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Do “the little things do something?”: Navigating Authoritative Discourses and Embracing Activism in Preservice Teacher Education

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Abstract: This paper delves into the responses of two preservice teachers (PTs) in a book club on children's literature depicting activism and critical social issues. Through multiple sessions of reading, reflecting on, and discussing activism in various picturebooks, the PTs grappled with their own beliefs and connections to activism. Employing Bahktin's theory of authoritative discourse(s) and a lens of #CurriculumSoWhite, we examine how the two PTs navigated the discourses of neutrality and apolitical teaching with an imposing discourse around activism in education. These frames together highlight the pervasiveness of whiteness in education. Findings indicate how the PTs engaged in the zone of conflict and created their own discourse of being a “good” teacher in both these spaces. While trying to save face in the imposing discourse of activism, the study amplifies the pervasive presence of whiteness in teaching and teacher education, unveiling how PTs navigate or appeal to these discourses in their reflections. The significance of this research lies in highlighting the complex negotiation of authoritative discourses and the implications for fostering transformative pedagogies centered around activism and critical social issues in the classroom. It underscores the need for longitudinal work in fostering communities of teachers prepared to challenge authoritative discourses of whiteness and embrace justice-oriented pedagogies.

Keywords: activism, preservice teachers, authoritative discourse, children's literature, preservice teachers, whiteness



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In recent years, various states have implemented book bans (Jenson, 2023) and teaching restrictions related to race/racism and critical race theory (Schwartz, 2023), reflecting a historical context in United States education that centers Eurocentric and white¹ perspectives while omitting diverse narratives and experiences (Stewart & Gallego, 2022). These restrictions prioritize the comfort of predominantly white children and families, perpetuating an authoritative discourse that contrasts with visions of literacy as liberating and culturally responsive (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Paris & Alim, 2017; Winn & Behizadeh, 2011). Consequently, educators face challenges navigating pervasive perspectives and policies which promote control and maintain a focus on white privilege in teaching and teacher preparation programs.

Simultaneously, there has been a surge in societal attention to activism, addressing issues like police brutality, racism, and environmentalism (Fletcher & Holyoke, 2023). While these stances of activism are not new to many communities, especially those marginalized in the U.S., there has been limited attention to these efforts with children and in schools (Bertand & Porcher, 2020). With the rise in awareness of children activists and an increasing availability of activist-focused children's literature (Fletcher & Holyoke, 2023), the narratives of activism have found their way into classrooms. Teacher education programs have also

responded by incorporating equity and justice missions (Bomer & Maloch, 2019). However, this creates tensions as preservice teachers (PTs) attempt to align with Eurocentric education and/or activism.

Children's literature, particularly picturebooks, offers an entry point for educators to resist the status quo and engage students in critical social issues and activism (Dutro, 2008; Fletcher & Holyoke, 2023; Möller, 2020; Wiseman et al., 2019). However, the

reliance on these texts can result in surface-level engagement with critical issues rather than a deep understanding of activism as a way of being in the world (Hendrix-Soto & Wetzel, 2019).

This study explores how two PTs navigate competing discourses, as they were exposed to discourses of activism while preparing to teach in a local and national context, with legislation restricting teachers from teaching specific positions regarding race, gender, and other identities that could be divisive concepts in

instructional practices. New Hampshire, where this study took place, passed such legislation less than a year prior to the beginning of this research. In New Hampshire, the state bill was contradictory, including language on academic freedom *and* avoidance of concepts in schools that could be experienced as divisive. However, how these concepts were defined was ambiguous, leaving confusion for teachers. Within this context, we examine the PTs' participation in a three-part book club, which

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¹ As aligned with Critical Whiteness Studies and other scholars, such as Matias (2020), we intentionally use a lowercase “w” in white/whiteness (unless in a section

heading), to decenter the power in how whiteness is upheld and enacted in our society.

involved reading and discussing a variety of activism picturebooks. The focus on activism confronted local legislation in promoting opportunities to teach various perspectives and advocacy. Further, PTs were in the midst of applying for local jobs and had just completed their preparation program, which had limited attention to activism in the coursework (Bertand & Porcher, 2020). During the book discussions, both PTs mentioned having had no experiences related to activism in their teacher preparation program. Our analysis investigates the impact and interaction of activism texts for these PTs as readers, teachers, and activists. We ask, in a book club exploring activism in children’s literature, how do PTs navigate zones of conflict between multiple discourses?

Theoretical frameworks of authoritative discourse and #CurriculumSoWhite guide this study alongside current scholarship on competing educational discourses. We then describe the book club’s value in discussing activism through picturebooks. Next, using data collected from the book club, we examine how the PTs position themselves as good teachers and their strategies to uphold the authoritative discourse. Finally, we discuss the implications of this study for fellow teacher educators, offering suggestions on supporting PTs in adopting a social justice approach to teaching in the face of demands from #CurriculumSoWhite.

Theoretical Framework

Authoritative Discourse

We draw on Bakhtin’s conceptualizations of authoritative discourse. Authoritative discourses are rooted in historical and societal contexts, often accepted without question. Bakhtin (1981) wrote that it is a voice that “demands that we acknowledge it, that we make it our own” (p. 342). While individuals

may reject or aim to modify it, its presence cannot be ignored as individuals constantly position themselves to it in some form (Morson, 2004). However, in addition to authoritative discourses, individuals regularly come into context with the discourses of others, which he terms *alien voices*. Bakhtin (1981) believed new understandings come from a struggle between negotiating these various voices. Tension rises from a juxtaposition of relative voices competing for autonomy within the individual (Bakhtin, 1981; Nystrand, 1997). The confluences of authoritative and alien discourses within and between individuals create what Bakhtin termed the “zone of contact” and give rise to an internally persuasive discourse. This lens helped us explore the PTs’ engagements with texts and each other as they negotiated authoritative discourses of teaching prevalent in their local communities (including our book club) and the broader history of education in the United States.

#Curriculum So White

The second concept that guides our thinking is the pervasiveness of whiteness in education (Matias et al., 2017; Zembylas & Matias, 2023). We align this pervasiveness to the authoritative discourse of education. Dr. Django Paris and organizations like the NYC Coalition for Education Justice call attention to this through the hashtag Curriculum So White. The key concept around #CurriculumSoWhite is that mainstream curricula often fail to reflect marginalized groups’ experiences, perspectives, and contributions, which can perpetuate systemic inequality and reinforce cultural norms aligned with whiteness and Eurocentrism. Proponents of the movement argue that a more diverse curriculum can help students develop a more nuanced and critical understanding of the world, challenge stereotypes, and promote empathy and respect for different cultures and perspectives (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Given the prevalence of whiteness in teaching and

teacher education (Sleeter, 2016; Zembylas & Matias, 2023), this becomes an important lens for us to make meaning of the PTs' responses and resistance to narratives and enactments of activism as teachers and people. Moreover, it relates to the affective and discursive moves they employ when engaging or avoiding topics of activism and justice in the discussions.

Together, these theoretical frames informed our investigation of how the PTs drew upon, negotiated, and resisted authoritative discourses and their experiences as learners (Lortie, 1975) and teachers regarding the prevalence of whiteness in education. We examined the authoritative discourse of whiteness and neutrality the teachers align to and the zone of conflict with our introduction of a discourse of activism in teaching. Specifically, we looked to the discursive moves employed in maintaining the status quo, upholding whiteness, and their comfortability in education.

Literature Review

Whiteness as an Authoritative Discourse

As is true for many systems and institutions in the United States, education and schools are steeped in whiteness and ideologies of white supremacy. Whiteness, in this regard, revolves around the privileging of white perspectives, values, and histories and dismissing or subordinating those of other groups (Hyland, 2005). The permanence of racism in society and schools requires alternative approaches in preparing teachers, especially the majority of white teachers, to be anti-racist and culturally responsive in their thinking and instruction (Lynn, 1998; Sleeter, 2017). As Sleeter explored across scholarship, there continues to be a filter of whiteness in teacher education, even when exploring equity and justice, that appeals to the comfort of white teachers and promotes color

blindness, neutrality, and individualism (Sleeter, 2016, 2017). Thus, teacher education programs and curricula often affirm affective responses and emotionalities of whiteness, contribute to various discourses used, and ultimately perpetuate these same lenses through which individuals think and function (Zembylas & Matias, 2023).

Related to Critical Whiteness Studies (CWS) (Hyttén & Warren, 2003; Marx, 2006; McIntyre, 1997) and second-wave white identity studies (e.g., Jupp et al., 2016; Miller, 2017) looking at whiteness and teacher identity, there is a positioning of how teachers, and people, see themselves, and also how others define them (Tatum, 1997). Authoritative discourses of whiteness result in perspectives of color-blind ideology, neutrality, and racism as an issue rooted in the past, are confronted by educators, it can result in *white talk* (Earick, 2018; McIntyre, 1997; Rogers & Mosley, 2006). This talk, “coded language that white people use to avoid self-reflecting on their own racialized worldviews” (Earick, 2018, p. 818), serves as an affective filter to avoid accountability. We look to the prevalence of whiteness and white talk perspectives that can lead to discursive moves to remove oneself from directly confronting notions of race and racism in teaching and thinking.

Further research indicates tensions in how teachers see themselves as ‘good teachers’ while maintaining values of whiteness and lacking awareness or confrontations of racism (Hyland, 2005; Kohli et al., 2017; Vaught & Castagno, 2008; Young, 2011). Kohli et al. (2017) summarized across studies that “being ‘good’ at teaching content but having no structural or social analysis for inequity was a prevalent blind spot of White teachers who maintained racism in K-12 schools” (p. 192). While we look at issues and oppression, including but not limited to racial justice in the activism texts, this authoritative discourse was pervasive in how the teachers conceptualized ‘good teaching.’

Discursive Moves in Addressing Topics that Challenge whiteness

In recent years, critical conversations in teacher education have gained significant attention for their role in fostering critical thinking about power, privilege, and students' position in the world, particularly in discussions about race (Vetter et al., 2021). These discussions serve as essential platforms to address complex sociopolitical issues in the classroom. However, research by Cook et al. (2022) reveals that pre-service teachers (PSTs) often engage in evasive discourse moves during critical conversations, perpetuating whiteness and shielding themselves from discomfort. The urge to protect notions of "niceness" in teacher education further contributes to avoiding critical self-reflection and discussions about systemic issues (Bissonnette, 2016; Cook et al., 2022). Additionally, Cook et al. (2022) identify how texts play a pivotal role in shaping the contextual conditions for PSTs to confront issues related to race and silence, with the potential to disrupt niceness and evoke critical conversations.

Another study by Colwell et al. (2021) examines PSTs' perceptions and planning for culturally relevant disciplinary literacy instruction. While PSTs acknowledge the challenges and inequalities students face, their planning often fails to address critical topics or integrate cultural competence adequately. Colwell et al. found that PSTs' hesitancy to embrace critical topics stems from the perceived conflict between culturally relevant pedagogy and required instruction in core content areas. Similarly, Knowles

and Castro (2019) explored how teachers' civic ideologies influenced their curriculum and instruction. Their study revealed that more experienced teachers tended to align with conservative civic education, emphasizing kindness and truthfulness, while all three civic education ideologies showed a positive relationship with responsible civic behavior. Knowles and Castro (2019) highlight the significance of teachers' civic ideologies in shaping curriculum and instruction. However, their study primarily focuses on civic education ideologies without exploring their intersections with other sociopolitical issues.

Despite the growing body of research on critical conversations and confronting the prevalence of whiteness in education, there remains a notable gap in the literature concerning their intersections with other pressing issues such as activism, race, gender, religion, and environmentalism. Our study seeks to address this gap by adopting a broader view of Bakhtinian heteroglossia and authoritative discourses as they emerge for teachers transitioning into their induction years. Specifically, we explore how #CurriculumSoWhite intersects with various discourses connected to activism in the context of PSTs' experiences during a book club. Further, we build on scholarship to examine the role of authoritative discourses in shaping what teachers conceptualize as "good" teaching (Kohli et al., 2017). Through an in-depth examination of discursive moves, protective discourses, and shielding behaviors, we aim to reveal the complexities of activism and teaching within a predominantly white-

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centered curriculum and contribute to a more inclusive and critically engaged educational environment.

Methods

We employed a case-study design, which is exploratory and descriptive in nature (Thomas, 2021), to structure our investigation. This methodology allowed us to closely examine and gain a profound understanding of a specific phenomenon (Yin, 2018). Specifically, this case study focused on how PTs negotiated understandings of teaching and activism through participating in a three-session picturebook club focused on activism. This case study is bounded around two PTs' engagement in these three online book club sessions.

Participants and Context

This study took place as an online book club at a small public college in New England during the final three weeks of the Spring 2022 semester. The book club was voluntary and not tied to any official teacher education coursework. On three consecutive Thursday evenings, the authors met with participants over Zoom to read picturebooks, discuss, and share perspectives on activism.

The decision to run the book clubs emerged from our critical content analysis, detailed in a prior study (Fletcher & Holyoke, 2022), where we examined picturebooks centered around activism. This analysis allowed us to explore the portrayals of activism in these texts and raised questions about how educators, particularly PTs, engage with and conceptualize activism. Our intent in conducting the book clubs was to provide a platform for sharing the findings from our earlier research with PTs, fostering a space for in-depth discussions and a deeper exploration of their perspectives on activism. We

recognize that the book club format has its limitations, which have been acknowledged by scholars in the field (e.g., Johnson, 2020). While it serves as a valuable platform for discourse on activism, it does not guarantee immediate action or activism. Importantly, this book club initiative was intended as a pilot study to gauge preservice teachers' initial responses and engagement with these texts and ideas rather than as a comprehensive activism professional development.

Students across the College of Education were invited to join the picturebook club on activism at the end of the 2022 academic school year. Students within the college worked with schools serving mainly white children and families (93%) in a rural fringe community. In total, two PTs signed up to participate in the book club sessions; both were graduating seniors who had just completed student teaching. All names used in this paper are pseudonyms. Ali identified as an Asian-American female. She completed her student teaching in the first grade. Catherine identified as a white female and finished her student teaching in the fifth grade. Both were members of the campus education honors society, where Catherine was president and Ali was vice president. The two had worked with each other extensively throughout their teacher preparation program. When asked why they joined this book club, they both shared that they wanted to learn about children's literature. Absent in their remarks was any mention of activism.

At the time of this book club, it is important to note current events occurring at the time. During the book club sessions, *Roe v. Wade* was being challenged, the war in Ukraine had begun and garnered tremendous attention, and racial violence and injustices continued to be pervasive in the United States.

Book Club Sequence

The picturebook club consisted of three 90-minute sessions over Zoom, each focusing on a specific subset of books on activism. These topics included the civil rights movement, environmental justice, and concept books— books designed to introduce young readers to activism. Moreover, in the third session, participants were given the opportunity to choose a picturebook on activism of their choice from a multitude of topics, such as education, women's rights, (dis)ability rights, and LGBTQ+. This added flexibility allowed the participants to delve deeper into a topic of interest, thereby increasing their engagement and motivation.

In each session, we introduced PTs to two to four activist picturebooks relevant to the topic. They were each invited to select one book to read and reflect on independently during the session. The decision of what books to offer was informed by a content analysis we conducted with picturebooks on activism (Fletcher & Holyoke, 2023) and was based on the availability of books that could be shared. Figure 1 displays the picturebooks offered to the participants for each topic. The top line of book covers are the titles the participants selected to read.

The book club began with a welcome and check-in, followed by time for individual written reflections on their conceptions of activism. Participants were asked to reflect on their conceptualizations of activism, the role activism played in the classroom, and if they viewed themselves as activists. This initial written reflection was designed to orient the students to their conceptions of activism and to facilitate a deeper understanding of the topic. They routinely revisited their reflections at the start of each session to consider ways they might expand, revise, or problematize what they had written the week before.

After these initial reflections, we introduced the main topic rooted in activism that they would explore in that session. We gave a short book talk on the different picturebooks. Participants selected one of the four books to read and were provided digital access to the stories. After reading the books, the participants reflected individually on the stories using a Google document shared with us. In their reflections, participants were asked to discuss their reaction to the book, how it depicted activism, consider the story's point of view, and how they envisioned using the book in their classroom. The majority of our time was spent in discussion as each

Figure 1
Cover of picturebooks included in each session of the activism book club

	Session 1	Session 2	Session 3	
Topic	<i>Civil Rights Movement</i>	<i>Environmental Justice</i>	<i>Concept Books</i>	<i>Choice Books</i>
Books PTs Read				
Other Books Offered				

session concluded with whole group examinations and reflections about the books, topics, and PTs thinking about them.

Data Collection

Data for this study included transcripts of the three book club discussions. This allowed us to examine verbal communication and meaning-making with the texts. Additionally, we collected participants' written reflections on each book they read as part of the picturebook club. Furthermore, we included pre- and post-study reflections that examined participants' conceptions of activism, activist, and their role as activists in the classroom.

Data Analysis

We adapted Nowell et al.'s (2017) six phases of thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a qualitative method used to identify, analyze, organize, describe, and report themes within a data set (Braun & Clarke, 2021). It is an effective method to examine various participants' perspectives, highlighting differences and similarities in addition to generating unexpected insights (Braun & Clarke, 2021; King, 2004).

In Phase 1, we created a secure online repository for all data and listened to and summarized each book club discussion. All book club discussions were transcribed using a third-party transcription service. Additionally, we read through all written reflections and their pre- and post-study reflections. While familiarizing ourselves with the data, we took researcher memos. Phase 2 involved regular team meetings, where we collectively examined our summaries, researcher memos, and the initial codes we identified. These codes, such as “shielding,” “attempting neutrality,” “being a good teacher,” and “doing the little things,” were generated through both In Vivo coding and our engagement with relevant

literature on how PTs navigate critical conversations (e.g., Cook et al., 2022).

Phase 3 led us back to the audio files and transcript. We again listened to the book club discussions with the transcripts to explore patterned meanings between our codes and generated initial themes. We developed notes about emerging themes and created thematic maps to visualize their hierarchical relationships. Pulling upon the scholarship of Bakhtin (1981), we were interested in how the multiple discourses present within the book club discussions interacted; this curiosity influenced how we drew our thematic maps and initial themes. In Phase 4, we identified the extent to which these relationships existed across the dataset and returned to the raw data to test how they were reflected. Next, in Phase 5, we defined two themes of interest: *positioning self as a good teacher* and *filters and shields for being a good teacher*. We created an audit trail that included summaries of our themes, excerpts for each, and analytic memos. Finally, in Phase 6, we identified illustrative data to share results.

Positionality

We are both new assistant faculty members at colleges of education with a deep interest in bringing activism into teacher education. Lauren grew up in New England, and both of us attended colleges and taught in the region. While we do not currently reside or work in New England, we acknowledge the impact our past experiences in the region have had on our interpretation of the research findings.

We both identify as white, cis-gender, able-bodied, middle-class women. As such, our positionality significantly influenced our experiences in the field and shaped the participants' voices in this study. It is important to acknowledge that social justice, race, and equity topics were frequently discussed

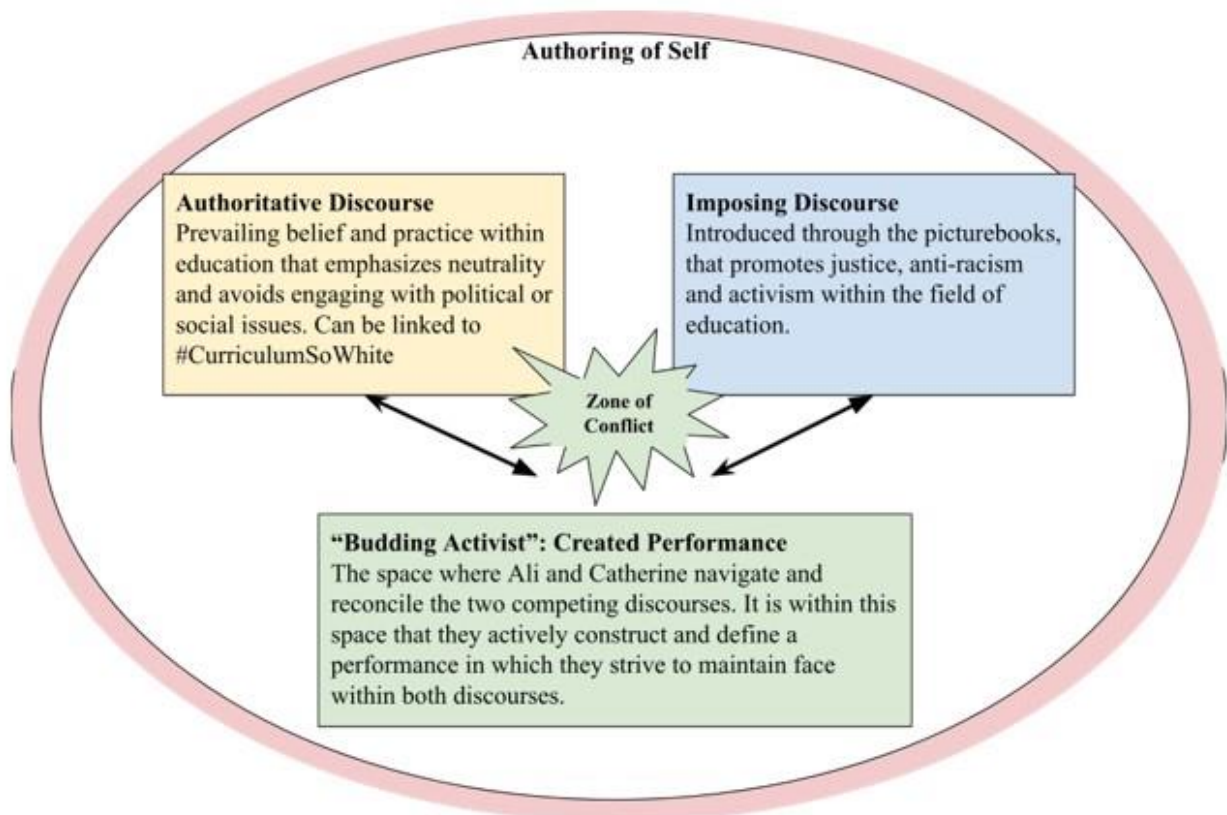
throughout this research. Existing research highlights the differential responses that faculty of color often encounter from students when discussing race-related topics compared to their white counterparts. Studies have shown that white students tend to feel more comfortable and open to guidance in exploring their white identities when engaging with white professors, as they perceive a sense of similarity and relatability (Bertand & Porter, 2020; Chesler & Young, 2007; Samuel & Wane, 2005; Turner, 2002). Therefore, our identities as white researchers engaging in conversations about race and activism in children's literature likely influenced how students responded and expressed their thinking on these sensitive topics (Sue, 2003; Torino, 2010).

Findings

This study examines how two PTs navigated competing discourses of activism within a book club setting that was outside of their teacher education coursework. Our analysis begins by exploring how Ali and Catherine situated themselves, in their words, as "good teachers" within two competing discourses. Specifically, beliefs and values shaped by their teacher education program and experiences as students and educators rooted in apolitical teaching and with an "imposing discourse" introduced to them in the picturebook clubs. This imposing discourse centered on justice, anti-racism, and activism. As Catherine and Ali navigated between these two discourses, they jointly forged a distinct space, which we refer to as the zone of conflict, wherein they grappled with crafting teaching identities that

Figure 2

Graphic depicting the discourses at play within the book clubs



harmoniously embraced both apolitical teaching and activism (see figure 2). We use the term zone of conflict to expand and problematize Bakhtin's concept of "zone of contact."

Subsequently, we examine filters that the PTs used to uphold an authoritative discourse of apolitical teaching. These filters became tools to shield from direct confrontation in the zone of conflict between the authoritative discourse and discourse of activism and in taking a critical lens to explore why this zone of conflict existed. Our analysis focuses on the dynamism between these discourses and the agency demonstrated by Ali and Catherine as they crafted teaching identities within this complex landscape.

"A Budding Activist": Navigating Authoritative and Imposing Discourses

Positioning themselves as good teachers was of key importance to Ali and Catherine throughout the book club. We identified this in instances where Ali and Catherine negotiated a new discourse to maintain a 'both/and' approach to the authoritative discourse of #CurriculumSoWhite and the imposing discourse within picturebooks on activism and the questions and content presented within the book club. The discursive work and positioning of being a good teacher falls into the zone of conflict as indicated in Figure 2. The teachers were invested in their practice, and both strove to align to what they named and identified as "good" teaching, promoted by legislation in their local context. The legislation in their local contexts equated good teaching as a neutral stance, and yet the participants also strove to align to our stance (the authors) as we discussed justice and activism in the school.

Prevalence of the Authoritative Discourse

Ali and Catherine entered the book club experiences with norms and beliefs that emphasized a politically

neutral stance in their classrooms, prioritizing academic instruction that avoided discussions of social justice or controversial topics. In our first session, Ali recounts how her cooperating teacher, during her first-grade student teaching experience, explicitly told Ali to exclude challenging topics such as the war in Ukraine, Black Lives Matter, or women's rights from classroom discussions. Her cooperating teacher shared that they were "best kept at home." Ali agreed with her cooperating teacher, stating, "It is best not to deal with it, if we said something, they go home to their parent, then there is a mess... I just avoid those topics." This stance highlights Ali's inclination to avoid discussing challenging topics closely tied to activism to maintain a politically neutral environment in her classroom.

Likewise, Catherine's cooperating teacher and methods professors advised her to "stay in the middle on everything" and present information from a neutral standpoint. She shared that she was told to avoid discussing the upcoming election or the Black Lives Matter movement altogether, where "the middle was tricky" to avoid upsetting students and families. Ali also shared similar sentiments about remaining neutral. When reflecting on activism's role in the classroom at the start of the book club, she wrote, "We [teachers] need to state both sides of something fairly." Both noted being neutral as providing students with "true" facts and perspectives from multiple points of view. Neutrality surfaced with the texts and current events, such as *Roe v. Wade* and vaccinations during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Drawing upon Bakhtin's scholarship, we identify these beliefs of political neutrality as part of the authoritative discourse. This discourse represents a dominant system of beliefs, values, and practices that hold authoritative power within Ali and Catherine's educational context. Reinforced by their teacher

education program and student teaching experiences, the authoritative discourse establishes norms and expectations for teachers to prioritize a politically neutral approach, focusing solely on academic instruction and avoiding discussions of social justice, activism, or controversial topics.

The Introduction of the Imposing Discourse

The belief to remain politically neutral in the classroom was confronted through the direct goals of the book club to examine activism and justice in teaching. For example, during the initial stage of the picturebook club sessions, PTs were prompted to reflect on the role of activism in the classroom and how teachers, along with children's literature, can support students in understanding and engaging with activism. This question sent a message that teaching is anything but apolitical. Both participants acknowledged that activism was gaining “more prominence” today and that it was a relatively new concept to them. Ali and Catherine shared that they had “never experienced activism firsthand.” Additionally, as they explored picturebooks during the first week, which focused on the civil rights movement, their notions of teaching from a stance of neutrality were further challenged.

Catherine provides an illustrative example as she reflects on remaining neutral, reading picturebooks of the civil rights movements. She states:

We [teachers] can't be biased. I think going at it from different angles, like the books we read about the civil rights movement, showing all sides, you can't just show, it's, ummm, it's a hard... well... I don't know, in my head it made sense, now I'm saying it out loud, and it doesn't seem right? It doesn't make much sense.

Initially, Catherine wholeheartedly advocated for maintaining a neutral stance on social issues.

However, when speaking about the Civil Rights Movement, she experiences a moment of realization mid-sentence, recognizing that a strictly neutral approach is inappropriate as the movement was defined by explicit racism. She backtracks, implying that teaching “different angles” would include validating the beliefs rooted in hate and inequality. When applying a lens of neutrality to a historical period delineated by racism and injustice, it became challenging for her to maintain value in teaching both sides. This disruption highlights the intricate complexities involved in maintaining a neutral position.

These diverse viewpoints and disruptions brought about by the book club align with Bakhtin's (1981) concept of “alien voices.” These voices represent alternative perspectives, discourses, and viewpoints outside a particular context's dominant or authoritative discourse. In Figure two, we refer to these viewpoints as the imposing discourse, reflecting their capacity to challenge and disrupt established beliefs and norms on teaching apolitically or remaining neutral.

Navigating the Zone of Conflict

However, amidst these two conflicting discourses, Ali and Catherine aspired to be perceived as good teachers, not only in the eyes of the authoritative discourse but also within the imposing discourse promoted by the book club. This tension engendered what Bakhtin (1981) describes as a “zone of contact,” and we reconsider it as a zone of conflict where Ali and Catherine navigated and reconciled the two discourses, performing a delicate balancing act. Their struggle encompassed maintaining a neutral stance, avoiding controversial topics, and simultaneously fostering an environment that encouraged student engagement and activism.

Catherine's use of the phrase "budding activist" provides an illustrative example of this. In the final book club session, she states, "I'm a budding activist. I like to sit back, to learn and understand what is going on... rather than jumping on the bandwagon." In this statement, Catherine is attempting to maintain face within both discourses. The role of a "budding activist" supports the apolitical teaching of #CurriculumSoWhite as she is "sit[ting] back," indicating a lack of action and avoidance of challenging topics. However, at the same time, she is positioning herself favorably within the imposing discourse of potentially doing the work and learning, though passively, through sitting back and naming herself as an activist.

Another example of this "both/and" is when Catherine and Ali expressed their intention to incorporate more activist narratives through the use of picturebooks in their classrooms. Catherine eloquently described this approach as "not reinventing the wheel, but just adding spokes to it," indicating her willingness to supplement the existing curriculum with additional stories of activism. Ali continued on that "adding spokes to it [the curriculum] paint[s] a broader picture." While their strategy demonstrates a commitment to enhancing the existing curriculum with diverse perspectives, it does not necessarily involve questioning or critically evaluating the fundamental structure of the curriculum itself. Instead, they maintain support for the authoritative discourse by continuing to teach according to the established curriculum. Nonetheless, their incorporation of what Catherine referred to as additional "spokes," or additional means of teaching activism through picture books, aligns in part with the imposing discourse by embracing stories of activism and social justice within the given framework.

A final striking example of how Catherine and Ali positioned themselves as "good teachers" amidst the

interplay of the authoritative and imposing discourses is evident in their repetitive use of the phrase "little things do something" to describe activism in the classroom. For instance, in her written reflection on activism in the classroom, Ali alludes to the fullness of a school schedule and states, "I think just doing little things do something for kids." However, she does not specify what these "little things" entail, leaving it open to interpretation. Similarly, during our discussion, Catherine echoes a similar sentiment, asserting, "[d]oing things on activism, even when they're small, count for something. It does something." Once again, her language remains vague, lacking specific examples.

Through these ambiguous phrases, Catherine and Ali offer procedural nods toward bringing activism into the classroom, aligning with the principles of the imposing discourse centered on justice and activism. By advocating for "little things" and the notion that they "do something," they seem to acknowledge the importance of integrating activism into their teaching practice. However, the lack of concrete details or explicit examples in their statements also allows them to avoid challenging the status quo of the authoritative discourse, which values a politically neutral stance. Their rhetorical strategy exemplifies how they navigated the zone of conflict by striking a balance between the two discourses. Although they appear supportive of activism in theory, their cautious approach ultimately reinforces the prevailing norms of apolitical teaching, demonstrating the complexities of positioning oneself within competing discourses.

The prevalence of these moves is not confined to these examples and was consistent across our sessions. Within the zone of conflict explored in this study, Ali and Catherine strove for balance to project a carefully crafted image amidst the collision between the established authoritative discourse ingrained in

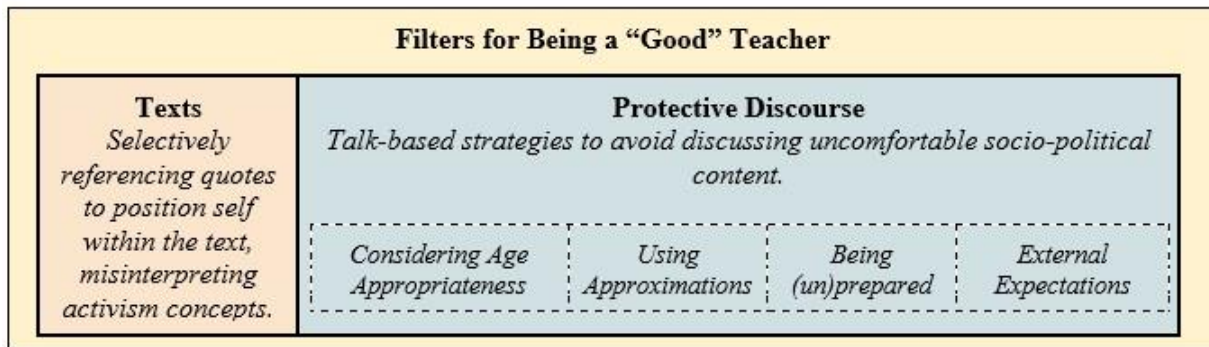
their teacher education program and local legislation and policy and the emerging imposing discourse rooted in activism from the book club discussions. They aimed to present themselves in a favorable light, embodying the image of a "good teacher" and "budding activist" to seek approval, acceptance, and recognition from others. However, in their pursuit of maintaining a positive image, they unintentionally overlooked critical self-reflection on their beliefs and the dominant discourses. Employing various filters and strategies to uphold their projected image, they aligned more closely with the authoritative discourse, often engaging in performative actions in response to the imposing discourse.

It is crucial to analyze how Ali and Catherine negotiated their performances within this zone of conflict, as it sheds light on the complexities inherent in teaching and teacher education and the intricate interplay between established norms and counter-perspectives. By examining their attempts to maintain face, we gain insight into the subtle dynamics of power, identity, and self-presentation within educational contexts.

**“Your voice doesn’t always have to be loud”:
Filters for Being a “Good” Teacher**

Building on the intricate dynamics explored in the first finding, we delve into Ali and Catherine's responses within the zone of conflict between competing discourses. We draw connections to Cook et al.'s (2022) analysis of discursive shielding employed by pre-service teachers (PTs) when confronted with challenging or divisive conversations. These shielding moves involve avoiding controversy, evading personal histories with texts, adhering to dominant narratives, and dismissing oppressive structures in society (Cook et al., 2022). In the context of our study, we found that Ali and Catherine also resorted to similar habits of shielding and navigating critical issues and tensions within the zone of conflict. However, in their attempts to manage this dissonance, they simultaneously used these shields as filters to distort the connection between teaching as a political act and enacting activism, aligning more closely with the authoritative discourse of whiteness, neutrality, and being a “good,” apolitical teacher. Through their shielding behaviors, they sought to reduce the tensions between the competing discourses of teacher activists and authoritative teaching paradigms. We outline two main ways in which they achieved this: (1) leveraging texts as tools for shielding and (2) employing protective discourses to avert direct engagement with the zone of conflict (see figure 3).

Figure 3
Filters preservice teachers used to position themselves as a “good” teacher



Texts as a Tool for Shielding

Ali and Catherine frequently utilized specific excerpts from texts to reinforce and validate their perspectives and experiences regarding activism. By selectively referencing small quotes or points from the stories, they positioned themselves within or alongside the text, occasionally leading to misinterpretations of the events and concepts related to activism. In this section, we explore illustrative examples of how the picturebooks served as a means to navigate the complexities of activism and teaching while reinforcing the dominant discourse of #CurriculumSoWhite, which these books aimed to disrupt.

For instance, during our first session centered on the Civil Rights Movement, Catherine discussed social media posts supporting the Black Lives Matter movement. She stated, “I don’t need to broadcast the same exact words, the same exact like verbiage...to show being an activist.” This straddled both discourses, and she later elaborated, “I’m comfortable saying I don’t know enough about this topic” and that “educat[ing] myself [about BLM movement] was more important than preach[ing].” Catherine dubbed her actions “silent activism” and drew parallels between herself and Georgia Gilmore, a civil rights advocate featured in the picturebook *Pies from Nowhere* (Romito, 2018). Catherine stated:

It's the silent stuff that you don't hear about and people aren't publicizing like, Hey, look at what I'm doing. Look at what I'm doing. She [Georgia Gilmore] was doing all of this. And she was like, I don't want them to know what's going on or how this is happening. It's just coming from nowhere...it's the things that you do behind closed doors that people don't always see that can also be activism.

Catherine used the text as a tool to affirm her existing actions and beliefs. She aligned her quiet, self-

educating approach with Georgia Gilmore making pies secretly, using the text as a shield rather than an invitation to explore the role of activism. Catherine’s meaning-making enabled her to use the text as a filter in the zone of conflict between discourses. Her interpretation allowed Catherine to filter the conflicting discourses and present herself as an activist without critically reflecting on her privilege and the broader implications of her actions.

Similarly, when Ali read the activist concept book *Say Something* (Reynolds, 2019), emphasizing the importance of using one’s voice to address injustices, she leveraged the text as a shield to validate her pre-existing views on activism. Focusing on the book’s line, “powerful words can be a whisper,” she states, “I really liked this... it [activism] doesn’t have to be a big thing...connecting to what I said the first day. It’s the little things. They don't have to be loud.” As was true across discussions, while both PTs appreciated the texts and noted how they offered “new perspectives,” Ali and Catherine typically connected to one small point that affirmed their views of being neutral and aligned to the apoliticism of the authoritative discourse of “good” teachers. Rather than serving as a foundation for exploration, the texts became blinders, limiting the incorporation of new perspectives.

Ali and Catherine's interpretations of texts also reiterated the lenses of #CurriculumSoWhite, as they simplified Civil Rights narratives and portrayed racial justice movements as belonging to the past. For instance, Ali’s reflections on the text *Someday Is Now: Clara Luper and the 1958 Oklahoma City Sit-ins* led her to conclude that racial injustices were mostly repaired or “not so much like that” in the present. Ali went on to share:

It made me sad to think that the world was once like that, but then glad that it's not so much like that anymore, not to be like happy,

sad, but you know, that those are the two words that are very simple, um, to use.

The reflection questions posed to them asked about connections of the text to the present day. However, Ali aligned her discourse to a broader discourse of whiteness wherein racial injustices are seen as only historical, such as only contextualizing racial justice with the Civil Rights Movement. A surface-level presentation of the text and descriptors such as “sad” and “glad” reduce the critical focus of how this text could be used or explored by adults and in teaching children. In their final reflections, both Ali and Catherine believed that the books affirmed the idea of “behind the scenes” activism or the notion that public displays of activism were unnecessary. They attributed this perspective to their engagement with the texts, positioning them as shields to avoid critical reflection and maintain their views of activism as either “silent” or inconsequential.

Ali and Catherine utilized texts as shields to reinforce their perspectives on activism and teaching while also privileging a #CurriculumSoWhite lens. By selectively extracting specific excerpts from picturebooks, they positioned themselves within or alongside the text, overlooking activism's broader implications and complexities. Rather than embracing critical reflection and new perspectives, the picturebooks became shields to protect their entrenched beliefs, perpetuating a limited view of activism and historical narratives. This pattern of shielding behavior also extended to the protective discourses enacted by the pre-service teachers, serving as filters to avoid addressing the zone of conflict within the book club.

Discourses of Protection as Shielding Moves from Activism

The second sub-theme explores how Ali and Catherine utilized protective discourses, acting as

shields and filters, to skillfully sidestep directly, engaging with the zone of conflict present in the book club environment. Protective discourse refers to intentional or unintentional talk-based strategies that allow individuals to avoid discussing uncomfortable sociopolitical content (Isler & Dedeoglu, 2019; Scherff, 2012). These discursive moves enabled the teachers to maintain emotional distance from conversations about systems of oppression and privilege.

One prevalent shield they employed was the notion of age appropriateness, claiming that the discussed books were good stories but not suitable for specific grade levels. They also employed approximations when contemplating the use of activist texts in their teaching. Simultaneously, they shielded themselves from activism by expressing uncertainty or perceiving it as unconventional. Moreover, they used restrictions from school curriculums, mentor teachers' language, and fear of parental responses to further protect themselves from fully embracing activism or discussing critical social events with their young learners. In this section, we explore the complexities of these protective discourses and how Ali and Catherine navigated the intricate landscape of activism and teaching within a predominantly white-centered curriculum.

“Playful Way[s]” and Age Appropriate Activism

Ali and Catherine frequently employed the shield of age appropriateness, asserting that certain activism books were unsuitable for specific grade levels. Catherine described *A is for Activism*, a concept board book, as “playful” and “fun,” stating, “It was nice, sometimes the books [on activism] are hard and heavy, reading it to a K [or] 1 class would go over their heads, they wouldn’t know about it.” By adding that reading it to a K/1 class would go over their heads, she uses the notion of age appropriateness to avoid

addressing activism directly. Additionally, naming activism as playful served as a discursive move to protect herself from needing to address activism more directly and as a filter to bridge apolitical, “good” teaching to enactments of activism. She simultaneously names activism as “fun” while noting that young children could not access the ideas presented in the text. Drawing on discursive moves of “age appropriateness” provided the PTs a spectrum to serve as the deciders of which concepts and versions of activism were “heavy” and which they might be able to teach in a “fun” manner. The reality of the text being a board book meant for younger children was ignored.

As was often true when the teacher candidates engaged in shields to protect from emotional engagements of activism, they affirmed one another, echoing the ideas and reinforcing the same external discourses. In this instance, Ali commented, “Even if they didn’t fully understand what feminism is in first grade or whatever it is, but they would have an introduction, and then if the teacher read it again, they would have more information.” She picks up the same shield of age appropriateness but also affirms that reading it anyway, without engaging in discussion or action, is enough. Naming that the children would not fully understand but could still read it served as validation for themselves in saying they would read it to children.

However, while they regularly noted age-appropriateness as a shield in their talk, Catherine and Ali also mentioned that young children will come up with ideas related to critical social issues and “spew them out” or “make some regurgitated comments about something they heard at home.” This created another zone of conflict in that they viewed activism as inappropriate while simultaneously recognizing that children were aware of and curious about these issues. This zone of

conflict positioned teachers as gatekeepers for engaging in activism in the classroom and determining what is appropriate or not to explore, regardless of children’s capacities or curiosities to think and talk about the issues. They did not address the zone of conflict but did puzzle through wonderings of, “How do we combat this and talk about it in a way that is appropriate for them?” However, these questions surfaced without actually seeking or providing answers. While they used age-appropriateness as a shield, it also illuminated their lack of comfort in knowing how to explore critical social issues and activism with young learners.

Filters of Approximations

Throughout our analysis, Ali and Catherine frequently employed approximations when reflecting on how they would use activist texts in their teaching. As a result of these approximations, they did not critically engage with the texts as readers and teachers of young students. For example, after reading *Malala’s Magic Pencil*, an autobiographical picturebook about Malala Yousafzai, Ali focused on a simplified extension, stating she would “simply ask [children] what they would erase and draw if they had a magic pen or pencil.” This approach ignored the profound themes of women’s rights and access to education portrayed in the text, dismissing opportunities for a deeper inquiry into Malala Yousafzai’s story and the complex issues she represents. Instead, it allowed for a superficial text extension activity that neither explored nor directly confronted activism. In this instance, Ali viewed the text as an anchor for an activity rather than embracing the potential for transformative action or approaches related to activism. In another example, after reading *We Are Water Protectors*, Ali, and Catherine agreed that it would be good to teach during “Earth Day and talking about the earth...and necessities of needs and maybe protecting the land

and cleaning up the earth and things like that.” In this example, they focus on surface-level activities, again missing the chance to deeply engage with the topic of water rights for indigenous communities. When discussing and using these texts, their approximations became shields from critically examining the texts and teaching stances, ultimately inhibiting their capacity to embrace activism as readers and educators of young learners fully.

(Un)Preparedness as a Shield

Ali and Catherine's emphasis on their lack of preparedness served as a shield to avoid engaging in activism and discussing critical social issues with their students. For example, in discussing their familiarity with activism and talking with children about it, Catherine shared her hesitation to engage children with this topic, stating:

There is so much that has changed in the last 21 years that I have been walking the earth... things are changing now that I didn't grow up with. And it's not that it is hard to be open to that, but it's not normal. It's not what you are used to.

Catherine's reflection on the rapid societal changes she witnessed in her lifetime and describing activism as new and not "normal" made her hesitant to discuss activism with children, aligning to economies of whiteness and normalizing her view and experience (Zembylas & Matias, 2023). This avoidance of discomfort or viewing activism as unfamiliar undermined her capacity to embrace activism as an educator, ultimately hindering her ability to engage with activist texts critically and have meaningful discussions with students about important social issues.

Ali and Catherine expressed discomfort and a sense of being unprepared to address "touchy" subjects in the classroom, raising concerns about the

appropriate language to use as teachers. When discussing teaching Martin Luther King Jr., Ali exemplified this uncertainty, stating, "Like Black vs. African American, that is the one I can think of because [in] Martin Luther King week, talking about all of those and civil rights, like what word might get the parent's attention." This unease was contextualized in a predominantly white community where sensitive topics garnered significant attention. Ali emphasized her apprehension to avoid potential conflicts with parents, but the root cause of her discomfort in engaging with activism and discussing critical social issues with students remained unexplored. Further, her concern was about how she would be perceived, not how her language choices would impact learners. The focus solely on linguistic choices overlooked the broader issues surrounding her preparedness to address activism and create inclusive discussions in the classroom, whether about historical events like Civil Rights or current events brought up by students. Ali and Catherine's emphasis on their lack of preparedness acted as a shield, hindering them from engaging in activism with their students and discussing critical social issues, further shaping their teaching approach.

External Expectations as a Shield

To further shield themselves from engaging in activism, Ali and Catherine also turned to restrictions or advice presented by the curricula at their schools, language from mentor teachers, and fear of what parents might say. They often noted the curriculum leaving little room for activism or inquiry projects. The curriculum became a shield and reason as to why they would not engage fully in activism or discuss critical social events with young learners. After discussing the text *Follow the Moon Home*, which presents a true story of a class inquiry project and protecting sea turtles, the PTs named there was no room for this in the curriculum.

If we were to do this exact activity and send kids out to find a problem to do something about. The things they are going to come back with - there is going to be a range... They can come back with problems to be explored, but you can't do all 19 of them. In a perfect world, you could, but there's not enough time in the year. Give them the tools they need to reach these goals on their own.

Comments such as this pushed the ideas of inquiry and activism away from the classroom and instead to the home or on children's own time. Beyond the texts, Ali and Catherine applied this idea to events in their classrooms, such as children's questions about the repeal of abortion rights. They named:

[A] lot of students brought up the... the... the bill. A bill, right? Talking about what is developmentally appropriate and making choices for yourself. In a very simple elementary way and don't be told what to do. You should follow rules and laws, but making choices for yourself... that makes sense, yeah?

There was a focus on the curriculum and rules in schools rather than thinking about authentic inquiries children brought or may bring to the classroom. When conversations were recounted in the group, both PTs presented a sense of pride that they could return to the planned curriculum and not the children's engagement in the current events. Similarly, Catherine noted that you can't let "it [activism] to take up all the time in your day because you easily could, but you have other things to teach too." They deflected opportunities to engage in critical issues and teaching and prioritized time, the curriculum, or age appropriateness as the rationale for why.

Another external expectation were the voices of their mentor teachers. Both Catherine and Ali used statements from their mentors as a rationale for their decisions. This deferral positioned experienced

teachers as experts who shepherded them to do something a specific way and upholds dominant discourses that more experienced teachers are knowledge holders, much like they positioned themselves as deciders for young learners. Ali and Catherine often referred to conversations where mentor teachers commented, "you can't, you can't really pick a side; you have to be like in the middle on everything." Or that they had been told to be careful with "touchy subjects" because "parents have the right to come in and communicate with you, and we have to be careful what we share." In this way, while drawing on notions and discourses of neutrality, the shield was the expertise of another educator, and that was why they were opting not to engage in discussions, texts, or enactments of activism in their lives. They revoiced conversations from mentor teachers as a shield or defense in examining activism in the classroom rather than owning their own decisions about teaching. They named that teachers told them to "Keep stuff at home because we didn't really want to deal with it..." Ali and Catherine did not address their views on this but rather added their voices and agreements, thus co-constructing the shield as to why activism and critical social issues are "not taught" in the classroom.

The teachers voiced societal fears, expectations of curricula, and 'expert teachers' to rationalize why they were not focused on activism in their teaching and lives. Repeatedly, Ali and Catherine focused on how their mentors told them specific ways to think or act or how they were concerned about specific topics in teaching. They wanted to teach "both sides" of issues to not upset the imagined families they would be working with. This was a common theme about not bringing in their "opinions" or perspectives and ensuring children were exposed to both sides. However, the teachers also saw the books as a way to shield the conversations with children because the books were "mostly true."

Discussion

This study highlights the complex interplay between authoritative discourses, such as #CurriculumSoWhite and whiteness in teaching and teacher education, and PTs' attitudes towards activism and critical social issues in the classroom. The findings illuminate how the two PTs often aligned with the authoritative discourse of neutrality and avoidance of sensitive topics, influenced by prevailing laws, curriculum, school environments, and whiteness as the norm in education. This stance was amplified by the teachers' affective responses of both comfort and discomfort (Zembylas & Matias, 2023), as they negotiated tensions between discourses. The tensions arose as the discourse of activism confronted with the authoritative discourse, leaving the PTs to grapple with conflicting perspectives on what it means to be a "good" teacher. While striving to bridge across the discourses, they may remain unaware of the harm of embracing neutrality, equivalent to colorblind ideologies around racism in schools (Zembylas & Matias, 2023), viewing it as an asset rather than recognizing its limitations (Freire, 1970; Giroux, 2018; Janks, 2010).

The context and locality of the PTs' student teaching experiences profoundly influenced the authoritative discourses they uphold as "good" teaching practices. For instance, local and national laws emphasizing avoidance of divisive concepts and catering to the comfort of white children and families served as shields that covered other filters enacted by the PTs. By complying with these laws, they perceive themselves as "good" teachers who uphold the status

quo. However, when confronted with opposing discourses, moments of dissonance occurred as PTs negotiated their stance between neutrality and activism. This was especially highlighted in Catherine's discussion of teaching both sides and the civil rights movement. Awareness of the noncongruence between these discourses emerged as they attempted to create spaces for neutrality and address critical social issues and activism in the classroom. Nevertheless, there remains a need to recognize that silence and inaction communicate a message to students, and addressing racism and oppression is vital to embracing activism and transformative pedagogy (Kendi, 2023).

The PTs used protective discourses to justify their shielding moves and avoidance of engaging fully with critical social issues and activist perspectives (Cook et al., 2021). They may defer responsibility by citing expert or veteran teachers' advice, time constraints in the curriculum (Colwell et al., 2021), or fear of parental or administrative disapproval. Additionally, they may draw on deficit views of young learners' capabilities, claiming that specific topics are not age-appropriate (Janks, 2010). However, rather than viewing these shielding moves as mere deflections, they represent opportunities for educators to disrupt the pervasiveness of whiteness and neutrality in education. The book club discussions serve as an external discourse that challenges PTs to recognize that activism and social justice can align with being "good" teachers, leading to transformative teaching practices.

“The two PTs often aligned with the authoritative discourse of neutrality and avoidance of sensitive topics, influenced by prevailing laws, curriculum, school environments, and whiteness as the norm in education.”

This study emphasizes the need for teacher education programs and schools to critically examine and disrupt authoritative discourses that perpetuate neutrality and avoidance of critical social issues. By fostering communities of teachers prepared to challenge these discourses and embrace transformative pedagogy centered around activism, teacher educators can empower future educators to effectively address social justice issues in their classrooms (Freire, 1970; Giroux, 2018; Janks, 2010). Through ongoing dialogue and reflection, educators can navigate the zone of conflict, allowing for a more inclusive and empowering learning environment.

Implications

The study's implications are important for teacher education programs and schools aiming to cultivate transformative pedagogy and challenge the pervasive influence of whiteness. Three key implications emerge. Firstly, there is a pressing need to confront authoritative discourses, challenging prevailing narratives of neutrality and avoiding critical topics. Aligned with previous research, whiteness operates as a “normative standard” (Bertand, & Porcher, 2020, p. 80), for preservice teachers, requiring teacher education program, and supplemental engagements such as this book club to directly address equity and justice in teaching. Secondly, fostering critical perspectives and modeling activism is essential for guiding PTs toward social justice and inclusivity. Lastly, ongoing, longitudinal support is crucial in nurturing communities that challenge authoritative discourses and foster transformative pedagogy centered around activism. In the subsequent sections, we elaborate on each implication, providing

specific recommendations for teacher education programs and schools to drive meaningful and sustained change in the teaching profession.

Explicit Confrontation of the Authoritative Discourse

This study underscores the need for an explicit confrontation of authoritative discourses to challenge the prevailing narratives of neutrality and avoidance of critical topics in teacher education programs and schools. Unlike Bakhtin’s proposal of internally persuasive discourse, individuals do not always confront the authoritative discourse when presented with others (i.e., alien voice). The findings revealed that PTs often align themselves with the authoritative discourse of neutrality and shielding moves to avoid fully engaging with activism and critical social issues. This points to the pervasive influence of whiteness as the status quo in educational settings, where compliance, alignment, and conformity take precedence over critical perspectives and transformative teaching. To disrupt inequitable opportunities and experiences in schools, teacher educators must prioritize transparent explorations of the prevailing discourses and equip future teachers with the tools to critically engage with activism and social issues in the classroom. By centralizing ongoing pedagogical stances around equity, responsive teaching, anti-racist pedagogies, and disrupting the status quo *through action*, teacher preparation programs can better prepare educators to confront authoritative discourses and embrace transformative pedagogy focused on activism and critical social issues, ultimately fostering inclusive and socially just learning environments.

“By fostering communities of teachers prepared to challenge these discourses and embrace transformative pedagogy centered around activism, teacher educators can empower future educators to effectively address social justice issues in their classrooms.”

Critical Perspectives and Modeling

The study emphasizes the significance of promoting critical perspectives in literacy and activism as ways of disrupting and decentering whiteness within and beyond the classroom. Preparing teachers with this explicit framework and lens for questioning texts and teaching practices will equip them with tools to negotiate and disrupt authoritative discourses (Hyland, 2005). The transparency of needed conversations about why there is discomfort in applying critical perspectives is also essential. In local communities for PTs in this study, there were laws around banning divisive concepts in teaching, though the law itself was written ambiguously, which reiterated a dominant discourse for teachers of avoiding taking a “side” in their instruction and an anxiousness in teaching about activism, current and historical events and upholding whiteness as a barometer for what is included in literacy and what is not. Further research is warranted to explore how teacher preparation programs effectively address these issues and empower educators to create inclusive learning environments that foster critical thinking and social consciousness in young learners.

Ongoing Experiences

The findings also underscore the importance of ongoing, longitudinal support to PTs to foster communities that challenge authoritative discourses of whiteness and embrace transformative pedagogy. Providing authentic experiences over time should offer inquiries for PTs into one’s own experiences, inquiries of the role of authoritative discourses in systems and structures, and unpacking how it manifests in teaching. This work must also be done in communities to grow and learn together. A shortcoming of our study was that there were only two PTs and we met only three times. Having more teachers and building a community to do this work over time could offer PTs a nuanced and multivoiced

understanding and meaning-making of their experiences and the discourses they are confronted with. Further, hearing from others on their textual meaning-making may also be an expansive opportunity, rather than having such alignment between both participants’ views.

As we saw with the PTs in this study, there was the maintenance of privileged perspectives and notions of “teaching all sides” without recognizing what this stance communicates to children. This new racism (Kohli et al., 2017), upholds singular narratives and experiences in schools that continue to center whiteness and shield from responsibility for complicity in upholding these forms of oppression. This means that stand-alone engagements, courses, and singular events focused on activism or confronting authoritative discourses are not enough. It needs to become a way of being so PTs can confidently define activism and explore what critical social issues for themselves in the classroom, with students, and in the world.

Hope

We hope exposure and practices engaging in critical perspectives and confrontations of authoritative discourses can guide teachers in their ideological becoming by confronting whiteness and apolitical teaching. While we did not see that happen in this study, we hope that with ongoing experiences and more explicit confrontations of the authoritative discourses, future teachers will be prepared to negotiate competing discourses and encourage transformation in schools. There is a need for future studies to look longitudinally, to engage in discourse analysis with teachers of their discourses and talk, to follow “zones of conflict” with PTs to explore if authoritative discourses of whiteness get perpetuated and when they do not, to take note of how and why teachers can resist these discourses and focus on justice in schools and society.

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