

Article

Transformative Potential of Culturally Responsive Teaching: Examining Preservice Teachers' Collaboration Practices Centering Refugee Youth

Amy Walker 

School of Teaching, Learning and Curriculum Studies, Kent State University, Kent, OH 44240, USA;
awalk104@kent.edu

Abstract: Using a critical ethnographic approach, this research explores the experiences of preservice teachers in a Midwestern educator preparation program as they plan and implement an interdisciplinary community exploration and learning project using culturally responsive teaching practices to center local refugee youth. Data collection includes observing collaborative planning processes, collecting written reflections and photographs, and conducting post-project interviews. Findings suggest that culturally responsive teaching practices can lead to the development of asset-based mindsets of their peers through an emphasis on openness, interdisciplinary collaboration, and centering refugee youth. The implications of reframing service learning as learning and exploration are discussed, highlighting the benefits for both students and preservice teachers in terms of cultural competence and equity. Considerations for future research include the importance of longitudinal studies on the impact of cultural responsiveness in educator preparation programs. The research contributes to the understanding of effective teaching strategies for promoting equity in education and highlights the transformative potential of culturally responsive teaching on preservice teachers in collaboration with each other. Overall, engaging preservice teachers in community exploration and learning projects as culturally responsive teaching has the potential to dismantle racism, challenge biases, promote openness and partnership, and foster equity across middle-level learning spaces.

Keywords: culturally sustaining pedagogies; middle-level teacher preparation; culturally and linguistically diverse youth; service learning



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1. Introduction

1.1. Realities of Refugee Students in the Midwest U.S.

Classrooms across the U.S. are becoming more diverse. Three million refugees have resettled in the U.S. in the last 50 years [1]. A total of 12,500 were resettled in 2021, and more than 25,000 refugees were resettled in 2022 [2]. The state in which this research takes place is in the top 10 states in the U.S. that resettle the most refugees [3]. Additionally, almost 75% of classrooms in the United States include at least one emergent multilingual student [4], and this state's population of emergent multilingual students has doubled over the last 10 years. Within 10 miles of the university lies the most diverse high school in the state, representing students from over 20 countries. The likelihood that preservice teachers will teach culturally and linguistically diverse students in their classrooms is plausible, yet the educator preparation program does not include many opportunities for teachers to build skills or experience for diverse classrooms [5].

This research takes place at a predominantly white institution in the Rust Belt. As a teacher educator at this university, I have the unique privilege of instructing the advanced studies undergraduate middle-level students for the entire year leading up to student teaching. Most of the preservice teachers in the middle-level education department reportedly remain in this state and teach. The geographical location of the university is

unique; it is nestled in an intersection of rural, suburban, and urban regions. Within a 15-mile radius, field experiences in this program range from small farm-town schools to inner-city middle schools. Despite the vast field of experience and the varying geographies, cultures, and languages represented within a short driving distance from the university, preservice teachers in this educator preparation program at this university are not required to take courses that focus on or include topics on teaching emergent multilingual students or refugee education.

Researchers report several roadblocks to urban refugee education success in the U.S.: 68% of urban refugees indicated discrimination and xenophobia as obstacles to their learning, and 72% indicated the lack of trained teachers as a barrier to urban refugee education [6]. To address these needs, researchers recommend the creation of non-formal education programs across learning spaces [6]. Preservice teachers in the middle-level program must be equipped with real-world knowledge and experience centering culturally and linguistically diverse students for their future careers as educators across learning spaces.

1.2. Culturally Responsive and Sustaining Practices

This research draws from culturally responsive teaching [7] and culturally sustaining pedagogies [8]. Culturally sustaining pedagogies recognize that students bring with them rich cultural experiences, languages, and identities that are valuable and deserving of recognition, empowerment, and respect in the classroom [8]. Culturally sustaining pedagogies sustain “linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of schooling for positive social transformation” [9] (p. 1) and “explore, honor, extend, at times, problematize [white] cultural practices and investments” [8] (p. 3). In these ways, culturally sustaining pedagogies call for educators to sustain and recognize student culture and language to improve student engagement and enable student agency [9]. To accomplish this, culturally sustaining pedagogies call for educators to boldly take action to address inequities and foster equity, such as using culturally responsive teaching [7].

Culturally responsive teaching utilizes the knowledge, experiences, and cultures of diverse students to improve the efficacy and relevance of learning as a means of equity [6]. Villegas and Lucas [10] argue that educators should see themselves utilizing culturally responsive practices as advocates in the community to disrupt inequities. The Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP) emphasizes the need to prepare preservice teachers to be culturally competent [11]. CAEP recommends that educator preparation coursework helps preservice teachers develop an awareness of diverse students in classroom planning, incorporate multiple perspectives, recognize and challenge their own biases and beliefs, and understand the power dynamics in school settings [11]. Teachers must use culturally responsive teaching practices to bridge students’ diverse experiences and their school learning [12]. There is both a need and expectation for educator preparation programs to focus on understanding and implementing culturally responsive teaching practices; however, research shows that there are persistent challenges when preservice teachers attempt these practices in educator preparation programs [5,13]. In order to plan authentic, integrative learning experiences, teachers must be culturally aware [14,15], and teacher preparation programs must include experiences that enable preservice teachers to gain first-person knowledge of diverse students they may teach in their future classrooms [13]. Teachers who implement culturally sensitive practices in their classrooms see culture as an asset that can encourage academic and social achievement [16].

For the sake of teacher preparation and to help preservice teachers develop cultural awareness in order to put culturally responsive teaching into practice, this study focuses on the relational competencies of culturally responsive teaching. Culturally responsive teaching calls for the development of relational competencies among students. Gay writes,

“If we are to avoid intergroup strife and if individuals are to live the highest quality lives possible, we simply must teach students how to relate better to people from different ethnic, racial, cultural, language, and gender backgrounds. These *relational competencies* must encompass knowing, valuing, doing, caring,

and sharing power, resources, and responsibilities. Hence, developing sociocivic skills for effective membership in multicultural communities is as important a goal of culturally responsive pedagogy as improving the academic achievement and personal development of students of culture". (p. 22, emphasis in original)

I wanted to create space and time inside and outside the classroom for preservice teachers to develop skills of knowing, valuing, doing, and caring, as well as sharing power, resources, and responsibilities [7,10]. Culturally responsive teaching maintains that student achievement improves when teachers incorporate, sustain, and honor the personal experiences and skills of students into their instruction [7] (p. 1). Students from historically marginalized groups experience bias, discrimination, and institutionalized oppression more than white students [9]. When teachers implement asset-based pedagogies and center students' cultural experiences and backgrounds, learning becomes more relevant and builds upon the skills and literacies students bring with them into a learning space [13]. To build these skills and to answer the call for educators to gain experience with refugee youth outside classroom spaces, I created a learning project as part of the preservice teacher curriculum. As a middle-grades generalist, I focused my curriculum courses on culturally responsive teaching practices and created a final project that required students to work together and center culturally and linguistically diverse youth. For this project, I sought out and developed a new partnership with a local refugee resettlement organization and used culturally sustaining pedagogies and culturally responsive teaching to frame the course project.

1.3. Interdisciplinary Teaching, Community Projects, and Reframing Service-Learning Projects

To prepare preservice teachers to implement culturally sustaining pedagogies addressing the needs of all students, including refugee youth, teacher preparation programs must include opportunities for preservice teachers to engage with and center culturally and linguistically diverse students in authentic ways. This research project builds on the work that is already being performed by extending culturally responsive teaching opportunities to the community and by engaging preservice teachers in interdisciplinary planning and collaboration. Participating in community-based programs as part of their field experience can provide preservice teachers with the opportunity to integrate theory into practice in authentic ways [17]. Furthermore, the Association for Middle-Level Education (AMLE) calls for interdisciplinary education to engage students in authentic learning experiences [18]. According to AMLE, interdisciplinary education helps middle school students make connections across subjects and see the relevance of what they are learning. Interdisciplinary education allows for the integration of multiple perspectives and a more comprehensive understanding of a topic. AMLE [19] emphasizes the importance of collaboration between teachers from different content areas to create interdisciplinary lessons and projects; by working together to develop culturally sustaining pedagogies centering refugee youth, this project answers the call for middle-level education programs to "implement curriculum and instruction that is responsive to young adolescents' local, national, and international histories, language/dialects, and individual identities" (p. 1). This knowledge and literacy building can be enacted through community exploration and learning projects.

Service learning has been a long-time standard and practice in teacher education programs across the United States that can help preservice teachers put theory into practice [20]. Research has found that preservice teachers did not understand equity related to classroom teaching nor how biases and stereotypes impacted their teaching, and engaging in community projects was one way that helped open their minds [21]. Service-learning projects can help preservice teachers form positive relationships with community partners and stakeholders and develop a greater understanding of the reciprocity in the processes of service and learning [22,23].

While rooted in the idea of community learning, the concept and practice of service learning can be problematic. In recent research, the scope of service-learning projects has been shown to reinforce stereotypes and, through an emphasis on service, perpet-

uate a (white) savior complex among students [24,25]. In these ways, the idea of service can potentially reinforce hierarchies and power dynamics that continue and uphold institutional racism.

This research project problematizes the idea of “service” and reframes the concept of service learning using culturally sustaining pedagogies. This research project uses culturally sustaining pedagogies to de-centralize the focus on the benevolent outcomes of preservice teachers’ work and instead center historically marginalized students by viewing the project as an opportunity for preservice teacher learning and exploration of students’ needs, interests, and experiences with the goal of supporting and sustaining their identities through a student-centered curriculum. I refer to this work as the “community learning and exploration project”, reframing the idea of “giving back” to communities to instead think about community participation from an exploratory and learning mindset. By planning a project and using culturally responsive teaching practices in this course, preservice teachers reflexively examine, analyze, and problematize the systems, spaces, and implicit biases that serve as barriers to social justice and refugee education while collaboratively learning and planning a project centering the needs of neighboring refugee youth. Furthermore, community exploration and learning projects answer the call for teachers to have more out-of-classroom experience. They also allow preservice teachers the practice of planning an interdisciplinary curriculum with refugee youth in mind, implementing responsive and authentic practices across learning spaces, and reinforcing the commitment to instruction that fosters active, purposeful, and democratic learning [26].

2. Materials and Methods

The purpose of this research is to observe middle-level preservice teachers as they develop culturally responsive and sustaining pedagogies through interdisciplinary collaborative planning centering urban refugee youth. When referencing interdisciplinary collaboration, I am referring to the four main concentration areas in which preservice teachers specialize: social studies, science, mathematics, and English language arts. In this program, preservice teachers are required to choose two content areas of their choice as their concentrations. For the scope of this in-class project, the stipulation was that preservice teachers could choose their groups as long as all four concentration areas were represented across each group.

As part of a required course in their advanced program of study, 21 preservice teachers collaborated in class to develop a 3-day learning program for refugee youth. This learning program was intentionally designed to take place during refugee students’ spring break, which occurred three weeks after the university’s break, so preservice teachers were able to plan and participate as part of their regular curriculum. This project was in partnership with both a local refugee resettlement nonprofit organization and the neighborhood library, both of which were within walking distance for most refugee families in this area. When I asked about the learning needs of refugee youth, the refugee resettlement organization identified a need for building literacy around issues of food and sustainability. To respond to these needs, these topics served as the theme of our community exploration and learning program. Preservice teachers named the program “Pass the Plate”. They worked together across content areas to design standards-based learning experiences around issues of food and sustainability for emergent multilingual middle-grade students. The following research questions guided my study:

1. How did preservice teachers’ use of cultural responsiveness in planning and implementing a community-based project impact their implicit biases and beliefs about culturally and linguistically diverse students and teaching?
2. How did the community exploration and learning project affect preservice teachers’ praxis?

This project uses critical ethnography, which combines the observations of everyday realities of people and the interrogation of power structures [27]. Critical ethnography is a methodology committed to highlighting and disrupting the status quo and addressing jus-

tice and inequities [28,29]. While examining relationships, inequities, and issues of power, critical ethnography also mandates an acknowledgment of the researcher's positionality.

My positionality in relation to this research cannot be ignored or skewed. I am a former language arts and ESL teacher. I taught English to resettling refugees in Eastern Europe and to documented and undocumented migrants in Midwestern public schools in the New Latino Diaspora—communities in geographic areas not traditionally thought of for having increasing populations of Latinx residents [30]. It was in my own experience teaching refugee students in a politically tumultuous time in Europe that I observed intense inequities and discrimination of Black and Brown youth. Being confronted by my own whiteness and by intense racism and injustice as a white woman in a position of power greatly impacted by own praxis. I am now a professor in the middle-level education program at a predominantly white institution in the Rust Belt. My research focuses on antiracist classroom practices, and my teaching practices seek to foster equity, love, and excellence across content areas with students at the center.

As a critical ethnographer, I was aware of my positionality when developing this research study in my own classroom with preservice teachers as participants. Keeping in line with critical ethnography, I am constantly asking, "Do I have a right to do this research? Who am I to do this work?" [31] (p. 90). Critical ethnography begins with the self but does not focus on the self; it maintains that researchers cannot separate themselves from the histories, places, and people with whom they research, and it calls for an ethical responsibility to confront injustice [32,33]. For this project, my focus was also not on refugee youth; rather, I centered my focus on the sensemaking of predominantly white middle-level preservice teachers as they grappled with this work. I intentionally designed this as student-driven so that my influence and position would be minimized as much as possible. Preservice teachers' participation in the research was not tied to a grade, and they had full autonomy over the lessons they designed for this project. I served as a facilitator and helper when needed.

Critical ethnography mandates that the researcher question and trouble relationalities and categories within power structures [32]. I questioned cultural responsiveness in its conventional use as a tool that mainly benefited classrooms and students. I questioned how preservice teachers positioning themselves as practitioners in this way might challenge the conventional ideas of cultural responsiveness.

Research occurred in two locations: in the education building on campus and in the community neighborhood where most refugee families resided, specifically the neighborhoods around the library in which this program occurred. Research involved weekly collaboration and planning sessions during class. Video recording captured students' planning and collaborative sessions, as well as whole group discussions and interviews about the project. I also collected artifacts in the form of project-informed assignments, including walking tours, reflective discussion posts, and reflexive writing. Preservice teachers also shared with me their group notes and lesson plans.

This project occurred over 12 weeks. Participants had 10 weeks during class to brainstorm, plan, design, and develop a 3-day-long learning program centering refugee youth that would take place at the library nearest the resettled refugee community, an inner-city neighborhood in a nearby urban area that was a 25 min drive from campus. This project was student led; university students responded to the needs of refugee youth by keeping with the theme of food and sustainability for this project. Students chose their groups, which comprised 4 or 5 preservice teachers, the only stipulation being that students in each group had to represent each of the four content areas.

Data collection included observation, field notes, and audiovisual recording of in-class discussions and collaboration sessions, as well as written reflections and semi-structured post-project interviews with preservice teachers. I used thematic analysis to analyze my research. I first conducted in vivo coding for my initial round of coding, resulting in 506 codes. I then conducted a series of recursive descriptive coding rounds, resulting in thirteen categories. I identified four themes from the research:

1. PSTs' reflexivity related to CRT led to changed beliefs and behaviors;
2. CELP and CRT built key pedagogical skills in PSTs;
3. PSTs developed asset-based mindsets of each other as colleagues;
4. PSTs developed asset-based mindsets of students and their cultures.

Table 1 shows the thirteen categories and four themes and how these aligned with my research questions.

Table 1. Research questions, categories, and themes from thematic analysis.

Research Questions	Categories	Themes
How did preservice teachers' use of cultural responsiveness in planning and implementing a community-based project impact their implicit biases and beliefs about culturally and linguistically diverse students and teaching?	CELP and CRT helped PSTs recognize and change implicit biases CELP and CRT fostered equity and open-mindedness through interdisciplinary planning CELP and CRT build socioemotional skills in PSTs	PSTs' reflexivity related to CRT led to changed beliefs and behaviors
How did the community exploration and learning project affect preservice teachers' praxis?	CELP added value to the MCED program by providing an interdisciplinary and authentic experience CELP increased interdisciplinary planning skills and understanding CRT helped PSTs understand the importance of student-centered learning, differentiation, and accommodation PSTs view CELP and CRT as vital components of educator preparation	CELP and CRT built key pedagogical skills in PSTs
How did preservice teachers' use of cultural responsiveness in planning and implementing a community-based project impact their implicit biases and beliefs about culturally and linguistically diverse students and teaching?	PSTs recognized the collective learning process and reflected on individual contributions Peers recognized each other's strengths from interdisciplinary collaboration PSTs reflected on, recognized, and valued each other's cultural differences	PSTs developed asset-based mindsets of each other as colleagues
How did preservice teachers' use of cultural responsiveness in planning and implementing a community-based project impact their implicit biases and beliefs about culturally and linguistically diverse students and teaching?	PSTs were most impacted by interacting with and learning from students PSTs recognized the importance of centering culturally and linguistically diverse students through planning PSTs viewed students, cultures, languages, and geographies as assets	PSTs developed asset-based mindsets of students and their cultures

3. Results

For the purposes of this article, I focus on the theme, "PSTs developed asset-based mindsets of each other as colleagues". I show how, through planning, together with culturally and linguistically diverse youth in mind, preservice teachers' culturally responsive practices also brought about culturally responsive practices with each other. I also explore how this collaborative process resulted in stronger relationships and a feeling of belonging for preservice teachers. While this theme was evident across each of the groups, for this article, I selected one particular group of students' responses as an exemplar of this theme. These students are Win, Kayla, Adam, and Eva (pseudonyms).

Gay encourages educators to write about their work and experiences with students of color into "meaningful tales of important happenings" to convey why culturally responsive teaching is a generative and impactful process [7] (p. 2). I draw from Gay and from cultural ethnography to first share my own observations in the form of a short vignette below to help situate this group's dynamics.

Win was a math and science preservice teacher in the cohort of this advanced program of study. I taught curriculum and instruction courses in both fall and spring semesters, so I had the privilege of instructing this cohort for the entire year. The first day I met Win in class, he showed us photos of his Ferrari. As the year progressed, he mainly kept to himself in the classroom but was friendly with his peers. He missed class a few times because he had to work at his parents' business, as his dad had fallen ill.

During the fall semester, on two separate occasions, Win asked if he could talk to me about career options. He said he was worried he was making the wrong career choice. Both times I listened, and I gave him resources to consider and advised him to talk to his advisor. Later, at department meetings, I found out that he had also talked to three other faculty members and expressed reservations of teaching and being part of this cohort.

During the second semester, Win asked to talk to me again about his trepidation of becoming a teacher. I asked him, "What are you afraid of?". He finally said, "I'm afraid I'm not going to connect with the students". I had seen Win in the field. He was personable and prepared, and I observed positive interactions between students and Win. After I mentioned those factors to Win, he said, "I know I have a different personality. I don't have many friends in this cohort. I don't know why, but I don't connect with them. I'm scared I won't connect with students. I'm wondering if middle grades education is for me".

On the day I introduced this community exploration and learning project to the class, I asked students to form project groups. The stipulation was that each group's members had to represent all four content areas. The last group to form was the one that included Win.

A few days later, two of Win's group members came to my office. They expressed anxiety and concern working with Win. One mentioned that Win was a nice person, but he did not complete his work. She actually began to cry; she stated she was having inner turmoil over this because, on one hand, she acknowledged that Win was ostracized from his peers in the cohort. She felt it was unfair for her cohort members to not like him; she said that many of their peers simply did not put effort into getting to know him. On the other hand, she had worked with him several times before, and he did not follow through on his work. She did not want to further ostracize him, but she was concerned about her grade and his level of participation and commitment. It was decided that the group would stay together and develop a group contract, complete with accountability measures and consequences for missing work and not being present.

Two days later, we had class again. Students sat in their new groups, and I elaborated on the concept and scope of the project: Students would plan, develop, and implement a 3-day learning program for urban refugee youth to take place at their neighborhood library during students' spring break. I explained that the local refugee nonprofit identified learning needs of refugee youth around food and sustainability, and that would be our focus, as this was responding to actual needs of local refugee youth.

Win raised his hand. "Do you know if any Burmese students will be attending? If so, I can probably translate".

The room was quiet, but all eyes turned and looked at Win. He continued, "My parents are immigrants from Myanmar. I came to the US when I was 3".

I responded that it was possible; along with six other nationalities, there was a large Burmese population in the neighborhood.

Up until this moment, Win had never talked with his cohort members or professors about his status as an immigrant or his cultural background. Or that he was bilingual.

3.1. Culturally Responsive Approaches Helped (Re)Position Immigration and Biliteracy as Assets

Through my observations and video recordings over time, there was a shift in Win's group. Toward the end of the project, Win was asked regularly for input. In their post-project interviews, each of his group members talked about Win and the uniqueness of his positionality in this project. Throughout the next section, I interweave excerpts from students' interviews and show how their responses bolstered this theme of PSTs developing asset-based mindsets of each other as colleagues. To situate these sections, I provide excerpts from students talking about their experiences with Win in Table 2 below.

Table 2. Interview excerpts of participants talking about collaborating with each other.

Participant	Interview Transcript
Kayla	<p>There was some nervousness with a group member [Win] as to what would be accomplished by him in the group. I think as a group, we all worked really nicely together. I thought contribution was all good. Our group all worked really nicely together. I think it got Win, who might not have been as excited about the project, way more excited. I think it helped give us all a comfort level—that we had someone in our group just like the kids coming to us who had a different upbringing, perhaps, than some of us did. So I think that gives us a comfort that we have someone who can maybe connect on a different level than any of the rest of us could. Even if it wasn't Burmese children coming in, it was still people who grew up with immigrant parents perhaps, and we had someone who had that—who wasn't an American citizen when he came to America. It got him really excited. I think that made him feel really good that we got to share part of his culture. And honestly, he didn't even know how to play chinlone; I think it might have bonded him and his father. So, I think there's a broader aspect to bringing in a culture of someone else's. I think that gave him some way to share himself. That was important for him and for the group and it really got him excited about it. And I think it was really a cool experience. I'm glad he was part of our group ...</p> <p>This project let me know that we might not know [students'] whole background. Even just working with Win, I didn't know he was an immigrant, honestly. I knew his parents were immigrants but I didn't know he was. Really listening to people: just because someone speaks English well does not mean their home speaks English as their first language. It's important to listen to the students and ask questions about their background, just so you know how to adapt your teaching. I feel like if you can know a little bit about what their home life is, you know, without prying, I think that helps you know how you can help them as a student, perhaps even better.</p>
Eva	<p>Working with Win was really fun, especially because he had a lot of insight into the Burmese population, which was really insightful for all of us because we were able to take his firsthand experiences and the knowledge that he has growing up in his household. We were able to incorporate that into our project. he was so excited to tell us about like chinloan. We were FaceTiming and he was showing me the multiple different balls that he has in his house—stuff like that that I never would have thought of. So I think it was interesting specifically to have somebody of a different culture show us some general activities or practices that they use in their culture, because I feel like it helps us kind of prepare better for the different people we're gonna get out to our program—like, how can we use this as an opportunity to connect rather than see it as something different?</p>

Kayla and Eva both mentioned they felt Win's increased productivity was due to his ability to relate to this project. When talking about the project centering on culturally and linguistically diverse students, Kayla said, "I think it got Win, who might not have been as excited about the project, way more excited". She talked about her other group members being nervous about working with Win, referring to the conversation she and Eva had with me in my office prior to the beginning of the project. She said, "Contribution was all good" and "Our group worked really nicely together". She went on to attribute this to culturally responsive teaching, saying, "I think that made him feel really good that we got to share part of his culture". She acknowledged the mutual benefits of planning with Win: the benefits he experienced as a cohort member and the benefits of having his skills and knowledge in collaborative planning. Similarly, Eva said, "[Win] had a lot of insight into the Burmese population, which was really insightful for all of us because we were able to take his firsthand experiences and the knowledge that he has growing up in his household". She also used the word excited when talking about the perceived benefits of planning with

Win. She talked about how Win's knowledge and experience as being Burmese helped the group better prepare their lessons when centering culturally and linguistically diverse students. Here, Kayla and Eva's responses suggest that they credited culturally responsive approaches for their group's productivity and output.

Cultural responsiveness allowed for the disruption of dominant discourses and expectations in typical group work. Kayla and Eva, two white women, felt less intimidated and anxious by this work of centering culturally and linguistically diverse students because of Win's experience and knowledge and what he brought to the group. This was a dynamic shift from the beginning of the project when both women were in my office worried about Win's work ethic and wondering how his previous lack of follow-through would ultimately affect this project. Culturally responsive teaching offered preservice teachers the opportunity to practice relational competencies not just among students but among each other. They got to know Win's background. They valued his culture and his experience. They practiced caring, saying that they were excited to get to know more about him. They shared power, resources, and responsibilities and foregrounded Win's expertise in their lessons. They used their experience with Win to situate themselves as future teachers. Kayla referenced her experience working with Win and said it was important to really listen to your students and not make assumptions. Preservice teachers developed culturally responsive lessons and simultaneously practiced cultural responsiveness among themselves by working together and learning from each other.

3.2. Cultural Responsiveness Led to Stronger Relationships among Preservice Teachers

Working together and planning this project, preservice teachers also talked about the development of stronger bonds with each other. Adam said, "I'm so glad I got to work with Win, Eva, and Kayla. I feel like I don't work with them that much, so having that type of moment and bond with them laughing and enjoying moments with the kids was really special to me". Adam talked about how his experience working with Win and the other group members was special. One of Adam's takeaways from his time on this project was sharing moments of laughter and joy with Win, Kayla, and Eva. Adam said, "It was a really fun opportunity . . . Each session, like creating the lesson plans, were so unique and so fun. I feel like every time though, we're not goofing off, but we joked a lot . . . I enjoyed every second of it".

Win stated in his interview that he felt this project contributed to him feeling an increased sense of belonging among the cohort. When I asked him what contributed to that, he said time to get to know each other and his peers taking an interest in his knowledge and expertise. He said,

We worked really well. We all got to talk to each other freely. [This project] is not an in-class thing. We all had to work together on it. I had a game, chinlone, they all wanted to play. Also, field [experience] helped out. You have to force yourself to get to know people. So I would say I feel more belonging . . . they took an interest in my game. I want to say the biggest thing is being treated equally by others.

Collaborating with peers on a community exploration and learning project centering refugee youth fostered a sense of belonging for Win. It also fostered a sense of equity. He felt his ideas were heard and listened to.

This project also helped students challenge their preconceived notions about working with their cohort members. Eva said:

It turns out that working with people that I didn't normally work with ended up building me great friendships and great relationships. I went to lunch with Adam and Win after the third day, and we were there for 2 h. It was ridiculous. I never would have anticipated that I would have actually built stronger friendships out of that than I normally would have. I consider myself to be somewhat of a floater in the cohort. I can just kind of talk to anybody. But being able to see people every

day that you're kind of going through the same thing with—I feel like it helped a lot to build relationships for me, personally.

Cultural responsiveness can result in more than just learning about and sustaining students' cultural backgrounds in classroom settings; cultural responsiveness in collaboration with other educators can evoke joy in teaching, collaborating, and learning. It can strengthen preservice teachers' relationships with each other. Learning from peers outside their concentration areas and learning to collaborate interdisciplinarily led to friendships and bonds among preservice teachers and offered them an idea of what collaboration in education could look like.

By reframing the idea of service to learning and exploration, this project removed the pressure to perform “service-learning work”. Providing a service insinuates that you are an expert in something in some way. Preservice teachers could be creative and adaptive. Win, Adam, Eva, and Kayla incorporated a traditional Burmese sport, chinlone, into their lessons. They also taught a simulated hydrodynamic water filtration system to students, which was arguably the most well-attended and requested station at the program that week. Groups had room to be fun, creative, and exploratory. They did not have to worry about being the expert in the room; in fact, they reflexively pushed back against that idea, as the community exploration and learning project challenged power dynamics and attempted to democratize the learning process for both refugee students and preservice teachers.

4. Discussion

4.1. Community Learning and Exploration Projects for Fostering Equity

Community learning and exploration projects do not just reframe a project; they reframe the classroom. By spending time in class to collaborate, the focus of the course became culturally responsive. Rather than having students build knowledge and skills to passively bestow on students, as promoted in the concept of service learning, preservice teachers were expected to remain open, flexible, adaptive, and ready to learn. Designing a project focused on preservice teachers' learning rather than their expertise challenges the hierarchies and power dynamics that often seem cemented in Midwest teaching and educator preparation programs. This project challenges the idea of power and reframes expertise as openness, which disrupts tenets of many educator preparation programs across academia. Using critical ethnography afforded me to examine these disruptions and foreground ways of thinking about culturally responsive approaches.

This project suggests that culturally responsive practices are not skills in a vacuum. They are interwoven, embodied practices that overflow into other areas of learning and education. A tenet of culturally responsive teaching is openness. Being open in planning for refugee students also afforded preservice teachers time and space to be open with each other. In this way, cultural responsiveness is recursive. The relational competencies of cultural responsiveness were not just developed as a result of interacting with students; these relational competencies of knowing, valuing, doing, caring, and sharing power, resources, and responsibilities were evident in the collaborative planning process. Group members cared about each other. They valued each other's opinions. They shared the workload, learning to delegate and learning to hold themselves accountable to do their part. They shared power and responsibilities.

A total of 80% of teacher candidates in the U.S. are white, monolingual women [34], while 49% of the student population are BIPOC students [35]. Educator preparation programs must include opportunities for preservice teachers to focus on racially, culturally, and linguistically diverse students. Cultural responsiveness must be implemented in a way that decenters whiteness. This seems inherently obvious, but modeling and teaching culturally responsive practices in teacher preparation programs requires careful attention in planning and design. Removing “service” from the idea of this project placed emphasis on preservice teachers as learners, not as those in power or in possession of something others needed, the very idea of which can perpetuate white supremacy and, at the very least, propagate a deficit mindset of students with historically marginalized backgrounds. The focus of the

community exploration and learning project was on building community, questioning biases, increasing understanding, and having mutual respect. Based on this research, I argue that a community exploration and learning project centering on culturally and linguistically diverse students organically confronts dominant norms. White preservice teachers cannot use or rely on their own experiences to contextualize or plan for students. As suggested in this research, this leverages preservice teachers with varying cultural backgrounds and opens opportunities for learning and cultivating the classroom community. It gives white preservice teachers practice in building active and respectful listening skills, openness and trust, and vulnerability, resulting in integrative and authentic learning experiences for all learners. As a result of this project, culturally responsive practices were evident throughout the teaching process and the collaborative in-class planning process. Centering Black and Brown students, refugees, and immigrants in the classroom is what is needed to decenter whiteness. Rather than tokenizing, it allows opportunities for preservice teachers to have the autonomy to decide if, when, and how they want to leverage or communicate their experiences for their own disruptions of power and dominant norms. Culturally responsive teaching and planning support the diverse knowledge and expertise of students of varying racial backgrounds, cultures, and languages.

4.2. Implications

Reframing service learning as learning and exploration adds to education research by challenging dominant ideas of community praxis in efforts to dismantle racism and oppression across learning spaces. Including community engagement opportunities in middle-level teacher preparation that incorporates learning and exploration of themselves, each other, and their students is one way preservice teachers practice cultural responsiveness and build cultural competence as preservice teachers [36]. Responsive teaching practices such as community exploration and learning projects are beneficial not just for students but also for preservice teachers, equipping them with the reflexive and dialogic work needed to sustain and foster equity across learning spaces.

4.3. Considerations for Future Research

One consideration of this project is that it was culturally responsive based on the information we were given from the refugee nonprofit about local refugee youth. One change I am hoping to make for future iterations of this project is to have preservice teachers meet some of the students beforehand. While preservice teachers walked the neighborhood and planned with students in mind, they had no way of knowing the individual students who would be there. This required preservice teachers to practice culturally responsive teaching in ways that would help them build skills as future teachers, as all educators plan at the beginning of the year with future students in mind and then adapt those lessons in response to students. These skills of planning and adapting are useful to both traditional classrooms as well as out-of-classroom learning contexts. While building skills of flexible and adaptable planning is valuable for preservice teachers, this project would be strengthened if preservice teachers could also meet students prior to spring break.

Further research is needed on the impact of practicing cultural responsiveness in planning and teaching in educator preparation programs. This research study was limited to one cohort and one semester-long project; while it offers promise and indication of positive impact, longitudinal research is needed to examine how culturally responsive practices in educator preparation programs impact teachers' praxis. After participating in these community projects, do preservice teachers go on to continue to foster equity and practice culturally responsive teaching in their own classrooms? Do these field experiences and community partnerships encourage teachers to be involved in out-of-classroom learning? Further research is needed to explore how early-career educators enact culturally responsive teaching in their classrooms.

5. Conclusions

Engaging preservice teachers in culturally responsive teaching practices has unexpected benefits for identifying, recognizing, and sustaining the cultural differences among cohort members within an educator preparation program. For some, it can lead to increased feelings of belonging in the cohort and strengthening of relationships among preservice teachers. Implementing a community exploration and learning project in authentic contexts serves as a way for preservice teachers to build the relational competencies necessary to practice cultural responsiveness. Responsiveness is not just a practice that centers students; it first requires the sensemaking of pluralistic experiences, cultural awareness, and an understanding and recognition of power dynamics across learning spaces. It repositions expectations, knowledge, and literacies. Responsiveness challenges the implicit biases of students and collaborators. Implementing community exploration and learning projects to practice and build culturally responsive teaching skills is one way to strengthen middle-level education programs, dismantle racism and bias across academic spaces, and foster equity.

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