Cultivating Critical Consciousness in Special Educators: A Conceptual Framework for Understanding Latinx Teacher Candidates' Critical Consciousness

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> So, for me, I came here [at 9] speaking Spanish. So, Spanish is my native language. Once I got here it was like everything was, you need to learn English! But I felt like, "You're taking away [my] roots."
>
> -Gabi, 20, Preservice Special Education Teacher

In this quote, Gabi, a participant in this study, points out how English-only instruction and policies in K-12 schools impacted her educational trajectory, as has been documented with other multilingual youth (de Jong, 2013). As a Puerto Rican who migrated to the mainland at age 8, Gabi experienced first-hand how her linguistic and cultural "roots" were considered liabilities rather than assets through the mislabeling of her bilingual language development as a disability (Gomez et al., 2008). While studies have shown that when students receive instruction from teachers with congruent racial and ethnic backgrounds, even for one year of their PK-12 experience, academic achievement and graduation rates improve (Bristol, & Martin-Fernandez, 2019; Ford, 2012; Gershenson et al., 2016; Egalite et al., 2015), being a same-race and/or same-language teacher does not necessarily ensure teachers of color are equipped with the knowledge and skills to "critique the cultural norms, values, mores, and institutions that produce and maintain social inequities" (Jackson et al., 2021; Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 162). There is limited attention to how special education teacher preparation programs, with predominantly White faculty can effectively incorporate their teacher candidates' lived experiences and foster the

development of Latinx teacher candidates' critical consciousness who represent diverse regional,

linguistic, and cultural heritages themselves (Gomez et al., 2008;). To prepare teachers with

critical consciousness recognizes that for teachers "knowing who they are as people,

understanding the contexts in which they teach, and questioning their knowledge and

assumptions are as important as the mastery of techniques for instructional effectiveness" (Gay

& Kirkland, 2003, p. 181).

Recognizing our positionality as White faculty and doctoral students, we sought to

disrupt patterns of microagressions and centering of "Whiteness" (Boveda, 2019; Sleeter, 2017)

within our program through incorporating the experiential knowledge and skills Latinx teacher

candidates bring (Nevaréz, 2022). With this goal in mind, we interviewed the Latinx teacher

candidates in one cohort to understand how their lived experiences might contribute to

developing critical consciousness. For the remainder of this article "Latino/a/x" will be used in

order to recognize our study participants' geographic origins and where "x" consciously

acknowledges gendered/genderless identifying persons and provides an inclusive, all-

encompassing term that does not make presumptions about the gender identity of any participant

(Vidal-Ortiz & Martínez, 2018).

Literature Review

When educational professionals commit to "critical consciousness," they seek to perceive

the social, political, and economic inequities present in society, engage in dialogue, and

ultimately advocate for change (Palmer et al., 2019). Scholars of teacher preparation for

culturally and linguistically diverse students have presented a variety of angles on preparing the

predominantly White teaching workforce for an increasingly multilingual and multiethnic

student population, a divide even more significant within the population of students with

disabilities (Bettini, 2018). As Ladson-Billings (2014, p. 77) explains, this is a "rEvolving", ever improving process of refining and strengthening teacher preparation to be evermore inclusive of and relevant to all cultural groups. As we reviewed the literature, we sought to apply a framework that would recognize the positionality of our Latinx teacher candidates and their future students. We found models that addressed culture, race, language, and calls for frameworks addressing intersectionality with disability. Through this process of synthesizing the theories and conceptual models emerged a multidimensional framework "rEvolving" the construct of critical consciousness, its connections to Linguistically Responsive Pedagogy (LRP) and Culturally Relevant Teaching (CRT), and forming a framework inclusive of the intersectionality of disability with other identity markers. We refer to this framework as the Cultivating Critical Consciousness in Educators (CCCE) framework which was also adopted and further developed in the primary authors' dissertation study (Broughton, 2019). In this section, we unpack the layers of the CCCE framework that informed the study design, data analysis and interpretation of the findings.

Cultivating Critical Consciousness in Educators (CCCE) Framework

The CCCE combines salient features of several conceptual models on preparing teachers with culturally, linguistically responsive pedagogies to form a comprehensible framework for understanding the beliefs and practices essential for educators to practice critical consciousness. Figure 1 illustrates the CCCE framework's integration of three constructs; 1) conscientização, the process of developing critical consciousness, (Carlson et al., 2006; del Carmén Salazar, 2013; Freire, 1970; King, 1991; Watts et al., 2011), 2) the interdependent relationship of knowledge and practice for cultivating transformative teacher learning (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; 2015), 3) the "[r]evolving" (Ladson-Billings, 2014, p. 77) tenets of culturally relevant,

sustaining, humanizing and linguistically responsive pedagogies (Gay, 2010a, 2018; del Carmen Salazar, 2013; Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2014; Lucas et al., 2018; Paris, 2012; Lucas & Villegas, 2010, 2013), and 4) an intersectional lens on students with disabilities who also identify as bi/multilingual students from culturally diverse backgrounds (Artiles et al., 2016; García & Ortiz, 2013).

<p style="text-align: center;">**<Insert Figure 1 about here>**</p>

Conscientização

Renowned Brazilian educational philosopher, Paulo Freire (1970) asserted the role of a teacher is to educate students on the systems of oppression impacting their lives and to take critical action to dismantle these systems. Freire recognized that in order for teachers to lead their students, they must make an ongoing commitment to becoming aware, or conscientização, of the sociopolitical dynamics of "what is taught, how, and to whom" (Gay & Kirkland, 2003 p. 181).

Several scholars have called attention to what is not critical consciousness and the possible stages for describing this process of becoming. King (1991) described the antithesis of critical consciousness as dysconsciousness or "an uncritical habit of mind that justifies inequality and exploitation by accepting the existing order of things as given" (p. 135). The phases of critical consciousness can be described on a continuum from dysconsciousness to critical consciousness. Dysconsciousness is characterized by passive adaptation, where one accepts the existing order of things as given. Carlson et al. (2006) designed a community-based participatory action research study which engaged community members in documenting health concerns in their African American community. Using the frame of critical consciousness, the authors found participants' development occurred on a continuum from dysconsciousness into emerging consciousness, growth along the continuum was facilitated by emotional engagement with the

issue and cognitive dissonance. Emotional engagement involved awareness of and exposure to societal inequities evoking emotions of despair, anger, and feelings of connection to the oppressed. However, this did not lead to questioning the status quo and taking critical action. Through a growing recognition of one's complicity in the social reality and even perpetuating issues of inequality in society, community members experienced cognitive dissonance leading to developing deeper critical consciousness and an intention to act. For teachers of color who have been enculturated into "whiteness", cognitive awareness also must involve "decolonizing the mind" through reviewing the ways systemic oppression and internalized racism has impacted their personal and educational journeys (Jackson et al., 2021, p. 294).

Tenets of Culturally Sustaining and Linguistically Responsive Pedagogies

In the decades since Freire (1970) presented critical consciousness as a dialogic approach between teacher and student, several pedagogical frameworks have proposed important components to bridging the cultural mismatch between teachers and students; such as Culturally Relevant, Sustaining Pedagogy (CRP) (Gay, 2010b; Ladson-Billings, 2014) and Linguistically Responsive Pedagogy (LRP) (Lucas & Villegas, 2013). The parallel components across these approaches can be summarized into three complementary strands; the Self, the Other, and Sociopolitical Dynamics. CRP focuses on teaching diverse students more comprehensively through "validation, comprehensive approaches, multidimensionality, empowerment, transformation, and emancipation" (Gay, 2010b, p. 29). CRP encourages educators to acknowledge and minimize deficit thinking regarding the academic abilities of diverse learners (Valencia, 2012). LRP centers the linguistic needs of emergent bilingual students. Lucas and Villegas (2013) identify two important areas of understanding that teachers need to effectively address these students' second language acquisition: "(a) an understanding that language,

culture, and identity are deeply interconnected; and (b) an awareness of the sociopolitical dimensions of language use and language education" (p. 102). Therefore, both CRP and LRP emphasize teachers' development of a critical awareness of the sociopolitical dynamics surrounding education and a willingness to take emancipatory action to address systemic inequities and the continued marginalization experienced by Black, Latino/a/x, other students of color and bi/multilingual students.

Intersectional Lens

García & Ortiz (2013) emphasized the importance of developing conceptual models that encourage researchers and educators to look beyond the main effects of any particular social identity category and seek to understand the multidimensionality of teacher and student identities. Responding to this call, the CCCE framework names and requires an intersectional lens throughout.

Across the domain of teacher dispositions and beliefs, we use intersectionality as a critical lens to delineate the complex ways identities may interact to privilege or disadvantage and marginalize a teacher or student within educational environments. First, for teachers, knowledge of self includes a well-developed sociocultural identity inclusive of the intersections of dis/ability with gender, race, ethnicity and linguistic background. For students, knowledge of the Other calls on teachers to center the effects of multiple identity markers to understand students' unique and dynamic experiences, funds of knowledge. Therefore discouraging "stereotyping, marginalization, misrepresentation and disempowerment" through making within-group variations visible (García & Ortiz, 2013, p. 35). Furthermore, knowledge of sociopolitical dynamics highlights how teachers' beliefs must be informed of the ways "the institution's response to [students' identities]-or its failure to respond" may contribute to magnifying

marginalization or privilege within schools and the classroom. The reciprocal relationship of beliefs and practice is reflected in the three areas of implementing culturally and linguistically responsive practice. Each strand also reflects scholars' calls for taking an intersectional lens into pedagogical practices, building rapport with students and families, and advocating for systemic change.

To date, the majority of the literature on teacher preparation for cultural and linguistic diversity focuses primarily on examining White general educators' dispositions, beliefs, and pedagogical practices (Civitillo et al., 2018; Pettit, 2011; Sleeter & Owuor, 2011). There is nascent research into Special Educators' preparedness for teaching emergent bilingual students (Jozwik et al., 2020), which indicates low self-efficacy and emergent competency across in-service and pre-service teachers. In addition, there is little to inform the field on the beliefs of Latina/x special education teachers about the intersections of disability with language, gender and race (Boveda & Aronson, 2019). Therefore, this study seeks to contribute to the literature by centering an often invisible subpopulation of the special education teaching workforce to understand the experiences and beliefs of equally understudied and underserved students with disabilities from diverse backgrounds.

Through applying the CCCE framework, we explored how the lived experiences of three Latinx teacher candidates inform their beliefs about teaching practices. The following research question guided our study: *In what ways are Latina/x preservice special education teacher candidates developing critical consciousness in their personal and professional beliefs about disability, language, gender and race in one teacher preparation program?*

Methods

In this section, we describe the iterative research process that informed both the development of the CCCE Framework and its application to data analysis. This study originated due to annual program improvement data that consistently indicated our preservice special education teachers performed lower in areas of addressing issues of diversity in their knowledge and practice. Over the years, these data consistently demonstrated that our preservice teachers performed lower on program assessments related to cultural and linguistic diversity.

Although the vast majority of our preservice teachers are typically White and female, we began experiencing increased enrollment of Latin/o/a/x students the last few years. As a result, we became increasingly interested in understanding how we may support and incorporate their unique funds of knowledge that might contribute to our program. As faculty who identify as White and cisgender male and female, we recognized how our positionality might perpetuate a sense of "whiteness" (Boveda, Sleeter, 2017). Therefore, in this study, we interviewed all Latinx teacher candidates in the same special education preservice teacher cohort about their personal and professional beliefs about teaching diverse students with disabilities. We obtained Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval to ensure the protection of human subjects. This approval included obtaining participant consent using established IRB guidelines.

Participants

There were three Latinx teacher candidates within the cohort (24 teacher candidates) and they each consented to participate in this study. At the time of this study, Marissa was a 21-year-old originally from a mid-sized suburban town in a midwestern state. Her family heritage includes White, Mexican and Native American. Yessica, 20 years old, was from a second-generation Cuban family in a southeastern state. Yessica grew up in a diverse metropolitan area

in the same southeastern state where this study was conducted. Gabi, 20 years old, relocated to this southeastern state from Puerto Rico in elementary school and personally experienced classification as an EL and received English as a second language (ESOL) services.

Data Collection

We collected data during participants' third semester in the program (summer). At this time, teacher candidates engaged in an on-site class and practicum at a partnership school site (a public charter school for students with learning disabilities, autism spectrum disorders, ADHD, and intellectual disabilities) where faculty and teacher candidates ran a summer school experience for students with disabilities (i.e., students with specific learning disabilities, Autism Spectrum Disorder, ADHD, and other Developmental Disabilities) with support from school administration.

Since three out of four authors were instructors of record for the students during this study, the non-instructing author conducted the interviews to minimize the impact of power dynamics on students' responses. Interviews were conducted one-on-one using a semi-structured lasting approximately 45 minutes each. Prior to this study, the Personal and Professional Beliefs About Diversity (PPBAD; Pohan & Aguilar, 1999) questionnaire was administered to the entire cohort to which the three participants belonged. The semi-structured interview questions were developed to allow participants to elaborate on their survey responses as well as gain deeper understanding of their personal histories and formative experiences with different cultural groups in their personal lives and within educational experiences. For example, participants were asked to "describe personal experiences with people/students of color (i.e., experiences growing up in their communities and at school)." Flexible follow-up questions were designed to encourage participants to elaborate on their thinking.

Data Analysis

As a research team, we conducted a collaborative qualitative data analysis (Gibson & Brown, 2009) through an iterative process by three of the authors coding each interview individually. Initially, the three authors used a deductive coding process. Each of us read and re-read the interview transcripts line by line to allow themes to emerge related to participants' personal and professional beliefs, attitudes, and values about themselves, others, and the socio-political landscape informing their beliefs. After coding each interview individually, we entered a verification process through consolidating our codes using an inductive constant comparative method of reflection and exploration of the data to allow for patterns to emerge (Corbin & Strauss, 2014). During this collaborative analysis, the researchers shared their various notes, raised questions, and offered suggestions, limitations, insights and thoughts about the emerging themes and patterns. This resulted in a codebook illustrating the relationships between codes and the themes and subthemes/patterns that emerged. Two primary themes that emerged included *personal beliefs about diversity* and *professional practice beliefs about diversity.*

With respect to personal beliefs about diversity, codes aligned into the following categories or subthemes: *knowledge of self* (self-awareness of one's own beliefs), *knowledge of the Other* (factual and experiential understanding of other cultures, languages, and other groups outside one's inner circle), or *knowledge of sociopolitical dynamics* (understanding of how social, political, or economic structures influence one's development and access to educational opportunity). *With respect to* professional beliefs about practice, codes aligned into the following categories or subthemes d: *practice of teaching* (teacher articulates an understanding that one's beliefs, values, or attitudes influence instructional decisions and delivery), *practice of knowing the other* (knowledge of other cultures, languages, and other groups outside their inner circle to

build rapport and engage the students and families at their school), or *practice of advocacy* (takes critical, specific action against systemic inequities to actively advocate for individual and groups of students who have been historically marginalized in schools).

This process resulted in the authors conceptualizing a framework for understanding the critical consciousness of these Latinx preservice special education teachers. (i.e., the CCCE). Therefore, we used a deductive approach to re-examine the data using this framework for this purpose. This analysis allowed us to better understand how the three participants were situated along a continuum of critical consciousness. Within each strand, beliefs were represented along the continuum of critical consciousness. For example, dysconscious beliefs highlight how a participant was unaware that others do not hold the same beliefs (e.g., expressions of White benevolence, privilege, color blindness, etc.). Emergent consciousness included evidence of efforts to become informed or questioning of past beliefs, and emotional engagement with sociopolitical issues that perpetuate systemic inequities, but did not express an intention to act. Moreover, critical consciousness was highlighted by participants' awareness of their beliefs, attitudes, or values coupled with their ability to critically identify how social systems perpetuate forms of prejudice against others. This also includes efforts to become informed, evaluate past beliefs, and articulate specific actions that lead to change. By placing codes along this two-dimensional model, we were able to visually compare and contrast beliefs across participants (see figures 2, 3, and 4 under the Findings section).

In an effort to strengthen trustworthiness and credibility, we took multiple steps to enhance the quality of the analysis. Researcher triangulation, as a result of independent and collaborative analysis by the research team, enhanced the credibility and trustworthiness of the inquiry (Patton, 2015). To ensure the transcripts and findings accurately represented their beliefs

and ideas, we utilized member checks and participants' reading of interview transcripts and drafts of the findings. As a result, the findings provide a rich, in-depth illustration of the beliefs, experiences, and attitudes from the perspective of each teacher candidate.

Findings

The findings reported here informed our understanding of the continuum of critical consciousness represented across these three Latinx teacher candidates at one particular time in their journey to becoming special education teachers. We describe the overarching themes that emerged from interviews after analysis using the CCCE framework. Finally, summarizing with an illustration of each participants' responses along the continuum of critical consciousness.

Beliefs about the Self

Each participant varied in their process of conceptualizing themselves as cultural beings. Marissa self-identified as a quarter Native American, a quarter Mexican, but "mostly white." Throughout the interview, Marissa expressed contradictory concepts of self, acknowledging her Native American and Mexican heritage on her father's side, but identifying as White, explaining, "...technically, I'm one-fourth Mexican… On paper I look Latin, but I don't speak Spanish… I wish I could speak Spanish." In contrast, the other participants, whose families maintain their language and culture, aligned their sense of self with their familial, cultural heritage. For instance, Yessica described herself as closely tied to her parents' identity as Cuban immigrants. Though she identifies herself as Latina, she did not portray race or ethnicity as something that had a significant impact on her life, the lives of those around her, nor the development of her beliefs about diversity. On the other hand, Gabi expressed her concept of the Self as deeply impacted by language and culture. Coming from the perspective of someone living across two cultures (mainland America and Puerto Rico) and languages (Spanish and English), she was

conscious of the conflict between maintaining her Spanish language heritage while also acquiring the English language. She recognized that her roots were deeply embedded in her home language by saying, "I hold on to my culture a lot. That's what defines me so everything that we used to do over there I still do it here." But, she also expressed how she was pressured at school to acquire English and abandon Spanish. Gabi shared her frustration over the impact this educational approach had on her language skills, "I don't have a grip on both, on either one of them. So that kind of makes me feel like I'm missing a little bit of both." Additionally, Gabi recognized how her sense of self and her personal beliefs were unique to her family and not necessarily right or wrong.

Beliefs about the Other

The concept of "the Other" and "Othering" refers to an objectification of "people who are different than the Western White self" and viewed as "inferior" to one's norm group (Villenas, 1996, p.713). Beliefs are formed from experiential knowledge and this was evident in how each candidate supported their beliefs about people outside their personal identity circle. The candidates shared knowledge of particular groups and varying understandings of others. For example, their beliefs about the Other ranged from the inclusion of students with disabilities, to beliefs tied to racism towards people of color, to an indifference towards members of the LGBTQA+ community.

During the interview, Marissa specifically addressed her understanding of people with disabilities based on her first-hand observations of her brother who was identified on the Autism Spectrum. Additionally, she went through a process of unraveling her childhood attitudes of ambivalence and beliefs consistent with dysconscious racism, often uncomfortably, contrasting these with her present experiences. In reflection about her personal relationships with those

outside of her personal cultural and racial background, she tokenized experiences with a "Black

friend" and a "gay boss." She also displayed cognitive dissonance regarding use of stereotypic

language commonly used in her childhood community and the diverse community of the

university she was experiencing in the present.

> We knew...some guys that were popular sports guys at school. My mom called them the
>
> thugs, but not in a derogatory way. It sounds very derogatory when I'm saying it, but it
>
> wasn't in a derogatory way...it wasn't meant to be derogatory at all, which sounds like it is
>
> now.

As she reflected on her exposure to cultural and linguistic diversity, she expressed how the

"culture shock" of coming to a large urban university in a largely immigrant and Black

community caused her to realize her naivety growing up.

Yessica spoke to the experiences of immigrants based on her family immigrating from

Cuba. Yessica communicated inconsistencies across her personal and professional beliefs about

diversity by expressing both emotional engagement with students and communities from diverse

cultural and linguistic backgrounds, but also situated the onus for progress on members of

historically marginalized groups. Though positive, she expressed an assimilationist point of view

on immigration and language, Yessica derives the majority of knowledge of the Other from

interactions with members of her own family. She summed up her value and respect for others;

"I used to have a teacher in high school that would tell us that diversity is the spice of life. And I

think it would be a very boring world if everyone's the same."

Gabi shared knowledge across several diversity groups based on gender identity, religion,

linguistic differences, culture, and race emphasizing the importance of understanding the

uniqueness of each as well as the belief that individuals within these groups have their own

personalities and that broad generalizations and stereotypes should not be used to stigmatize the

Other. She emphasized the importance of mutual respect,

> As I grew up... we were so diverse so we were just accepting of everybody else...My
>
> parents told me this is how you behave around people. You respect them no matter what
>
> and this is how my culture is.

Beliefs about Sociopolitical Dynamics

The candidates' perspectives on the ways sociopolitical dynamics perpetuate systemic

oppression of non-dominant identity groups varied. Marissa seemed ambivalent about staying

current with politics. "I know what's happening in the world, but I'm very bad at actually keeping

up with it.... I'm in my sunshine land." She expressed the belief that her experiences and those of

others were not related to or influenced by the sociopolitical climate around her. When there was

national news of racial tensions and injustice, she remembers thinking, "What are you talking

about?" Throughout the interview, Marissa showed her uncertainty as she experienced cognitive

dissonance between her upbringing and what she was witnessing around her. She confessed that

she honestly thought, "I'd seen it all," but her recent experiences brought to her attention that "it

was very privileged-White back home." In the end she concluded, "I live in a little bubble."

Yessica's beliefs about sociopolitical dynamics focused on the topics of immigration,

economic opportunity, and linguistic assimilation, yet she presented dichotomous perspectives.

In terms of linguistic assimilation, she saw value in both English and Spanish languages for the

purposes of assimilation. She emphasized the importance of learning English over Spanish in

order to assimilate to American culture and to access economic opportunity. She explained,

"Obviously life is easier if they learn whatever the language is." However, in the next sentence

she expressed a personal inner conflict,

But I feel like there's so much cultural stuff tied to their language and so much

background tied to their language that losing that is kind of losing part of their identity...

And I don't think that placing a value of one over the other is really a good thing.

She also assumed a perspective that people living in poverty live in ignorance of opportunities

for social mobility such as attending college; it's "like a self-fulfilling prophecy...people might

think they can't do it" and "they don't know any better".

While Gabi touched on similar topics, she portrayed immigrants as hard workers often

motivated by economic necessity or security seeking "a better life, something different." In the

case of her family, "it was because my dad wanted something better for us than what we had."

She recognized the contributions immigrants bring to society, because of their motivation and

drive,

When you move to a place looking for better, you work better, you try your best, you

improve so much... and you're working hard, you're probably adding value...the results

could be great to not just yourself but everyone around you, even the country.

Gabi recognized that the immigrant experience in the United States is laced with opportunity

alongside oppressive, marginalizing systems that disenfranchise non-native English speakers. "I

came here speaking Spanish. And once I got here it was like everything was about how you need

to learn English." She went on to explain how being required to speak only English made it

appear like she knew nothing about academics, "I would just sit there and stare." Overall, she

highly valued bilingualism and acculturation over assimilation and schooling that emphasized

English-only acquisition.

In addition to understanding personal beliefs, we were interested in understanding how these beliefs informed each participants' perspectives on instructional planning, delivery, and engagement of students with disabilities and their families.

Beliefs about the Practice of Teaching

Culturally responsive pedagogy calls for schools and teachers to incorporate the cultural ways of being in communities of Color by including the dynamic ways students enact language, cultural practices, and racialized identities into the classroom norms (Gay, 2010b, del Carmén Salazar, 2013). The degree to which participants' spoke to this integration of students' funds of knowledge into instruction varied from superficial application to dynamic application (Esteban-Guitart & Moll, 2014; Kelly, 2006). Two participants (Marissa and Yessica) responded to how they considered their students' culture by sharing how they differentiated instruction using ability grouping, implemented evidence-based instructional strategies, and incorporated students' interest areas into the lesson. They both shared the belief that instructional strategies were more relevant than consideration of students' cultural backgrounds in addressing the learning needs of the students with disabilities in their classrooms.

Once again, Yessica offered conflicting beliefs. Initially, she explicitly dismissed the role culture could play in her instruction by saying, "I feel like that doesn't play any kind of role in their needs or in what I can do to help them." Instead, she emphasized the importance of content and pedagogy over students' cultural backgrounds in her previous experience as a bilingual aide since "they are all kind of learning the same thing and my lessons are all basically the same so in that sense, it doesn't really matter where they are from." However, when asked how culture would play a role in her future instructional practices, Yessica spoke to the importance of "making content relevant" by being careful not to use "something so culturally different" that it

is "difficult to grasp the general concept." She continued to specify how she learned to be flexible "you have to be willing to scrap something and try something different," cater instruction to individual needs and interests that are "culturally similar," and foster communication through "using native language."

Gabi presented an integrated view by placing equal importance on evidence-based instructional practices and culturally responsive pedagogy. She spoke to developing a strong "classroom culture," while also referring to specific teaching experiences to exemplify how she enacted her beliefs about the important use of differentiation, individualized instructional practices, and humanizing practices that addressed students' needs for language learning needs, learning differences, and cultural inclusivity. She recognized these students' needs by drawing from her personal lived experiences, "because I knew that if I didn't, they would just be like, 'Oh look, the wall.' Because that's what I used to do." Furthermore, she critically reflected on how her lessons contrasted with a mentor teacher's, Gabi described how ensured there was differentiation; "[My mentor teacher] would teach the whole group, and then I would pull a small group and I would try to go over the information to see if they really got it." In short, for Gabi, culture was explicitly linked to teaching and learning. In her words, "it plays a big role in people's lives and it is important."

Beliefs about the Practice of Knowing the Other

An integral characteristic of culturally responsive teachers is the ability to build rapport with students and their families to foster a deep understanding of their funds of knowledge (Case & Taylor, 2005; Esteban-Guitart & Moll, 2014; García & Ortiz, 2013). Candidates spoke in varying degrees about conscious approaches to learning students' cultural funds of knowledge, engaging with students and their families, and making efforts to integrate their ways of knowing

into their instructional practices. In preparation for the summer practicum, teacher candidates had the opportunity to review student cumulative files to gain background information on their students to prepare their classrooms to meet students' needs. Each participant drew from cross-cultural friendships to inform their beliefs about practices for knowing the Other. For Marissa in particular, developing cross-cultural friendships "shows a sign of mutual respect of [or] having an understanding of each other." Nevertheless, Marissa seemed to dismiss the relevance of culture during the current practicum experience stating, "In a longer period of time, I'd probably try to learn more about their culture and bring that to the classroom." She emphasized a desire to be "culturally sensitive" with the caveat "if there's more showing, or other cultures, present in them." Ultimately, though, she felt learning their "interests" was enough, "because everyone has those".

Both Yessica and Gabi revealed how meeting their students in person challenged their preconceptions about the capabilities of students with more physically and intellectually impacting disabilities. Yessica reflected, "I thought their disabilities would be more apparent, you know more visible than they are." Similar to Yessica, Gabi explained her surprise about the students she worked with. She shared, "I thought I was going to get like a crazy classroom, everybody with different disabilities, [and] not know what to do."

Marissa, Yessica, and Gabi were keyed into understanding their students' disabilities and ensuring their classroom designs addressed their needs. However, learning about and incorporating considerations for their students' disability characteristics into the learning environment seemed to take priority over the students' funds of knowledge.

Beliefs about the Practice of Advocacy

A common theme across all pedagogies for supporting culturally and linguistically diverse students is "the moral duty of educators" to take action to dismantle systems of oppression through improving educational opportunities for all (del Carmen Salazar, 2013). Though teacher candidates have limited power in the classroom to make systemic change, they can begin with "specific actions" within their instructional and professional practices (Stewart et al., 2021). Out of the three participants, Gabi was the only candidate to initiate discussion about the importance of advocating for students with intersectional needs across culture, language and disability. She positioned herself to intervene with students who would otherwise "fall through the cracks." In contrast, Marissa and Yessica expressed emotional concerns about the overwhelming needs of their students of color but did not provide examples for action steps they took or would take.

Gabi recounted several instances where she worked to assist students who she was concerned would not get the kind of instruction they were entitled to. During her first student teaching experience, she recalled working with a Korean student who was new to the classroom and only spoke "a few words" of English. She noted that though the student was off-task and not following along, "the teacher wouldn't redirect him or anything." Gabi immediately took it upon herself to work with the student "one-on-one all the time" to role play instructions, use Google Translate to communicate in his native language, and teach him English vocabulary. She also embodied the goals of culturally sustaining pedagogy (Paris, 2012) when she emphasized that supporting emergent bilingual students with language and learning needs to include maintaining their home language,

> So, I just feel a push to have [students] have both [languages]. Like saying, 'Okay, you know this language and you need to learn this new one, but you can still keep yours.'

This helps them a lot more than, 'Okay you can't keep yours, it's only English. You need to sit there and listen to us speak English.' Because [that] just puts a barrier in, you know?

Beliefs Along a Continuum of Critical Consciousness

Examining findings for each participant across all themes, revealed Marissa, Yessica, and Gabi were developing along a two-dimensional continuum. Figure 1 is a visual example of how the continuum and the six themes related to knowledge and practice domains are organized. Figures 2 (Marissa), 3 (Yessica), and 4 (Gabi) provide graphic models of how each participants' beliefs align within this framework. For each participant, we discuss examples of where they are situated on the continuum in relation to the six themes for illustrative purposes.

<insert figure 2 here>

Overall, Marissa's comments indicate that she held a dysconscious orientation across many of the themes, contrasted with instances of emerging critical beliefs related to the treatment of diverse students with disabilities in schools. Marissa's interview illustrated an emerging critical consciousness in the area of *knowledge of Self*, reflective of her own cultural heritage loss and limited cultural identity development. Marissa's beliefs about professional practices were characterized by a *practice of teaching* indicative of White benevolence or 'savior complex' by desiring to make a difference but downplaying the relevance of culturally responsive practices in instruction and building cultural competence by developing rapport with students within her practicum.

<insert figure 3 here>

As a second generation Cuban American, Yessica drew her beliefs and funds of knowledge from her family heritage and her experiences growing up within a diverse

metropolitan area. There were many areas where she remained neutral or expressed contradictory beliefs. Overall, Yessica demonstrated primarily emergent critical consciousness across all six themes. While she discussed some approaches exemplary of cultural responsiveness, such as surveying students about their interests, ability grouping to meet individual needs, and using native language, she was not able to articulate why she took these actions. In other instances, she continued to dismiss the importance of incorporating students' cultural backgrounds into instruction and made generalities about people from other cultural backgrounds.

<insert figure 4 here>

Overall, Gabi expressed beliefs consistent with a practice of critical consciousness across all six strands. In Gabi's interview, she expressed a critical awareness of her cross-cultural positionality as both a member of Puerto Rican and mainland culture. She specifically named family values and experiences as an English Learner (EL) as contributing to the development of her knowledge of Self, the Other, and sociopolitical dynamics. Furthermore, she confidently articulated how she seeks to implement culturally and linguistically appropriate practices of teaching, knowing the Other, and engaging in acts of advocacy. For instance, her personal experiences as an EL expressly informed her beliefs about others and served as the foundation for her practice related to emergent bilingual students with disabilities. Furthermore, she drew on recent classroom experiences which reinforced and expanded her knowledge of the intersectional needs of exceptional students from various backgrounds over time. Under practice of teaching, similar to her peers, she emphasized the socialized view of "one way" to deliver instruction for students with disabilities. Finally, Gabi was unique in highlighting her advocacy by describing how she personally took the initiative to intervene and provided preventative instructional support to emergent bilingual students with whom she worked.

Discussion

This study originated from observing a cohort of teacher candidates' overall limited responses to addressing the cultural, linguistic backgrounds of K-12 students with disabilities across program benchmarks. Historically, the majority of our teacher candidates are White females. However, as we seek to recruit and retain Latinx teacher candidates in our program, we recognized the need to understand the variety of life experiences they bring, incorporate their funds of knowledge, and equip them with the skills to take critical action. This discussion highlights four major implications for assessing teacher candidates' development of critical consciousness in order to become transformative special educators who perceive the sociopolitical dynamics within the educational system which continue to marginalize K12 students with disabilities.

Implication 1: Differentiate Program Experiences for Within-group/Within-individual Differences

We found the complex nature of critical consciousness among the study's three diverse Latinx teacher candidates included both within-group and within-individual variability. This finding emphasized to us the importance of designing differentiated program experiences to meet teacher candidates where they are.

The Latinx population in the U.S. represents people of diverse national origins, linguistic practices, and cultural heritage (Noe-Bustamante, 2020). The teacher candidates interviewed in this study were equally diverse in heritage and belief systems. This cross-section of Latinx preservice teacher candidates illustrated within-group diversity of the Latinx community. This was further corroborated by participant responses during interviews. Each teacher candidate drew from their experiences with people inside and outside of their immediate family from high

school through college. Collectively, they expressed mutual respect for all cultures, but each participant demonstrated maintenance of some element of stereotyping others, including other Latinx communities. In addition, each individual varied in their awareness of sociopolitical dynamics for communities outside their inner circle. Across these three candidates, we saw evidence of internal struggle and cognitive dissonance between previously held beliefs and emerging beliefs as they reflected upon their coursework and clinical field experiences. Marissa, Yessica, and Gabi's belief systems varied in development according to their formative experiences with particular minoritized groups across cultural, racial, linguistic, or LGBTQA+ communities. Therefore, it seems logical to differentiate coursework, clinical experiences and coaching supports within a teacher preparation program to address gaps and areas for growth among Latinx teacher candidates (Gupta, 2006; Hedges, 2012).

Implication 2: Develop Teacher Candidates Awareness as Cultural Beings

Secondly, we noted how these Latinx teacher candidates entered our teacher preparation program in different areas of development with respect to each one's Knowledge of Self and ability to identify as a cultural being. Since critical awareness of one's positionality is a foundational component of becoming a culturally responsive educator, teacher preparation programs must provide candidates with opportunities to connect with their "funds of identity" and form an awareness of themselves as cultural beings.

A monolithic application of the commonly held assumption that racial-congruence between teachers and students will lead to improved academic outcomes of historically marginalized students disregards the diversity of Latinx communities (Downer et al., 2016; Egalite et al., 2015; Egalite & Kisida, 2018). Instead, teacher preparation programs must recognize Latinx teachers need to develop critical consciousness as well as their White cohort

members. Therefore, it is important to consider how differing cultural factors such as

socioeconomic conditions, access to social/religious institutions, cultural artifacts, familial and

community relationships influence "funds of identity" (Esteban-Guitart & Moll, 2014). In this

study, identity characteristics distinguishing these candidates revealed factors that may

contribute to the development of their internalized racism, ableism, and raciolinguistic beliefs

systems (Fallas-Escobar et al., 2022). Our candidates' identity development was influenced by;

1) home language use, maintenance of Spanish, familial and cultural heritage, 2) parental and

local community values, 3) K-12 school experiences, and 4) salient, first-hand experiences with

discrimination based on race, language, disability or gender markers of identity. As teacher

educators, we can support Latinx candidates to examine their own "funds of identity" to surface

their experiences with systemic oppression and extend their capacity to understand those students

with identities outside their familiar inner circle.

Implication 3: Explicitly Emphasize the Intersections Between Culture and Disability

Thirdly, we learned teacher candidates did not make connections between other identity

markers and disability, nor between their beliefs and integrating their values for diversity into

their teaching practices. As we probed participants' thinking about their beliefs about diversity

and their practice as emerging special education teachers, Marissa, Yessica, and Gabi spoke

about disability and culture in dichotomous ways mostly, as if one does not connect with the

other; however, to a lesser extent, they also spoke about disability and culture in more integrated

ways. Artiles et al. (2016), García & Ortiz (2013), and others write extensively about the

importance of recognizing the complex intersections between culture and disability. In particular,

the historical reality of disability being an object of both protection and exclusion/disadvantage.

It is at the intersections of disability and culture that "protecting" students with disabilities can

morph into exclusion and disadvantage due to racial, language, class, or gender differences (Cavendish & Espinosa, 2013). Understanding these intersections and their impact on students is critical for our teacher candidates to be equipped to truly advocate for students with disabilities and the diversity they represent (García & Ortiz, 2013).

Implication 4: Adopting Critical Consciousness as a Practice & Reflection Tool

As White faculty, who strive to understand how to recruit and prepare teacher candidates from diverse backgrounds to engage in decolonizing and re-envisioning equity for K12 students,, the findings highlighted the importance of humanizing teacher preparation programs. The CCCE framework allowed us to unpack the racialized, ableist, and raciolinguistic experiences informing each candidates' development individual development of each candidate towards a practice of critical consciousness (Freire, 1970; Hill-Jackson, 2007; Jackson et al., 2021). These insights prompted reflection and revisions to how we approach the recommended integration of "diversity", language, and intersectional impacts on students of color with disabilities throughout our program (Gay, 2010a; 2018). This study reaffirms how teacher learning and transformation to enact humanizing pedagogies is not a static process (del Carmen Salazar, 2013; Sleeter, 2008), but requires ongoing practice, evaluation and personal reflection (King, 1991; Palmer & Martínez, 2013; Ladson-Billings, 2014). Figures 1-4 illustrate how such a frame might support teacher educators in thinking about their teacher candidates and the complexity of the notion of critical consciousness and the intersectionality of disability in our teacher preparation programs.

Implications for Research

This study contributes to the emerging literature on preparing Latinx special education teachers to be practitioners of critical consciousness who recognize the sociopolitical dynamics impacting students at the intersections of disability, language, and race. As the concept of critical

consciousness expands in usage within teacher preparation, we advocate for researchers to take a humanizing approach. Critical consciousness is an experiential, developmental process, without an observable, measurable end point, therefore experimental studies that control for mitigating and malleable factors would dilute and divorce the essential features for developing a profound understanding of each participants' process. Future qualitative, ethnographic, and longitudinal studies would inform the application and long term validity of the framework. In addition, application of the framework to various cultural, racial, disabled, and linguistically diverse groups would inform the reliability and viability of applying this construct across environments.

Limitations

The findings of this study are confined within the responses of a small group of Latinx preservice special education teacher candidates. Therefore, this study is limited in terms of number of participants and so cannot be construed to be generalizable. However, this study is an example of studies that can examine issues related to the intersection of teacher education and special education related to issues of diversity.

Conclusion

Uncovering the within-group diversity of belief systems amongst our Latinx teacher candidates challenged our own biases and assumptions. This study prompted the authors to take the opportunity to reflect on how neither "Latinx names" nor ethnic identity were accurate signals of a teacher candidate's practice of critical consciousness. We fully support the need for and importance of diversifying our teacher workforce. However, diversifying the workforce in and of itself is likely not enough (Egalite & Kisida, 2018). We also need to purposely prepare our teachers to have a critical habit of mind about themselves, their relationship to the Other, and the sociopolitical dynamics that perpetuate marginalization of exceptional learners at the

intersections of race, language, gender, and cultural identities, regardless of their culture, ethnicity, race, or linguistic difference. By conceiving of teacher candidates' personal and professional beliefs on a continuum, teacher educators can individually provide targeted scaffolds to support their process of humanization. When teacher candidates are empowered to harness their heritage, they in turn, become prepared to engage their K-12 students' to connect their "roots". Indeed, by taking such responsibility, we have opportunities to provide safe spaces for teacher candidates to process and grow from the complacency of a "sunshine land" to the emancipatory action of a practice of critical consciousness.

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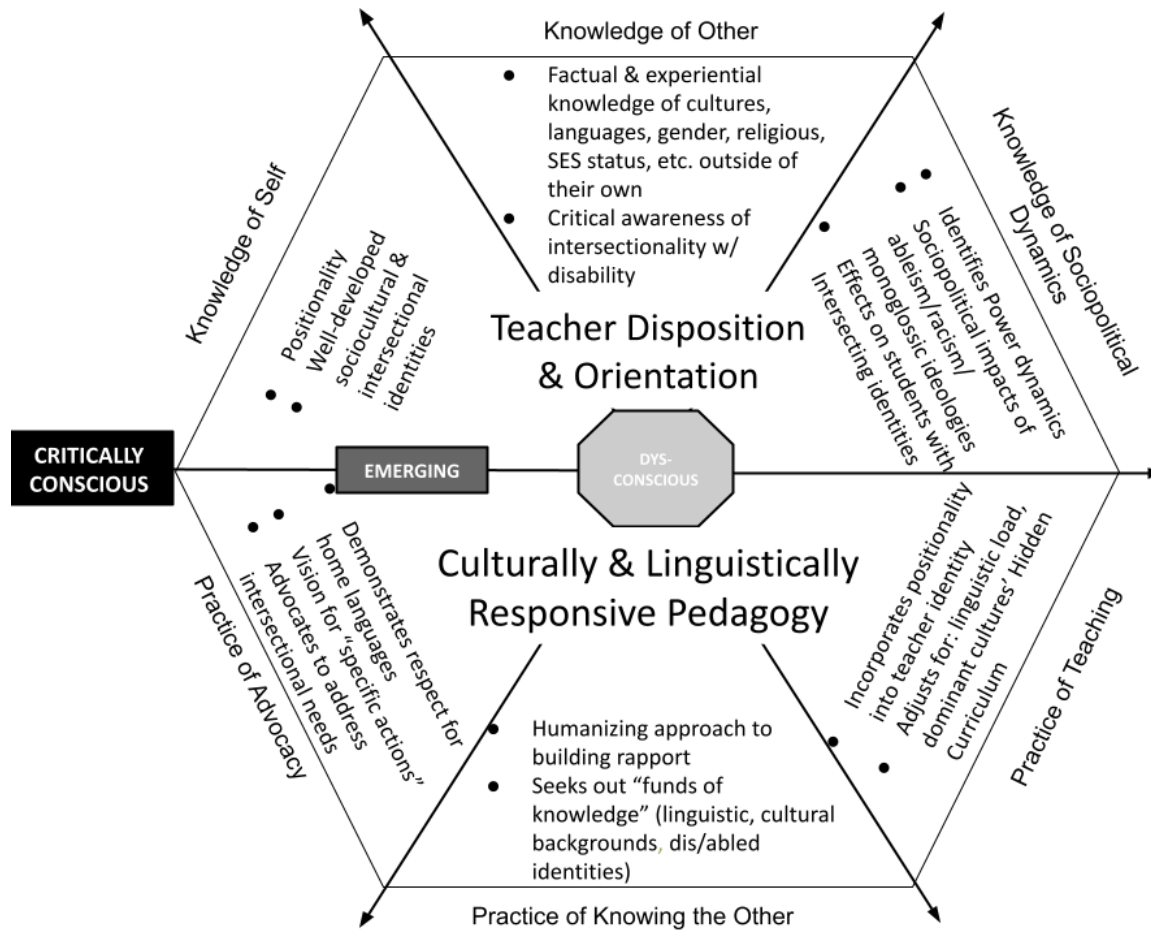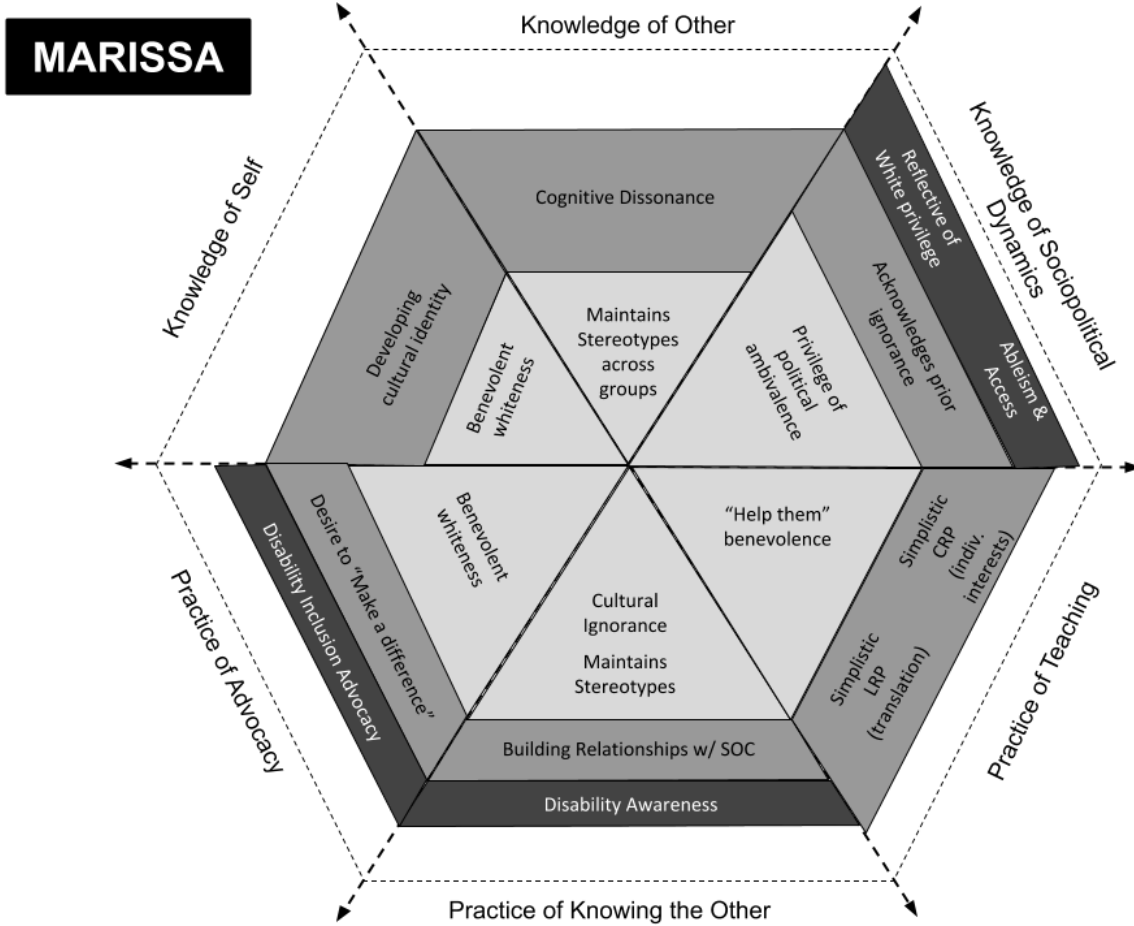
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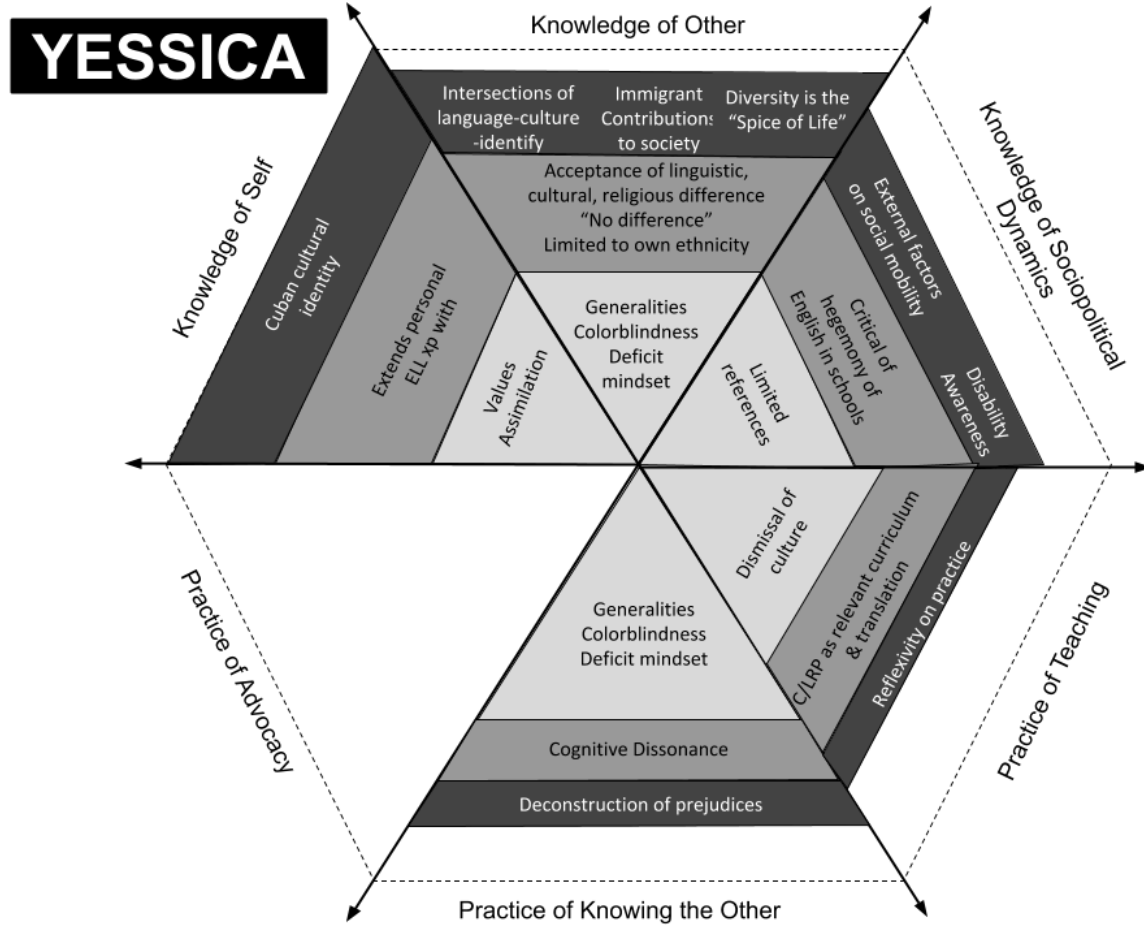
Figure 3

Figure 4.