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Applying an Intersectional Framework to the Literacy Worlds of Preservice Teachers

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Abstract: Within social justice literacy teacher education, there has been a lack of attention to the framework of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991) and how it can be used to prepare teachers to work in diverse settings. In this case study, we examine six multimodal literacy identity projects created by preservice teachers (PTs) as part of their required reading coursework. Using Boveda's (2016) notion of intersectional competence as an analytic frame, we found that PTs named sociocultural identities, such as race, gender, religion, and dis/ability, in connection to texts from their childhood and early experiences with reading motivation. Additionally, PTs exhibited an understanding of systems of oppression related to race, religion, and ability, but lacked an emphasis on the intersections of multiple markers of difference. These findings illuminate the process of identity fracturing as one way PTs disaggregate and reaggregate their own identities to deepen their understanding of interlocking systems that appear within literacy curriculum and instruction. Implications for future teacher preparation coursework are discussed.

Keywords: identity development, intersectionality, literacy education, preservice teachers

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The goal of justice-oriented teacher education programs is to prepare preservice teachers (PTs) to address educational inequities in the classroom. However, this difficult task often leads to reinforcing normativity (Beneke & Cheatham, 2020) or reifying a hierarchy of marginality (Hyland, 2010) due to a lack of nuance around intersectional identities. This pattern hinders PTs' critical awareness of how privilege and oppression manifest in developing teacher practice. Our study on intersectional identity markers in preservice teacher literacy identity projects aims to address this problem. We believe it is imperative for teacher educators and researchers to push conversations forward by incorporating intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991), or the study of intersecting social identities and how they relate to systems and structures of discrimination, as a framework to nuance the multiple levels of privilege and oppression that K-12 students experience inside and outside of classrooms. In this paper, we argue that using an intersectional framework in teacher education courses can guide PTs' insights towards recognizing the complexity and fluidity of cultural and systemic privilege and oppression (Leckie & Buser De, 2020) in personal and professional identity development.

As White women in the field of teacher education, we acknowledge the endurance of White epistemological presence and dominance. Indeed, in social justice teacher education in particular, we see significant missed opportunities to engage with multiple identity markers. For instance, in a review of the literature, Pugach et al. (2019) found that 73% of the 53 empirical research articles on social justice in teacher education had no mention of

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intersectionality. Clearly, if teacher education programs are serious about implementing justice-centered pedagogies, they need to develop (and implement) a language of complexity around teacher identity (Pugach et al., 2019; Shelton & Barnes, 2016) to address multiple intersections of privilege and oppression in their classrooms and fieldwork, and, indeed, to engender broad transformative change.

Literacy classroom teachers and researchers who embody an intersectional approach to literacy instruction must "critically understand the deeper analyses of historical oppressions and social formations based on race, class, gender, and sexuality" (Brochin, 2018, p. 165) and move beyond sweeping notions of inclusivity or multiculturalism (Ahmed, 2012). Critical analysis and deeper understanding of historical oppressions, or *intersectional competence* (Boveda, 2016), begins by turning attention to our own experiences. In our reading methods course with PTs, we began here.

In this paper, we look closely at six multimodal literacy identity projects to see how our PTs were taking up their intersectional identities in relation to their experiences of becoming readers and writers, and how this relates to their professional teacher identity development. To guide our work, we ask the following research question: *To what extent do PTs notice and name their own intersectional identity markers (i.e., race, ethnicity, nationality, gender, sexuality, language, dis/ability, socioeconomic status, and religion) within a literacy identity project in a reading methods course? What implications do these data provide for future course and field work experiences?*

Theoretical Framework

The paradoxes of identity permeate our current study. Identity is both unique to an individual and implies a relationship to others (Buckingham, 2008). It is both determined by one's self and also reinforced by others. It is both concrete and fluid. While the purpose of this article is to capture PTs' thinking of their identities within a specific moment of time, we recognize that identities change over time and shift depending on different discourse communities (Gee, 2012; Lewis et al., 2007). Our hope is to use these snapshots of identity, that at times may feel concrete and permanent, to further push our work in literacy teacher preparation by naming specific examples of identity work as related to PTs' literacy practices.

Our theoretical framework is grounded in Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1991) scholarship on intersectionality, a term generated from Crenshaw's work in the legal sector regarding violence against women of Color. Intersectionality highlights how the intersection(s) of multiple identity markers variably manifest into, onto, and out of an individual's lived experience. For instance, in the case of violence against women of Color, Crenshaw (1991) explains that intervention strategies based solely off the experiences of women who do not share similar class or race backgrounds will offer limited help because ultimately the oppression women of Color face is different. Thus, attention to the intersections of race, gender, class, sexuality, language, and ability is the starting point in understanding the necessary work towards social justice for marginalized communities. We also incorporate Crenshaw's historical analysis as channeled through critical race and feminist theories to further nuance the identity-based politics of teaching. Within this frame, we include the unceasing White discourse patterning embedded in the dominant cultural imagination (e.g., news media, movies, student experiences) of whom teachers are, what they do, and how this looks and sounds (Leonardo & Gamez-Djokic, 2019).

In schools, the privileging of the White, English-speaking, heterosexual teacher-body amidst an increasingly multiracial, multilingual U.S. demographic creates an educational conundrum that, despite increasing pedagogical initiatives towards social justice and equity, speaks to how deeply Eurocentric ideologies pervade notions of professional knowledge and practice (Compton-Lilly et al., 2017). The experiences of marginalization in teaching, therefore, where certain identity markers are privileged above others, is not a zero-sum game of who has power and who doesn't, but a complex interplay of systems designed to privilege dominant identities first, and manipulate, through language, ideology, assumption, and otherwise—all markers that do not match the status quo. Intersecting identities of race, sexuality, gender, and class, for example, each hold positionality in relation to this norm, which structurally and symbolically shape and contort participation for all subjects involved (Collins, 1991).

The theories presented above shape our teacher educator philosophy and guide our endeavor to center PTs' intersectional identities at the fore, and duration, of their tenure. As White, female instructors, we especially choose to engage this lens as an act of pedagogical disruption to "traditional" evaluative measures of professional discernment and expertise, and to monitor our own (White) "assessment" gaze (Inoue, 2015) when teaching. Additionally, we believe this work provides momentum to move past "doing diversity" (Ahmed, 2012, p. 16) into a deeper understanding of how one's personal identities impact and shape one's developing professional identity for and alongside the children in their care.

Literature Review

In response to the overwhelming presence of Whiteness in teacher education (Sleeter, 2001), scholars have sought out ways of bringing intersectional theories and frameworks into teacher preparation programs. Theories of intersectionality allow researchers to learn from both White preservice teachers and preservice teachers of Color about their experiences in teacher preparation programs. Often, the intersection of multiple identity markers, such as race, gender, class, and language, can result in structural barriers that threaten the retention of preservice teachers of Color in their teacher education programs (Bell & Busey, 2021). To disrupt this, teacher educators have created professional development workshops (Escalante, 2020) and redesigned teacher preparation courses (Bertrand & Porcher, 2020; Scrimgeour & Ovsienko, 2015) to center frameworks of intersectionality. A widely used application of intersectionality in the work of preparing teachers is Sealy-Ruiz's (2018) work on the archaeology of self. In her work, preservice teachers are pushed to "peel back the layers" of their identities to examine personal racial beliefs and practices and foster racial literacy. Scholars have found that incorporating Sealy-Ruiz's archaeology of self serves as a disruption in teacher preparation, pushing programs from naming words like *diversity, equity,* and *inclusion* to exploring them in practice (Bertrand & Porcher, 2020).

The most widely researched pedagogical approach to building PTs' intersectional competence is inviting PTs to self-reflect on their own intersectional identities. This has often taken the form of written assignments asking students to write a narrative or an autobiography about their sociocultural identities. In a teacher education course focused on cultural issues, Leckie & Buser De (2020) collected 31 multicultural autobiographies enrolled in the course. Upon careful analysis, the researchers found that PTs not only focused on their racial or ethnic identity, but also a large majority of them focused on gender as well. However, social class was more difficult to locate within the written autobiographies. The researchers also noted that PTs' "experiences of discrimination were more strongly expressed than those of privilege" (p. 121) throughout the autobiographies of students enrolled in the course. Similarly, Miller (2017) looked at 73 PTs' written narratives to analyze the complex nature of race, racism, and Whiteness as they intersect with other identity markers. Miller (2017) found that most insightful attention to the White PTs' racial identity occurred at the intersection of other identity factors, specifically when this happened in "abrupt and disjunctive ways" (p. 29) such as identifying outside of middle classness. Examining the intersections of multiple identity markers provides space for more nuanced and complex understanding of singular identity categorizations such as race. It is imperative in analyzing PT's self-reflections, however, to clarify the difference between grouping by identity marker (for processes of disaggregated data, for example) and the nuancing of identities as intersectional, fluid, and contextually flexible. We believe these distinctions are key to developing a complexity of language around intersectional identity with our students.

Researchers have also looked at PTs' reflections on their own intersectional identities during field-based practicum visits, student teaching experiences, and

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across entire program experiences. Scholars have found that PTs' reflections on intersectional identities caused tensions and insights into the ways privilege and oppression co-exist, prompting PTs to find counter-narratives for themselves and their students (Maddamsetti, 2020) and empathizing with the challenges faced by students from historically marginalized backgrounds (Rivera Maulucci, 2008). One starting point for amplifying PTs' intersectional competence is to locate tensions caused by intersectional oppressions and privileges. Providing multiple opportunities for PTs to reflect on and discuss their intersectional identities across coursework and field experiences is an important foundation for in-service teachers' ability to enact critical and justice-oriented pedagogical practices (Skerrett et al., 2019).

In coursework that utilizes frameworks of intersectionality, scholars have examined specific classroom discussions where preservice teachers deepen their understandings of where, why, and how these identity markers shape and have been shaped by cultural practices and schooling experiences over time. In a foundations course for urban education, Hyland (2010) documented the fracture in the classroom community when weekly discussion topics transitioned from race to sexuality. Perouse-Harvey (2022) also noted White PTs' levels of both resistance to and adoption of theories of intersectionality and DisCrit during weekly discussions. Feelings of resistance and discomfort are not uncommon as PTs are asked to engage in group dialogue around topics of intersectionality (Escalante, 2020).

Specifically within literacy teacher education, frameworks of intersectionality have been applied to critical literacy approaches to analyzing texts (Matteson & Boyd, 2017). However, less is known about how intersectionality in the literacy teacher education classroom applies to preservice teachers' identity development as future literacy educators.

Developing a teacher identity is a complex and dynamic process. Through identity work in teacher education, scholars suggest that teachers will become "more aware of the identity issues of the students in their own classrooms and [be] willing and able to support them to cope with these issues" (Beijaard & Meijer, 2017). Looking specifically at the development of PTs' literacy teacher identities, scholars have found that learning about reading identities can help PTs view reading as an act that develops over time for both themselves and their students (Kerkhoff et al., 2020). What is missing from this work is the added connection to PTs' sociocultural identities within the reading and broader literacy processes. There continues to be a need for research that connects frameworks of intersectionality to PTs' literacy teacher identities.

In the present study, we focus on PTs' self-reflections on their intersectional identities through multimodal practices (Kress & Selander, 2012) as an initial step in building one's intersectional competence—a necessary component in teacher identity development. We build on research in the field that centers frameworks of intersectionality as necessary tools in justice-oriented teacher preparation. Through the following explanation of methods and analysis, we hope to illuminate patterns and themes of how we assessed intersectional competency and how these understandings impact PTs' development toward just and equitable literacy instruction.

Methods

To structure our investigation, we used an instrumental case study (Stake, 1995) to discover how PTs conceptualize intersectionality when framing their literacy identities. The benefit of using a case study methodology is being able to closely study a phenomenon and gain a deep understanding of a particular case (Yin, 2018). This case study is bounded around PTs' coursework that engaged an intersectionality framework within two courses

(reading methods and applied learning theories) at a large research university in the Southwest.

Participants & Context

Using purposeful sampling (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), we selected six participants from an undergraduate cohort (n=15) enrolled in an Early Childhood-6th grade teaching degree program based on their engagement with a framework of intersectionality across the two course assignments. First, in the applied learning theories course, PTs completed a brief writing assignment (primary data source #1) where they were asked to describe their intersectional identities prior to creating their literacy identity project. This writing assignment connected to our teacher preparation program's cross-cutting themes (Wetzel et al., 2020), a document that outlines our commitment to pursuing social justice through education. Specifically, this assignment connected to the theme of "continuously examining how our identities sometimes afford us privileges and other times, result in oppression" and how our personal identities are deeply connected to our professional identities (p. S321). After reading a mentor text (Asenuga, 2019) as a guide to reflecting on one's own intersectional identities, PTs were prompted to name their identities, reflect on the afforded privileges or oppressions, and share how these intersecting identities impact their experiences in the classroom as a student and as a teacher. From this assignment, we captured PTs' current sociocultural identity markers (see Table 1, all names pseudonyms). All categories and labels reported come from the PTs' language. The variance in language used by PTs to describe their own identities (e.g., heterosexual vs. straight) was interesting to us, and future work could look into the impact that PTs' language use has on their own identity formations.

Students completed the literacy identity project (primary data source #2) within the first month of the reading methods course. This assignment prompted students to create a multimodal presentation, reflecting on their multiple social identities (e.g., race, language, gender identity) and how these identities may have influenced their development as a reader and a writer (see Appendix). When we say "multimodal," we mean the multiple modes (or ways) people make meaning for themselves and others, which includes art, audio, image, digital storytelling, and modular remix (among other modes). The course assignment also asked PTs to examine their personal literacy histories to push them to see how beliefs and experiences may impact the decisions we make as teachers. We conceptualized this particular assignment alongside critical literacy scholars who argue multimodality as a vehicle for transcultural, identity-rich, design-based meaning-making (Kress & Selander, 2012; The New London Group, 1996; Wargo, 2017), and employed it as a tool for sense-making across different perspectives, languages, experiences, and intentions. In this way, we trouble the privileging of written composition as the primary vehicle for intersectional assessment.

After two weeks of preparation, PTs each spent 5-7 minutes sharing their presentations on Zoom to the entire cohort. Because the assignment took place within the first month of the first semester of the cohort's professional development sequence, this project also served as an opportunity for community building as the PTs learned about each other's personal literacy journeys. During the presentations, PTs made connections to familiar texts and literacy practices across the presentations using the chat function on Zoom. Students would often refer back to ideas gleaned from their own and other's multimodal literacy identity presentations throughout the semester. After completion of the course, we looked across all 15 identity projects and selected six projects where PTs explicitly engaged in the framework of intersectionality for further analysis.

Table 1

Participants' Self-Described Identity Markers

Participant	Race/ Ethnicity	Gender	Sexuality	Language	Dis/ability	SES	Religion
Aashna	Pakistani-American	female	NR	Urdu, Gujrati, English	NR	NR	Shia Muslim
Abigail	Black	female	straight	English	NR	NR	Christian
Ava	Asian (Filipino)-American	female	straight	English	NR	NR	Christian
Courtney	White	female	bisexual	English	ADHD, Depression, PTSD	NR	Christian
Natalia	White (Hispanic)	female	heterosexual	Bilingual (Spanish & English)	NR	Upper class	Christian
Sara	White	female	straight	Bilingual (English & Spanish)	NR	Middle class	Jewish

Data Collection

Our data collection focused primarily on the multimodal projects and presentations from within the reading methods course. The PTs created presentations using Microsoft Powerpoint, Google Slides, and Canva (https://www.canva.com/). Others chose to create their presentation using video platforms, such as Animoto (https://animoto.com/). We collected each PT's formal presentation of their projects, which averaged 5-7 minutes per participant. We also drew on participants' intersectionality reflections completed in the applied learning theories course to serve as a reference for the ways in which they discussed their identities within the literacy projects. Additionally, field notes and recorded small group discussions from the reading methods course were collected to triangulate the findings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Data Analysis

We draw on Boveda's (2016) notion of *intersectional competence* as we focus our analysis on the importance of intersectionality work specifically within the field of teacher preparation. Similar to notions of cultural competence as a skill necessary for enacting culturally sustaining pedagogies (Paris & Alim, 2017), *intersectional competence* is a term used to describe preservice teachers' and practicing

teachers' understandings of intersectionality as it specifically applies to students, families, and themselves within the field of education (Boveda & Aronson, 2019). We took a critical sociocultural approach to our data analysis by drawing on three indicators of *intersectional competence* as indicated by Boveda (2016):

- the ability to clearly identify sociocultural groups and markers of difference
- an emphasis on the interlocking and simultaneous effects of multiple markers of difference
- an understanding of the systems of oppression and marginalization that occur at the intersection of multiple markers of difference (p.32)

Primary data, focused on the multimodal creations and recorded presentations, were coded by both authors in relation to each of the three indicators through multiple rounds of analysis. Our first round of coding began with an inductive approach where we derived patterns and themes from the data itself (Miles et al., 2014). Our second and third rounds of coding looked at the initial patterns in reference to the three indicators of intersectional competence, which were turned into codes such as *identifying sociocultural groups*, *naming intersectionality*, *understanding systems of oppression*, and *understanding systems of privilege*.

Positionality

We are both current doctoral candidates in language and literacy studies and take interest in equity-focused teacher education and culturally sustaining pedagogies. Kerry identifies as a White, cis-gender, middle-class woman who taught elementary language arts for 10 years. Heather also identifies as a White, cis-gender, able-bodied, monolingual woman who has taught elementary multilingual students for five years. We recognize that many of our identities differ from our participants, which does not allow us to bring shared cultural or racial understandings to our analysis outside of what our participants chose to share with us. As doctoral students, we also have the privilege of serving as field supervisors and course instructors. It is important to note that we were both instructors of the required reading methods course and that Heather was an instructor in the applied learning theories course where this study took place. We recognize that power and differing levels of hierarchy may affect the ways in which the participants were willing to vulnerably discuss their identities. We therefore sought to learn from the PTs who stepped into this space of vulnerability willingly.

Findings

The purpose of this study was to determine how PTs notice and name their own intersectional identity markers within a literacy identity project. From our analysis of the six identity projects, three themes emerged: 1) naming sociocultural identities represented in texts and literacy worlds, 2) exhibiting an understanding of systems of oppression, and 3) a lack of emphasis on the intersections of multiple markers of difference. While these findings may come across as static moments in time, especially in relation to PTs' sociocultural identity markers, we recognize the fluidity in identities and identity development. Holding these moments still helps to illuminate the process of literacy teacher identity development.
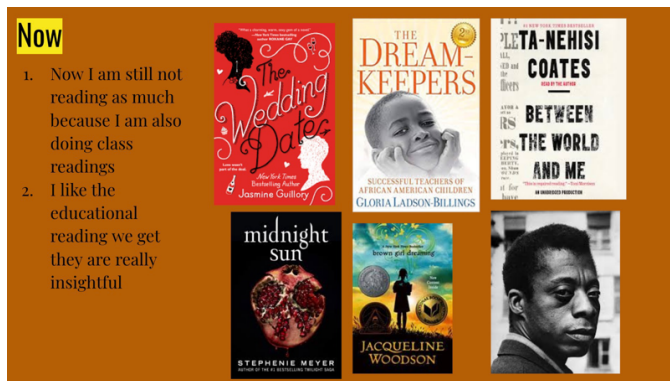
Naming Sociocultural Identities Represented in Texts & Literacy Worlds

Focal student data reveals a spectrum of sociocultural identity awareness. In relation to formative literacy experiences in school, PTs specifically connected

Figure 1

Slide from Abigail's Literacy Identity Project

their identities to the texts they read. Identity markers that appeared throughout the projects included (in order of frequency): race, gender, and religion.

PTs' racial identities were referenced the most across the identity projects. This is not unusual as race is a hyper-visible (and politically motivating) social construct (Hyland, 2010). Drawing on their understanding of Bishop's (1990) concept of windows and mirrors, PTs reflected heavily on the texts they grew up reading and whether or not they felt their race or culture were represented within these texts. Abigail bemoaned early reading experiences being limited to books given in class, noting she could not "relate to any of the characters," and at one point, she "didn't think that there was [sic] books with a Black female lead—at least none that [she] could find easily." Reflecting on her current identity as a reader, she noted the positive impact the exposure to Black characters, authors, and scholars in college had on her teacher identity, and she included multiple examples of influential texts in her slide (see Figure 1). Abigail also noted contemporary and historical anti-Black violence and schooling oppressions that marked, for us, an intersectional awareness of her identity as an educator with a Black, female body. Similarly, Ava referenced her racial identity as an Asian-American in her project as she made note of

her delight in seeing more Asian-American representation in current YA novels (e.g., Jenny Han's *To All the Boys I've Loved Before* trilogy) and other pop culture outlets (e.g., the *Crazy Rich Asians* franchise). Courtney shared that one of her main takeaways from reflecting on her past literacy experiences was realizing she "gravitated towards books that had characters that look like me—young, White American girls." However, unlike Abigail, Ava and Courtney's comments did not extend to include political or historical commentary on the exclusions, misrepresentations, or overrepresentations of race and ethnicity within these selections, or in relation to their own developing intersectional awareness in relation to teaching.

Aashna attended primarily to her racial identity through the writing pieces she included in her project (see Figure 2). In a slide that reflected her elementary literacy memories, Aashna included a picture of a book she wrote and illustrated in the 4th grade. In discussing the book, she shared with the class that this was her attempt to write in cursive and then continued on to discuss her illustration:

> And the picture here of me and my mom I thought was interesting because I drew us as a really peach light, like white colored skin. I went to a predominantly White school and I always felt like I needed to fit in, so I drew my skin color like that, too.

Aashna continued sharing how the authoring of her racial identity, in juxtaposition to her school's demographic and material norms, shifted as she moved on to the second illustration on the slide (for more on self-authoring through multimodal design, see Wargo, 2017). The second picture (see Figure 2) is a shape poem she wrote and illustrated in the fifth grade. During the presentation, she noted the shift in the way she revised her racial presentation through the changes her illustrations:

Figure 2

Slide from Aashna's Literacy Identity Project

And then in this picture, this is fifth grade, and now I colored my skin a little bit darker which is more like my skin color. So I thought that was interesting how in fourth grade I did it like that and in fifth grade I did it like this.

As a student of Color growing up in a predominately White school, Aashna experienced the pressures of wanting to "fit in," racially-speaking, and reflected on the ways her self-representation shifted across her elementary years through careful attention to the illustrations in her written texts. She shows a collection of Junie B. Jones early readers on her slide as well, a favorite serial of Aashna's that prominently centers a White character––who, through narrative mishaps with "Mrs." the teacher, similarly struggles to "fit in" at school.

Ashna's project evokes a question of *intersectional belonging* in reflection on her own schooling. In this specific case, her multiple use of the words "fitting in," both as a former elementary student *and* a future elementary teacher (as evidenced through her public presentation), is salient to her growing professional identity—darker skin and teaching, we hear from Aashna, can, and should, align purposefully in literacy work. We notice she does not include cultural or familial tensions in racial identity alongside her reading of these books. Aashna's recognitions, though pivotal, remain at skin level, and hover at the edge of a deeper inquiry into the historical and social discourses, or the material experiences, around schooling in a darker body than one's peers. Because we focus our analysis through coursework presentations, we also acknowledge we are not provided, nor would we expect, more story than the parameters of the assignment can provide. Though all our PTs' stories deserve to be told, not all stories will, or should, be told. In which case, we leave space for (and protect) what was also untold.

Sociocultural identity markers of gender and religion also appeared across the literacy identity projects, though not as frequently as race or skin color. Continuing with the example of Aashna's shape poem (Figure 2), Aashna transitioned from focusing solely on her racial identity to her expression of gender identity as she analyzed her illustration of her finger nails:

> I was constantly trying to figure out who I was, trying to fit in. If you can see, on the thumb and the pointer finger I colored my fingernail green and then I tried to erase it. Because I grew up around all boys and thought that nail polish was just too girly, so I tried to erase it. I'm like, no, no, no that's not me. And it really wasn't. I wanted to wear nail polish, but I never did.

Here, Aashna attended to her expression of dominant gender markers as was documented in her illustrations for a poem in the 5th grade. She speaks of both skin and nail color as multimodal entry points to self-authorship and self-definition, which, for Aashna, index her body as a salient presence in schooling spaces, as both student and teacher. It is interesting to note that in the sequence of her presentation, Aashna first attends to her racial identity (as skin tone) followed by her gender identity, but ends short of addressing the intersection of these two identities within her literacy project. This could be in part due to the nature of the assignment and how piecing apart these identities was most salient for the stories she wished to share through her presentation.

Sara included multiple examples of texts about her religion that she remembered reading as a young child, such as *Apples and Honey: A Rosh Hashanah Story* by Jonny Zucker. The text that was included in her literacy identity project showed up again in a lesson plan Sara created to teach her 4th graders about the Jewish holiday the following semester. Sara was one of only two PTs who identify as Jewish within this cohort and her literacy identity project was full of attention to her religious identity and the impact it had on her literacy development.

Despite PTs expressing a diverse array of racial, gendered, and religious backgrounds, their multimodal literacy identity presentations show nearly identical classroom book collections during elementary school; most of which centered White, cis-gender, able-bodied, English-speakers and/or animal characters. This theme is both striking and, at the same time, unremarkable. Striking in that such a homogeneous school-based literacy foundation could springboard such a variety of responses, but unremarkable in its endemic familiarity.

"Despite PTs expressing a diverse array of racial, gendered, and religious backgrounds, their multimodal literacy identity presentations show nearly identical classroom book collections during elementary school."

Exhibiting an Understanding of Systems of Oppression

Across the six focal participants, we saw different access points in noticing and naming levels of privilege and oppression in relation to identity. Rarely did PTs speak to any privileges they may have had in learning to read, but rather focused attention on oppressive practices they experienced. Specifically, three PTs name religion and dis/ability to recognize oppression(s) they experienced. Natalia, for example, shared that growing up in a strong

Christian household, she was prevented from reading texts with magic, such as the *Harry Potter* series. It wasn't until college where she read *Harry Potter and The Sorcerer's Stone* for a children's literature course that she fell in love with the series. Sara also included her religious identity in her literacy project, citing Jewish children's books and religious texts her parents read to her as a young child. During her presentation, Sara pointed out Christianity's institutional privileges (religious holidays and values) as she compared her experiences to her peers. Again, in juxtaposing her childhood memories to dominant schooling practices, Sara began (re)imagining literacy learning in contrast to the commonplace, with and alongside her colleagues. In a small group discussion at the end of the semester, Sara noted, "Literacy just has so many different forms, and so, even if [students] go to religious events and they're listening to preachers that's literacy; going and reading comic books—that's literacy . . . you're sharing with them that there's no one path to literacy." Beginning with her multimodal literacy presentation and moving across the semester, Sara reimagined literacy learning by expanding her view on what counts as literacy to incorporate both religious identities and multimodal literacy practices.

Similar to naming religion as a prevalent identity marker, multiple students shared struggles with reading ability, motivation, or dis/abilities. During her literacy identity presentation, Abigail shared how her struggle to read in elementary school led to constantly trying to avoid the tests her mother and teacher wanted to schedule to check for dyslexia. Because of this experience, Abigail shared that she "didn't really read" in elementary school. Similarly, Courtney specifically named her dis/ability identity marker as a cause for her "I hate reading" phase in upper elementary school.

Courtney shared that her undiagnosed (at the time) ADHD caused her to struggle with the sustained silent reading time in the classroom. During her literacy identity presentation, Courtney shared:

> I was undiagnosed ADHD when I was a kid. And when books started to have less pictures and more white space, I was really uninterested. And this is kind of a funny story, but I hated reading so much that every day, when it was reading time in my class I would pick my nose until my nose bled. Every single day. So that I could go to the nurse and get out of reading time. I probably did this for two months straight. And so my teacher told my mom and then my mom threatened to take me to the doctor and cauterize it. I was like okay. But yeah, I did not like reading at all. It's just really boring to me.

Courtney's experience is reflective of the ways in which her undiagnosed ADHD hindered her ability to engage and enjoy independent reading time during her upper elementary school years, an experience that is not uncommon. What is noteworthy about this attention to an oppressive experience actually comes from Courtney's reflection on this experience: "I honestly kind of wish that my teachers would have provided audio books so that I could walk around and listen to books. I think that would have been really great for me." In this moment, Courtney recognized the harm that came from her early experiences learning to read and began to consider a more culturally and socially responsive approach to reading instruction. In sharing with her peers, as well, the recognition of her differences contributed to pushing back on neurotypical literacy practices in the elementary classroom.

Courtney was also one of the only PTs to mention any privilege she had in relation to her literacy identity. While not directly connected to a specific identity marker such as race or class, Courtney did share during her presentation that she felt lucky to have

had access to a lot of diverse literature in her elementary classrooms. She included a specific example of *The Legend of the Bluebonnet: An Old Tale of Texas* retold and illustrated by Tomie dePaola as one her favorite books growing up. In sharing this example, Courtney names what she views as an element of privilege—her exposure to diverse texts. However, others might point out that citing this text as an example of diverse literature is problematic. Debbie Reese (2020), a Nambé Pueblo scholar and educator, has made several critiques of misinformation within the text as related to the Comanche People, including the fact that the story claims to be an "old tale of Texas" but the Comanche People predate the U.S. and its states.

This example that Courtney shared in her literacy identity presentation is important for multiple reasons. First, while her example of diverse literature could be considered problematic, she is demonstrating her knowledge of texts as windows into the lives of people and experiences outside of herself (Bishop, 1990). As a White woman in a cohort with PTs of Color, Courtney has continuously cited her desire to listen and learn from her peers of Color. Courtney is developing her future teacher identity by connecting her own experiences of growing up with "diverse" children's literature to how she envisions her future literacy teaching practices as grounded within diverse children's literature. The disconnect between her knowledge base of diverse children's literature and her desire to include it becomes the teaching moment that teacher educators lean into to help grow Courtney as a future social justice literacy educator.

> **"One of the most interesting juxtapositions within the presentations were the identities and intersections that were *not* included. The most prevalent lack of inclusion was the sociocultural identity marker of class or socioeconomic status."**

Lack of Emphasis on the Intersections of Multiple Markers of Difference

Through our analysis, one of the most interesting juxtapositions within the presentations were the identities and intersections that were *not* included. The most prevalent lack of inclusion was the sociocultural identity marker of class or socioeconomic status. Beginning with the PTs' self-reported identities in Table 1, only two PTs mentioned their socioeconomic status: Natalia identified as upper-class and Sara identified as middle-class. The remaining four did not disclose any information about their socioeconomic status. Additionally, across all six literacy presentations, not one PT mentioned class as it related to their literacy identity. This finding aligns with scholars who have noted the ways in which children's literature often ignores social class (Crisp et al., 2016; Jones, 2008). If the literature PTs engaged with at a young age did not explicitly address issues of socioeconomic status, how do teacher educators encourage reflection and engagement with this identity marker on its own and at the intersections of other social categories?

Furthermore, upon analysis, we recognized that many of the PTs were not attending to the "interlocking and simultaneous effects of multiple markers of difference" (Boveda, 2016, p.32). The only evidence of recognizing an intersection of multiple identities was when Abigail discussed the intersection of being a Black girl who could not see herself in the books she read growing up. When PTs did discuss multiple sociocultural markers, they were discussed as separate topics. For example, in Aashna's presentation, she discussed both her racial identity

and her gender identity in two separate stories. First, she shared the story about changing the way she colored her skin tone. Next, she shared the story about erasing the nail polish she drew on her hand to avoid being seen as too "girly." In sharing these identities, there was no dialogue, from Aashna, from us as the course instructors, or from other members of the class around the intersection of being a young girl of Color. In hindsight, we recognized this as a missed opportunity to generate important discussions around the interlocking systems that are present in schools and literacy curriculum.

While race was the most frequent identity marker included in the literacy identity presentations, it was not emphasized in every one. Both Sara, who identifies as White, and Natalia, who identifies as Hispanic, did not refer to their racial identities in relation to their early literacy experiences. Instead, these PTs focused on their religious identities and the ways these identities influenced the texts their parents did or did not allow them to read as a child (e.g., Sara reading *Apples and Honey: A Rosh Hashanah Story* and Natalia not being allowed to read about magic due to her family's Christian beliefs). Additionally, they separated their linguistic identities when they shared isolated stories related to their ability to speak and read in Spanish in relation to the texts they enjoyed as children. By taking an intersectional lens to these presentations, we notice that the intersection of race and religion as well as race and language are missing. This lack of emphasis could be caused by multiple factors, including the time constraint of the presentations or our lack of guidance on how to conceptualize and unpack these intersections within the scope of the literacy identity presentations. Alternatively, it could be a deliberate decision to focus on the identities most salient to the stories they wished to share about themselves as early literacy learners and future literacy instructors. While we do not have the authority to explain why, this finding illuminates the need for teacher

educators to continue to bring specific, reflective prompts that encourage students to put their racial identities in conversation with other identity markers to deepen our understanding of interlocking systems and the impact they have on literacy curriculum and instruction.

In the following discussion, we examine how identity-fracturing, or how the PTs disaggregated their identity markers within their presentations, prepared the PTs for more complex dialogue around curricular discernment. Then, we consider the utility of fracturing the racialized and gendered status quo in response to the participants' literacy identity presentations. We will also put these notions into conversation with Boveda's (2016) use of intersectional competency and our work as teacher educators.

Discussion

In reflecting on intersectional identities and composing multimodal literacy identity presentations, PTs were able to name specific sociocultural identities, like race, connected to their early, informative literacy experiences and exhibit an understanding of systems of oppression. Individual PTs named systems of oppression related to dis/ability and religious identities as impacting both motivation to read at an early age and the texts to which they were exposed. However, this naming of identities and accompanying experiences of oppression in the literacy classroom lacked an emphasis on the *intersections* of multiple markers of difference. When multiple markers of difference in early literacy experiences were discussed, they appeared as separate topics (e.g.'s Aashna's inclusion of racial identity and gender identity in separate writing examples). The construct of intersectional competence (Boveda, 2016) helps to illuminate the areas within the PTs' developmental process of learning to teach and form a literacy teacher identity where a deeper understanding of how interlocking

systems of privilege and oppression are implicated in literacy curriculum and instruction.

When we asked PTs to engage in self-reflection around intersectional identities as a first step towards building intersectional competence, we drew on our pedagogical understandings of critical literacy (Vasquez et al., 2019) and multimodality (Kress & Selander, 2012) in the design of the project. We feel these choices supported our goal of fostering PTs' recognition of privilege and oppression in their schooling experiences by providing a visual landscape to the materials and patterns of their early literacy lives. For instance, by asking the PTs to engage their memories with imagery, many revisited elementary schoolwork and dug up old favorite paperback books. When we viewed the projects as a whole, from presentation to presentation, patterns began to emerge. Vulnerabilities around difference, or ability, when rehashed alongside course content, showed the PTs they were not alone in feeling like they didn't "fit in"—albeit, their entry point to "fitting in" showed up in different ways. We believe the visuals and stories of early schooling experiences helped stretch the container of what could be discussed in class around identity, inclusivity, and literacy teacher practice. And indeed, each entry point became a foothold to future shared discussions.

Identity Fracturing

As instructors, we were initially struck by the PTs' choices to disaggregate their identity markers for the sake of presentation, but we see this now as a preliminary (and valuable) step to bringing more

> **"Subtle changes in intersectional awareness were illuminated by the PTs ability to identify events in juxtaposition to dominant literacy practices, like light on a prism. And once recognition strikes, for both storyteller and listener, the practitioner's toolbox of discernment grows."**

nuance, or language of complexity, to intersectional marginalization in classroom spaces. Each story the PTs presented widened the dialogue around how teacher instruction shapes the lives of the children in their care. And for each PT, it seemed that in order to pull one's pieces (identities) back together, to realize one's own whole self as dynamic, complex, and whose voice is uniquely needed in the classroom, *each component deserved air-time*. This makes sense. Subtle changes in intersectional awareness were illuminated by the PTs ability to identify events in juxtaposition to dominant literacy practices, like light on a prism. And once recognition strikes, for both storyteller and listener, the practitioner's toolbox of discernment grows.

In sum, the sociocultural identity markers, when filtered through one's timeline of schooling and literacy acquisition, provided participants a chance to deconstruct experiences from their apprenticeship of observation (Lorti, 1975), or their own experiences with schooling and teaching, from years of being a student. It is here that we note the unbearable uniformity, and layers of embedded harm, in those early experiences for the PTs. We also believe that by presenting and discussing these projects, the PTs began to collectively (re)design what it means to become a literacy teacher by utilizing (and countering) the emerging "prism"—or, a gestalt representation—of the status quo. For instance, as seen in coursework that followed the literacy multimodal presentations, our PTs often puzzled over how to negotiate political binaries in their planning for working with children, and their developing intersectional competence helped illuminate and pixilate dominant discourses

for further interrogation. In this way, we could pinpoint commonplace patterning (or, dominant practices) showing up across PTs' lived experiences, such as the proliferation of White character leads in picturebooks. This pattern led us to consider materials (such as provided crayon colors), instructional decision-making (pace, topic, and mode), and measures of intellectual ability (by being compared to a "good" reader) that reflected dominant practices around teacher body and behavior, curricular discernment, and instruction. Next, by dialectically juxtaposing named instantiations of dominant practices alongside the stories and images our PTs shared, we began to see how directly naming Whiteness and White discourse patterning, such as worship-of-the-written-word or one-right-way (Jones & Okun, 2001; Yoon, 2012) supported a critical interrogation around who teachers are and what teachers can do to support their learners.

This intersectional fracturing, though complex, provides an entry point for White teachers and teachers embedded into systems of Whiteness to wrestle with the legacies and enactments of Whiteness through their interrogation of curriculum, instruction, pedagogy, and participation. Similarly, and per this study, we hypothesize that the development of intersectional competence in early teacher education may support teachers in reimagining how their developing teacher identity acts alongside, through, or upon teaching discourses in equitable and humanizing ways. For example, when Sara recognizes Christianity's institutional privileges, she parallels Anglo-normative assumptions of what are considered "essential" units by schooling standards. Indeed, for Sara, as for many White people, it is only in experiencing and feeling contrast to dominant norms that awareness and investment in these norms is shifted (Leonardo, 2009; Lipsitz, 1998).

These affective memories, we argue, contribute to the collective (re)designing of who a literacy teacher can and must be in today's pluralistic society. To compare one's professional identity development to one's experiences in early literacy and schooling discourses, in the act of envisioning a more inclusive literacy classroom, is to welcome dissonance, discomfort, and a fertile space for learning.
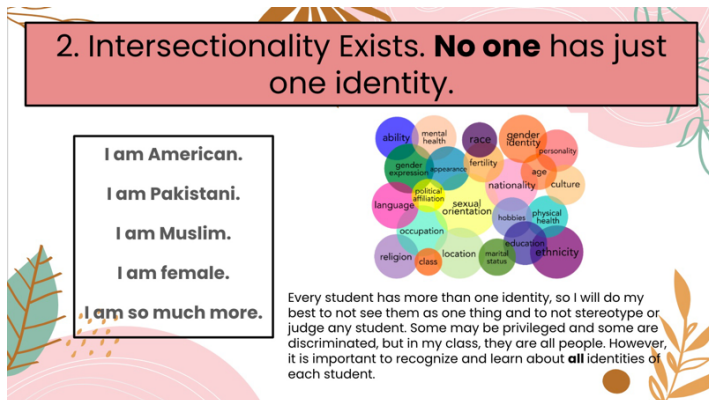
Hybrid Tensions

The literacy practices PTs experienced as learners through their childhood and adolescence speak to broad cultural frames around what behaviors constitute being a reader and writer (and a teacher of readers and writers) in contemporary U.S. society. For instance, for many women, the historical "feminization" of teaching (Leonardo & Gamez-Djokic, 2019) shapes conceptions of care, planning, and literacy enactment in classrooms. Additionally, because 80% of our teaching force identifies as White, one's racial positionality, especially as a White listening-subject, matters significantly to the curricular and instructional manifestations of linguistic appropriateness (Flores & Rosa, 2015) regarding literacy. This dominant intersectional identity, if not disrupted through explicit inquiry around the historical, institutionalized discourse patterning shaped by race and gender, will reify certain "best" practices that reproduce dominant evaluative interpretations of learner ability. This "status quo" must be acknowledged if preservice teachers are to resist, redesign, and cultivate their own professional identities in response. We emphasize that it is not the White woman under scrutiny, but the systems and practices that this intersectional identity has come to dominate that demand interrogation.

Courtney's reflection about using audiobooks in her future classroom, for instance, reflect what Wetzel et al. (2019) calls a *hybridity*, or a multiple-layered

Figure 3

Slide from Aashna's Teaching Philosophy Presentation

tension, in learning to teach. In Courtney's case, the hybridity of this statement included the personal tension she experienced related to her identity as a young reader plus her developing identity as a literacy instructor. We consider her negotiation of these dual identities around the problem of reading engagement as a form of intersectional competency. Although it is early in her teaching journey, she is recognizing there are multiple variables that constitute conceptual knowledge around learning to read. In addition, by shifting her notion of what "good" reading looks and sounds like, she is envisioning her future literacy instruction in deeply meaningful ways. In this way, we believe Courtney's fractured identity stories, much like those told by many of our PTs, helped to reimagine the possibilities for literacy teaching.

In drawing forth the status quo through counterstories, hybrid-tensions (personal and professional) were more likely to form and become footing for future comparative analysis. These conceptions contrast with schooling ideologies that champion measures of standardization, another notable component of a developing literacy teacher identity. We believe, in effect, that such standardized experiences in early schooling grounded how our PTs, individually and in various settings, began to

recognize and (re)consider intersections of their identity. By making these hybrid tensions visible through dialogic and expressive modalities such as the literacy identity project, we could support the development of an identity-rich language of complexity. We could foster social justice stances to speak back to essentializing school rhetoric and help teachers and teacher educators move away from reinforcing normativity (Beneke & Cheatham, 2020) in the literacy classroom. Furthermore, this language of complexity is something the cohort will co-create over time as they encounter a diversity of experiences, settings, and professional expectations in their student teaching placements, and then return to their cohort to discuss and share their stories.

In closing, we return to Aashna's story as a developing literacy teacher with intersectional competency. In a final project exploring her teaching philosophy (Figure 3), we see Aashna directly naming her own intersectional identities: "I am American. I am Pakistani. I am Muslim. I am Female," aligned and centered in a text box. The words are bolded and end with the phrase, "I am so much more." Similarly, her statement at the bottom of the page is confident and direct, and, as her instructors, we feel this change. Her use of language in this piece feels new and exciting, and the collision of perspectives (self, students, people) around her conception of intersectionality appears to be crystallizing.

Implications

If teacher educators implement the same literacy practices that already exist in schools, we risk perpetuating the same oppressive structures we claim we are trying to disrupt. Centering a framework of intersectionality within teacher preparation programs, specifically through critical, multimodal literacy identity projects, opens space for PTs to reflect and critically analyze the multiple layers of privilege and oppression that impact their literacy

worlds and foster a journey towards intersectional competency (Boveda, 2016), intersectional advocacy (Brochin, 2018) and intersectional justice (Annamma & Winn, 2019) within the literacy classroom. This competence thus becomes a driving factor in our instruction and research within teacher education, as it is simultaneously a prerequisite and a relevant skill that all teachers continue to expand through application and reflection. In this study, intersectional competence allows us to view our PTs' identity projects as a preliminary step towards expanding their competency as burgeoning social justice educators.

As we work towards building intersectional competence (Boveda & Aronson, 2019) in both ourselves as teacher educators and in our PTs, we recognize the necessity of drawing more emphasis to the "interlocking and simultaneous effects of multiple markers of difference" (Boveda, 2016, p. 32). While this study highlights the beginning of this intersectional identity work in our PTs, there is a dire need for more work to be done in this area. For example, teacher educators who include similar literacy identity projects in their courses can begin by making explicit expectations for PTs to attend to their intersectional identities within their presentations. Additionally, researchers can further this work by determining the ways in which PTs' intersectional awareness and competency impacts their instruction, especially as it relates to their ability to facilitate critical conversations around texts (Diaz et al., 2021; Nyachae, 2021). Momentum toward epistemological equity in schooling must begin with the recognition that, as Aashna so boldly wrote, all of us—as educators and students, and our ways of being and doing—"are so much more." Our students deserve more.

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Appendix

Literacy Identity Project Assignment Guidelines

To understand the experiences of young readers and writers, we must begin with reflection on our own journeys as readers and writers. This assignment asks you to explore your reading and writing life in the past and in the present. Examining our personal histories as readers and writers pushes us to see how what we believe and have experienced may impact the decisions we make as teachers. Part of this work is to critically examine how our multiple social identities (race, language, gender identity) and the broader sociocultural context in which we grew up in influenced our experiences with literacy and language learning, our biases regarding what it means to be "literate" or a "good reader and writer", and other (appreciative or deficit) views we may hold about ourselves or others. Reflecting on our current habits and practices as readers and writers gives us insight into what it means to build a meaningful reading and writing life. In unpacking our literate lives, we begin to see the ways in which we can understand our students as readers and writers and create learning environments that engage students in reading and writing.

Multimodal Guidelines

You will compose a "multimodal" presentation, meaning that what you design will include more than print text. You will choose 4-5 key events in your life (from childhood to the present) that provide insight into who you are as a reader and writer and 2-3 key takeaways from your work as a reader and writer this semester. A detailed assignment description will be given in class. Bring your multimodal presentation to class and be prepared to share a handful of key takeaways from this project and supporting quotes/artifacts on the due date. Have fun!

Helpful Platforms 🎥 🎞️ 💯

- **Canva**   (https://www.canva.com/)
- **Biteable**   (https://biteable.com/)
- **Powtoon**   (https://www.powtoon.com/)
- **Animoto**   (https://animoto.com/go/home)
- **Slidesgo**   (https://slidesgo.com/)