Culturally Relevant Booktalking: Using a Mixed Reality Simulation with Preservice School Librarians

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The role of school librarians is often overlooked in advancing a respect for cultural diversity among youth, yet librarians are in key positions to champion for social justice reform in educational settings. In this qualitative study, we examine preservice school librarians' experiences with booktalking multicultural literature in a mixed reality simulation environment, as a vehicle to introduce social justice issues. Our purpose was to explore the booktalking experience as a means of developing preservice librarians' understanding of culturally relevant pedagogy, a stance concerned with developing cultural competence and critical consciousness. Our findings revealed that preservice librarians gained different levels of understanding of culturally relevant pedagogy; yet, the experience provided them with an opportunity for engaging in critical reflection regarding personal bias and systemic racism in schools and literature.

Introduction

Students in United States (US) schools represent a diversity of race and ethnicities, yet a persistent gap between the teaching force and the students in US classrooms in terms of gender, race, and ethnicity has been widely discussed in the literature (e.g., Galman, Pica-Smith & Rosenberger, 2011; Spainerman et al., 2011). This diversity gap was the topic of a recent US National Education Association report (Dilworth & Coleman, 2014). Similar gaps have been identified and discussed in Australia (Mills, 2013), Europe (Humphrey et al., 2006), and the UK (Pearce, 2012). School librarians, as members of the teaching force in these contexts, reflect similar demographics and challenges in engaging students representing diverse languages and cultures. The stated mission from the American Association of School Librarians, "to ensure that students and staff are effective users of ideas and information" (AASL, 2009, p. 8) along with their common belief that "equitable access is a key component for education" (AASL, 2007, p. 2) aims to be inclusive of all students and all kinds of diversity.

A particular challenge for educators of preservice school librarians is how to promote the practice of culturally relevant pedagogy in school libraries. Bush and Jones (2010) conducted a Delphi study to understand what leaders in the field perceived were the dispositions needed by

school librarians in order to meet the needs of all students. Their study was sparked by the inclusion of dispositions as learning standards in the Standards for the 21st Century Learner (AASL, 2007). One stated purpose of the Bush and Jones study was to influence the preparation of school librarians so that they could teach dispositions to students. Among the categories revealed in their study was empathy, which they defined as "compassion, honors diversity, kindness, open-mindedness, listens to all points of view, learning experiences for all" (p. 8). One way to explore the disposition of empathy is to examine culturally relevant pedagogy in school library preparation.

Culturally relevant pedagogy attempts to bridge the cultural gap between teachers and students, resting on the proposition that students can experience academic success while also developing cultural competence (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). And while the authentic use of culturally relevant pedagogy by educators is limited (Sleeter, 2011a), the use of culturally relevant pedagogy by school librarians may be even more limited (Kumasi, 2012). Multicultural literature may be one venue for school librarians to begin to engage in culturally relevant pedagogy (Souto-Manning, 2009).

Multicultural studies are laden with varied definitions and vague descriptions of culturally relevant pedagogy (Sleeter, 2011a; Young, 2010). The term "culturally relevant pedagogy" (CRP), as popularized by Ladson-Billings (1995), is defined as teaching practices that build on the student's family dynamics, languages, ethnicities, communication discourses, value systems, and overall life experiences. Further, CRP supports academic achievement and challenges the very same educational and political system that was built around a hegemonic theory of oppression for students of color (Young, 2010; Villegas, 1991). Many of these multicultural studies cite the same limitation: that educators are unsure of what culturally relevant pedagogy looks like as a tool for social justice reform because they were never given the opportunity to learn, use, or model it (Kumasi & Hill, 2013; Sleeter, 2011a; Villegas, 1991; Young, 2010). Hill and Kumasi (2011) demonstrated that school librarians in particular do not feel their preparation programs train them to become culturally competent pedagogues. In response, this study provides a tangible example of how school librarians and other educators can increase their propensity for cultural competency and sociopolitical teaching, using the technology of virtual reality to promote what Young (2011) calls a meaningful and safe dialogue about race and other cultural differences.

This study examined the perceptions of preservice school librarians about sharing multicultural literature through booktalks with diverse students in a mixed reality simulation. These candidates were enrolled in a master's level school librarianship class, Selection and Evaluation of Resources (LIBS 678), where the candidates were given the opportunity to discuss their epistemological views about cultural practices and sociopolitical teaching. LIBS 678 candidates[1] in the past have been asked to find a convenient group of adolescents as defined for this course as aged 11 through 18 and to perform the booktalk in front of them. Although this has been successful, candidates, who have mostly represented the dominant culture, tended to choose adolescents with whom they felt most comfortable, i.e. most like themselves, and to choose books that they themselves have read and enjoyed. This assignment was changed to have the candidates perform booktalks using multicultural literature, and to perform the booktalk in front of actors televised as avatars representing multicultural adolescents in a mixed-reality simulation.

Research Questions

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[1] To avoid confusion, the authors have elected to use these terms in this article: candidates – preservice school librarians, participants – preservice school librarians who consented to join this study, avatars – avatars in this study who represented middle school students, students – K-12 students.

The study focused on the following research questions:

      RQ1. What are the perceptions by candidates of multicultural booktalking before and after the mixed reality experience?

      RQ2. How is the mixed-reality simulation an effective tool for teaching culturally relevant pedagogy?

Theoretical and Literature Perspectives

Booktalks involve short introductions to specific book titles in order to entice readers to those titles. The practice of booktalking has long been a staple of librarianship with numerous books (Cole, 2010; Mahood, 2010; Schall, 2011; York, 2008a) and practitioner articles extolling the practice for librarians (Chance & Lesesne, 2012; Langemack, 2010; Young, 2003), teachers (Dionisio, 1989; Featherston, 2009; Wozniak, 2011), and students (Fischbaugh, 2004). Recent interest has developed in digital forms of booktalking such as book trailers or short videos (Chance & Lesesne, 2012; Gunter & Kenny, 2008). Bodart (2010) notes that there has been little research from the library field about the outcomes of booktalking. Wozniak (2011) describes an intervention that included regular booktalks by the classroom teacher resulting in improved attitudes toward reading by middle school students. Beard and Antrim (2010) found that when a school librarian collaborated with the reading teacher and included booktalks, lower achieving students read more. Although teaching with multicultural literature has received attention in the literature (Hinton-Johnson & Dickinson, 2005; Landt, 2008; Lowery & Sabis-Burns, 2008), the practice of booktalking multicultural literature has been the subject of only a few articles (York, 2008b, 2009). Employing teacher action research, Souto-Manning (2009) examined how multicultural children's literature in her primary classroom could serve to promote a culturally responsive pedagogy using a variety of literature to provoke conversations about race and equality even with very young students.

    An interest by the profession in multicultural literature (Rochman, 1993) has persisted throughout the past several decades but not without some controversy. The meaning of multicultural has been criticized as too focused on the five "Fs": food, fashion, fiestas, folklore, and famous people (Begler, 1998, p. 272); or on promoting a sense of tourism and exoticism, rather than a transformative affirmation of differences and commonalities across cultures (Sayles-Hannon, 2009). According to Banks and McGee Banks (2010), who have identified four levels of multicultural content integration, the most superficial levels of integration (i.e., the contributions and additive approaches) merely scratch the surface of a culture's traditions and preserve the dominant mainstream group's centric position in the curriculum. Banks and McGee Banks (2010) criticize these approaches since they position multicultural content as "add-ons" to the "regular" curriculum. Kumasi and Hill (2013) conducted a discourse analysis to investigate the perceived cultural competence of LIS students in an effort to better understand the discourses that exist in library science. They suggest there are hidden and competing discourses in LIS surrounding the role of school librarians in cultural competence because of ambiguous multicultural rhetoric, the desire to be viewed as politically correct, and conflicting ideologies or paradigms of thought.

    Much of the current thought and practice about teaching to and for diversity has been influenced by the work of Ladson-Billings (1995), who is credited with the concept of "culturally relevant pedagogy" (CRP), or teaching where educators foster high academic standards by facilitating cultural competence and critical consciousness to prepare students to engage in life-long learning and democratic citizenship by fighting against social injustices. According to Ladson-Billings (1995, 2000) high academic success is fostered when teaching and learning is focused on student achievement, critical thinking, rigorous learning outcomes, and real world examples that exemplify challenging concepts. Cultural competence was more than fostering

personal knowledge about a cultural other, it was when an educator had the ability to promote students' own understanding of their culture while simultaneously exposing the culture that oppresses them. Lastly, an educator fostered critical consciousness when he or she helped students to question the systemic inequities, racist ideologies, and societal injustices perpetuated by the status quo. There has been a call to make this pedagogy more critical and guide students to question the status quo and wrestle with issues of social injustice and power (Giroux, 2000) and to sustain cultural identities and language differences (Paris, 2012).

Background of the Current Study

In this study, school library candidates or preservice librarians engaged in booktalking with socio-politically inclined books to a virtual multicultural audience, and in doing so, they were provided with several structured opportunities to reflect and create meaning about the experience and their possible biases. This multicultural booktalking study builds a bridge between York's (2008b, 2009) conclusion that little is known about multicultural booktalking and Ladson-Billings' (1995, 2000) proposal that CRP begins with critical reflection. The experience itself occurred in Teach-Live, a mixed reality teaching lab where candidates interacted with actor-controlled avatars in the roles of diverse middle school students (ages 11-14 years old). The teaching lab consisted of a room where the preservice librarians viewed onscreen a simulation of a small classroom. Simulation technologies such as Second Life have been the subject of research into preservice education related to teaching efficacy (Cheong, 2010) and mathematics and equity (Brown, Davis & Kulm, 2011). Both authors conclude that such simulations, while requiring a steep learning curve into the technology, offer a rich environment for candidates to apply and practice teaching in "ways that reduces real world risks, complications, costs, and ineffectiveness" (Cheong, 2010, p. 870). The mixed reality setting used in this study, Teach-Live, did not require candidates to become proficient in the protocols of Second Life or any other technological medium, but provided a similar, low-risk simulation of a real classroom. The simulation was mediated by an onsite technician who provided the training for the simulation experience.

Methods

Participants and Data Collection

Participants in this study were enrolled in LIBS 678, a hybrid summer course that includes selection, collection development, and materials for adolescents. Though much of the course took place asynchronously online, the candidates came to campus for a two-day residency. Assignments in this class included reading, listening, and experiencing materials for adolescents such as print books, e-books, audiobooks, television, and movies. Candidates were also instructed to select materials to represent several categories including award-winners, multiple genres, and selections reflective of diversity. Among the required categories were several multicultural ones including African-American, Latino/a or Asian American characters or themes, and an international title. Many candidates chose a book from one or more of these categories for the booktalk assignment. Candidates also had assignments to promote books with adolescents including a book trailer, a read-alou*d experience, and booktalking.*

In the past, since the booktalking experience allowed candidates to choose any adolescent audience, some candidates, based in a school, would choose a class of students at the end of the school year or another convenient group, such as youth from their church or neighborhood. Often they chose groups with whom they were familiar and very comfortable. As instructors, we

wanted to provide them with a more diverse opportunity and had discussed having them booktalk to adolescents during the few days when they come to campus during the summer term. The Teach-Live Lab offered a unique opportunity that also fit the short time available during their on-campus visit and had the added benefit of providing every candidate with a similar controlled experience.

The instructors informed candidates that they would prepare and deliver a five-minute booktalk of two or three multicultural titles to a group of adolescents when they came to campus. They were told that the talks would be given in a teaching simulation to a group of five avatars, who represented middle grade students (approximately 11-14 years old). The student avatars included two females and three males and two African-Americans, two Caucasians and one Latino. Candidates were also told that actors who would interact with them in real time remotely controlled the avatars. Prior to the simulation, they were provided with some general articles that included booktalking tips (Anderson & Mahood, 2001; Scanlan, 2010) and were told to select two or three multicultural titles that would be likely to interest a diverse audience. Candidates were placed in groups of three to five and were assigned to engage in pre- and post-booktalk group chats and online chats. The pre-booktalk chat occurred synchronously using the chat feature in Blackboard, an online course management system. One group had technical difficulties and chatted instead using the instant messaging function on the social media site Facebook. These chats were recorded and the transcripts served as one data source for this study. Groups were given the following prompts for this first chat:

1) What book or books have you selected for your booktalk and why? and
2) How are you feeling as you anticipate this experience?

The Teach-Live Lab was a new addition to the College of Education's preparation for preservice teachers. The lab was used to provide preservice teachers with experience in classroom management. Candidates would receive behavioral challenges within a continuum of five levels, with the fifth level representing the most disruptive behavior from the avatars. Challenges included avatars who called out verbal challenges, such as "Why do we have to learn this?" as well as avatars who were disengaged, almost asleep in class. For this study, we employed the lab for a somewhat different purpose. We recognized the kinds of diversity in terms not only of ethnicity and race but behaviors and temperaments. Our candidates were mostly experienced classroom teachers, and we were not concerned as much with their ability to "manage behaviors" but wanted to offer a realistic experience of talking with an unfamiliar and diverse audience. We provided the avatars, who were remotely controlled by actors from the University of Central Florida, with a copy of the assignment and the following instructions to keep in mind during the simulation: "We would like some challenge and reaction from the avatars (level 2) that reflects their cultural differences (and may manifest as behavioral challenges) but would like the candidates to complete their booktalks receiving honest feedback (both positive and negative)." On the day of the booktalks, candidates took turns presenting their booktalks in the Teach-Live Lab. The technician operating the lab strictly enforced the five-minute limit. All booktalks were videotaped to facilitate grading the assignment. Only the booktalks from participants who had signed consent forms were transcribed by the graduate research assistants (GRAs). The "interactors" or actors who operated the avatars also provided signed consent to permit videotaping.

Following the experience, students met in focus groups with one of the GRAs. GRAs led a discussion using the following questions: 1) How did it go? 2) Which student [avatar] seemed to particularly respond to the book? 3) Did anything surprise you about the experience? and 4) Is

there anything about the experience that you'd like to add? GRAs recorded detailed field notes from each session. A decision was made not to record or transcribe these debriefing meetings because we believed candidates would be more honest and forthcoming if they were not recorded.

After the on-campus visit, candidates returned to the online class assignments. The post book-talk assignment required candidates to read an article by Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995) considered a seminal work in the area of culturally relevant pedagogy, and candidates were asked to reflect on the article and the experience on their group's Blackboard discussion board. This discussion employed a threaded discussion rather than real-time chat in order to facilitate the composition of more reflective responses to the following prompts: 1) What does Ladson-Billings mean by "culturally relevant pedagogy?" 2) How does this article relate to your booktalks? 3) How would you incorporate Ladson-Billings' CRP if you were to repeat the booktalks to the same audience? 4) What has been your major take-away from this experience? Candidates posted an initial response to each question and then returned to respond to every other member of their group. These responses were collected by the GRAs as one of the data sources.

Grades for the assignment and the final course grades were posted before the faculty members analyzed the data in order to avoid a conflict of interest and to preserve participant anonymity. The two faculty members were unaware of which candidates had consented to be members of the study. Consent forms and the four data sources were handled by the GRAs. The four data sources - pre-booktalk chats, transcribed booktalk videotapes, debriefing focus group field notes, and the post-booktalk discussion forums - were scrubbed of any mention of non-consenting candidates and pseudonyms were assigned to consenting participants. As a part of the consent form process, participants were asked to provide some demographic information and this information was connected with the appropriate pseudonym.

Eight candidates consented to participate, but one withdrew from the course, so seven participants remained. All participants were female. One, Emily, was African-American, and others identified themselves as either "Caucasian or "European American." Two participants, Jessica and Kristy, were between 18 and 24 years old. Olivia was between 25 and 35 years old. The remaining four participants, Samantha, Camilla, Emily, and Abby, were between 36 and 47 years old. Participants provided some information about the demographics of their school systems; this information was self-reported and varied in specificity. Samantha offered the most detailed and seemingly diverse context: "53% are Caucasian, 24% are African American, 9.3% are Hispanic/Latino, 5.6% are Asian, 0.5% Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, 0.3% American Indian/Alaska Native, and 7.5% multiracial." Camilla and Jessica identified their school systems as mostly Caucasian, and Abby stated her school system was 75% Caucasian. Kristy was not currently employed in a school system, and Olivia did not include this information on her consent form. Emily described her school system as "suburban and mixed race."

Data Analysis

Transcriptions were placed in Excel spreadsheets with a separate tab for each source.
The research team met as pairs consisting of a faculty member and a GRA to begin the analysis. Each pair looked at the three data sources: pre-booktalk chat, debriefing field notes, and post-booktalk chats and attempted to assign codes based on the research questions for response to the Teach-Live simulation, opportunities, challenges, and cultural references. Statements by the candidates from these data sources served as the unit of analysis.
Following this exercise the entire team met to discuss and compare findings. The team realized that the data coded for culture was usually double coded as an opportunity or a challenge.

Additionally, the significant amount of data coded as cultural required another framework for further analysis of this code. We were familiar with the Banks and McGee Banks (2010) framework for multicultural activities but found Nieto's (2010) framework for multicultural schools more compatible with school or library pedagogy and practice. Table 1 shows the Nieto (2010) framework as we applied to the analysis.

Table 1. Nieto's (2010) Framework for Multicultural Schools

Level	Definition
Monocultural	Dominant culture taken for granted, "color blind" – see no differences in students and treat everyone the same. Low performing students considered "lazy and disruptive." Topics such as racism, sexism, and homophobia considered "dangerous." Not one of Nieto's official levels but indicates an absence of multiculturalism (pp. 249-51).
Tolerance	Ultimate goal is assimilation of difference, additive approach with activities related to other cultures added to the curriculum. Differences are acknowledged and it's the teacher's job to be sensitive (pp. 251-253).
Acceptance	More literature and information about other cultures is included. Instead of a melting pot, diversity is viewed as a salad bowl that views students as each bringing something special (pp. 253-255).
Respect	Admiration and high esteem for diversity. Literature by its very nature considered multicultural. It's safe to talk about "crucial role of labor in US history" and "part played by African Americans in freeing themselves from bondage." Parents and community members invited to classes (pp. 255-257).
Affirmation, Solidarity, Critique	Differences that students and families bring are embraced, accepted and extended. Takes an active (inquiry) stance toward culture and challenging the status quo because learning at this level is deeply rooted in equity and social justice. Considers fundamental issues of living with difference that might be areas of struggle, conflict or pain. Approach to literature would include questions of who wrote this book, who's missing in the story, why – point of view. Multicultural literature is not separate from literature because all literature is multicultural. No topic is taboo as long as approach is respectful. All students can learn (pp. 257-261).

The post-booktalk chats were the first analyzed with this framework because the team determined that these chats were the lengthiest and most applicable of the data sources. At this point, participants had been introduced to the concept of culturally relevant pedagogy and were able to respond in a more holistic and reflective manner. The team met together to discuss and code each line from the chat based on the Nieto (2010) framework. When there was disagreement, the team discussed each person's perceptions and personal experiences to substantiate a contested code. Then, the researchers would vote on the contested code until there was unanimous agreement. For example, when Abby said, "It is so important for students to feel valued and an easy way to accomplish this is to be respectful to your students and their parents/guardians" the team was torn between level two (Tolerance) and level four (Respect) because on one hand, Abby is using the terminology of "respect;" however, as one of the team members pointed out, this statement actually represents a statement commensurate with the Tolerance level because while the importance of valuing students is widely accepted; it is not as "easy" as simply being respectful to them and their families. Team members then used a shared understanding of the Nieto (2010) codes to revisit the pre-booktalk chats and debriefing field notes to look for and code other examples of cultural references.

Data analysis for the purpose of this paper focused on the post-booktalk field notes and online chats. The transcripts of the actual booktalks were only used to understand the context of participant comments.

Findings

The Teach-Live Lab

The Teach-Live Lab was a unique setting for the candidates and the researchers. Candidates faced a screen projecting images of a classroom with the five avatars that were depicted as full-bodied, somewhat realistic-looking middle school students (11-14 years old). The movements and speech of the avatars were real-time reactions to participants' booktalks. Much of the discussion in the debriefing focus groups honed in on the lab experience, the avatars, interactions with the avatars, and what were perceived as problems with classroom management. One student expressed nervousness with the setting (Samantha), and another said it was not authentic (Emily). Abby, on the contrary, said it was very comfortable because she was not in a room full of people. Several students contrasted the experience with interacting with "real students" and wondered how it would have been different to booktalk to diverse middle school students in person. While the students were told ahead of time that they would be giving their booktalks to avatars, they did not know what to expect. Kristy said she didn't anticipate full-bodied avatars; she expected them to be faces and not full bodies. Others talked about the jerky movements, as Abby said, she thought there might be a "*glitch or something with the program*" and found their movements distracting. Samantha, on the other hand, commented that she did not engage with the avatars because of a lack of movement. One student commented on the lack of eye contact. Olivia said the "*technology of the avatars weirded me out*" and "*The avatars themselves really surprised me because their arms were just hanging there and it didn't seem very authentic*." Emily expressed, "*I actually liked the avatars*."

Many students remarked about the five-minute time limit as a constraint and wished they had had more time. While they were instructed to booktalk three books, most reported that they only got through one of their planned booktalks. Emily seemed to expect better behavior toward a "special speaker." Several of the students compared the experience to a classroom. As Abby said, "*I think I would have had more control in a classroom environment where I would have asked the audience to hold all questions and comments until after the talk*". Kristy yearned for a "*traditional classroom set-up.*" This reflects the general difficulty that our students, who are classroom teachers, have in making the transition toward becoming school librarians where they may only have five minutes and may not know the students.

Levels of Multiculturalism. The preservice librarians in this study provided rich conversation in the online discussion following the booktalking experience. The data from these discussions was coded using Nieto's model of four levels of support for multicultural education with an additional level of "monocultural" which fails to acknowledge diversity in schools. Nieto makes the point that these levels are not static or discrete but dynamic and interactive (p. 249). In Nieto's words, "this model can assist us in determining how particular school policies and practices need to change in order to embrace the diversity of our students and their communities" (p. 249). In terms of this study, the hope was that Nieto's (2010) model would assist us in developing a continuum for considering how library practices such as booktalking might promote and support diversity. Findings are presented according to the Nieto (2010) levels as described in Table 1.

Monocultural. Nieto described a monocultural school as one where the dominant culture's centric position is taken for granted in practices, pedagogy, materials, and curriculum. Monocultural comments were present in some of the participants' responses, particularly those that treated

cultural differences as monolithic or generalizable to all members of a culture. Some remarks suggested that the families and cultures of diverse students were deficient compared to the candidates themselves, "*When education is neither stressed nor valued in the home, it makes our job that much harder*" (Abby). Abby even went so far as to suggest a more monocultural society would be more desirable, "*Maybe it would be better to be a country like Italy or somewhere that is not as diverse. Sometimes I wonder if by trying to be the so-called 'Jack of all cultures,' we are the master of none.*"

Camilla also suggested that her booktalk choice was "*a perfect example of how important an education is, how it can change your life/circumstances in a powerful way and also that everyone, if they have the discipline, can do it.*" This is characteristic of seeing lower social class as a personal choice rather than as a result of systemic inequalities and limited opportunities for advancement. We considered her comment "monocultural" because underlying Camilla's statement was the assumption that all people (regardless of sociocultural identity) have an equal opportunity for attaining an education. In reality, membership in different ethnic, racial, or class groups bears a strong relationship to one's ability to attain an education (e.g., Kozol, 2005), yet Camilla's comment suggested her belief in a level educational playing field. Camilla was viewing educational opportunity from the perspective of the dominant culture and was not considering educational opportunity from the perspective of groups that have faced social, political, and educational oppression. Hence, her remark represented a monocultural view.

The participants treated the students' behaviors as disruptive problems related to classroom management rather than cultural differences. Emily suggested these students shouldn't be "coddled." There were few direct references to the library at this level except for Camilla who suggested, "*As a librarian I would love to be able to offer them great worlds to escape to through great books!*" Participants seemed empathetic toward the difficult home lives and neighborhood conditions of their students, but they did not position themselves as activists working for these students who live in, as Camilla said, "*homes barely shelter* [sic] *from the elements with tar paper for windows*" and neighborhoods where "*prostitutes and drug dealers did not even try to hide on the corners*".

Tolerance. Tolerance, which focuses on assimilation, was coded as the second level although in Nieto's (2010) framework, it is the first level of a multicultural school. At the level of tolerance, the teacher's role is to be aware of cultural differences, and to attempt to be sensitive to the differences of culture. In the classrooms of this study, a common strategy was to add activities or resources to be inclusive of all cultures, which one of the participants (Abby) referred to when she described "*a country like ours that is such a huge melting pot*".

The majority of coded responses from participants fell into the category of tolerance. Some of the behaviors included adding materials to the collection, such as Camilla's plan to buy more materials, since she had "*see[n] the black and white numbers of the racial makeup of the school.*" Olivia even defined this level in her statement of her learning: "*think about all of the students: gender, race, and interests when making selections.*"

The preservice librarians acknowledged the differences or otherness in the diverse students and suggested it was their role to be sensitive and in doing so demonstrate their respect. For instance, Camilla noted "*How a teachers* [sic] *speaks and treats a student of a race other than her own speaks volumes.*" Jessica said that she "*liked the idea of celebrating different cultures.*" Olivia was more cautious in her approach to students, noting the need to "*encourage the students, not upset them.*" Kristy saw tolerance as her goal, stating, "*Instead of making a general booktalk that will speak to the mainstream, the booktalk should include more about the cultures present in the room.*"

Additionally, the preservice librarians made statements that demonstrated diverse students were very different from them. Olivia said, "*I always think I am failing as a teacher because I haven't found the perfect lesson plan to reach my diverse population*." Engaging the diverse students on a superficial level was viewed as a best practice in an effort to avoid difficult conversations or socially uncomfortable situations. At least one school district reinforced this difference, as Abby noted: "*My school put all of us new hires in a van and drove us around to every neighborhood and housing complex we draw from so we could see where our students lived*." That difference was also stressed in recognition that even language is a form of diversity, such as Camilla's comment that "*if you become frustrated with their accents or prior knowledge they feel devalued*." Jessica saw this difference as an educational goal, noting that "*Even if you have a school that is not extremely diverse, it will be important to teach them lessons about diversity now so that they will be prepared when they are in diverse situations*." For many of our participants and for many schools, Nieto's (2010) level of tolerance is considered to be "multicultural."

Acceptance. At the level of "acceptance," cultural diversity is acknowledged rather than marginalized (Nieto, 2010, p. 253). The school curriculum reflects cultural pluralism and the educational setting is less a "melting pot" and more a "salad bowl" where cultural differences are visible and distinct (Nieto, 2010, p. 255). The post-booktalk remarks coded at this level demonstrated an emerging understanding of multicultural education and culturally relevant practices. For instance, Camilla spoke about making explicit connections between the characters in her selected books (*A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier* and *A Girl in Translation*) and the students in the audience:

> *If I were to repeat my booktalks to the same audience I would structure the talk to hit on Ladson-Billings' [1995] three points in a concise manner, taking time at the end to relate the main characters to the students in the audience.*

Similarly, Jessica indicated the importance of knowing about students' backgrounds and culture in order to practice cultural relevance: "*First of all, in order to use the idea of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy, I have to know something about the culture of the students.*" Olivia also discussed cultural relevance as knowing students and building relationships with them: "*…it is about relationships and understanding the students.*" Camilla, Jessica, and Olivia demonstrated their awareness that cultural relevance begins with acknowledging and accepting cultural differences.

Samantha made the connection between culturally relevant pedagogy as described by Ladson-Billings (1995) and her future role and practice as a school librarian. Samantha described what she planned to do as a librarian to show her acceptance and understanding of cultural diversity among her students:

> *To me, as a librarian, I need to ensure academic success with my population by finding relevant, high-interest, on reading level books and creating lessons that bring about success for students of all ethnicities. I need to allow students to embrace their cultural identity within my library and class settings and create lessons and find books that embrace their culture.*

She also spoke of doing "*a community scan and a collection scan to find the multi-cultural holes in our collection*" when she returned to her school in the fall. Though Samantha had ideas for what culturally relevant practices would look like in her library, her ideas were still ambiguous and emerging.

Respect. "Respect" was the next level identified by Nieto (2010, p. 256). At this level, cultural differences are highly valued and approached in a positive, respectful manner. The students and

their cultural identities shape school practices and curriculum. Schools and educators operating at this level believe all children can learn regardless of how they might be labeled elsewhere (e.g., special education, English language learner).

Compared to the lower levels previously described, there were fewer remarks by the preservice librarians coded at level four. Some of these remarks addressed the inclusion of students' families and community members in the school library's programming. Olivia mentioned that educators should develop relationships with students, their parents, and members of the community. Jessica spoke in more detail about the need for involving the community in the library as a way of demonstrating cultural relevance, especially in situations where she may be less familiar with the cultural backgrounds of her students:

> *It was hard to make it culturally relevant when, again, I knew almost nothing about their culture. The article [by Ladson-Billings] suggests becoming a fixture in the community and being active there so that you can truly learn about their culture, and they can see you as a member of their community. In a similar situation [like the booktalk with the avatars] where I knew absolutely nothing about the kids, I might have invited a parent or community guest in to give them someone to identify with and to help me relate to them and them to relate to me.*

Jessica's comments recognized that her own culture likely differed from that of her students. This realization was not a challenge but an opportunity for learning since she had ideas in mind for addressing her lack of knowledge. Several other comments noted the importance of using the library to empower students. Camilla saw her book choices as powerful in terms of their ability to help her future students exercise agency in trying situations:

> *These stories were inspirational and meant to show students that no matter what your personal circumstances are, you can be in control of your life and have the ability to change your circumstances if you have the personal strength to do so.*

Here, Camilla recognized that students may face a multiplicity of challenges and "personal circumstances," yet she expressed her faith in students' abilities to rise to these challenges if they draw from a store of personal strength. After reading the Ladson-Billings (1995) article, Jessica spoke of the librarian's role as a provider of "*encouragement and empowerment to know [students] can succeed,*" while Samantha commented that "*learning is so much more powerful when kids take responsibility for it, rather than us directing them.*" This belief in empowering students relates to Nieto's (2010) belief in the success of all students as an indicator of the level of "respect" (p. 256).

 Further, remarks coded at the level of respect alluded to the need for showing students how to challenge oppressive stereotypes about cultural groups. Samantha commented, "*I think dispelling myths and stereotypes in literature is so very important, and the younger the better.*" Samantha's statement was in line with Nieto's (2010) discussion of honesty in the school curriculum – sensitive topics ought to be addressed rather than avoided. Jessica extended this idea by acknowledging that educators should be aware of their own presumptions and biases about cultural groups: "*It is very unfair and stereotypical* [sic] *to say that since they were black their culture was exactly this way or because they were Latino their culture was another way.*" In sum, the preservice librarians operating at this level recognized the importance of empowering students, reaching out to the community, and being transparent about the existence of issues like racism and stereotyping.

Affirmation, solidarity and critique. Using Nieto's (2010) multiculturalism framework, the level of affirmation, solidarity and critique is commensurate with an affirmation of cultural, ethnic, racial, and gender differences. Specifically, differences that students and families bring are

embraced, accepted and extended. Educators take an active and inquiry stance toward culture and consider social injustices as areas of conflict or pain that must be addressed. A librarian's approach to literature would include questions of "who wrote this book, who's missing in the story and why," and "what is the point of view of the characters?" Topics such as racism, sexism, and classism are not taboo because the librarian broaches these topics through the literature in a respectful way that causes students to reflect about their experiences, their perspectives, and their pain in an effort to promote inquiry into their own experiences as well as those of others who might be different from them.

        Librarians who embrace this level of multiculturalism demonstrate an understanding that culture is not a fixed construct but one subject to on-going critique. The preservice librarians who worked in this dimension understood that students must work together, struggle, and experience some discomfort in facing the differences that others have. Specifically, Abby discussed how literature can empower students to "*make decisions and providing the opportunity to look critically at issues concerning them personally and the world in general, and help them overcome difficult circumstances.*" Camilla suggested:

> *I believe there is as much to learn (if not more) from characters that make the wrong choices as those that make the right ones. I would not be surprised if many students have not had personal experience with gangs (I know they have quite a presence here) and it would be interesting to hear their stories and discuss alternate paths Yummy might have taken than the one that ultimately led to his death.*

Samantha specifically identified critical consciousness and is able to connect this aspect of culturally relevant pedagogy with booktalking:

> *Many of the books also had characters that challenged the status quo and reading them would allow students to have what she calls critical consciousness. My goal with my book selections was to bring forth books that challenged stereotypes for different ethnicities, that made students think about different cultures and to not judge a person by their ethnic cover. If I did it again, I'd focus more on that and also show them the importance of cultural identity in the books and how the books make you think about your place in the sociopolitical arena that we live in today.*

As these findings illustrate, the statements from participants fell into the full continuum of Nieto's (2010) levels of multiculturalism. While some of their responses remained at the lower levels of "monocultural" and "tolerance," it was evident their consideration of culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995) prompted reflection and plans for future practice. Next, we turn to participants' perspectives on booktalking in a simulated classroom setting.

Discussion

In this study, we explored 1) candidates' perceptions of multicultural booktalking before and after a mixed reality simulation experience and 2) the efficacy of a mixed reality simulation for teaching culturally relevant pedagogy. To address our first research question regarding candidates' perceptions, we found candidates focused solely on the selection of literature and ensuring that books met the terms of the assignment prior to the booktalk. This lack of attention to the booktalking process carried through to the post-book talk when some participants characterized the students as disrespectful and disruptive. Problems with the booktalking experience were often blamed on the behavior of the avatars rather than the preparedness of the candidates themselves.

        The findings of this study revealed several challenges and opportunities presented by the booktalking experience and they related to becoming culturally relevant educators, becoming school librarians, and responses to the setting of the Teach-Live Lab. A major challenge faced by

the group was the lack of their ability to get through their list of books in the face of an active audience. Few of the participants were able to get past their first book. Almost all of the participants failed to note that as a problem, and those that did attributed it to the behavior of the students. They did not feel in control of the booktalking experience, and in some cases were over-cautious about leading the group to new books. They referred back to their experiences as classroom teachers frequently, noting instances in which they would not have tolerated the behavior of the avatars or in which they would have broadened the experience to be more instructional. That school librarians frequently address students whom they do not know, are expected to deliver instruction in unfamiliar classrooms, and that with very little time to delve into complex issues with students was not mentioned.

Participants blamed the technology for some of their challenges in the booktalks. They reported finding the avatars distracting and were unable to determine the connection between the avatars and actual students. On the other hand, in reviewing the post-booktalk chats and field notes, participants were much more open about describing the behavior of individual avatars than they might have been of individual students. The perceived unreality of the setting allowed them to discuss their struggles with differences and stereotypes in a forthright and candid manner.

In response to our second research question about the possibility of utilizing mixed reality simulations for promoting culturally relevant pedagogy, we found nearly all of the participants reported awareness of the need for school library collections to have multicultural resources that matched the makeup of the school. Several of them moved into Nieto's higher levels, noting that as future librarians they perceived they had an important responsibility to show acceptance and understanding of all cultures, of using the library collection to dispel myths and stereotypes, and to work with literature to spark conversations that critique their culture and those of others.

Conclusion

In outlining four levels of multicultural education in schools and contrasting these with a "monocultural" level that does not consider diversity, Nieto (2010) urges educators to envision ideals of "diversity, equity, and high levels of learning" (p. 261). She suggests that the scenarios she provides for each level are attainable because pieces of each level exist in our schools today. In the same way, we saw aspects of each level in our participants. They drew from the assignments in the class, the readings, and their experiences booktalking to avatars to construct frank conversations about poverty, race, and culture experienced in their classrooms and our society. Their shared experience of the Teach-Live Lab provided a common ground for these discussions. While many participants critiqued the animation of the avatars as distracting and the misbehaviors of the avatars as challenging, the experience nevertheless provoked thoughtful reflection about culturally relevant pedagogy.

Limitations and Future Implications

This was a limited case study with only seven participants and employed a technology of avatars and a Teach-Live Lab that may not be widely available. We recognize that the study cannot be generalized to other settings or other participants. This was an exploratory study and we anticipate the need for further research both into the technology and into the important issue of culturally relevant school librarianship.

Since participants reported the avatars were unrealistic and not representative of real students, it would be interesting to explore whether more realistic, human-like avatars would result in more positive perceptions of the simulation experience. Further, future research could

investigate whether less stereotypical portrayals of racially diverse students would alter the perceptions that preservice librarians have about booktalking to a multicultural audience. If this research direction is taken, it would be important for the actors portraying student avatars to have thorough training in order to effectively convey a message that is replete with positive affirmations of students of diverse cultures and ethnicities.

We chose the Nieto (2010) framework to make sense of the vast amount of cultural references we found in the candidate responses. The application of this framework and our findings now cause us to wonder if the framework might be used to develop a continuum of culturally relevant practices for school librarians. Most participants made connections with selection criteria and collection development. Some mentioned displays and other features of the school library facility. At the levels of respect, participants saw the need for the school librarian to reach out to families and the community and build those connections for students, which seems to be commensurate with Kumasi and Hill's (2013) identification of the socio-cultural disposition, which recognizes that a librarian's cultural competence is not about knowledge acquisition or service to students in diverse cultures, but it calls for having "authentic interactions" within "the contexts of their daily lives" (p. 137). We were especially encouraged by the responses at the level of affirmation, solidarity, and critique such as Samantha's statement:

> *If I did it again, I'd focus more on that and also show them the importance of cultural identity in the books and how the books make you think about your place in the sociopolitical arena that we live in today.*

This highest level of multicultural practice has a particular resonance with the school library profession's *Standards for the 21st Century Learner* (AASL, 2007) including the first standard that learners will "inquire, think critically, and gain knowledge." Samantha's comments suggest a glimpse at how even a five-minute booktalk might accomplish this. Thus, school librarians working at this highest level is the ideal where structural inequalities are challenged, but as Honma (2005) suggests, much work needs to be done to move America's school libraries from the "unquestioned system of white normativity and liberal multiculturalism" (p.1) toward truly helping educators and students confront the societal injustices perpetuated by the status quo.

School librarians serve everyone in a school community. The library profession has standards that promote the kinds of inquiry found in Nieto's (2010) highest levels of critique. More importantly, school librarians have a unique perspective regarding the intersection of social justice and literacy because they see the big picture inclusive of the whole school, the whole curriculum, and the whole child. They have much to offer a school seeking to advance toward the more transformative and emancipatory pedagogies described by Ladson-Billings (1995), Nieto (2010), Sleeter (2011a; 2011b), and Banks and McGee Banks (2010). In this paper we seek to demonstrate a unique strategy for introducing culturally relevant pedagogy into the preparation of school librarians. The mixed reality medium is an innovative setting for educators to safely practice genuine sociopolitical teaching to increase student learning and encourage preservice candidates to address human rights and social injustices in classrooms and school libraries around the world.

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