

Preparing Teachers of Color for Contentious Conversations:

A Mixed Reality Simulation Study in Ethnic Studies Teacher Education

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Abstract

This study examined the written reflections of 16 secondary preservice teachers (PSTs) of Color after participating in a Mixed Reality Simulation (MRS) in an ethnic studies pedagogy course. The study's purpose was to provide insight into the attitudes of PSTs of Color to help teacher education programs understand the importance of teaching communication strategies to support the longevity and persistence of future ethnic studies teachers, particularly teachers of Color. Using a situated learning context, the MRS placed PSTs in a meeting with a parent accusing them of having a "liberal agenda" and teaching Critical Race Theory. A qualitative thematic analysis was conducted of the students' reflections written before, during, and after the MRS experience. Findings indicate: (1) The PSTs' attitudes shifted from nervousness prior to participating in the simulation, to frustration with the parent, to gaining confidence after the simulation; (2) The PSTs learned to shift the discussion from being defensive, to referring to their adherence to state/curricular expectations as student-centered teaching professionals; and (3) The PSTs overwhelmingly saw the benefit of participating in the MRS

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and wanted more opportunities for themselves and PSTs in other content areas.

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Introduction

With AB 101 signed into law in 2021, all California high school students will be required to take ethnic studies (ES) to graduate, starting with the class of 2030 (Hong, 2021). Currently, teacher education programs (TEPs) across the state continue to wait for the California Department of Education to finalize the certification requirements for ES teachers (e.g., credential, micro-credential, supplemental credential). These decisions will guide TEP coursework and offerings in ES, including ES pedagogy and content knowledge.

However, one overlooked aspect of secondary ethnic studies is the current political climate in which ES teachers are teaching. While California remains a “blue” state, the politically conservative wave of anti-Critical Race Theory (CRT) legislation has made its way into local, more conservative school districts. For example, districts in Tulare, San Luis Obispo, Riverside, Orange, and San Diego counties have introduced, and in some cases adopted, policies or resolutions that prohibit classroom teaching and content that invokes CRT (Lambert, 2023). While ES pedagogy and content are an essential part of teaching secondary ES, future ES teachers also need support to persist in the field against white supremacists who do not understand the value that ES offers to all students academically and personally (Sleeter, 2011).

Literature Review

White supremacy, which includes heteronormativity (Smith, 2010), is deeply ingrained in US education, including the dominance of White teachers (Taie & Lewis, 2023); the White behaviors and English-only monolingualism valued in school (DiMaggio, 1982; Farkas et al., 1990; Ferguson, 1998); and the reliance on a Eurocentric curriculum. Consistently, US public school curricula exclude and erase marginalized communities from canonical knowledge. Such erasure results in a deficit-based perspective of marginalized students, families, and communities and, instead, communicates racist, heteronormative socio-political messages (Solórzano et al., 2000) that treat marginalized students like outsiders in academic spaces and Other them (Thomas, 2016).

The consequence of white supremacy in schools is that marginalized students experience systemic trauma from kindergarten through

higher education (Goldsmith et al., 2014; Williams et al., 2022). Systemic trauma occurs when schools imply that White (straight, cis-, and Christian) culture is the “right” culture (Goldsmith et al., 2014; Williams et al., 2022). Students who do not begin school with the necessary cultural capital or who are unwilling to assimilate can suffer emotionally, becoming disconnected and resistant to school (Fine, 1991; Fordham, 1993), and/or suffer academically, performing lower and perpetuating educational equity gaps, particularly across racial groups (Carter, 2013). Over time, the invalidation that marginalized students experience begins to enact systemic trauma on them as they internalize shame for their identity(ies), culture(s), knowledge, and/or home language (Darder, 2012; Valencia, 2002).

To heal the systemic trauma enacted on marginalized students, classrooms need to be sites of healing that are free from white supremacy. Decoupling schools from white supremacy is a process of healing that liberates marginalized students from further school-induced systemic trauma (hooks, 1994). ES centers and privileges the voices, histories, and experiences of marginalized communities (Yosso, 2006). ES pedagogy has students critically examine their realities, including their school (e.g., school policies, practices, curricula), by actively challenging the Eurocentric teachings that stereotype, erase, or euphemize the histories of marginalized communities (Tintiango-Cubales et al., 2014). The interwoven, foundational values of ES teaching include holistic humanization and critical consciousness (Tolteka Cuauhtin, 2019) that formulate the seven principles ES lessons should include: cultivate, celebrate, center, critique, challenge, connect, and conceptualize (Liberated Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum Consortium, 2019). In a well-taught ES course, students gain the knowledge and skills needed to challenge dominant perspectives in society and, in turn, develop cultural pride (de los Rios et al., 2015), mitigating the assimilationist messages conveyed through traditional US curricula. ES helps students develop their own ES lens to recognize, understand, and critique any instances of injustice or oppression they experience or witness (Arce, 2016; Morales et al., 2016). TEPs preparing ES teachers need to ensure that their PSTs are willing to examine and challenge the “deficit model of traditional programs” (Fernandez, 2019, p. 188) that perpetuates the same systemic barriers ES works to remove. Such barriers include curricular models, language policies, and classroom management practices (Harry & Klingner, 2007; Solórzano & Yosso, 2001).

However, rarely acknowledged in TEPs is the additional trauma PSTs of Color experience. Too many TEPs normalize racism (Marom, 2019; Sleeter, 2001) through the perpetuation of the same White cultural capital that is prioritized in K-12 schools (Souto-Manning, 2019).

Racism's physical and mental impact on ToCs is well documented (Amos, 2016; Dixson & Dingus, 2008; Kohli, 2018; Kohli & Pizzarro, 2016). The accumulation of ongoing racial microaggressions (Pierce, 1974), racism, and curriculum violence (Ighodaro & Wiggan, 2013) experienced in their K-16 schooling and on the job creates a "racial battle fatigue" (Smith et al., 2006) where "the stress of unavoidable front-line racial battles in historically white spaces leads to people of color feeling mentally, emotionally, and physically drained" (p. 301). White supremacy takes a toll on ToCs; consequently, they are too emotionally, mentally, and physically wounded to remain in K-12 classrooms.

Given the high rates of teachers of Color (ToCs) who leave the profession compared to their White counterparts (Thomas-Carver, 2019), providing support for preservice teachers (PSTs) of Color who will teach ES is vital. The rates of new ES ToCs leaving the profession have the potential to be significant when considering the onslaught of parents, administrators, and politicians questioning an ES teacher's professional expertise and teaching philosophy. TEPs need to build in experiences that will prepare PSTs of Color to navigate the white supremacist voices who question and threaten their expertise to help TOCs persist and ensure the future of ES in secondary schools.

This study examined the written artifacts of 16 secondary preservice teachers (PSTs) from an ES pedagogy course at a public, state university. The artifacts were completed after the PSTs participated in a Mixed Reality Scenario (MRS) activity in class; students were asked to reflect in writing on their experience of participating in an online, real-time scenario where they had to defend their classroom teaching to a White parent who was accusing them of having a "liberal agenda" and teaching CRT to their 10th grade student. This study examined the following research questions: After participating in an MRS experience in an ES teacher preparation course: (1) What, if any, attitudinal shifts did PSTs of Color express towards having to discuss their teaching and curriculum during a parent-teacher meeting simulation? (2) What communication strategies did they derive from the experience? and (3) What, if any, benefits did they derive from the MRS experience? My purpose is to provide insight into the experience of PSTs of Color to help TEPs understand and integrate strategies to support the longevity and persistence of future ES teachers, particularly ToCs.

Theoretical Framework

This study takes place in the context of a mixed reality platform. Past research in other fields has found that participants find simula-

tions more realistic than role-playing (Bell & Waag, 1998; Seymour et al., 2002; Slater et al., 2009). More recently, mixed reality began to be implemented in TEPs (Kaufman & Ireland, 2016). Traditionally, PSTs participate in field observations before student teaching, which provides inconsistent opportunities to engage directly with students in the classroom. Rarely do PSTs practice all the skills necessary for a classroom teacher until they are student teachers (Ward et al., 2018).

Mixed reality simulations (MRS) are grounded in situated learning. “Situated learning” is embedded in the context, activity, and culture in which the learning takes place (Lave & Wenger, 1990). The activity or social practice takes place in the social context of a setting that utilizes the knowledge being practiced (Cobb & Bowers, 1999). As a result, interaction and discourse are important parts of situated learning, where learners become a part of a “community of practice” (Lave & Wenger, 1990). As an example of situated learning, MRS learning occurs from a learner-centered standpoint (Koc & Bakir, 2010) and provides a useful framework for virtual environments in teacher education contexts. Past research on mixed reality in teacher education has shown that MRS provides a safe place for PSTs to practice and receive coaching (Dieker, et al., 2014). MRS allows PSTs to make mistakes in the simulation and attempt the simulation multiple times without running the risk of negatively affecting students, teachers, parents, or others in real-world situations (Ledger & Fischetti, 2019).

However, given the focus of this study pertains to ES PSTs and TOCs, this paper would be remiss if it did not adopt an ontology grounded in ES tenets of holistic humanization and critical consciousness (Tolteka Cuauhtin, 2019). As such, Indigenous Knowledge contrasts the characteristics of Eurocentric views on knowledge (Blackstock, 2009). Indigenous Knowledge is not a monolith but has common characteristics, in particular having a holistic base where the knowledge of different disciplines is mutually dependent on one another and cannot be divided (Battiste & Henderson, 2000; Cajete, 2000), which is a clear contrast to the silos of different disciplines in US education that separate subject matter from kindergarten through higher education. In contrast, Indigenous Knowledge takes a holistic approach, dependent on the local ecosystem, that develops an understanding and embodiment of the interconnected relationship between the people, the local ecosystem, other living beings, and the spirits that share the land (Battiste & Henderson, 2000; Henderson, 2000). Indigenous ontology also values intergenerational practices that are supported by knowledgeable Elders (Cajete, 2000; Couture, 1996; Peat, 1994; Stiegelbauer, 1996) and guide their lives in the physical and spiritual world (Cajete, 1999, 2000).

When compared to Western ontologies, Indigenous ontologies are free from racism, heteronormativity, and capitalism and have persisted despite white supremacy, colonization, and even genocide.

One Indigenous ontological lens, the Breath of Life Theory (Blackstock, 2009, 2011), has been applied to social work (Hall & Edwards, 2002; Townsend & Kennedy, 2004); geoscience (Semkin, 2005); people-environment relations (Vorkinn, 2001); and educational equity (Duncan-Andrade, 2022). Because Indigenous Knowledge connects individual needs to caring relationships, balanced individuals can establish a caring community that cares for other members' well-being, which likewise ensures that a community culture and knowledge can thrive (Blackstock, 2011). Without individual well-being and caring relationships, a community suffers and cultural knowledge disappears. Schools rely too heavily on remaking programs or materials to improve individual student achievement (Duncan-Andrade, 2022) and align with Western ontology's focus on the individual (Maslow, 1943). Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs prioritizes an individual's physiological needs and self-actualization, placing 'relationships' last on the hierarchy of needs. Past research argues that if teachers take a holistic approach by critically examining the structural inequities within US schools that perpetuate equity gaps and enact harm, they can better understand and respond with care to marginalized students' lived realities (Duncan-Andrade, 2022; see also Kohl, 1994; Noddings, 1999). This paper posits that the same argument can be applied to TEPs who claim to want to support the preparation and retention of PSTs of Color. Therefore, while MRS is grounded in situated learning and communities of practice, Indigenous Knowledge also serves as an appropriate framework for this study when talking about the longevity and persistence of future ES teachers, particularly ToCs.

Methods

For the examined course, "Ethnic Studies Methods," the two semesters under examination were the first times the course was offered at this institution. This course is not required but is an elective option for all single-subject credential students interested in teaching ES or teaching from an ES pedagogical lens. Many enrolled students are English/Language Arts or Social Studies PSTs, but Math and Science PSTs have also enrolled. The course provides PSTs with foundational knowledge on ES content and ES pedagogy, as well as anti-racist teaching, critical pedagogy, and humanistic pedagogy. The researcher currently serves as the instructor for the course from which the data

was collected. All PSTs were given the option to participate in the study. Participant demographic data can be found in Table 1.

The MRS took place in the final third of each semester. Provided by Mursion, MRS is a mixed reality platform that relies on technology called TLE TeachLivE™, developed at the University of Central Florida, to enhance the preparation and retention of PSTs (Hudson et al., 2019; Hudson et al., 2018). MRS provides an environment made up of digital and physical components (Lindgren et al., 2016). The program combines artificial intelligence and live actors to simulate various interactive settings and scenarios (e.g., classroom teaching, small group meetings, and one-on-one discussions).

For this class, the PSTs interacted with a virtual White parent and Black principal projected on a screen. The characters (‘avatars’) provide real-time responses to PSTs through a live actor improvising behind the scenes via Zoom. For the present scenario, the PST is a secondary teacher having a parent-teacher conference with their school principal present regarding the parent’s concern that the curriculum is pushing a “liberal agenda,” including teaching CRT. The parent can provide varying levels of pushback, depending on the level of difficulty set for the simulation (e.g., easy, medium, or hard). The principal provides minimal commentary, mainly during the medium and hard levels to show support for the teacher. Figure 1 depicts what PSTs see on the screen during the MRS parent-teacher-principal meeting.

The classroom was arranged in a fishbowl structure, with PSTs’ tables surrounding the MRS participant, who faced a projector screen depicting a school office where the parent and principal avatars were seated. Avatars are a “perceptible digital representation whose behaviors reflect those executed, typically in real time, by a specific human being” (Nagendran et al., 2013, p. 110). Each PST was given a mini-

Table 1
PST Demographic Breakdown by Course Semester and Year

	<i>Semester, Year</i>		<i>All Students</i>
	<i>Fall, 2023</i>	<i>Spring, 2024</i>	
Total Enrolled Students	9	7	16
Students of Color	9	7	16
Women	6	5	11
Men	3	2	5
Hispanic/Latinx	4	3	7
Asian American, Pacific Islander	3	1	4
Biracial/Multiple Races	2	3	5

imum of five minutes in the simulation, with the rest of the class observing and taking observation notes on what strategies were working or not. The PSTs selected the difficulty level for their turn and had the option to pause the simulation at any time to ask for help from their peers and receive coaching from the instructor. Between each PST's turn, the instructor would facilitate a short discussion: what went well in the simulation, what information was gained from the simulation that was useful for them to understand the parent better, and what other strategies the PSTs could try during the next round.

Regarding data collection, past research has shown that using data in instructional decisions can improve student performance (Wayman, 2005; Wayman et al., 2007; Wohlstetter et al., 2008). Student learning data, in the form of written reflections, was collected as a homework assignment after participating in the MRS in class. Human subject approval was deemed 'exempt' by the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB) because of the use of anonymized student coursework as the main data source. Students were asked to reflect on the following topics before, during, and after the activity: how they felt about the given scenario; what strategies they would use to navigate the discussion with the parent; and the benefits, if any, they felt the MRS activity held for PSTs. All the questions also asked them to discuss their perspectives as PSTs of Color.

Data was then coded at the completion of each semester. Open coding (Mostyn, 1985) was used, focusing on searching for and identify-

Figure 1

Parent-teacher-principal avatar meeting simulation (still image).

L-R: Parent, principal.



ing common threads across the PSTs' reflections that reflected their feelings, any learned strategies, and any perceived benefits of the MRS experience (DeSantis & Ugarriza, 2000). After coding the data, I searched for patterns that emerged across the data to provide a detailed account of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Lastly, final themes were derived from the analysis to answer the research questions, including any indication of shifts in attitudes/feelings in the PSTs, such as their feelings, any learned strategies, and any perceived benefits of the MRS experience. Microsoft Word was used to organize the coding, patterns, and final themes. Initial findings reveal three main themes: (1) The PSTs' attitudes shifted from nervousness before the MRS, to frustration with the parent's ideologies and responses, to gaining some confidence by the end of the MRS; (2) The PSTs learned to shift the discussion from being defensive with the parent, to instead referring to their adherence to state/curricular expectations as student-centered teaching professionals; and (3) The PSTs overwhelmingly saw the benefit of participating in the MRS and wanted more opportunities for themselves and other PSTs before student teaching to prepare for the realities of classroom teaching.

Findings

Initial findings reveal that the MRS proves to be beneficial to PSTs' confidence and developing their professional communication, but they express the need for more opportunities to practice navigating difficult conversations before entering the classroom, especially as future ToCs.

From Nerves and Frustration to Confidence

The PSTs' emotions shift wildly prior to, during, and after participating in the MRS. Before the MRS begins, the PSTs are given the scenario, but not told about the MRS platform, and then asked to rate themselves on a 4-point Likert scale for the following question: "How confident are you that you can talk with the parent and your principal in a meeting that is productive and, in the end, allows you to continue teaching your students through a critical lens?" Most PSTs rate themselves as feeling "confident" or "somewhat confident."

However, once the MRS platform is introduced, the PSTs' emotions become apprehensive and unsure about how to handle a scenario that is no longer hypothetical but in real time. In their written reflections, many express feeling "nervous" or "intimidated" about what to do, even when the PSTs have some strategies to rely on going into the simulation. For instance, one Latino PST writes that "I think I wasn't

prepared enough for my actual simulation” and that prior to the MRS, “[I] did have concerns whether or not I could handle [the meeting].” A biracial PST shares that “the thought of having to argue with a parent and defend myself and my teaching style does scare me,” also expressing a fear that she may “get fired within my first two years of teaching” because of her dedication to “being the teacher I want to be.” These concerns are common for many of the PSTs, many of whom share that they know meeting with upset parents is an inevitable part of teaching, but they also realize handling parents’ issues is different for ToC.

During the MRS, the PSTs’ emotions shift from nerves to frustration because of the avatar parent’s responses as ToCs. Several PSTs express concern about being ToCs and having to defend their teaching to confrontational, politically conservative parents. A Latino PST, who is neurodivergent, shares that he felt that the parent “mostly had a preconceived idea about me with how I look,” which, he says, has happened to him before but is no easier to handle in the simulation. On occasion, the parent would provide comments like, “I’m not racist—I have a Black friend, but...,” “I don’t see color,” or “I support your people, but...”; the PSTs pick up on these racially coded statements and discuss the frustration they elicit from them in their reflections.

A Latina PST expresses how she was surprised by the tenor of the parent’s questions, describing them as “attacks” on her and her peers’ race/ethnicities and questioning their personal beliefs. For example, during the MRS, the parent asked one PST, “Do you support Black Lives Matter?” This PST also realizes that this scenario is the reality of the situation for ToCs, writing “Many teachers of color, especially ones teaching Ethnic Studies, will have to face personal attacks by parents and members of the public who do not agree with diverse perspectives in the classroom. Teachers of color unfortunately have to be prepared to deal with these attacks and be able to move forward in their classroom and teach their content.” A biracial PST reflects that the teaching profession is made up mainly of White women who “get to miss the racism that I will inevitably have to face, even though I’m teaching the same material.” Another Latina PST explains the frustration she feels when White people “do not see that they have a very different life experience” compared to POCs. A third Latina PST reflects upon how difficult it is “to not internalize comments made by parents and the criticism that comes with it.” The parent’s lack of empathy consistently agitates the PSTs of Color, who feel that their racial/ethnic identities make them targets for racial trauma when teaching ES curricula, especially compared to their White counterparts. Their discussions of White privilege in the teaching profession, including the lack of recognition from White colleagues, are

a common thread across their written responses and written as an accepted, unfortunate reality of teaching. These discussions by the PSTs are consistent with past research that found many White teachers begin teaching with an insufficient amount of cross-cultural background, knowledge, or experience (Sleeter, 2008) and a lack of awareness of their privileged position in US society (Brown et al., 2017).

After the activity, the PSTs overall feel more confident in navigating difficult discussions about their curriculum. One example is from a biracial PST who, when reflecting on the experience, writes, “This was actually a very reaffirming experience for myself. I was left feeling as though I understood myself and the challenges I may face in my future as I attempt to teach lessons that may be ‘unpopular’ to some.” She states that she feels “very proud” of herself for not capitulating to the mother’s wishes and for “reaffirming the lesson’s historical accuracy and validity.” Twice she states that she feels “reaffirmed” by the experience because she was able to maintain her commitment to teaching a lesson that was rooted in “accuracy and validity.” One PST, an immigrant from Mexico, feels that this simulation has helped her “take into consideration these types of parents and guardians” when teaching but also states that “I will... never jeopardize my authenticity to please White people and others” because she wants “to be a good and inclusive teacher who authentically cares for all of her students.” The statements from both the PSTs demonstrate their desire to remain true to the purpose of ES: “to help students critique racism and its personal and social impact, as well as to challenge oppressive conditions” (Tintiango-Cubales et al., 2014, p. 111). Tintiango-Cubales and colleagues’ (2014) review of the literature found an important component of ES teaching is a strong commitment to an ES pedagogical stance, which these PSTs demonstrate, despite the pushback and racial microaggressions felt from the politically conservative parent.

Overall, the PSTs know their classroom experiences will be different as ToCs, but the MRS helps them feel confident in their difference. For instance, a Pacific Islander PST explains that the experience served as “a great reminder of how different we [PSTs of Color] are. Yet, it is those differences as educators that can help us to improve.” The MRS helped the PSTs to recommit to their teaching intentions as ToCs who will not perpetuate the whitewashing of the traditional US K-12 curricula. While initially intimidating to the PSTs, the MRS does not serve as a deterrent but as a confidence booster. Finally, the neurodivergent Latino PST who initially felt the simulation was stressful, by the end, feels “satisfied that I attempted the simulation to test my ability and know that I need to be much more prepared for the real thing

one day in case it does occur, which it probably will.” Again, the PSTs collectively write about the reality of this simulation coming to fruition when they are in the classroom. However, the MRS helps them begin to prepare for that reality. While the PSTs may not feel one hundred percent confident and ready to engage in these conversations at present, they all feel surer of themselves as ToCs by the end of the activity.

Remaining Student-Centered and Professional

Throughout the MRS, the PSTs’ strategies for navigating the meeting move from wanting to change the parent’s ideologies to “having her respect my position and my duties as a classroom teacher, even if our perspectives were different.” At the start of class, the instructor asks the PSTs to list any strategies they can use during the parent-teacher meeting. The instructor then facilitates a brief discussion about the strategies the PSTs came up with to build background knowledge and to give them a toolkit to draw from during their turn in the simulation. Before participating in the MRS, the PSTs’ communication strategies for the parent-teacher meeting rely on appealing to the parent’s logic; they talk about attempting to explain ES pedagogy (Tintiango-Cubales et al., 2014) and persuading the parent through (what they deem) reasonable arguments rooted in tenets of ES teaching (Tolteka Cuauhtin, 2019).

However, during the activity, the PSTs realize that the parent is not going to change her beliefs no matter how logically they defend their teaching and curriculum. A Latina PST summarizes what occurred in the activity: “Some of my classmates tried to argue for the validity of their teaching, including perspectives and empathy in the classroom, but the parent did not seem interested in even entertaining the idea.” In another reflection, a biracial PST notes that “I grew frustrated with the mom because there did not seem to be anything that would appease her. I also wondered what strategies I could try as more and more of my initial strategies were tried and shown to not work with the mom.” After several of their peers take their turns in the MRS, the PSTs quickly realize that the parent has no interest in changing her opinions, nor does she have any interest in hearing about ES pedagogy or tenets. Knowing the mother had no understanding of ES or of CRT frustrates many of the PSTs. A Latina PST describes her experience with the mother, who “seemed very close-minded and immediately got on my nerves because she kept accusing me of brain-washing her [student] with liberal ideologies when in reality all we do as...teachers is speak the truth.”

Despite their frustrations, the PSTs eventually realize that they

need to focus less on the parent's beliefs and more on their professionalism and role as an educator. The PSTs realize that teachers cannot change the ideologies of (racist) parents, but need to rely on an approach that is more student-centered. As one PST writes, "My goal should not be to change a parent's mind, rather attempt to come to a resolution for the student to have a safe and comfortable experience in the classroom." The PSTs eventually shift from focusing on themselves to focusing on the student's positive experience in the classroom. One strategy the PSTs learn is to focus on the academic success of the student to show that both they and the parent have the best interests of the student as a common goal. The PSTs brainstorm bringing the student's stellar work to the meeting as evidence of the student's performance, learning, and enthusiasm for the class. The PSTs also suggest sharing upcoming readings from class with the mother to placate her and to demonstrate the high level of critical thinking the students engage in during class, which the mother responded to positively during the MRS.

The PSTs also learn additional strategies, such as the importance of listening to the parent more carefully and avoiding hasty conclusions or defensiveness. One Pacific Islander PST realizes that she needs to "focus less on rebutting everything the parent has to say and more on listening to what the parent has to say to find out what the root of the problem is." When the PSTs start to listen more attentively to the parent, they discover that the mother, rather than the student, has concerns about the class curriculum. The student has been performing well academically. The parent is concerned about teaching that contradicts her personal beliefs as a politically conservative military wife. However, in their written reflections, the PSTs collectively express agitation that the parent ignores their student's performance and interest in the class; one Latino PST expresses this, writing, "I felt bad for [the student] since in this simulation, it seems like she is a good student who is just excited about the topics and is building her own opinions about the subject matter." Several other PSTs share similar sentiments, wishing the student had a voice in the discussion, something the student would have in the ES class. As a result, another strategy the PSTs develop during the MRS is to invite the student to participate in a second meeting between the parent, teacher, and principal because they feel the student's voice should be heard to adhere to ES pedagogy (Tintiango-Cubales et al., 2014).

When these strategies are employed in the MRS, the parent stops aiming racially coded language and microaggressions at the PSTs. Rather, the mother begins to focus more on the school district and the state. An Asian American PST summarizes another strategy gained

from the MRS: “References to authority beyond my control can be extremely helpful in shifting the blame away from me as a teacher to what is mandated by the state,” including focusing the discussion on college requirements, meeting district/state standards, and teaching according to the state’s “Standards for the Teaching Profession” (*California Teacher Performance Expectations*, Commission on Teacher Credentialing, 2016). During the MRS, some PSTs suggest the parent take up their issues with the school board or the California Department of Education, which the parent accepts. While this solution may not be ideal given the amount of pushback local districts are feeling from conservative parents, the strategy works to mitigate the parent’s anger and divert any further “racial battle fatigue” (Smith et al., 2006) away from the ToC in the scenario.

By the end of the MRS, the PSTs learn to center students in the discussion, to focus on listening to the parent, to ask questions to understand the parent’s perspective, and to explain that their teaching is district-approved and centered in preparing college-ready students who can think critically. None of the PSTs attempted or suggested any strategies that capitulated to the parent’s wishes to change the curriculum. Instead, the strategies they developed helped them feel more confident taking these types of challenges. A Latina PST states, “I saw the meeting as a way for the parent to safely air out her concerns, be heard, but still understand that I could not change the content of my class without doing a disservice to my students.” Another Latina PST writes that “a huge takeaway is to stop defending myself because I know I have nothing to hide and I am teaching the curriculum I need to be teaching.” The PSTs’ commitment to their students is unwavering, refusing to do “a disservice” to their students by teaching inaccurate or whitewashed content. In their reflections, overwhelmingly the PSTs stand resolutely behind the importance and significance of teaching an ES curriculum and, by the end of the MRS, understand how to professionally navigate conversations with stubborn, ideologically conservative parents.

Additional MRS Opportunities for All

Overwhelmingly, the PSTs see the value of participating in the MRS to develop their teaching professionalism and communication. While the PSTs see the benefit of MRS as helping them to navigate a politically charged situation as an ES teacher and/or a ToC, more of them write about the benefits MRS can provide all PSTs, regardless of race/ethnicity or content area. A common thread in their writing is the desire to have more opportunities for all PSTs to engage in MRS

experiences to help them learn how to effectively communicate with parents.

The PSTs believe that MRS experiences can benefit all PSTs, not just ones preparing to teach ES. They refer to MRS as “eye-opening,” “inspiring,” “unique,” “enjoyable,” “useful,” and “a great tool!” One PST summarizes their collective sentiment: “I would recommend MRS simulation for any pre-service teacher.” Aside from feeling nervous or anxious before participating in the MRS, none of the PSTs express any negative feelings towards the experience. Over the course of the two semesters, only one PST has declined to participate in the MRS, while others have asked to participate multiple times to try different strategies or to increase the difficulty of the simulation.

Most PSTs appreciate the opportunity to practice talking to parents during the MRS, a lesson they feel their TEP lacks. One Latina PST realizes experiencing a parent-teacher meeting before student teaching is rare, and so, “I would suggest this [MRS] for any future educator to get a feel of parent-teacher conferences.” Another PST is of a similar mind, explaining that MRS “is good practice in a low-stakes way to dealing with parents, students, and many other situations a teacher may find themselves in an education environment.” The PSTs see the main advantage of using MRS because it is “low stakes.” They can experiment with strategies, make mistakes, and practice without the risk of real-world consequences (Ledger & Fischetti, 2019). A bi-racial PST explains that “This was genuinely one of the best teaching moments I’ve had in the [teacher education] program and I’m grateful we got to experience it” because it was the first time that she had the chance to practice talking to parents before student teaching. She adds that she would “love a ‘Teaching Parents 101’ course” to help PSTs develop professional communication skills.

Based on their written reflections, communicating with parents is something that these PSTs are concerned about; for future ES teachers who are also ToCs, the fear of further racial trauma and racial battle fatigue is warranted (Smith et al., 2006). Several PSTs share having role-played different teaching scenarios or having briefly talked about communicating with parents in other courses, but they overwhelmingly agree MRS is much better at developing parent-teacher communication skills. One Filipino PST explains, “The MRS simulation is a great way for pre-service teachers to practice speaking with combative parents and coming to a resolution with them in a way where the parent is content (or at least not actively combative) and the classroom is still able to learn about ‘controversial’ topics like perspective, diversity, and other ethnic studies principles.” Given the controversy behind ES and many ES top-

ics, the PSTs for this course see the advantage of learning to effectively communicate with parents as important for their future careers. The stakes are higher for ES PSTs of Color when it comes to “combative parents,” but the benefits MRS has for all PSTs are apparent.

Lastly, the community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1990) and Indigenous Knowledge (Blackstock, 2011) that emerge are other benefits the PSTs derive from the MRS experience. For example, a Latina PST liked the community knowledge that emerges during the MRS, writing that she appreciated “being able to talk with a group of people and discuss what we could do, how to answer the parents’ questions, and the teacher moves we should implement.” Being able to unpack, brainstorm, discuss, and reflect on what they were seeing and hearing in the MRS helped the PSTs to collaboratively develop strategies and experiment, guided by the coaching and facilitation of the instructor. The PSTs drew from their collective knowledge and experiences to help them navigate the simulation. Past research argues that TEPs that are committed and willing to challenge systemic barriers in US education need to recognize the knowledge, perspectives, and experiences that PSTs of Color bring to their learning and teaching (Gist, 2017). Furthermore, their collective experiences as members of communities of Color, who have all felt racial trauma since they first entered US K-12 public schools, helps them establish a caring community that works together to protect one another’s well-being, similar to the value Indigenous Knowledge places on relationships and collective well-being. Community support is also evident in their written reflections, where different PSTs mention how well specific students did during the MRS and how proud they are of one another for navigating the experience together.

Implications

This research has several implications for preparing future ES teachers. First, the written reflections of the PSTs of Color demonstrate the very real “racial battle fatigue” (Smith et al., 2006) that exists for ToCs and how PSTs of Color already have an awareness of this inevitability. Because they know that their experience inside and outside the classroom will be different from their White counterparts, PSTs of Color want to learn strategies to mitigate these “battle wounds.” Similarly, ToCs need to be armed to persist in the classroom for the betterment of students of Color. Students of Color benefit from having racially/ethnically diverse teachers because ToCs can connect to the curriculum and the realities of their students of Color (Achinstein et al., 2010; Achinstein & Ogawa, 2011; Ladson-Billings, 2001; Villegas

& Irvine, 2010). If TEPs want to recruit and retain PSTs of Color, then they must ensure that these PSTs are not being set up to be further traumatized in K-16 schools. Otherwise, racial battle fatigue will continue to enact trauma on ToCs, push them out of classrooms, and negatively impact students of Color who, in different circumstances, would benefit from having a ToC in front of the classroom.

Second, based on the unsuccessful strategies they relied on at the start of the MRS activity, PSTs need to be taught strategies to handle professional discussions and potential conflict with parents. Equally important is that they need opportunities to actively *practice* using these strategies in a situated learning context (Cobb & Bowers, 1999; Lave & Wenger, 1990). By participating in the MRS, the PSTs worked together to brainstorm and try out more successful strategies for challenging parent-teacher meetings; however, they were only able to gain these professional strategies by participating in the simulation. As a result, the PSTs in this course saw the advantage of preparing themselves for talking to difficult, politically conservative parents, using their collective knowledge that can help protect them as ToCs. Likewise, they saw the advantage MRS holds for all PSTs to practice speaking to parents before entering the K-12 classroom. MRS can help PSTs develop the communication skills needed to speak to parents as professional educators before student teaching or their first year in the K-12 classroom, skills seemingly neglected in TEPs.

Lastly, the current political climate that has inaccurately positioned ES as problematic cannot be ignored if schools are going to retain ES teachers and/or ToCs. As long as ES curricula continue to be politicized by the “culture wars in education” (Buenavista, 2016, p. xiv; Evans, 2015; Wetschler, 2011), TEPs are doing a disservice to ES PSTs by not supporting their development of professional communication skills to back up their teaching pedagogies, curricula, and professionalism. Gaining these skills while student teaching or in the first year of teaching does not position any novice teacher for success, regardless of their content area. TEPs have a responsibility to ensure the preparation of their PSTs when pursuing their credential, as defined by California’s Teacher Performance Expectation 6.4 that emphasizes the importance of knowing how to “communicate effectively with...families, and members of the larger school community to support teacher and student learning” (2016). Given the stakes are higher for ES teachers and ToCs who are committed to teaching alternative perspectives and may lose their jobs as a result, TEPs cannot assume that ES PSTs and PSTs of Color will just figure out how to effectively communicate with families who question their expertise. As such, learning to communi-

cate professionally is something that TEPs need to actively incorporate into their coursework to support the longevity and persistence of future ES teachers, particularly ToCs.

Conclusion

Overall, this study demonstrates the need for TEPs to include experiences that prepare PSTs of Color to navigate white supremacist voices who may question and threaten their expertise to help ToCs persist and ensure the future of ES in secondary schools. Using MRS in a PST course is one strategy that can help PSTs practice using different communication strategies, whether given in advance or derived from a community of practice and support. MRS provides PSTs with the type of situated learning needed to emulate parent-teacher discussions that will inevitably take place. The retention of ES PSTs can benefit from MRS to help inform, clarify, and explain their curriculum in ways that can de-escalate a politically tense conversation. For PSTs of Color, MRS can benefit their retention and persistence in the classroom, particularly in a field where ToCs are confronted with racism from the traditionally whitewashed K-12 curriculum, racial microaggressions, and their own TEP. TEPs need to make a concerted effort to respond to the needs of ES PSTs and PSTs of Color if the field is to diversify and ensure the academic success of K-12 students of Color.

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