Black boys as early as preschool (Gilliam et al., 2016) and had them examine the discipline data for our region. Finally, students took the Harvard Implicit Association Test, which assesses if the participant has bias towards or against Black or White people. Through this evolution of activities, several students went from being enlightened about the effects of bias in schools and classrooms to personally affected when recognizing the extent to which they, too, held bias. One student wrote:

> This semester, I have not only learned about these middle schoolers, but also about myself. I have learned more about my bias, which I wasn't really sure I even had. These biases come from how and where I grew up. Throughout this semester, I have worked on decreasing these biases and being a more open person, especially towards my students because you don't know what you don't know.

For a White PST to be confronted with his own bias at the same time that he was forging relationships with predominately Black students was an incredibly powerful experience. This acknowledgement required not only intellectual humility, but also a developing understanding of historical and societal conditions. For this reason, we see the simultaneous investigation of larger systems, interrogation of personal histories, and experiences with young adolescents and communities as necessary for beginning to develop preservice teachers' critical consciousness. In the next section, we will explain how our partnership with Pine View Middle school was a crucial engagement for connecting theory to practice as preservice teachers grew in their critical thinking and asset orientations.

Complicating and Humanizing Middle School Students and Their Communities

Teaching the course on-site at Pine View Middle School provided a microcosm of the systems we discussed in our class for preservice teachers. Due to the demographic divide between many of the preservice teachers and the Pine View students, we wanted to ensure that PSTs' learning about societal power dynamics coincided with building relationships with young adolescents from diverse backgrounds. The combination of learning about systems, exploring the school's larger community, and working with children helped preservice teachers experience praxis. As one student explained at the end of the course:

> I sometimes hear the critique that college education classes show a disconnect from the real world…however, this class disproved this by letting us learn theory in the real world. As we discussed things in class, we got to see them in action through our work with the seventh graders, through our Eagle Hours, or through a simple walk in the hallway.

As his writing suggests, being able to humanize the theoretical concepts we explored throughout the semester was key to preservice teachers' understanding and development and was only possible because of our partnership with Pine View Middle School.

In order to introduce the PSTs to the surrounding Pine View community, we worked early in the semester with the principal to generate a list of community spaces that are important to the families of Pine View Middle School. The preservice teachers then went on a scavenger hunt in the school's surrounding community to visit each place and were asked to think about what each community space revealed about the community's assets. In class discussions, the preservice teachers articulated that the experience helped them see the importance of learning

about a community's resources, illustrated the richness of students' lives, and highlighted the many assets, which exist in the community.

Because a formal clinical experience was not associated with the course, we developed two structures, 7th Grade Buddies and Eagle Hours, to ensure that the preservice teachers were both providing a service to the school and learning about youth and communities at the same time. To start, PSTs were matched with two to three 7th Grade Buddies with whom they worked in a Math or Science classroom over the course of the semester during the independent work time in the classes. This opportunity to forge a relationship with students helped teacher candidates appreciate young adolescents and recognize their assets. Each week PSTs sent the Pine View teachers feedback about individual students' learning during the work session and what the PST thought was "cool" about each student.

Several PSTs commented on how 7th Grade Buddies challenged their assumptions about young adolescents. As one noted, working with 7th graders "helped me to realize that I am really not that different from young adolescents." Dispelling societal notions of young adolescents as otherworldly is a key commitment in our program; we seek for PSTs to embrace the complexity and humanity of middle schoolers. Not only did working with Pine View students challenge preservice teachers' deficit notions of young adolescents, it also helped them see the strengths middle school students possess, as this PST describes:

> I used to think that middle schoolers were really childish, awkward, and crazy. But after spending time in classrooms, I realized that they can be so mature and they're not too different than people my age. Some of my students have so much responsibility at home taking care of siblings because their parents work all day. Some of them have experienced trauma, they carry this with them, and they [are] just so strong.

This statement illustrates how through experiences in the Pine View classroom, this PST came to understand that there is not such a wide gulf between students and teachers, that both live complicated lives and have a great deal to offer one another. While working weekly with 7th graders helped PSTs build relationships with a small group of students, Eagle Hours helped them expand their knowledge of students and their families.

Eagle Hours were designed as opportunities for preservice teachers to provide service to Pine View while simultaneously allowing them to have meaningful experiences in the school community. These informal opportunities to interact with students opened up possibilities for how preservice teachers viewed young adolescents. Working in the media center, one preservice teacher noted that seeing the diversity in books "reminded me that each individual student is different and should be treated as their own person instead of the average student." This opportunity showed her that we should not view young adolescents as a monolith, but rather we should come to appreciate, understand, and appeal to all of their individual tastes.

Eagle Hours provided a plethora of opportunities for preservice teachers to see not only children outside of academic settings, but to see also how Pine View's faculty interacted with students outside of the classroom. For example, every quarter the school offered a school-wide incentive for students during which they could move freely throughout the school to participate in different activities. One preservice teacher who volunteered to help with this event shared how impressed he was to see a school that respected students' freedom:

> Students want to feel as though they can be trusted to do the right thing. The fact that they were not simply cattled from station to station or forced to stay in one station the entire time means that the teachers feel comfortable in trusting the students.

This experience provided an important insight into the relationships between students and teachers: those relationships do not have to be rooted in control, but can be powerfully based on trust and respect.

The preservice teachers also enjoyed opportunities to see how the Pine View Middle School teachers engaged with families. For example, several PSTs volunteered at the Student-led Parent Conferences by greeting caretakers or babysitting younger children so that caretakers could focus on their middle school child's conference. Preservice teachers shared their enthusiasm about seeing so many caretakers and watching their interactions not just with their children, but watching how the school interacted with families. The conferences also provided a window into how the Pine View faculty interact with families and how families interact with one another. Remarking on the class differences among families at Pine View, one student noted:

> While engaging and interacting with families at Pine View, I realized just how diverse the school really was. I know people always tell you not to judge a book by its cover, but I was able to tell very fortunate families from ones that were not as fortunate. They were evenly dispersed, but they all seemed to get the same attention from all the faculty at the school. It was really cool to see the interactions between families.

As indicated here, it was important for PSTs to experience the positive interactions between the school and its families. More importantly, this experience of interacting with families dispelled the myth that families in underserved communities do not care about their children's education. In fact, the PSTs witnessed the great lengths families went to in order to attend their child's conference. PSTs' echoed this recognition as well in their responses to *The Hate U Give,* which depicts the strong bonds of a family. Preservice teachers remarked throughout their reading of the book that their ideas about fatherhood, incarceration, poverty, and education were turned upside down.

Ultimately, as one PST explained, "Working with [the Pine View] students made me realize just how important each [course] essential question is. If I do not know myself and my students, I cannot create a safe space for all of my students." Equity-focused education relies on the willingness of teachers to search within themselves for how they can actively confront structures that perpetuate inequitable outcomes for students.

Teaching Boldly

At the end of their first semester of our two-year program, PSTs read excerpts from *Teach Boldly* (Fehr & Fehr, 2010) and reflected on the actions they could take to cultivate a more equitable world.

Personal Implications

We are writing this article at the end of our two years with this group of preservice teachers and are struck by how deeply our work around deficit thinking continues to influence our students. After being embedded at Pine View for a semester, most PSTs were placed in other schools for their first practicum experience. We had encouraged PSTs to have their "antennae" up for

examples of deficit thinking once they went into schools, and students repeatedly shared with us their surprise at how rampant it is in schools. As one PST explained:

> Now I've seen what we learned in [our class] happening in our placements. Seeing deficit thinking firsthand has made me step back and think about what kind of teacher I want to be. It's easy to say "I won't be that way," but it's different once you're in the school surrounded by other teachers who are constantly speaking in deficits about their students. I've heard teachers say "that kid just doesn't care" or "their parents are poor and never come to the meetings" or "it doesn't matter how much we give them, some kids are just here (on a certain academic level) and they're gonna stay there." I had to push those thoughts to the back of my mind and actively practice thinking about those same kids with an asset-based mindset.

On the heels of spending a semester learning with and from Pine View educators who demonstrate an affirmative stance, preservice teachers were dumbfounded that some educators would share negative views so openly about children and families. Another PST commented on how the prevalence of deficit thinking reflects on teachers and "ultimately affects them negatively and their work ethics. I think I've realized that teachers like that give off a bad image and accumulates negative opinions from others." Recognizing the impact that deficit thinking can have on school communities, these PSTs were intentional about avoiding those conversations in their placements and doing everything in their power to be advocates for their students and emphasize their assets.

Several preservice teachers who started the program with a colorblind ideology ended the first course with a recognition that they must always be "culturally curious" and to "continue to dive into what makes me, me." The commitment to working on oneself as a teacher is foundational to being a reflective practitioner and a lifelong learner. For other PSTs, the course taught them more about themselves than they realized when they started the program, as they completed the first semester with a newfound conviction to continue recognizing and challenging their own biases. One PST shared, "I feel that one of the most important ways to cultivate a more equitable world is to always confront your biases before you enter the classroom…It is important as educators to not only be aware this happens, but to actively confront it." This assertion underscores that awareness on its own is not enough and that it must be coupled with action and advocacy in order to make a difference. While the course was revelatory for some PSTs, for others it strengthened their preexisting convictions towards social justice. One PST explained, "This year has just affirmed for me that the education system in America is influenced by inequities, and that as teachers, we have some degree of agency in creating a classroom and world that is more equitable." At the conclusion of this first course in our program, many of the preservice teachers expressed an eagerness to learn how to develop classroom communities and curricula that support equity.

Curricular Implications

This course did not focus on pedagogy or curriculum design but rather on the types of thinking and understanding that are necessary for teachers to build relationships with students and design meaningful curriculum for students. We assert that creating a space for PSTs to engage in broader understandings of schools, society, and themselves is imperative for cultivating equity-orientations in the pedagogy courses and field placements to follow. Beyond

the work we as educators must always be doing on ourselves, it is also important that we create learning opportunities for our students to critically engage with the world around them. As one teacher candidate boldly stated:

> We need to educate the youth on the inequalities people experience and the reasons that those inequalities are in place. These students, even though they're young, are already beginning to figure out that the world puts people at a disadvantage depending on their race, income, sexuality, and gender. So knowing why these disadvantages are in place is the first step to finding a solution to help change it… These are tough topics to bring up, but I think as educators we have a duty to educate on how the world truly works and encourage them to take a stand on what's fair and right.

This preservice teacher ended the semester believing that the role of the teacher is fundamentally connected to equity work and to the deconstruction of oppressive systems. In this final assignment, many of the other preservice teachers articulated that they were committed to engaging in equity work in their future classrooms, but were yet unsure how to do so. In the semesters that followed this course, we were able to integrate these commitments to equity as we taught the PSTs to design curriculum and build communities of learners in their classrooms.

Closing Thoughts

Throughout this course, our students grappled with information that is often difficult to process both intellectually and emotionally. However, we found that by the end of the course, the preservice teachers felt a sense of urgency to enact equity-oriented teaching. Further, we saw that our course readings, tasks, and engagement on-site at the PDS were not only valuable, equity-oriented learning experiences for PSTs, but also valuable steps in maintaining a mutually-beneficial PDS partnership.

It is important to carefully and intentionally scaffold students' experiences with social justice concepts in order to mitigate potential resistance. We attempted to do this by beginning with texts such as *Outliers* and *13th*, which set up a frame for the ecologies in which both the PSTs and young adolescents exist. Young adult literature proved to be a helpful vehicle for illustrating the concepts we explored, and allowed the PSTs build empathy for characters whose experiences were vastly different than theirs. Once we established a foundation for critical ways to think about children and the systems that affect them, the PSTs began to interact with and start building relationships with young adolescents at Pine View Middle School. Waiting several weeks before working with middle school students helped the teacher candidates bridge theory and practice and humanize the abstract thinking they had engaged in previously in the semester.

We believe that all of these components were necessary for the progress PSTs made with regard to their critical consciousness. It may be seen as unconventional to begin the teacher education program with a course that does not address curriculum or pedagogy. However, by preparing the PSTs to enter their practicum placements and pedagogy courses with complicated insights into the ways that schools, students, and teachers are entrenched in complex cultural and historical systems and legacies, they are better positioned to incorporate equity-orientations in their work as teachers. Further, many of our students had engaged with some of the key concepts of this course in a prerequisite educational foundations course, however, they were able to engage more deeply with them during this course because of the work within the partnership.

Our course and program commitments parallel NAPDS Essential #1 in that we seek to promote equity within schools and the broader community. Teaching the course on-site provided an authentic space for PSTs to map their understandings of systems onto real children, schools, and communities. However, it was important to us to not simply use Pine View Middle School as an educational tool for the preservice teachers; we wanted to be sure that our presence there was also beneficial to the school community. Meeting with the principal of Pine View Middle School to discuss how our course goals aligned with the school's needs and goals resulted in our implementation of 7th Grade Buddies, which provided detailed feedback on student progress, and Eagle Hours, which provided energetic volunteers for school and community events. In each subsequent semester, we have continued to meet with the principal and administrators at Pine View Middle School to consider how we can continue to collaborate in ways that benefit the students, faculty, and staff of Pine View as well as the preservice teachers.

There is a continued and ever-growing need for preservice teachers to enter the teaching profession prepared to engage in equity work and confront oppressive systems and practices. While there are myriad ways to engage preservice teachers in thinking about the historical and cultural embeddedness of problematic practices in schooling, we found that this course, which connected theory to practice in the context of a professional development school partnership, provided a powerful framework for educating equity-minded future teachers.

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