ASIA PACIFIC JOURNAL OF EDUCATION AND SOCIETY

Asia Pacific Journal of Education and Society, 2026, 14(1), Article 13
eISSN: 3177-7743

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Research paper

Resistance, Discomfort, and Belonging: Role-Play as a Pedagogical Strategy in ESOL Teacher Preparation

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Citation: Halpern, C., Yantorn, B., Mendez, L., & Castañeda, M. (2026). Resistance, discomfort, and belonging: Role-play as a pedagogical strategy in ESOL teacher preparation. *Asia Pacific Journal of Education and Society, 14*(1), Article 13. https://doi.org/10.20897/apjes/18738

Published: June 10, 2026

ABSTRACT

This qualitative case study explored how preservice teachers in an undergraduate ESOL course in Spring 2025 at a College of Education in Southwest Florida engaged with a classroom role-play activity designed around intersecting student identities, raising questions about teachers' attitudes toward students whose language backgrounds, racial and ethnic identities, family circumstances, and other dimensions of experience shape their participation and belonging in school. Grounded in theories of identity, power, and teaching as a reflective practice, the study examines how role-play can support preservice teachers in reflecting on their attitudes and assumptions as they prepare to teach multilingual learners. The activity involved preservice teachers working in small groups to develop and perform school-based scenarios based on randomly assigned intersecting identities drawn from a range of dimensions, including race/ethnicity, gender, language background, religion, socioeconomic status, and disability. Data sources included classroom observations, debriefing discussion notes, and individual written reflections. Four themes were constructed using thematic analysis: resistance, discomfort, empathy, and recognition of opportunity. While some preservice teachers expressed initial hesitation or skepticism, others found the experience meaningful, particularly those who related personally to the scenarios. The findings suggest that role-play may be a useful pedagogical strategy in teacher preparation, as it provides a structured space for preservice teachers to engage with the complexities of teaching students from different backgrounds and to begin reflecting on their responsibilities as future educators.

Keywords: teacher preparation, role-play, ESOL, case study, qualitative study

Preparing high-quality teachers who can meet the needs of students with different cultural and linguistic backgrounds remains a central challenge in U.S. teacher education (Lucas & Villegas, 2011; Sleeter, 2001). Many K–12 classrooms include students whose lives are shaped by intersecting language backgrounds, racial/ethnic identities, migration trajectories, economic conditions, and (dis)ability experiences (García & Kleifgen, 2010; Yuval-Davis, 2011). At the same time, the teaching force is still largely homogeneous: 77% female and 80% White (Pew Research Center, 2024), and predominantly middle-class, monolingual English speakers who were educated in environments quite different from the classrooms they teach (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021, 2022). This demographic and experiential gap does not signal ill intent or a deficit (Gorski, 2016); it indicates that many preservice teachers enter preparation programs having had little meaningful contact with communities whose linguistic, cultural, socioeconomic, and even immigration backgrounds differ from their own (Kim et al., 2024).

Preservice teachers' own life histories and social positions influence how they perceive and respond to their students, alongside coursework, prior schooling, family narratives, community norms, and broader discourses about race, language, and immigration (Freeman et al., 2021; Gorski, 2016; Kim et al., 2024). For preservice teachers with limited experience in multicultural and multilingual communities, it can be difficult to see how power and privilege operate in everyday classroom interactions (Crenshaw, 1991; Yuval-Davis, 2011). Consequently, a central task for teacher education should be to help them develop the self-awareness, knowledge, and pedagogical dispositions needed to teach children whose lives and identities may be quite different from their own (Halpern, Aydin, Halpern, Franz, & Parks, 2026; Halpern, Trunfio, & Aydin, 2024).

In the United States, teacher preparation programs typically combine coursework and field experiences in local schools, guided by state standards. Among the required coursework, ESOL courses are designed to introduce second language acquisition, applied linguistics, and instructional strategies for multilingual learners (de Jong & Harper, 2005; TESOL International Association, 2019). Although these components are necessary to meet endorsement requirements, such as in Florida (Florida Department of Education, 2010), their scope is limited (Peña et al., 2018): they address second language learning theories and other linguistic dimension of multilingual learners' experiences, but do not always prepare preservice teachers to understand the broader conditions that shape how these students navigate and adapt to U.S. schooling. In other words, developing multilingual learners' English language proficiency corresponds to only one—and often the most visible—dimension of their school experiences (García & Kleifgen, 2010; Karataş & Oral, 2015). Multilingual learners may also be navigating questions of immigration status, racial and ethnic discrimination, socioeconomic hardship, religious difference, disability, and gender and sexual identity, all of which shape their participation, sense of safety, and belonging in school. Yet these dimensions are not always systematically addressed across teacher preparation programs and, when they are, tend to remain confined to individual courses rather than being treated as interconnected realities that future teachers need to understand (Halpern, Aydin, Halpern, Franz, & Parks, 2026; Halpern, Trunfio, & Aydin, 2024).

These concerns point to the need for pedagogical approaches in teacher education that intentionally address how intersecting identities shape students' school experiences (Crenshaw, 1991; Yuval-Davis, 2011). Such approaches ask preservice teachers to consider not just who their students are individually, but how race, language, class, disability, and other dimensions of their lives work together to shape what school feels like for them. Role-play is one approach that creates opportunities for experiential learning in the relative safety of the college classroom, where preservice teachers can rehearse interactions, try out responses, and receive feedback before facing similar situations in real schools (e.g., Alam et al., 2020; Schussler et al., 2017; Yoon, 2024). When scenarios center on intersecting identities, this rehearsal becomes more than a communication exercise: it asks preservice teachers to briefly inhabit perspectives quite different from their own and to examine the assumptions behind their decisions (Breese et al., 2023; Meedendorp & Deunk, 2024; Pearce, 2018). In that sense, role-play works on two levels, as an intellectual exercise and an affective one.

This study explored a role-play activity in an upper-level undergraduate ESOL course at a College of Education in Southwest Florida, in which small groups of preservice teachers developed and performed school-based scenarios based on randomly assigned intersecting identities, followed by a whole-class debriefing and individual reflections. The goal was to understand how this activity shaped preservice teachers' engagement with identity, privilege, and marginalization as they prepared to teach multilingual learners. Therefore, the study aimed to answer the following research questions:

1. How did preservice teachers experience and interpret a role-play activity centered on intersecting student identities?
2. How did their discussions and written reflections reveal shifts or tensions in their awareness of intersectionality, privilege, and marginalization in relation to teaching multilingual learners?
3. How did the role-play activity contribute to preservice teachers' sense of responsibility for fostering belonging and inclusion in classrooms with multilingual learners?

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section reviews research on role-play and drama-based pedagogies in education, focusing on how they are defined, used in teacher preparation, and connected to work with multilingual learners and students from different backgrounds. This body of scholarship provides a foundation for examining the role-play activity explored in this study.

In an article by Mehdiyev (2020), role-play was defined as the dramatization of an action, situation, or idea by one or more people, in which participants assume specific roles within an enacted scenario to develop skills and learn concepts. Similarly, Alam and colleagues (2020) described role-play as an active learning technique that engages students in imagined situations and drama-based activities, making learning more interesting and meaningful. These studies emphasize that role-play offers learners opportunities to practice communication in

social contexts and in roles different from their own, helping them step outside their comfort zones and experiment with new forms of expression. In this sense, role-play is understood as a participatory approach that demands active engagement, as students take on roles, make decisions, and interact with others rather than passively receiving information.

Previous studies have documented how role-play and drama-based approaches have been used in different ways and for different purposes across educational contexts. Schussler and colleagues (2017) examined virtual role-play to help teacher candidates manage bullying and improve classroom conversations, finding that repeated practice with simulated scenarios enabled candidates to refine their responses over time. Boggs and colleagues (2007) proposed interactive drama as an alternative to traditional role-plays, showing that observing and discussing dramatized cases helped students connect course theories to real-life situations. Yoon (2024) discussed drama-based pedagogy, including role-play, as a promising approach for preparing preservice teachers to navigate complex situations involving students from different backgrounds. What these studies share is the idea that role-play and drama create a space where learners can rehearse responses, examine assumptions, and reflect on social and educational dynamics before facing similar situations in real classrooms.

In addition, role-play has also been examined more specifically in the context of teacher preparation. Amirkhanova and Bobyreva (2020) and Kuzembayeva and colleagues (2023) found that role-play contributed to the development of communication skills among preservice teachers of English as a foreign language. Beyond communication skills, Meedendorp and Deunk (2024) showed that drama- and theatre-based approaches can help teachers develop greater awareness of how their classroom decisions affect students from different backgrounds. These studies point to role-play not only as a tool for rehearsing specific skills, but also as a space for critical reflection on how teachers relate to and respond to students whose experiences differ from their own (Mehdiyev, 2020).

Most relevant to the present study are works that focus on preparing teachers to work with multilingual learners and students from different backgrounds. Powers and Duffy (2018) examined the use of Theatre of the Oppressed to help preservice teachers recognize, confront, and challenge beliefs about their own identities and those of their future students, emphasizing the importance of acknowledging multiple identities within diverse classrooms. Breese et al. (2023) argued that developing awareness of individual, structural, and systemic racism and implicit bias is crucial for building classroom practices that are responsive to all students' needs. Similarly, Pearce (2018) discussed racial microaggressions as a tool for helping beginning teachers identify and challenge racism in schools, noting that many teacher education programs in England and the United States do not adequately prepare teachers for this work. What connects these studies is the idea that preparing future teachers to work with student populations from different backgrounds requires more than instructional strategies; it also requires teachers to examine their own beliefs, assumptions, and the ways in which identity and power shape everyday classroom interactions.

Research on role-play and drama-based pedagogies points to their potential to support teacher learning in meaningful ways, from rehearsing communication skills to fostering critical reflection on identity and power. At the same time, relatively few studies have examined role-play designed around intersecting student identities and focused specifically on preparing teachers to work with multilingual learners. This study addresses that gap by exploring how a role-play activity in an ESOL course shaped preservice teachers' engagement with questions of identity, belonging, and their responsibilities toward the multilingual learners they will one day teach.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study draws on Crenshaw's (1991) theory of intersectionality and hooks's (1994) writing on critical consciousness in education. Intersectionality was used to examine how different aspects of students' lives (e.g., language, race, disability, immigration status, socioeconomic position, gender, and sexuality) shape preservice teachers' perceptions and experiences teaching these students in school. It also highlights that preservice teachers do not stand outside these dynamics: their own social positions and histories influence how they interpret students' behaviors, needs, and possibilities.

hooks (1994) conceptualized teaching as a practice of freedom in which students and teachers work together to develop critical consciousness; that is, they become more aware of how power operates in everyday life and commit to acting against the conditions that produce injustice. This process is relational and affective, involving discomfort, the questioning of internalized beliefs, and ethical engagement with others' experiences. In teacher preparation, this means creating spaces where preservice teachers can examine ideas such as who counts as a "good student," what a "normal family" looks like, or which ways of speaking are treated as "standard," and connect these ideas to longer histories of exclusion.

Within this framework, role-play was not treated as a substitute for the lived experiences of marginalized communities, but as a reflective practice that made visible how preservice teachers made sense of situations, positioned students and families, and imagined their responsibilities as educators. Thus, the analysis that followed

focused less on the "accuracy" of the representations created and more on what these representations and the conversations around them reveal about how preservice teachers are beginning to engage with intersectionality, power, and the politics of belonging (Yuval-Davis, 2011) in the context of teaching multilingual learners.

METHOD AND RESEARCH DESIGN

This study used a qualitative case study design (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) to examine how a role-play activity supported preservice teachers' engagement with intersectionality as they prepared to teach multilingual learners in one upper-level ESOL course at a public university in Southwest Florida. A case study design was chosen to allow an in-depth account of how this activity unfolded in the course and how participants made sense of it, drawing on multiple data sources rather than on standardized measures or pre-/post-comparisons. Details about the course, setting, and role-play implementation are provided in the Case Setting section below.

The study is situated within an interpretivist and constructivist epistemology, in which knowledge is understood as socially constructed and context dependent (Crotty, 1998; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Preservice teachers' reflections are treated as partial and situated accounts of how they understood the role-play, shaped by the course dynamics and the researchers' positions in the classroom.

Case setting

The study was conducted in an upper-level undergraduate Foundations of ESOL course offered in Spring 2025 at a public university in Southwest Florida. The course is part of the requirements for preservice teachers' ESOL endorsement in Florida. It covers topics in second language acquisition theories, applied linguistics, cross-cultural communication, and teaching practices responsive to students' different backgrounds.

Course texts and activities addressed the education of multilingual learners through textbook chapters, peer-reviewed articles, discussions, in-class activities, small-group work, written reflections, and field experience in local K–12 schools. The role-play activity, the focus of this study, took place in two consecutive modules (Weeks 4 and 5) on teacher attitudes toward multilingual learners, following introductory work on ESOL policy, foundational concepts, and the role of culture in teaching. In these modules, students examined cultural deficit explanations and assumptions of genetic inferiority (Freeman et al., 2021), implicit bias and microaggressions (Sue, 2010), and broader factors that shape teachers' attitudes toward students from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds (e.g., Pettit, 2011; Reeves, 2006), using readings, guided discussions, and reflective activities to interrogate their own beliefs.

By the time the role-play was introduced in Week 5, preservice teachers had been working together for over a month, which meant they had already developed rapport with one another and with the instructor. That relational foundation of trust mattered for an activity that required publicly performing scenarios and reflecting on their own assumptions and experiences.

Participants and ethical considerations

Participants were selected through convenience sampling, as they were preservice teachers enrolled in two sections of an ESOL course taught by the first author. A total of 47 preservice teachers agreed to participate and signed informed consent forms. Most participants were majoring in Early Childhood Education or Elementary Education; the remaining preservice teachers majored in Child and Youth Studies (n = 6), Special Education (n = 5), Integrated Studies (n = 1), and there was one graduate student in English. A few reported minors in Spanish (n = 2), History (n = 1), and Psychology (n = 1).

Consistent with patterns in the U.S. teaching force, participants were predominantly female, with three identifying as males. While most participants self-identified as white, U.S.-born, and monolingual English speakers, other participants identified as Black (Haitian heritage and African American), Hispanic/Latino, South Asian, and Eastern European. A few reported bilingual language histories (e.g., Spanish, Malayalam, Polish, German, Russian). Five participants identified as members of the LGBTQ+ community. Given the small numbers in each category, demographic details are reported only in aggregate to protect participants' confidentiality. In the findings section, participants are referred to by codes such as PST-1, PST-2, …, where PST stands for preservice teacher.

The study received approval from the authors' university's Institutional Review Board prior to the start of the semester (Protocol #2025-14). Preservice teachers were invited to participate in the research at the end of the semester. This was a deliberate methodological choice, as waiting until the semester was nearly over to introduce the research component, the first author aimed to ensure that preservice teachers produced their reflections and participated in the activity without knowing their work might become data. This delayed consent procedure was designed to minimize the risk of social desirability bias, as participants were less likely to shape their responses based on what they thought a researcher might want to hear. The first author, who served as the course instructor

and principal investigator, explained the study and emphasized that participation was voluntary and would not affect participants' grades or standing, as the semester had already ended and final grades had been submitted.

Role play activity

The role-play activity was designed to give participants a structured opportunity to explore how intersecting aspects of K–12 students' identities and circumstances shape their school experiences through concrete classroom scenarios. At the start of the session, participants were introduced to the idea that school experiences are shaped by multiple, overlapping dimensions of students' lives, including language, race, disability, socioeconomic status, religion, and gender. They also watched and briefly discussed Adichie's (2009) "The danger of a single story" to consider how classroom practices can reinforce or disrupt stereotypical portrayals of students and how teachers' responses may challenge or reproduce patterns of exclusion.

Participants were randomly placed in small groups, each assigned to one of seven scenarios (Table 1). Each scenario presented a classroom situation involving an elementary, middle, or high school student whose background and circumstances could affect their participation or sense of belonging if not addressed thoughtfully. The scenarios varied by grade level and instructional context and were designed to prompt attention to different aspects of students' lives and identities without claiming to represent any group's experiences comprehensively.

Each group developed a short 5-minute skit to perform. Groups decided how to distribute roles and how to portray the situation and were asked to include: (a) the interaction described in the scenario, (b) strategies a teacher might use to support the student in an inclusive way, and (c) possible outcomes or solutions that could foster safety and belonging. Beyond these guidelines, groups had substantial creative freedom. Because the class met for three hours, planning and performance occurred within a single session; the compressed timeline was intentional, aiming to elicit preservice teachers' initial interpretations rather than polished performances.

Table 1

Summary of role-play scenarios prompts

Scenario	Grade level	Classroom context/ instructional setting	Student and contextual factors
1	3rd grade	Small-group read-aloud activity during literacy instruction	Diego is a Latino multilingual student with ADHD; the scenario focuses on how his participation and behavior are interpreted and supported during a guided reading task.
2	Kindergarten	Whole-class celebration of a classmate's birthday	Kai is a Haitian American bilingual student on the autism spectrum; the scenario addresses sensory needs, social interaction, and ways to make classroom celebrations inclusive.
3	4th grade	Classroom assignment to create a family tree	Sophia is a Black and Hispanic student in foster care; the scenario addresses how assumptions about "traditional" family structures may affect students' experiences.
4	6th	Class is preparing for a field trip that requires a $15 payment	Maria is a Latina multilingual student whose family faces financial constraints; the scenario highlights how fees and school costs can create barriers and stigma if not addressed thoughtfully.
5	5th	Class discussion about family traditions	Fatima is a student whose religious practice is visibly expressed through her wearing a hijab; the scenario explores how religious and cultural backgrounds are acknowledged in class discussions and how teachers can respond to peer curiosity without singling out or stereotyping students.
6	4th	Class discussion of rules for playing kickball at recess	Theo is a Brazilian deaf student who uses Brazilian Sign Language; the scenario centers on access to communication, peer interaction, and participation.
7	9th	Student presentations for a "Who Am I?" project	Taylor is a biracial student whose gender expression and sense of self do not fit conventional expectations; the scenario examines how teachers can acknowledge and respect students' identities during classroom activities about self and identity.

Note. These scenarios were designed as pedagogical vignettes to center particular intersections of identity and school contexts; they do not seek to represent any group's experiences comprehensively, but to prompt discussion about how preservice teachers might respond in more or less inclusive ways.

This was the first semester in which the role-play activity was incorporated into the course. It was added after several iterations of the course, when the first author observed that traditional readings-and-discussion formats, even when paired with field observations, were insufficient to foster experiential and reflexive engagement with questions of identity, power, and teacher attitudes toward multilingual learners. The activity aligned with the course objectives and with the instructor's commitment to integrating critical, experience-based reflection into teacher preparation.

Data collection

Data for this case study were collected from multiple sources to examine how preservice teachers experienced and interpreted the role-play and how they articulated teachers' attitudes toward multilingual learners. Three primary sources were used: (a) observational notes taken during the role-play session, (b) notes from the whole-class debriefing discussion, and (c) individual written reflection papers completed after the activity. Using complementary sources is consistent with qualitative case study approaches that seek an in-depth, contextualized understanding of a bounded case (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

During the class session, the first and fourth authors observed small-group work as preservice teachers planned and performed their skits, taking brief notes on questions raised, decisions about how to portray the students and teachers in the scenarios, and visible reactions to the backgrounds and circumstances described. Additional notes documented how groups represented classroom interactions, the strategies they chose to highlight, and signs of discomfort, resistance, or empathy. Immediately after the performances, a guided debriefing discussion invited participants to comment on what they noticed, identify supportive or problematic strategies, and raise questions about assumptions embedded in the scenarios. Notes from this discussion captured key comments, patterns in responses, and moments when questions of power and privilege were named or resisted.

Finally, all participants completed an individual written reflection as a course assignment. They were asked to describe their experience with the skit, explain their group's decisions about characters and dialogue, and discuss how the activity influenced their thinking about working with students from different backgrounds whose lives extend beyond the language classroom. They were also prompted to connect the role-play to course readings on teacher attitudes. These reflection papers were a central data source, providing insight into how preservice teachers interpreted the activity, understood their responsibilities as future educators, and related the role-play to broader course concepts.

Data analysis

The data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Finlay, 2002), consistent with the study's interpretivist, constructivist, and critical orientation. The analysis focused on how preservice teachers made sense of the role-play activity, articulated their attitudes toward multilingual learners, and engaged with questions of identity, privilege, and belonging.

The analysis followed an inductive approach, with codes and patterns developing from repeated and close engagement with the data rather than from a predetermined framework. The research team engaged in an iterative process of repeated readings of observational notes, debriefing notes, and reflection papers to become familiar with the dataset, noting recurrent issues and key language (Nowell et al., 2017). Initial codes were developed collaboratively by the first and fourth authors, drawing on their shared observations during the role-play activity and their familiarity with the course context. Because participants' written reflections were submitted as course assignments, only the first author, as the course instructor, had access to them; consequently, the subsequent phases of analysis, including organizing codes into themes and their review and refinement, were conducted by her. Coding attended to explicit statements and how participants positioned themselves in relation to multilingual learners and questions of identity, power, and privilege. The codes were examined for patterns and organized into themes (Braun & Clarke, 2019) that summarized how preservice teachers experienced the role-play activity and understood its relevance for practice. Initial themes were reviewed and refined (Nowell et al., 2017), resulting in four themes.

This approach to analysis is consistent with reflexive thematic analysis, in which the researcher's active role in constructing themes is acknowledged rather than minimized. Accordingly, inter-coder reliability procedures were not applied, as they would be inconsistent with the epistemological foundations of this study (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Throughout the analysis, the research team used reflexive discussions and written memos to consider how their perspectives and prior experiences shaped their interpretations. Trustworthiness was ensured by an emphasis on credibility and analytic transparency (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), supported by multiple data sources, repeated readings, and iterative movement between data and themes. The goal was not neutrality, but a coherent interpretation centered on participants' words and attentive to how questions of identity, power, and belonging were negotiated in the role-play context.

Positionality

The first author approaches teacher education from a perspective shaped by both professional and personal experience. Theoretically, her work is grounded in Freire's (1970) understanding of education as a practice that demands critical reflection, hooks's (1994) commitment to teaching as a relational and transformative process, and Bartolomé's (1994) critique of teacher preparation programs that prioritize methods and strategies over the critical examination of assumptions, beliefs, and the ideological positions that inform how teachers perceive and respond to students from different backgrounds. In her view, learning to teach involves more than acquiring techniques; it requires developing the self-awareness and critical disposition to understand how one's own experiences and social position shape what happens in the classroom.

This perspective is also informed by her own trajectory. She grew up in Brazil, occupying a position of social privilege (i.e., white, middle class, educated), where the structures of exclusion and discrimination that shaped others' lives did not directly affect her own. Her awareness of these issues developed gradually, shaped first by her upbringing and the values instilled by her family, and later through professional work in undergraduate student recruitment for competitive internships and entry-level jobs, where she observed how selection processes systematically excluded candidates based on criteria rooted in race, socioeconomic status, gender and sexual orientation, religion, and school prestige. Moving to the United States deepened this awareness in a more personal way: as a Brazilian immigrant, a woman, and a speaker of English as an additional language, she found herself positioned as a minority in ways she had not previously experienced. She has also been categorized as Latina by institutional and social structures in the U.S., a label that does not reflect her own sense of identity and an experience that itself illustrates how social categories are externally imposed and contested rather than simply descriptive, which is central to the theoretical framework of this study. As an adjunct instructor, she also navigates the institutional margins of the academy, an experience that informs her attentiveness to questions of access, belonging, and power.

These experiences, combined with years of teaching undergraduate ESOL courses and listening to students from minority backgrounds describe feeling unseen and unrepresented in their teacher preparation programs, led to the design of the role-play activity examined in this study. Over multiple iterations of the course, the first author observed that preservice teachers tended to approach multilingual learners primarily as a pedagogical challenge to be solved through the right methods and strategies, rather than as whole persons whose lives, identities, and circumstances demand a more critically informed response. The role-play was designed as one attempt to create space for a different kind of engagement.

The remaining authors were students or advisees of the first author who contributed to different phases of the project. The second and third authors joined the project after data collection had been completed and did not participate in the role-play session; both were interested in gaining research experience and contributed primarily to the literature review, as well as helping select participants' quotes for the publication and participating in discussions of the study's theoretical foundations. Finally, the fourth author, a former student who now teaches in a K–12 multilingual classroom, collaborated with the first author on designing the role-play activity and its scenarios, and observed group work during the session, assisting with the initial interpretation of the data analysis.

FINDINGS

Four themes were constructed using thematic analysis: resistance, discomfort, empathy, and recognition of opportunity. Some participants expressed hesitation or skepticism about the activity, while others found the experience meaningful, especially when they related personally to the scenarios. The subsections below present each theme.

Theme one: Resistance

This theme describes moments when participants limited how far they were willing to examine their own assumptions. The resistance was subtle: it appeared in how reflections were framed, what participants emphasized, and what they avoided. Several participants later acknowledged that the scenarios they created relied on stereotypes. One participant reflecting on a skit about Sophia wrote, "the assumptions we brought to our role from the teacher were that he asked Sophia if her parents were deported because she was Hispanic" (PST-4). This recognition came only afterward, illustrating how quickly some groups linked ethnicity, immigration status, and deficit narratives when crafting their scripts. In this case, Sophia's ethnicity and presumed family circumstances were combined in ways that reflect how race and immigration status tend to operate together in how students are perceived and misread by their teachers.

In other cases, participants named an assumption but did not explore why they held it or how it might shape their work as future teachers. A participant who played a parent wrote, "I kind of assumed that [the mother] would be able to communicate with the teacher easily, but this isn't always the case" (PST-15). Such comments

acknowledged an assumption without considering its origins or implications. Similar one-sentence reflections appeared throughout the data, with little exploration of how these expectations form or how they might influence future practice.

Some participants turned to broad statements about fairness that avoided questions of power and difference. One participant concluded that "the most important rule is to care for all of your students equally, so they do not feel left out or different. We treat them with equity when making lessons or activities that address their needs" (PST-10). While well-intentioned, this language does not consider how language background, race, disability, and family context shape what fairness looks like in real classrooms. In several reflections, "treat everyone the same" became the final answer, allowing participants to affirm good intentions without examining why some students feel "left out" in the first place.

Resistance also appeared in how some groups used their "creative freedom." In the scenario involving Diego, a Latino multilingual learner with ADHD, the group portrayed the teacher largely ignoring his needs, something they described as "what teachers usually do" during the debriefing discussion. When asked why they scripted the scene this way, participants hesitated before admitting they had reproduced familiar classroom patterns. Notably, even when given space to imagine a more responsive teacher, the default was to replicate what already exists. Diego's language background, ethnicity, and disability were each present in the scenario, yet the group's response treated his struggles as a behavior problem rather than considering how these dimensions of his experience might be shaping his participation in the classroom.

What characterized resistance in these reflections was not hostility toward the activity but a limited willingness to sit with discomfort long enough to examine the origins of their assumptions. It appeared in brief acknowledgments that went no further, in fairness statements that expressed good intentions without examining the conditions that make some students feel excluded, and in creative choices that defaulted to existing practices rather than imagining alternatives.

Theme two: Discomfort

This theme describes the discomfort many participants felt when performing situations involving harm, exclusion, or identities different from their own. For some, the tension came from recognizing the value of the activity while feeling uneasy about what they were asked to embody. One participant noted, "I was very uncomfortable during our performance. I had to play a student who didn't stand up for her friend who was being ridiculed by their teacher" (PST-9). The discomfort stemmed not only from acting out bullying but also from playing a bystander who failed to intervene.

Participants worried about misrepresentation, especially when portraying disability or linguistic difference. Reflecting on a scenario involving ADHD and limited English proficiency, one participant wrote, "The hardest part was finding a scenario that wasn't disrespectful… At points, I felt like I was being tasteless, rude, and disrespectful" (PST-16). The same participant added feeling like an "impostor" when pretending to have a learning disability or to speak English as an additional language. Another participant, assigned to portray an autistic Haitian American boy, shared, "I felt like I was being disrespectful… I was afraid of overdoing a movement or a mannerism" (PST-18). These reflections point to participants' awareness of the risk of reducing complex identities to something superficial, even as they tried to approach the roles with care.

Discomfort also appeared around visible markers of identity. In both sections, the groups assigned to the skit about a student who wears a hijab chose not to include any visible sign of religious dress; as a result, classmates were initially unsure why the character was being teased. During the debriefing, group members explained that they avoided wearing a scarf because they did not want to seem as though they were "putting on a costume." Their hesitation reflected a desire to avoid caricature but also removed the element that shaped Fatima's experiences in the scenario, illustrating how discomfort can lead to decisions that erase rather than acknowledge identity.

For some participants, discomfort was also tied to biography. In one group, a participant who had been adopted helped prepare a skit about adoption but declined to perform because it felt too close to her experience. This illustrates how role-play can surface personal histories and how participation may need to be negotiated to avoid emotional harm.

Others struggled when assigned roles that conflicted with their values. One participant described discomfort playing a peer who dismissed a non-binary classmate: "I am very supportive of gender orientation in general, so I was not comfortable playing this role at all" (PST-28). Another participant, who portrayed an administrator interacting with a non-binary student, explained: "I was honestly uncomfortable because I didn't want to hurt anyone's feelings in my own college classroom if anyone identified as one" (PST-34). Similar concerns emerged when portraying race, mixed heritage, or disability. One participant wrote, "For me, it was attempting to be a mixed-race girl; I felt extremely awkward" (PST-32). Another participant, who played a deaf student, wrote, "I was extremely uncomfortable in my role… it could have seemed like I was 'making fun' of someone using ASL. It was hard to act like I had a 'disability' (deaf)" (PST-33).

Overall, this theme describes discomfort not as a rejection of the activity but as an ethical concern: students were aware of the weight of the identities they portrayed, yet uncertain about how to represent them responsibly. At times, this discomfort led to avoidance, suggesting that such role-play activities need to be carefully scaffolded so that participants can work through it rather than retreat from it.

Theme three: Empathy

This theme depicted moments when participants used the role-play activity to imagine classroom situations from students' and families' perspectives. Several reflections described stepping into the "student's shoes" and reconsidering classroom decisions through that lens. As one participant wrote about Kai and the others depicted in the scenarios:

> The solution may be the easiest, but that does not mean it is fair to him. Kai had to miss the celebration and, in turn, was isolated from his peers. If I could do something differently in my own scenario or any of the others, I would put myself in the student's shoes. If I were Kai, Taylor, or Sophia, what would I want my teacher to do? (PST-11)

In this case, empathy involved reassessing a seemingly straightforward instructional choice by considering its emotional consequences for the student. Empathy also appeared when participants revisited familiar classroom activities in light of the scenarios. Responding to a case involving a family tree assignment, one participant commented during the class discussion:

> I liked the classroom discussion on Scenario 3. The group that presented brought up how activities like family trees can be hurtful for those who are in foster care or have complicated family situations. I thought that was an amazing idea because if I put myself in that student's shoes, I could see how they might have negative emotions about talking about their family history. (PST-19)

This comment highlights how routine assignments can carry different meanings depending on a student's family context, made visible when the participant consciously tried to see the task from the student's perspective. For participants, this kind of perspective-taking also drew on aspects of their own backgrounds. PST-7, who played a mother, said,

> I felt comfortable playing this role as I am a mom myself. My character was a mother from another country, and it made me think about how I would feel if I had to advocate for my child in a different language and the barriers I would face because of this. (PST-7)

In this case, motherhood helped her imagine the vulnerability of navigating a school system in another language. Empathy also appeared when students reflected on the combined impact of language, disability, and family circumstances. One participant wrote, "I learned how difficult certain situations can be not only for students but also for parents. There is so much going on in their lives, and as teachers, we have to be careful not to make things harder for them" (PST-21). Another commented how the activity "opened my eyes to how small comments or decisions can make students feel excluded, even when that was not the intention" (PST-18). These reflections show empathy tied to a growing awareness of how everyday decisions intersect with students' broader life conditions.

These reflections and comments suggest that the role-play helped participants move beyond abstract commitments to "being kind" or "treating everyone equally" toward more situated forms of perspective-taking. Even when empathy did not result in detailed practical plans, it marked moments when participants recognized the emotional weight of classroom routines for multilingual and other minoritized students and began to consider how their choices could ease or intensify that burden.

Theme four: Recognition of opportunity

This final theme described moments when participants treated the role-play not simply as an assignment, but as a chance to reconsider their future teaching and identify areas for growth. Several reflections linked the activity directly to classroom decision-making. One participant wrote, "This activity made me once again consider how important it is, as a teacher, to be thoughtful of my students' backgrounds. Certain decisions could embarrass or isolate them, which is the opposite of the environment I want to create" (PST-13). Another commented during the class discussion that the role-play "made me think and consider diversity in my future teaching and classroom… especially how I will handle these future situations as a professional" (PST-28). In these reflections and comments, attending to students' backgrounds, needs, and identities becomes part of teachers' ongoing pedagogical responsibility.

Participants also noted how unpredictable classroom situations can be and how important it is for teachers to be ready to respond to situations they had not anticipated, particularly with respect to students' identities and cultural or linguistic backgrounds. Several reflections emphasized that real classrooms rarely follow a fixed script and that teachers must be ready to respond to situations they had not prepared for. As one participant explained:

> I took a lot away from this activity. The biggest thing was that there are so many different situations that can arise in a classroom that you never would have guessed. You always have to expect the unexpected and be prepared to change your plans. (PST-5)

Another participant emphasized that "not every activity will make each student comfortable, and as teachers we have to be flexible with making sure each child gets a fair education" (PST-20). Thus, the role-play was interpreted as a rehearsal for navigating unpredictable combinations of linguistic, cultural, and personal differences.

For some participants, the activity prompted a clearer sense of advocacy for marginalized students. Reflecting on scenarios about gender identity, language, and disability, one participant spoke about how the role-play "made me realize that I may be the only adult in the room who stands up for that student" (PST-14). Another observed that "teachers have more power than we sometimes think, and we can either shut students down or make them feel like they belong" (PST-9). While general, these reflections signal a shift from focusing solely on delivering content to recognizing teachers' role in shaping conditions of belonging.

Participants also identified specific practices they wanted to adopt. One wrote, "In my future classroom, I will be more careful with projects like family trees or 'Who am I?' presentations, and I will offer alternative options so that students who have different family structures or identities don't feel singled out" (PST-17). Another planned to "check in with students individually before assuming they are okay with certain topics or celebrations" and to "make space for them to share concerns without feeling like a burden" (PST-34). These early strategies indicate attempts to translate insights from the activity into concrete intentions for inclusive practice.

Ultimately, the reflections and comments described in this theme suggest that the role-play became more than an academic exercise: participants began to ask what the scenarios meant for their own future classrooms and how they might respond differently, whether by rethinking familiar activities, paying closer attention to how students experience them, or using their position as teachers to help multilingual and other students feel seen and included.

DISCUSSION

This study examined how a role-play activity designed around intersecting student identities in an undergraduate ESOL course opened up and sometimes constrained preservice teachers' reflection on their attitudes toward multilingual and other minoritized students. Rather than moving along a neat path from "unaware" to "aware," participants shifted between positions that affirmed, questioned, or only partially reworked narratives about students and themselves as future teachers. This pattern is consistent with work that frames role-play as participatory pedagogy (Alam et al., 2020; Mehdiyev, 2020) and extends it by showing how contradictory and unresolved perspectives on students' identities and circumstances can surface within a single activity, rather than following a linear path of growth.

From an intersectional perspective (Crenshaw, 1991), the role-play highlighted a tendency to focus on single dimensions of identity even when the scenarios were written around intersecting positions. Resistance appeared when participants relied on broad claims about treating "all students the same" or "equally," framing equity mainly as individual kindness or fairness. These responses align with prior work showing that teachers often avoid naming race, language, and other dimensions of difference directly, relying instead on neutral or universalist language that obscures how structural conditions shape students' experiences (Breese et al., 2023; Pettit, 2011; Sue, 2010). In this study, these patterns appeared in broad statements and in brief reflections that named an assumption but left it unexplored.

At the same time, the activity produced moments when participants recognized the limits of "sameness" as a guiding principle. When participants wrote about putting themselves "in the shoes" of the students in the skits and questioned classroom practices such as family-tree projects or birthday celebrations, they moved closer to an understanding of how policies, tasks, and routines are experienced differently by students depending on their language background, race, disability, family structure, and gender (Gay, 2018; ; Işıklı & Fazlıoğlu, 2026; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). These moments echo research showing that drama- and role-play-based activities can support perspective-taking (Boggs et al., 2007; Schussler et al., 2017; Yoon, 2024). Yet these expressions of empathy coexisted with stereotypes and universalist language elsewhere in the reflections. They suggest that even within a single activity, preservice teachers can oscillate between reproducing "single stories" (Adichie, 2009) and challenging them.

The findings also emphasize the central role of affect in teacher education that centers on questions of identity and power. Freire (1970) and hooks (1994) suggest that critical consciousness grows not only from new information but from pedagogical encounters that are emotionally charged and require honest dialogue. In this study, discomfort took multiple forms, including worry about misrepresenting disability, unease about "acting" a non-binary or mixed-race student, reluctance to perform a hijab that might feel disrespectful, and decisions to step back when scenarios overlapped with painful experiences such as adoption or conflict within a foster family. These reactions suggest that preservice teachers were not indifferent to the responsibility of portraying experiences that were not their own and the risk of reducing complex identities to something superficial. Yet many were unsure

how to balance the need to "show" intersecting identities in the skits with the risk of caricature or appropriation. Similar tensions have been reported in other studies, where discomfort was expected and necessary for examining their own assumptions, yet could lead to retreat or self-protection when not carefully scaffolded (Breese et al., 2023; Powers & Duffy, 2018).

Thus, discomfort functioned as both a resource and a constraint. On the one hand, it signaled ethical awareness and a degree of humility, as participants were cautious about speaking for people whose experiences were very different from their own. On the other hand, it sometimes led to avoidance, such as omitting the hijab altogether or recreating "typical" teacher behaviors rather than using the creative space to imagine more responsive practices. In this sense, discomfort alone does not guarantee critical insight. It needs to be named and worked through structured debriefing and guided reflection, paired with explicit opportunities to analyze how race, language, disability, and other dimensions of difference operate in the scenarios. This builds on calls for teacher education that deliberately addresses bias, discrimination, and the conditions that shape students' experiences in school, rather than assuming that exposure alone will lead to deeper understanding (Breese et al., 2023; Dogutas, 2025; Pearce, 2018).

The role-play also created spaces where participants began to recognize their own place within the politics of belonging in schools (Yuval-Davis, 2011). Belonging was not only about feeling "included" but about having one's identities, histories, and languages recognized as legitimate and valued (Gay, 2018; Islam et al., 2026; Lucas & Villegas, 2011). When participants wrote that teachers "may be the only adult in the room who stands up for that student" or that small decisions can make students feel excluded, they were articulating a growing sense of their institutional power as future teachers. This aligns with hooks's (1994) conception of teaching as a practice that can either reproduce the conditions that exclude minoritized students or work toward creating classrooms where they feel recognized and supported, and with work showing how role-play and drama-based pedagogies can invite future teachers to notice how classroom practices signal who belongs and under what conditions (Meedendorp & Deunk, 2024; Powers & Duffy, 2018).

Finally, this study contributes to current discussions on the use of role-play in teacher education. Prior research has shown that role-play can support perspective-taking and pedagogical decision-making when tied to course content and followed by structured reflection (Boggs et al., 2007; Schussler et al., 2017; Yoon, 2024) and that it can strengthen rehearsal of classroom interaction in low-stakes settings (Amirkhanova & Bobyreva, 2020; Kuzembayeva et al., 2023; Mehdiyev, 2020). The findings from this study extend these claims by illustrating that role-play can also become a space where resistance, avoidance, and the reproduction of familiar classroom patterns are enacted. That some groups used their "creative freedom" to mirror what "teachers usually do" rather than to imagine more responsive practices suggests that role-play does not automatically foster critical awareness. Instead, it points to the assumptions and unresolved tensions that participants bring to the activity regarding language, race, religion, disability, and gender (Tashtoush et al., 2024). For teacher educators, the pedagogical value of role-play lies not only in the scenarios themselves but in what participants' choices reveal about those assumptions. In this sense, role-play activities designed around intersecting student identities can function as both a diagnostic and a generative tool, surfacing the boundaries of teacher candidates' current understandings while opening possibilities for deeper work on belonging and the experiences of multilingual learners in subsequent coursework and field experiences (Tuanpusa et al., 2026).

CONCLUSION

This study examined how a role-play activity designed around intersecting student identities in an ESOL course invited preservice teachers to confront, resist, and reconfigure their assumptions about multilingual learners and other minoritized students. The findings suggested that role-play is a pedagogical space that is rarely straightforward: preservice teachers may draw on stereotypes and general notions of fairness, experience ethical discomfort, practice putting themselves in the "student's shoes," and begin to imagine alternative ways of fostering belonging and inclusion in the classroom.

Limitations and recommendations for future research

Several limitations should be noted. First, this study took place in a single course at one public university, so the findings are context-bound rather than generalizable; they offer insights that may resonate with similar settings (Stake, 1995). Future studies could include multiple institutions, program types, and course formats to examine how different contexts shape preservice teachers' engagement with role-play activities of this kind.

Second, the data relied on classroom observations, debriefing notes, and written reflections produced shortly after the activity. These sources illuminate participants' immediate sense-making, but do not address whether the insights translate into longer-term changes in thinking or practice. Follow-up interviews and longitudinal research

that follow preservice teachers into later coursework, internships, and early teaching would help clarify how early role-play experiences influence decisions about multilingual learners.

Third, although designed to highlight intersecting identities, the scenarios represented only a limited set of configurations of language, race, disability, religion, family structure, and gender. Such scenarios risk unintentionally reinforcing the "single stories" they aim to challenge (Adichie, 2009) if not accompanied by explicit discussion of stereotyping and representation. Future work might co-design scenarios with multilingual communities or invite preservice teachers to generate cases from field observations that capture how intersecting dimensions of students' identities and circumstances shape their school experiences.

Fourth, it is important to note that this study did not set out to analyze how specific combinations of identity (e.g., race and language, or disability and immigration status) shaped individual participants' responses. The focus was on exploring how the activity as a whole shaped preservice teachers' engagement with questions of identity, power, and belonging, rather than on tracing intersectional patterns across participants. Future research, particularly studies that include individual interviews, could examine whether participants who personally identified with the scenarios responded differently from those who did not, while remaining cautious about drawing conclusions based solely on participants' demographic characteristics (Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1991).

Fifth, this analysis focused on preservice teachers' written reflections and classroom observations. Future research could examine how participants' linguistic, racial/ethnic, and educational backgrounds shape their responses to activities of this kind, while remaining cautious about essentializing participants based on these characteristics (Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1991).

A final limitation is that this was the first time this activity was implemented in the course. As an exploratory case study, the findings reflect a single iteration of the role-play, which limits conclusions about how the activity might develop or improve over time. Future implementations could build on the lessons learned here to refine the scenarios, strengthen the scaffolding, and better prepare participants to work through discomfort rather than avoid it.

Implications for teacher education practice

This study raises several implications for teacher educators who seek to engage intersectionality and belonging when preparing future teachers to work with multilingual learners. First, the findings suggest that role-play can be a useful strategy for revealing how preservice teachers understand and respond to intersecting identities, particularly when paired with structured opportunities for self-reflection. Inviting preservice teachers to analyze their own assumptions, the lines they wrote, and the choices they made can move reflection beyond generic statements about fairness toward more critical engagement with power, privilege, and the conditions that shape students' experiences in school.

Second, the intensity of discomfort described in the reflections points to the need for careful scaffolding. Introducing the ethical dimensions of representation before the activity, naming discomfort as expected, and building in structured opportunities to process emotional responses can help preservice teachers work through the discomfort rather than avoiding certain roles or situations. Teacher educators may also need to offer concrete strategies for representing disability, gender, religion, and language differences in ways that are respectful and contextually informed.

Third, the findings highlight the importance of situating role-play within broader frameworks of teaching practices that are responsive to students' different backgrounds (Gay, 2018; Lucas & Villegas, 2011; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). When preservice teachers linked the scenarios to decisions about curriculum, instruction, or one-on-one interactions, they began to see intersectionality as a framework for rethinking everyday classroom practices.

Finally, the study suggests that resistance and discomfort should not be treated as obstacles to be eliminated, but as important information about where preservice teachers are starting from and what feels most threatening or unfamiliar. Default responses such as "treating everyone the same" suggest how certain patterns of avoidance continue to shape what counts as normal practice in schools. Approaching these moments as opportunities for dialogue, rather than as evidence of individual failure, can support continuous engagement with intersectionality, culture, and the politics of belonging in multilingual classrooms.

Acknowledgement

The author has no specific acknowledgments to declare.

Funding

The research did not receive any funding.

Ethical statement

This study received IRB approval under Protocol #2025-14.

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests or personal relationships that could influence the work reported in this paper.

Author contributions

The first author conceptualized the study and was responsible for all the sections. The second and third authors prepared the literature review, selected participants' quotes for the publication and contributed to the discussion of findings. The fourth author contributed to the design of the role-play activity and class observation.

Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are not publicly available due to ethical and privacy considerations but may be available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

AI disclosure

The authors used generative artificial intelligence tools for language editing. All intellectual content, interpretations, and final revisions remain the sole responsibility of the first author.

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