

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Transforming Minds, Engaging Hearts: A Qualitative Case Study of Teacher Candidates Developing Critical Consciousness through Tutoring Refugee-Background Students

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Abstract

In response to the growing number of refugee-background students (RBSs) in the United States and the growing need for tutors to support students with limited or interrupted formal education (SLIFE), a TESOL special topics seminar was designed to create a dialogical space where teacher candidates could engage theory with teaching praxis. The course placed teacher candidates with RBSs in local high schools, prompting inquiry into the students' diverse literacy backgrounds, experiences with migration, trauma-sensitive approaches, and processes of academic and cultural adjustment. Utilizing justice-oriented pedagogies, this qualitative case study examined how teacher candidates approached their work with RBSs as part of this course. Qualitative analysis of the semi-structured interviews, questionnaires, and final lesson portfolios revealed three key themes: (1) the centrality of using socially-just, trauma-sensitive and asset-based pedagogies; (2) the sense-making process of developing critical consciousness in praxis as candidates identified curricular exclusion, interrogated culturally inappropriate assignments and reflected on their own positionality; and (3) the importance of building relational trust through understanding the unique assets and needs of RBSs, a socio-emotional foundation that proved inseparable from, and generative of, the critical consciousness candidates developed across all three themes.

Keywords

asset-based pedagogies; culturally responsive pedagogy; limited and interrupted education; refugee-background students; socio-emotional learning; teacher preparation; trauma-sensitive approaches

INTRODUCTION

As we reflect on this qualitative case study that took place on the cusp of the pandemic, we recognize that this work takes on a renewed sense of urgency in 2026, amidst the recent political shifts in the United States, where immigration policy and public discourse around refugees, asylum seekers, and displaced populations have become increasingly polarized. Under the current administration, while there have been some efforts to expand refugee admissions after previous restrictions, the landscape remains fraught with contradictions and uncertainty. For example, expanded pathways for resettlement coexist with heightened border enforcement, asylum restrictions, and persistent anti-immigrant rhetoric in some political and media circles. These polarizing tensions affect both the lived realities of refugee-background

students (RBSs) and the institutional contexts in which teachers are prepared to serve. Educators are increasingly called to navigate the complexities of sociopolitical narratives, while also continuing to affirm the dignity and humanity of our students.

The U.S. Department of State reported that 4,053 refugees ages 5-19 were admitted into the United States in 2021 (U.S. Department of State, 2021). According to the U.S. Customs and Border Protection (2023), more than 2.8 million migrants, with nearly 7,000 accompanied minors, have been encountered from January to September of 2023. The U.S. Census Bureau estimates a total immigrant population increase of almost 30% between 2005 and 2022, to a total of over 46 million. Students from ethnic minority groups make up over 55% of this student population (NCES, 2021).

This qualitative case study took place in San Diego, California, a major border city and long-time site of refugee resettlement that has been undeniably impacted by recent shifts in immigration policy. Under the current administration, changes in asylum processing and delays in federal funding have disrupted local shelters and resettlement agencies such as the International Rescue Committee, our partner in providing placement services for our teacher candidates in local high schools. Despite the federal policies, San Diego has continued to support refugees, immigrants, and migrants, by reallocating emergency funds to provide basic services including food, transportation, translation, and legal support.

Throughout this paper, we use these terms with intentionality. *Refugee* refers to individuals who have fled persecution and have legal protections under international law (UNHCR, n.d.). *Immigrants* refer broadly to individuals who have relocated to the United States regardless of legal status, while *migrants* encompass those in transit or with temporary status (Custodio, 2010). Where possible, we use *refugee-background students* (RBSs) as our primary term, as it captures the specific population of our study.

With ethnic minority groups comprising 77.2% of the student population, 16% of which are English learners (California Department of Education, 2025), the San Diego Unified School District reaffirmed its stance on protecting all students, regardless of immigration status, and committed to keeping enforcement agents off school campuses. The ever-changing political landscape underscores further our charge as teacher educators to continue our work on developing critically conscious teacher candidates, whose responsibility it is to advocate for and serve those most vulnerable and marginalized. It is with this intention the first author, a professor in the graduate TESOL program at a University in Southern California, developed a

special topics seminar course offered within the Master of Education in TESOL program, to prepare teacher candidates to specifically support RBSs with critical awareness, relational care (Noddings, 1992), and humanizing, justice-oriented pedagogies. The goals for this course were as follows:

In this course, candidates will gain a deep understanding of refugee student experiences through coursework and fieldwork experiences. Candidates will trace the history of refugee experiences globally and analyze contemporary refugee issues within the United States. More specifically, candidates will address the unique educational needs of refugee students. Specific topics include literacy development, approaches to supporting the needs of students with interrupted formal education and utilizing the framework of cultural and socio-emotional responsiveness in pedagogical practice based on an understanding of the possible trauma-related factors impacting refugee educational achievement. Candidates will develop a teaching portfolio guided by action research principles including an understanding of the needs of their refugee students, addressing their needs, and reflecting on their teaching practice as they think of ways in which to better address the needs of their students.

Designed with care to avoid essentializing students' experiences or cultures, the course offered a dialogical space where teacher candidates engaged theory in praxis through direct tutoring in local high schools. Its structure aimed to cultivate critical awareness of the sociopolitical and educational forces shaping RBSs' lives, affirm the cultural and academic knowledge these students bring, and challenge deficit-based narratives by grounding practice in relational, asset-based, and justice-oriented pedagogies.

The goal of this qualitative case study was to understand how our teacher candidates made sense of and approached their work with their RBSs as they engaged theory in praxis. In particular, the following two research questions guided this study:

1. In what ways did participation in a seminar course designed to support refugee-background students influence teacher candidates' understandings of trauma-sensitive and asset-based pedagogy?
2. In what ways did teacher candidates shift their perceptions of and pedagogies with refugee-background students through engagement in coursework and direct tutoring experiences?

LITERATURE REVIEW

RBSs come with experiences, often carrying an additional layer of imposed vulnerability rooted in persecution, conflict, or an oppressive system in their country of origin (Custodio & O'Loughlin, 2020). They also bring experience and history of a culture not only shaped by

their languages, but also their geographical, social, economic, and semiotic dimensions. Settling into a new life in the country of relocation, they are challenged with learning a new idiom, moored in an unfamiliar history, a new vocabulary, and a set of unspoken conventions. In this context, RBSs are understood not solely through legal or resettlement categories, but through an expansive lens that recognizes the sociopolitical, cultural, and historical conditions that shape their educational experiences (Dryden-Peterson, 2016). SLIFE, a subgroup within refugee and immigrant populations, refers to students who arrive with gaps in formal schooling due to displacement, war, or structural barriers to education (Pentón Herrera, 2022). This categorization, while useful for understanding educational needs, must be approached critically to avoid pathologizing students' backgrounds.

A central concern in the literature on refugee education is the persistent reliance on deficit models, which frame RBSs as lacking language proficiency, academic readiness, or forms of capital (Al-deen, 2025; Baecher et al., 2019; Browder et al., 2022; Cooc, 2023; Shapiro & MacDonald, 2017; Yosso, 2005). Such narratives overlook the resilience, linguistic dexterity, and rich lived knowledge these students bring. In fact, the literature shows how the term “SLIFE” itself has been critiqued for not being able to capture the nuances of “interrupted” education and for serving as a dehumanized umbrella term that fails to account for the heterogeneity in learner groups whose educational interruptions do not have similar histories or typologies (see Browder et al., 2022). This literature review counters these models by engaging with scholarship grounded in justice-oriented pedagogy (Cochran-Smith et al., 2009), an approach that centers the sociopolitical contexts of RBSs and actively works against structural conditions that devalue their humanity, onto-epistemologies and lived realities (Molina, 2026).

Within this overarching theoretical orientation, we organize our review around three analytically connected frameworks that together structure our inquiry. Critical consciousness (Freire, 2014), the development of awareness of structural inequity and the capacity to act upon it, served as the aspirational goal for our teacher candidates in this study. Asset-based pedagogy, and specifically Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth framework, provided the lens of that consciousness, through which we wanted our teacher candidates to learn to *see* their students and the capital or assets they embody. The relational and affective work, or the socio-emotional dimension, emerged as the lever through which we believed this critical consciousness developed in practice for our candidates, where they described trust-building, emotional attunement, and responsiveness to students' whole-person needs as foundational to

their work. By bringing these frameworks into dialogue within a justice-oriented approach, this literature establishes a foundation for understanding how teacher candidates can be prepared to support RBSs in ways that resist assimilationist, dehumanizing, and colonial logics (Molina, 2022).

Despite overwhelming challenges, RBSs display extreme resilience, agency, motivation, and desire to succeed (Custodio & O’Loughlin, 2017; DeCapua et al., 2020; Gándara, 2015; Gorski, 2016; Grotberg, 1995; Shapiro et al., 2018). But these assets are often shadowed by a deficit perspective. Deficit thinking is the belief that a “student who fails in school does so because of internal deficiencies [with] limited intellectual abilities, linguistic shortcomings, lack of motivation to learn and immoral behavior” (Valencia, 1997, p. 2). This belief devalues students’ rich lived experiences, cultures, histories, wisdom, and knowledge systems (DeCapua et al., 2020; Gay, 2018; Hammond, 2014; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Paris, 2012).

Ways of equipping schools with culturally sustaining approaches (Paris, 2012) to better serve this diverse population, including SLIFE, have been documented by a wealth of research (Custodio & O’Loughlin, 2017; Gay, 2018; Hammond, 2014; Howard, 2016; Paris, 2012; Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017; Shapiro et al., 2018; Stillman & Anderson, 2017). Culturally sustaining pedagogies (Ladson-Billings, 1995) respond to the unflattering perspectives of students from marginalized or minoritized communities. These pedagogies are premised on funds of knowledge which is defined as the “historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning and well-being” (Moll et al., 1992, p. 133) that SLIFE and RBSs bring to the classroom. This perspective encourages teachers to “have a clear mindset of *difference*, not *deficit*” (DeCapua et al., 2020, p. 129; emphasis original) and aligns with socially just and empowering practices (Chubbuck, 2010) to provide students with ways to “deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world” (Freire, 2005, p. 34).

Grounded in culturally sustaining pedagogies (Paris & Alim, 2017), trauma-sensitive pedagogical awareness (Custodio & O’Loughlin, 2020), and justice-oriented frameworks (DeCapua & Marshall, 2015; Gutiérrez, 2018; Cochran-Smith et al., 2009), this review highlights approaches that center the humanity, strengths, and sociopolitical contexts of refugee-background students. These frameworks do not treat trauma, cultural difference, or academic gaps as deficits to be remedied, but as entry points for relational, transformative pedagogy, while remaining attentive to the risk of romanticizing students’ experiences of hardship (Pentón Herrera, 2022). While “trauma-informed” and “trauma-sensitive” are often

used interchangeably in educational literature, this study intentionally adopts the term trauma-sensitive. This choice serves to demarcate the pedagogical and environmental shifts made by teacher candidates from the clinical and diagnostic frameworks typically associated with “trauma-informed” care (Downey & Greco, 2023). Our focus remains on the creation of safe, restorative classroom spaces (Alexander, 2019) grounded in relationality.

Refugee Background Learners and Countering Deficit Models of Education

Recent research around educational programs for refugee-background SLIFE (RB-SLIFE) explores three important themes: (a) a whole-child perspective to teaching integrating trauma-sensitive approaches and socio-emotional awareness (Nicholson et al., 2019); (b) the need to interrogate deficit pedagogical models and relate these with culturally sustaining pedagogies (Browder et al., 2022); and (c) development of critical consciousness (Freire, 2014) in teachers to respond to the specific needs of adolescent RB-SLIFE (Marrero Colón & Désir, 2022; Masters, 2019; Pentón Herrera, 2022).

Although substantial literature addressing SLIFE needs exists, few studies discuss appropriate empirical or ethnographic data on pedagogical strategies for teacher candidates engaging with RB-SLIFE populations. Among those that focus on teacher strategies is Pentón Herrera et al.’s (2022) self-reflective discussion on ways of providing socio-emotional and academic support to SLIFE to address “cultural dissonance” triggered by the “hidden curriculum” and a school’s “subliminal culture” (p. 5). The authors suggest “tailor-made” (p. 8) programs to capture the unique needs of SLIFE, with individual scaffolding for language, L1 literacy and content support to activate their funds of knowledge, oscillation between implicit and explicit language instruction and “[o]pportunities for authentic learning beyond the school walls” (p. 13).

Casanova and Alvarez (2022) provide similar suggestions on integrating SLIFE cultural wealth in the classroom to achieve better learning outcomes. These studies echo suggestions offered by Cranitch (2010) for Australian SLIFE. Watkins et al. (2019), also working on SLIFE in Australia’s New South Wales recommend strengthening teachers’ understanding across the curriculum, since supporting SLIFE education is a complex and layered enterprise. Holmkvist et al.’s (2018) study on Swedish SLIFE reports how teachers’ instructional design might address SLIFE academic needs better through conscious attention to communication by providing language support assistance.

An exploratory study by Cho et al. (2019) conducted with six elementary school teachers makes a compelling case for envisaging SLIFE education through an asset rather than a deficit lens, especially because the authors found that the teachers' attitudes towards the SLIFE English Language Learners (ELLs) were "largely deficit-oriented" (p. 40). Christensen (2018), reporting on her capstone project for the MA-ESL program at Hamline University also focuses on the need for teacher preparation programs to include curricula on SLIFE education for all teachers, literacy interventions as additional support to ELLs, and additional learning time for SLIFE.

Studies such as these reiterate the necessity of developing teachers' critical consciousness towards SLIFE learning by promoting an asset-based lens in their pedagogical interventions. However, little is available on how teacher candidates in a preservice graduate TESOL program can prepare to educate the RB-SLIFE subset. In this study, we examined our own intentional practices in supporting teacher candidates to respond to the academic and linguistic needs of RB-SLIFE enrolled in American High Schools. Through the collaborative development of our critical consciousness, we hoped to learn how an asset-based lens can best inform our pedagogies around supporting RBSs (Browder et al., 2022; Custodio & O'Loughlin, 2020).

Addressing RB-SLIFE Needs

RB-SLIFE in the United States have the daunting challenge of assimilating into mainstream American life by navigating many situations that demand proficiency in both everyday English (Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills) and academic English (Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency) (Cummins, 1979; Miller et al., 2005). They must unlearn many skills they have built, reframe some to accommodate different ways of doing and feeling, and learn some from scratch in adolescence. These linguistic, social, emotional, and academic adjustments can be traumatic and painful, and the high expectations they and their parents set for academic success can add to this stress. RB adolescents also often carry responsibilities at home, such as being cultural and linguistic brokers, caregivers or breadwinners (Pentón Herrera, 2022).

To aid the settling-in processes of SLIFE, schools aim to provide students with acculturation to United States schooling, socio-emotional support, literacy and language instruction with content integration, and academic skills (WIDA, 2015). But most programs address what is to be done *to* or *on* this population rather than *alongside* them. Many more bridging strategies are required before RB-SLIFE feel confident and safe enough to have things

done *upon* them, including (a) honoring the students' home cultures; (b) providing them with a safe space to use their language(s); (c) valuing the experience and skill sets they bring as part of their community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005); and (d) meeting them where they are.

Reports on RB-SLIFE education programs and interventions (e.g., Benseman, 2014; Custodio, 2010; Custodio & O'Loughlin, 2017; DeCapua & Marshall, 2011b; DeCapua et al., 2020; Freeman & Freeman, 2002; Montero et al., 2014; Shapiro et al., 2018; Short & Boyson, 2004; WIDA, 2015) discuss the gaps arising out of a lack of accommodation to students' funds of knowledge. As Greathouse et al. (2019) posed, "How can we hope to teach the whole child if we fail to *see* the whole child?" (p. 42, emphasis original). In a study on adolescent RB-SLIFE, Hos (2014) proposed four themes that represent "an ethics of care... (a) patience/flexibility and empathy for students, (b) implementing appropriate English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) pedagogical practices, (c) building students' self-confidence, and (d) advocacy for students" (p. 485).

In addition, RB-SLIFE is a group at high risk of dropout. Custodio and O'Loughlin (2017) described a gap between students' skills and expectations causing "students [to] frequently give up" (p. 4). And Hill (2018) mentioned a lack of psychological and academic preparation (Rong & Preissle, 1998), students' negative self-perceptions about their academic ability (House, 1993), socio-emotional needs, cultural dissonance, connections to programming and services, and interpersonal relationships as reasons for a high SLIFE dropout rate (Pentón Herrera et al., 2022). Further, there is a close link between literacy development and development of the whole child, as literacy "is always connected to meaning making" (Shapiro et al., 2018, p. 4). And, as Miller et al. (2005) pointed out, these students are expected to "acquire social communication skills and academic writing and speaking skills, while attempting to catch up to native-speaking peers, who themselves are continuing to develop academic and language competence" (p. 22).

Underpinning this discourse on what RB-SLIFE *need* is the conversation around what such students *bring*: a strong sense of identity, proficiency in one or more languages, cultural capital, a strong incentive to succeed, and resilience (Custodio & O'Loughlin, 2017). Schools can respond to resilience through protective factors to support RB-SLIFE, such as Henderson's (2013) resiliency wheel and Custodio and O'Loughlin's (2017) resiliency checklist. These and similar strategies are central to providing an asset-based learning context to RB-SLIFE.

Asset-Based Pedagogy

Curricular structures to counter the deficit philosophy include programs that take whole-child development approaches such as development of first language literacy, sheltered instruction, after-school activities, and community building and acculturation to the culturally alien school systems. Custodio and O’Loughlin (2017) identified curricular supports for RB-SLIFE, including a focus on reading literacy development through picture books, read-aloud protocols, and readers’ theater, bilingual language support, and other school-based and nonacademic resources. These programs build on what RB-SLIFE *have* and accommodate this with what they *need* “as a bridge between the skills and knowledge the students bring to their new school and the academic expectations of their peers” (Custodio & O’Loughlin, 2017, p. 86).

Other approaches to RB-SLIFE education include service learning (Mitchell et al., 2015), community-based learning (Whitaker & Hines, 2018), systemic functional linguistics (Harman & Khote, 2018), mutually adaptive learning paradigm (DeCapua & Marshall, 2011a; DeCapua et al., 2020), and sheltered instruction observation protocol (Center for Applied Linguistics, n.d.). While service learning has been criticized as a deficit model by reflecting a “savior complex” (Whitaker & Hines, 2018, p. 316), these other approaches are largely asset-based, drawing on funds of knowledge (Gonzalez et al., 2005), culturally responsive pedagogy (Gay, 2018), and culturally sustaining pedagogy (Paris & Alim, 2017).

At the heart of this study’s asset-based orientation is Yosso’s (2005) community cultural wealth framework, which moves beyond a narrow view of cultural capital to recognize six distinct forms of capital that communities of color, and by extension, RB-SLIFE, bring to educational spaces: aspirational, linguistic, familial, social, navigational, and resistant capital. This framework is particularly generative for teacher preparation because it provides a concrete vocabulary for what teacher candidates must learn to *see* in their students. Rather than approaching RBSs through a deficit lens that foregrounds what students lack, community cultural wealth directs teacher candidates’ attention toward the rich and varied resources students already possess, resources that are often invisible within Euro-American educational systems precisely because those systems were not designed to recognize them (Molina, 2022; Molina, 2026; Yosso, 2005). In this study, developing the capacity to recognize and build upon students’ community cultural wealth, we believe, is a core dimension of critical consciousness—the analytical and ethical transformation that the seminar course sought to cultivate in teacher candidates.

Trauma-sensitive models provide additional structures and interventions to benefit RB-SLIFE. Ramasubramanian et al. (2021) proposed a trauma-informed equity-minded asset-based model (TEAM) framework that can be applied to pedagogical practices with RBSs, one that (a) recognizes the dominant ideologies in education, (b) recognizes the effects of systemic trauma and aims not to retraumatize students, (c) builds trust and agency among students, and (d) focuses on equity-based and asset-based approaches rather than deficits. Understood through a trauma-sensitive lens, we see this framework as aligning closely with the relational and affective dimensions of teaching that are situated within social-emotional learning scholarship.

Critical Consciousness as the Heart of Social Justice Pedagogy

To help teacher candidates equip themselves with the competencies, attitudes, and skills to educate RB-SLIFE, a critical consciousness lens encourages reflection on “what is to be taught, how, and to whom” (Gay & Kirkland, 2003, p. 181). Critical consciousness, “a heightened awareness of the world and the power structures that shape it” (Styslinger et al., 2019, p. 9), encourages teacher candidates to not only make a shift in their educational paradigms “but also the way [they] think, write, speak” (hooks, 1994, p. 11). hooks (1994) referred to this ability as *praxis* or “action and reflection upon the world in order to change it” (p. 14). As Darling-Hammond (2000) pointed out:

Developing the ability to see beyond one’s perspective, to put oneself in the shoes of the learner and to understand the meaning of that experience in terms of learning, is perhaps the most important role of universities in the preparation of teachers. (p. 170)

Within social justice education, critical consciousness encourages educators to teach by raising student consciousness and then trusting that students “will feel increasingly challenged and obliged to respond” to the inequities and injustices they come to recognize and realize (Freire, 2005, p. 81). These educators can “come to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation” (Freire, 2005, p. 83).

Adopting critical consciousness as a normative pedagogical practice allows co-construction of knowledge, skills, and strategies and sets the context for developing thoughtful, compassionate, and asset-based interactions between students, teacher candidates, and teacher educators. Preparing teacher candidates to effectively serve an RB-SLIFE population thus requires reimagining traditional teacher roles and creating a space for them to become advocates of social justice, equity, and human-centered learning. Pitner and Sakamoto (2016)

presented a set of pedagogical methods to encourage critical consciousness building among students, and Gay and Kirkland (2003) have shown that promoting critical consciousness is important to counter resistance observed in preservice teachers.

In terms of RB-SLIFE education, building critical consciousness is crucial to developing teacher candidates' awareness of "systemic and structural inequity and [their] understanding [of] how dominant ideologies contribute to reproducing social inequity" (Pollard, 2017, p. 36) and especially crucial to understanding how "achievement dilemmas are influenced by culture, class, ethnicity, and racism" (Gay & Kirkland, 2003, p. 183). Although many studies report critical consciousness as an integral component of social justice education and culturally responsive pedagogy, fewer studies consider it as the enactment of a pedagogical philosophy in practice—as something teacher candidates *do* rather than simply *know* (Molina, 2019a, 2019b, 2020, 2021a, 2021b). McDonough (2015) noted that critical consciousness is most often framed as a tool, viewpoint, or framework to be developed or achieved, but rarely as an embodied social practice. This distinction is central to our study: we are interested not in whether teacher candidates can articulate critical consciousness, but in how it emerges through sustained, relational engagement with RB-SLIFE.

We believe this emergence is neither automatic nor purely intellectual. Drawing on Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth framework, we argue that critical consciousness in this context requires teacher candidates to first develop the capacity to recognize the aspirational, linguistic, familial, social, navigational, and resistant capital their students bring, capital that dominant educational systems have historically rendered invisible. This recognition, however, does not occur through reading and discussion alone as our findings reveal. This deep learning becomes possible through the kind of emotionally attuned, trust-based, relational practice that social-emotional learning scholarship describes as foundational to meaningful pedagogical relationships (Custodio & O'Loughlin, 2021). In this way, asset-based pedagogy and SEL are integral to critical consciousness and are constitutive of how it develops in practice. In our study, we examined how teacher candidates engaging with a high school RB-SLIFE population used this integrated framework to address pedagogical gaps emerging from the immersion of this at-promise demographic within mainstream classrooms, and in doing so, examined our own developing criticality as teacher educators.

METHODOLOGY

We employed a qualitative case study methodology (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Creswell, 2008; Yin, 2009) to understand how our teacher candidates made sense of and approached their work with their RBSs as they engaged theory in praxis. As previously noted, the following two research questions guided this study:

1. In what ways did participation in a seminar course designed to support refugee-background students influence teacher candidates' understandings of trauma-sensitive and asset-based pedagogy?
2. In what ways did teacher candidates shift their perceptions of and pedagogies with refugee-background students through engagement in coursework and direct tutoring experiences?

Recruitment and Participants

This study was conducted with an intact group of graduate students enrolled in the EDUC 548 Special Topics course focused on working with RBSs. We made an announcement in class delineating our purpose and articulated the details of teacher candidate involvement which included responding to a questionnaire, participating in an end-of-course interview, and permission to analyze their final portfolio project. We emphasized the voluntary and confidential nature of this study with no repercussions to their course grade should they elect not to participate. All seven students consented to participate. This study was approved by the University's Institutional Review Board (IRB-2020-44).

Of the seven students, two were international students: one female from Korea and one male from Saudi Arabia. Five were domestic students: one identified as a Filipino-American immigrant female, one identified as an African American female, one identified as a White male, and two identified as White females. Six were teacher candidates in the MEd in TESOL program, and one was an undergraduate from the Liberal Arts College. Their ages ranged from 22–43 years.

The RBSs tutored by our teacher candidates had a range of ages (13–20 years), English proficiency levels, and needs, including improving reading and writing skills, English assignments, and preparation for college and scholarship applications. They had an average of 3–4 years of being in the United States and exposure to English. The students identified a

variety of countries as their home countries, including Burma, Congo, Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, Tanzania, and Thailand.

Our teacher candidates tutored RBSs as a required fieldwork component of the graduate TESOL seminar, a course designed in direct response to the growing number of refugee-background students in the San Diego region and the urgent need to prepare teacher candidates to work effectively with this population upon graduation. The seminar met weekly for three hours throughout the semester, creating a dialogical space where candidates engaged with theory in praxis. Teacher candidates were placed at two high schools in the San Diego area that partnered with the International Rescue Committee (IRC); one teacher candidate worked with an adult student directly at the IRC's English language program. The tutoring was thus not a standalone research intervention but an embedded fieldwork experience integral to the program's design, with candidates applying theoretical frameworks from weekly readings and discussions directly in their tutoring sessions.

Data Collection and Analysis

For this study, we analyzed three pieces of data: surveys, interviews, and portfolios.

Figure 1. Data Collection Procedures

Data Collection Procedures



Surveys: A 10 question Google Forms survey to all TCs, and provided 30 minutes of class time to complete.

- Two questions related to tutoring placement and demographics of the RBSs.
- Remaining questions focused on preparation, perceptions, insights, triumphs, challenges, and instructional approaches in their work with RBSs.



Interviews: a nine-question, in-person, end-of-semester interview with each TC to probe deeper into their survey responses.



Portfolios: Final lesson portfolios were collected to understand:

- (a) how TCs identified RBSs' needs and approached their tutoring sessions in response to those needs
- (b) theories and research that informed their instructional practice, and
- (c) self-reflections on their own positionality, identity, assumptions, biases, judgments, etc.

We emailed a 10-question survey to all our teacher candidates and provided 30 minutes of class time to complete it. The two initial questions related to tutoring placement and

demographics of the RBSs. The remaining questions focused on preparation, perceptions, insights, triumphs, challenges, and instructional approach in their work with RBSs. The teacher candidates were also asked about advice they would provide future tutors interested in working with this population. We used Excel to analyze themes across responses.

We conducted a nine-question, semi-structured, in-person, end-of-semester interview with each teacher candidate (approximately 30 minutes) outside of class time to probe deeper into their survey responses. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis.

Final lesson portfolios were collected to understand (a) how teacher candidates identified RBSs' needs and approached their tutoring sessions in response to those needs, (b) how they articulated their positionality and, if applicable, their intersectionality, in considering their work with their RBSs, (c) theories and research that informed their instructional practice, and (d) reflections on their learning from participating in this experience.

We engaged in an iterative and collaborative data analysis process. Drawing on Saldaña's (2009) approach, we used analytic memos to document our reflections on coding decisions, emerging themes, and evolving interpretations. We independently coded selected data using our initial codebook to assess the relevance and reliability of our themes. We met regularly to share insights, question assumptions, and deepen our analysis, working intentionally to uphold the trustworthiness of our codes and thematic findings. Throughout this process, we cross-checked our understandings with one another and engaged in member-checking with the teacher candidates to ensure that our interpretations resonated with their experiences.

Following this collaborative phase, we conducted a secondary analysis using NVivo to examine recurring patterns across data sources and generate visual representations. A research assistant also reviewed the data alongside the codebook, and any discrepancies were discussed until we reached a shared understanding. This iterative, participatory approach allowed us to surface key findings in a manner that honored the integrity of the data and the voices within it.

FINDINGS

Several key quilted findings emerged from this study illustrating the complex and nuanced learning experiences of teacher candidates as they tutored RBSs and engaged in a seminar designed to prepare them for this work. First, the seminar course supported teacher candidates in gaining historical and contemporary understandings about RBSs; however, the learning they derived from tutoring was far richer and deeper than any seminar could provide. Second, the

teacher candidates exhibited an understanding of trauma-sensitive and asset-based approaches in their interactions with their RBSs while also critically evaluating theories in practice, where they were careful not to essentialize their understanding of RBSs and remained present to the emerging needs of individual students. Third, the teacher candidates developed critical consciousness as they witnessed systemic oppression and exclusion within the curriculum, challenged their own assumptions and biases about students, and reflected on their positionality and developing teacher identity.

Sense-Making of Trauma-Sensitive and Asset-Based Approaches in Practice

The seminar course introduced teacher candidates to historical and contemporary frameworks that foreground trauma-sensitive, culturally sustaining, and linguistically responsive approaches to working with RBSs. These theoretical perspectives provided essential grounding, yet candidates consistently noted that the richest learning occurred through direct tutoring interactions, which was laden with temporal and contextual “messiness”. The seminar readings introduced teacher candidates to trauma-sensitive and culturally responsive frameworks that encouraged them to approach their work with RBSs through a compassionate, asset-based lens.

Trauma-Sensitive Approaches

Although the teacher candidates were not professionally trained in trauma-informed practices from a clinical perspective in the seminar, through readings and seminar discussions, we noted that the teacher candidates demonstrated more cognizance and sensitivity to possible pre-arrival trauma through mindfulness of and respect for their tutees’ differential experiences. While trauma-informed approaches are associated with clinical practice (Chudzik et al., 2026; Downey & Greco, 2023; Nicholson, et al., 2019), trauma-sensitive practices are more aligned with school (McConnico et al., 2016) and classroom environments prioritize “a safe and supportive community that enables both students and adults to feel safe, build caring relationships with one another, regulate their feelings and behaviors as well as learn” (Alexander, 2019, p. 94). Though trauma-informed and trauma-sensitive approaches may appear interchangeably in the literature, we have decided to use trauma-sensitive approaches throughout to clearly demarcate the work of professionally trained clinicians and counselors from the work of teachers. The literature highlights the importance of bridging the interconnected school ecosystem from leadership, teachers, paraprofessionals, staff, to the school’s mental health services to provide optimal support for RBSs.

One teacher candidate shared about an assignment that a tutee brought to a session:

There was like a question that asked, you know, “What’s the hardest thing that you’ve ever been through or had to overcome?” and so, I thought, “Okay, so maybe instead of me asking her, you know, ‘What’s the hardest thing?’ I can say ‘What’s a challenge?’” . . . and sorta clarifying that you don’t have to talk about the hardest thing you’ve ever went through.

Several teacher candidates alluded to the importance of ensuring their interactions or conversations with their tutees did not make their tutees “uncomfortable” or trigger trauma about life prior to the United States, where “people were not treated humanely” or where the experiences may have been “horrific.” This subtle shift illustrates their emerging skill in creating emotionally safe spaces for dialogue. This capacity to recognize and respond to students’ emotional states reflects what social-emotional learning scholarship identifies as a core pedagogical competency: the ability to attune to students’ affective needs and create conditions of psychological safety before academic engagement can meaningfully occur (Cho et al., 2019; Pentón Herrera et al., 2022).

At the same time, relational investment and co-construction of knowledge became central to their approach. As one teacher candidate wrote:

[It is important to] really observe the learner that you are working with and sort of like cater your strategies to them and in doing that is, you know, is taking into account their previous learning experiences . . . it requires like you know personal investment to dialogue with them and stuff like that.

The teacher candidates emphasized the importance of observing students carefully and tailoring their strategies to suit individual needs, reflecting a commitment to co-construct knowledge through meaningful dialogue, highlighting that teaching these students is as much about building trust and empathy as it is about academic content.

The teacher candidates also recognized the socio-emotional dimensions of tutoring, acknowledging moments when students needed to pause academic work to process emotions. One teacher candidate described how sessions sometimes shifted focus when students needed to talk about unrelated personal experiences, illustrating the holistic nature of trauma-sensitive pedagogy. This illustrates a foundational principle of both trauma-sensitive pedagogy and socio-emotional learning, where relational trust and emotional attunement are not peripheral to pedagogy, but situated very much within it (Cho et al., 2019; Custodio & O’Loughlin, 2020).

Sometimes I felt based on how a session was going that the student needed time to talk about something completely unrelated to the assignment. They needed to, they were having some sort of emotional experience and they needed to talk about that.

Navigating Cultural Tension Points and Deepening Responsiveness

In addition, the teacher candidates grappled with the challenges of cultural responsiveness beyond surface-level engagement. Though the teacher candidates cited consideration of student cultures, they were negotiating norms, intersectional identities, and capital with their tutees. One teacher candidate was initially taken aback by the lack of boundaries around space where she felt students were touching her things without her permission:

[T]hey just like grab my things. It's really like a sensitive topic to like say something about this. I cannot like make like a decision . . . a statement about them. For example, I cannot say they are rude or something because maybe it's different.

She realized that she could not characterize others' behaviors solely on her own understanding of what she considered normative. Another teacher candidate began to become conscious about selecting relevant materials and her appearance as she engaged with Muslim students:

I tried to think really carefully about the materials that I used like when I brought in reading assignments, so I used Teaching Tolerance . . . I felt like that those were the things I did to like be culturally responsive, but I also found that there was like a lot of things that like I didn't know cause I—she was Muslim and there's some things I didn't know about like the Muslim religion so I know they need to like dress conservatively but you now like one time I went in like a tank top shirt and I was like—after I left I was like, “Oh I hope that was okay that I was tutoring like this.”

It became clear to the teacher candidates that viewing culture as a lens for selecting materials and being responsive to potential behavioral differences was helpful but insufficient. As one teacher candidate framed it, “it was surface level.” She stated,

It's really easy to show interest and appreciation in the small “c” part of culture. “Please tell me about your food, oh tell me about how you say this, oh tell me about the way you dance, tell me about the clothes you wear”—those things are easy. It's the big things, the values.

She tried to frame questions and conversations from a sense of “genuine curiosity” of the culture the students were bringing into the classroom “in the moment.” However, she realized that she did not learn in class how to address the deeper value systems. For example, in a conversation with her tutees regarding her own lived experience, “It was an ‘Oh my God! What is wrong with you?’ because I am not married, because I don't have children.” In this way, it appears negotiating culture and value systems became important to this teacher candidate.

The teacher candidates also brought students' languages into their sessions. Two teacher candidates spoke Arabic and used this knowledge of the tutees' home language as a resource in their tutoring experiences. One teacher candidate shared that though he did not know his

tutee's language, when his tutee had difficulty grasping a term, they would look up the word together through Google Translate. He went on to say,

[When] implementing translanguaging into our tutoring session, for one, he thought it was crazy and the other Tanzanian students in the class would hear us say, me saying some Tanzanian words and they thought it was really interesting. They thought it was crazy that we were bringing their language into the classroom.

In terms of access to the academic material, one teacher candidate shared how she was conscious about the importance of scaffolding learning for her students: "Because they are in the beginning stage, I don't want to use too many big words because we want to break it down so that they understand and then maybe step by step, [introduce] other words that come with that."

The teacher candidates recognized the assets and capital their tutees brought into the classroom but also shared concerns that teachers at the high schools may not be aware of their students' linguistic backgrounds and academic levels. For example, one teacher candidate stated,

[T]he reading material she was assigned was far too advanced for her reading level. I am having trouble understanding how she could properly complete this assignment and learn the material she needs to know when it is so difficult. If we could have kept working, I think I would have focused more on showing her how to skim and scan for answers rather than going sentence by sentence to clarify the meaning of the readings. . . . I'm interested to know if this student's teacher is aware of her linguistic background.

It was clear that the teacher candidates' approach demonstrated a developing balance between honoring students' assets and navigating the complexities of trauma, culture, and identity. This was an ongoing process that pushed them to challenge deficit-based models and embrace justice-oriented, relational pedagogy. While they valued incorporating students' languages and cultural practices as assets, such as using Arabic or translanguaging strategies, they realized that understanding deeper cultural values and norms required ongoing reflection and learning, revealing how cultural humility is essential to avoid essentializing or stereotyping.

Navigating Challenges While Addressing RBSs' Academic Needs

The teacher candidates reported frustration where planning was challenging due to temporal and contextual constraints. Because this was an after school voluntary tutoring program, our teacher candidates would see students inconsistently, and some students wanted immediate support with impending assignments rather than work on ongoing linguistic and skill development. One teacher candidate stated,

When I went there, I had an impression that I would have some time to use things that I planned myself, like lessons, activities. I wanted to do that, but like they're all in so much of a rush, like they wanted to finish their homework and get out of there.

The teacher candidates also identified instructional strategies and materials they could provide to support their tutees, including developing vocabulary, unpacking prompts, and employing reading strategies; while leveraging student background knowledge, making connections to make content relevant, and ensuring they do not contribute to any additional harm. The teacher candidates also demonstrated an understanding of potentially limited or interrupted education for these students to identify their needs as they supported them with their assignments, “realizing that there are things we have to teach them first in order for them to go to the next level.” A teacher candidate shared this awareness of identifying student needs and building from that by stating, “I would love to do some reading work, with texts that are more appropriate for her level.”

Even with the temporal and contextual challenges, the teacher candidates were able to work with their students and their needs as they emerged in the moment, recognizing that with consistency and longer time periods with the students could have provided deeper learning opportunities.

Developing Critical Consciousness through Reflexive Engagement

Through their direct tutoring experiences, teacher candidates began to cultivate a critical consciousness that foregrounded an awareness of systemic oppression, inequity, and their own positionality as emerging educators. This process was neither linear nor easy, but rather an ongoing journey marked by moments of discomfort, questioning, and transformation.

Schools as Spaces of Continual Harm

The teacher candidates repeatedly raised concerns about the disconnect between their tutees' existing academic, experiential, and linguistic understandings and what their tutees were expected to produce for their teachers at the high schools in which they tutored. One teacher candidate reflected on the impact of gaps in formal education with her tutee from Somalia:

These gaps, and lack of access can create frustrations and difficulties for students who are then enrolled into the American education system and expected to meet state standards. The background of these students should be explored and considered when teaching them and helping them become accustomed to life and education in their new homes.

One teacher candidate felt the teacher was culturally insensitive by assigning his tutee a paper on practicing freedom of speech:

I felt her sense of embarrassment and alienation when she expressed that she never practiced freedom of speech. For a teacher, the fact that freedom of speech is an existing right in the dominant culture can draw freedom of speech as the norm for all students. However, that is not the case as many refugee-background students come from countries where freedom of speech is a dream or a wish.

This experience informed his understanding of how to think about designing his future lessons to “serve and attend to all students’ cultural, academic and emotional needs,” noting that “cultural insensitivity can trigger traumatic memories that can alienate students.”

Leveraging Students’ Lived Experiences

Finding relevance and resonance with tutees’ lived experiences is another important area that teacher candidates garnered as they reflected on their tutees’ assignments. One teacher candidate wrote:

Most of the homework that the student needed help with did not value students’ knowledge and experience just as Omerbašić (2018) found formal schooling to be. It was mostly reflecting on the form of language or on looking for answers in texts and movies. Therefore, there was a noticeable shift in the student’s level of engagement once she was asked to write an essay that reflected on her experience [...] By being part of that experience, integrating students’ funds of knowledge in every lesson has become at the top of my teaching strategy list.

The teacher candidate similarly found “that students were in need of much more scaffolding and culturally relevant teaching. This reminded me of the literature because it suggested that students would greatly benefit from course material that they found relevant to them.” In the literature assigned to the teacher candidates in this course, culturally relevant teaching, particularly for RB-SLIFE, moves beyond surface-level cultural acknowledgment to center students’ lived histories, linguistic repertoires, and funds of knowledge as the primary instructional resource (Casanova & Alvarez, 2022; Custodio & O’Loughlin, 2017; DeCapua et al., 2020; Molina, 2026; Pirbhai-Illich et al., 2017). As the data in this section illustrates, culturally responsive and sustaining teaching included designing tasks that invite students to draw on their own experiences as content, using translanguaging as a pedagogical tool, and remaining responsive to the onto-epistemologies students bring.

In a portfolio reflection, a teacher candidate shared concerns about the academic scaffolds required and the ways centering tutees’ lived experiences can unleash their creativity:

She left with a better understanding of who James Baldwin was and wrote her own poem. I was again concerned about the lack of scaffolding and explanations that the student had received beforehand. I also thought that some of the questions and material in the assignment were too advanced for the students' reading and writing levels. If we had more time to work together, I would have liked to discuss the poem more to make sure that she truly grasped the message behind it. I enjoyed helping her with her own poem, since it was a way for her to express her creativity.

These experiences deepened the candidate's understanding of how dominant curricular assumptions can inadvertently retraumatize and marginalize students, which really highlights the importance of culturally and emotionally responsive teaching.

Engaging in Critical Self-Reflexivity

Critical self-reflexivity also emerged as a powerful theme. Candidates acknowledged how prior assumptions, often shaped by previous experiences, exposure to media and literature, or personal biases, were challenged and sometimes discarded entirely through lived interactions with their tutees. One teacher candidate shared,

I went in and actually met some of these students and realized that even the assumptions that I had that were based on that research were, in a lot of cases, were just not, I mean, it was, I, I had to throw a lot of that out the window.

She also found that instead of feeling “grateful” or “happy” to have navigated their way out of the refugee situation and to be in the United States, she learned that “this was just a place they needed to be and they were all waiting to go.” She found that she needed to engage in a constant (metacognitive) “process of figuring out—how do I understand? How do I account for this and prevent this from happening again without even knowing it is happening?” This teacher candidate candidly shared how her initial stereotypes dissolved once she met the students, prompting a continual metacognitive process of “figuring out” how to truly understand and support them without unknowingly causing harm.

This reflexivity extended to power dynamics in the classroom. One teacher candidate cautioned how important it was to be aware of the power dynamics present in a learning and teaching context. She recalled being “checked” by the tutees when they realized her “savior” messaging in her work with them:

I thought that I would be looking at ways I could help students have something they did not have, and as I spoke with them and worked with them and saw how they were using their time and energy, I saw, oh no no no . . . they are fully versed in this skill, they know how to use it, they are just not using it in a way I think they should, which is not the same thing.

Many teacher candidates connected their developing critical consciousness to their own identities, recognizing how their race, gender, and linguistic backgrounds shaped their perspectives and teaching approaches. For example, one teacher candidate said, “Especially as a woman of color and a student of color, I can identify how useful these practices (e.g. responsive pedagogy) would be in the classroom.” Likewise, another teacher candidate considered her own lived experiences as a language learner and some social issues she encountered. Her tutee was then able to bridge her own experiences with the book’s content. These examples reflect how responsive pedagogy resonated deeply with her own experience, reinforcing the importance of equity-minded teaching that centers students’ lived realities.

Perhaps most importantly, the teacher candidates recognized their tutees as experts and were the source and resource to best understand and respond to their immediate, emerging, and long-term goals. The relationship shifted from a unidirectional “savior” model to a reciprocal process where students became the teachers of their tutors, guiding them consciously and unconsciously to reconsider assumptions and expand their understandings. This move away from “saving” students toward “partnering” with them serves as tangible evidence of their developing critical consciousness and a direct answer to how their practices shifted through praxis. This transformation of the hearts and minds of the teacher candidates affirmed the foundational role of critical consciousness in fostering social justice pedagogy, where educators are continually challenged to interrogate power, privilege, and exclusion within educational spaces.

DISCUSSION

As teacher educators who are multilingual, South Asian scholars with transnational histories, we approached the interpretation of these findings from a position of embodied understanding of the complexities of navigating language, culture, and identity across educational contexts. One of us was born and raised in Japan to South Asian parents who, in the aftermath of post-partition India, experienced displacement as refugees in their own country and later became part of the global diaspora. She was educated in an American English-medium school and brings a transnational lens to the preparation of language teachers. The other author, a Fulbright visiting scholar from multilingual and multicultural Assam, India at the time of this study, was herself navigating the experience of living and working in the United States during the very semester this course was taught. We recognize that these intersecting positionalities did not make us insiders to our teacher candidates’ or tutees’ specific experiences, and we, of course,

do not presume equivalence between our histories and those of RB-SLIFE who have survived displacement, trauma, and interrupted schooling. Rather, our experiences attuned us to the nuances of our teacher candidates' sense-making in ways that shaped our interpretive lens throughout this study.

The findings of this study offer a direct response to the first research question by illustrating how teacher candidates moved beyond deficit-based understandings of RBSs toward a more nuanced, asset-based pedagogical framework. Throughout this course, the teacher candidates experienced a profound deepening of their conceptualization of culture, challenging theoretical frameworks that essentialized culture and problematizing their preconceived notions of culture. They recognized the fluidity of culture (Molina, 2013), acknowledging that their tutees' and their own identities are shaped by multiple intersections (Crenshaw, 1991) and experiences that influence the contextual space in which they found themselves. Within this space, they shared examples of ongoing negotiation and sense-making of the various systems of knowing and being. They also developed shared understandings through meaningful interactions, an open heart, and a genuine sense of curiosity as they designed intentional supports for their tutees on their academic tasks.

Through assigned readings and videos, the teacher candidates developed an understanding of potential prearrival trauma that some of their tutees may have experienced, and they approached their work with sensitivity, care, and a keen sense of ensuring they did not cause tutees further harm. Building on this foundational understanding, the power of engaging in real-world praxis tutoring RBSs in the local high schools supported our students to move between theory and practice, where they began to reconceptualize student potential using the architecture of the TEAM framework (Ramasubramanian et al., 2021). They recognized the limitations of their expertise and acknowledged that all they could do was listen, empathize, and design learning experiences that were meaningful and relevant to their students' unique experiences and interests. Through seminar discussions, they began acknowledging what they could do within their sphere of expertise and when to seek assistance and resources beyond their scope.

The teacher candidates who had experienced marginalization as immigrants or language learners themselves found resonance between their journeys and those of their tutees. This shared experience fostered a deeper connection as they could empathize with their students and use their existing and learned forms of capital in supporting tutees. Even the teacher candidates

who did not share similar experiences of marginalization used asset-based approaches such as translanguaging to center their tutees' linguistic backgrounds.

In addressing the second research question, the data demonstrates that the tutoring experience acted as a critical "tension point" that forced candidates to bridge the gap between seminar theory and classroom reality. This shift is most evident in how candidates began to confront their own biases. We did not anticipate the degree to which this opportunity afforded the teacher candidates a heightened sense of critical consciousness in confronting their biases and assumptions and recognizing persisting systems of oppression. They often questioned the implications of the assignments and prompts, addressing issues of "cultural insensitivity" and "lack of connection, relevance, and meaning" to their tutees' lived experiences. In addition, they learned how important it was to scaffold tutee learning by building background, providing contextual and conceptual understandings, and empowering their tutees to take the lead in their learning process. On the whole, we believe this tutoring experience afforded students the ability to enact elements of the TEAM framework (Ramasubramanian et al., 2021) in their praxis which (a) recognizes the dominant ideologies in education; (b) recognizes the effects of systemic trauma and aims not to retraumatize students; (c) builds trust and agency among students; and (d) focuses on equity-based and asset-based approaches rather than deficits.

By explicitly aligning these findings with our guiding research questions, a clear argumentative arc emerged. The seminar provided the necessary theoretical scaffolding, but the dialogical nature of the tutoring praxis was the primary driver of transformation. These results suggest that for teacher candidates, developing critical consciousness is not merely a cognitive shift reached through reading, but an embodied social practice refined through the "messy" reality of teaching in real-world contexts. By moving from a savior-oriented mindset to a relational model, candidates demonstrated a capacity to enact the very asset-based pedagogies required for equitable refugee education.

IMPLICATIONS FOR LANGUAGE TEACHER PREPARATION

There are several implications for teacher education programs in preparing teacher candidates to work with RBSs, including the importance of providing responsible and ethical preparation, opportunities for critical consciousness development, and a holding environment (Kegan, 1994) to express their vulnerabilities, challenges, and learning through self-introspection within the context of the seminar course.

In terms of working with RBSs, it was important for our teacher candidates to understand the potential trauma the students may have experienced and be cognizant of how to refrain from potentially retraumatizing them. The teacher candidates demonstrated sensitivity to this by refraining from inquiring about their tutees' past and being open to listening to tutees who wished to share their experiences.

The teacher candidates also learned about asset-based pedagogies, theory, and praxis while learning from their students as sources and resources. Being aware of their tutees' potential for having experienced limited or interrupted schooling and varying levels of proficiency in the English language, the teacher candidates engaged in constant needs assessments leveraging student assets, using these as resources to build their lessons upon. The teacher candidates engaged in planning for their tutees but remained open and flexible to changes such as impending assignments coming due, which required dedicated time during the tutoring session and irregularity in their tutees' attendance. Although this proved frustrating at times, the teacher candidates learned it was important to remain present to their students' socio-emotional dimension and leverage the rich content and language they brought to each session, while also thinking about their tutees' learning across sessions.

Critical consciousness development is an under-researched area, particularly regarding teacher preparation. It was important to provide the teacher candidates with opportunities to examine their assumptions and biases regarding their students. Sometimes, this shift takes an experience or "aha" moment that shakes us to our core. The development of critical consciousness is personal and cyclical, and it takes a certain openness to unpack one's learning and re-enter this world with a new understanding or perspective. The teacher candidates demonstrated varying levels of critical consciousness development in the sharing of their learning, and reflections from the tutoring sessions often were revealed in the dialogic forum of the seminar sessions, which served as a space for mediation through feedback (Johnson & Golombek, 2011; Molina, 2021b).

Parallel to this self-introspection is the learning and unlearning of systems of oppression, particularly in educational contexts. The teacher candidates encountered myriad ways their tutees came up against Euro-American onto-epistemologies in the curriculum and the pedagogies and practices that were unfamiliar and offensive to their tutees. The teacher candidates found it important for their tutees' teachers to understand the perspective of their students and develop a socioculturally sensitive lens through which to analyze their curriculum and pedagogy.

This study revealed that learning occurs within an ecological context whereby the teacher candidates engage within complex personal, social, and political levels of understanding as they interact with their histories, texts, tutees, peers, and teacher educators as facilitators. In this study, the seminar served as a community of practice, whereby the teacher candidates had a holding environment (Kegan, 1994) to share their vulnerabilities and dialogue around questions, challenges, and concerns as they worked with their RBSs. Building relational trust with teacher educators and peers became essential to provide opportunities for growth and learning.

CONCLUSION

The seminar provided an invaluable opportunity for the teacher candidates to engage with RBSs, creating a dialogical space to reflect on and theorize their tutoring experiences in praxis. While teacher educators can attempt to prepare teacher candidates to work with RBSs through readings, videos, and discussions, these methods cannot replicate the depth of learning that comes from direct experiences with tutees.

It is important to acknowledge that the seminar did not fully equip the teacher candidates as they expressed some degree of unpreparedness and felt overwhelmed when faced with the challenge of effectively serving their tutees. However, despite their initial frustrations, the teacher candidates began to demonstrate an ability to quickly assess their tutees' immediate needs and set broader goals for their progress, particularly for those who attended the tutoring sessions regularly. Over the semester, the teacher candidates gradually developed a sense of confidence in their work with their tutees, as demonstrated in their lesson portfolios and reflections.

One notable aspect of teacher candidates' growth was their sense-making of trauma-sensitive and asset-based approaches in praxis undergirded by a sense of critical consciousness. They recognized the potential trauma of the tutees' prior experiences and approached their work with sensitivity, focusing on identifying and leveraging the students' strengths, agency, and capital. It became clear that the teacher candidates' goal was to support and empower the students to enact agency in their own learning.

The teacher candidates applied a cyclical approach of awareness, analysis, and action to their pedagogical practice. Through their work with RBSs, the teacher candidates became keenly aware of the potential historical trauma and complex realities of their tutees, who continued to experience oppression in their schools. This awareness prompted the teacher

candidates to critically examine their own practices and adapt them to better address their tutees' academic and socio-emotional needs.

Though the seminar and tutoring work brought challenges, they provided a transformative experience for the teacher candidates, and we hope for the tutees as well. Although the teacher candidates felt unprepared and overwhelmed at first, they gained confidence, adopting a trauma-sensitive, asset-based approach that prioritized tutees' strengths and well-being. They also developed a sense of humility where they recognized areas of growth in their own pedagogical practice and in the assumptions and biases they brought to this work. This heightened sense of critical awareness and deep thinking, we believe, will be instrumental in guiding how teacher candidates conceptualize and approach their work with students in any setting even amidst changing political landscapes wrought with uncertainty.

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