




“Awareness is Just the First Step”: Preservice Teachers’ Changing Views of Teaching Multilingual Learners in an ESOL Course

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ABSTRACT

There is an urgent need to prepare highly effective teachers to meet the challenges posed by an increasing number of multilingual students from different backgrounds in U.S. public schools. Traditional teacher preparation programs tend to offer English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) courses to meet the state’s ESOL endorsement requirements; however, these courses tend to focus on language acquisition theories and methods, failing to equip future teachers with the knowledge and skills to implement pedagogical approaches that leverage on students’ prior knowledge and backgrounds, which would contribute to their academic success and language proficiency development. In this study, researchers employed a longitudinal case study design to explore how preservice teachers perceive their preparation to promote a humanizing pedagogy beyond ESOL training. The case was an upper-level undergraduate ESOL course at a university in Southwest Florida. Multiple sources of data (e.g., course assignments and discussions) were collected from 27 volunteer participants enrolled in the course in the fall of 2023 and analyzed using analytic coding. The findings indicated that participants had a limited willingness to reflect on their prior assumptions about teaching multilingual learners and to understand the educational, cultural, and social needs of these students. The study’s findings emphasize the crucial need for focused, intentional training in self-awareness and humanizing pedagogies in teacher preparation programs to equip future teachers with the skills and knowledge to support the academic success of multilingual students.

Keywords: longitudinal case study, humanizing pedagogies, preservice teachers, teacher preparation programs, ESOL

In recent years, there has been growing recognition of the need to prepare teachers who can effectively educate the increasing number of students from different backgrounds in U.S. public schools. This necessity is evident in regions like Southwest Florida, where 32% of students speak a language other than English at home, 157 languages are spoken, and 156 countries are represented in the public schools of the 27th-largest school district in the country (The School District of Lee County, 2024). In Florida, traditional teacher preparation programs offer English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) courses to address the needs of students with multilingual backgrounds and to meet the ESOL endorsement requirements of a bachelor’s degree plus 15 semester hours distributed across methods, curriculum/materials, cross-cultural communication, applied linguistics, and assessment in ESOL (Florida Department of Education [FLDOE], n.d., 2011, 2025). However, these courses tend to focus on language acquisition and may inadvertently reinforce single-cause, deficit perspectives of students from different backgrounds, failing to equip educators to implement pedagogical approaches that appreciate and leverage students’ prior knowledge and backgrounds (Darder, 2016; Freeman et al., 2021; Halpern, 2019; Halpern & Aydin,

2020; Halpern, Trunfio, & Aydin, 2024). In response, the principles of a humanizing pedagogy (Freire, 1970/2018) with culturally responsive approaches foreground this study, recognizing that multilingual learners' (MLs) lived experiences and community knowledge are central to teaching and learning.

In light of ongoing shifts in institutional and state-level policies affecting higher education, programs must look beyond basic ESOL instruction and center on humanizing pedagogy (Diem & Hawkman, 2019; English, 2020; Halpern & Aydin, 2020). Preservice teachers must be encouraged to develop an awareness of the systemic and structural issues that affect students from different backgrounds in their schooling experiences. This involves challenging preservice teachers to identify and move beyond single-cause perspectives on students' experiences and backgrounds that impact their learning and academic success (Freire, 1970/2018; Hooks, 1994, 2017; Rudnick, 2019).

This study explores how preservice teachers perceive their preparation to promote a humanizing pedagogy in education beyond ESOL training, specifically within the context of an upper-level undergraduate ESOL course at a university in Southwest Florida. By incorporating this pedagogical approach alongside traditional ESOL content, the course aimed to broaden preservice teachers' understanding of their roles as educators in a pluralist society. The research questions guiding this investigation were:

1. How do preservice teachers perceive their role in advancing a humanizing pedagogical approach while earning their ESOL endorsement in teacher preparation programs?
2. To what extent do preservice teachers perceive their role as future teachers capable of promoting a humanizing pedagogical approach to addressing the needs of MLs?

By examining these questions, this study seeks to contribute to the discourse on preparing teachers who are not only culturally responsive but also committed to fostering an equitable and just educational environment for all students.

Toward a Humanizing Approach to Teacher Preparation Programs

Prior research that centered on social justice and humanizing teaching approaches in teacher preparation programs have primarily addressed the importance of continuous professional development to support in-service teachers and provide preservice opportunities to engage in critical dialogue and reflections on their field experience and community-based practices in K-12 settings (e.g., Aronson, 2020; Crosby, 2018; Goodwin & Stanton, 2022; Hayden & Gratteau-Zinnel, 2019; Heineke et al., 2022; Leiva et al., 2021; Lund & Le., 2015; Nguyen & Zeichner, 2021; Nieto, 2018; Ortega, 2021; Spitzman & Balconi, 2019). Most of the studies discussed in this section were conducted in the United States, unless otherwise specified. Specifically, this study examined the literature that focused on teaching social justice to prepare educators to teach students from different backgrounds, which includes multilingual students (MLs)¹.

In graduate teacher preparation programs in the United States, a teacher-mentoring system grounded in social justice and critical, relevant education has supported novice teachers in implementing critical social justice and promoting equity in their teaching practices (Aronson, 2020). Such mentoring programs have also been crucial in promoting and supporting novice teachers in developing culturally relevant practices for teaching MLs (Crosby, 2018; Hayden & Gratteau-Zinnel, 2019). When teachers develop a social justice mindset, they utilize marginalized students' funds of knowledge as assets, allowing them to co-create a curriculum where students have opportunities to have deep reflections about the issues that affect them, giving them agency to reimagine realities that benefit all students (Aronson, 2020; Goodwin & Stanton, 2022).

Heineke et al. (2022) found that in-service teachers who participated in a graduate professional development program focused on language and cultural understanding changed their daily instructional practices. In-service teachers who incorporated asset-based perspectives to their instruction aimed at developing social justice advocacy and creating welcoming learning environments for MLs and their families. Such shifts in perceptions and instructional practices were possible after providing coursework grounded in teachers' collaborative experiences focused on solving problems in their communities, which gave them concrete advocacy opportunities to support students with similar social, cultural, political, economic, and familial contexts. Ortega (2021) found that teachers who used pedagogies grounded in social justice and personal transformation developed English learners' social awareness by implementing class projects that allowed students to question and challenge social inequities in their communities. This created a safe space for students to learn, encouraged them to reflect on their lives and communities, and motivated them to consider ways to act, support, and transform their own lives, and to care about transforming the lives of others and their communities.

¹ The researchers recognize the implications of using emergent bilinguals, English language learners, multilingual students, or culturally and linguistically diverse students interchangeably; however, they preferred multilingual learners, understanding that it encompasses the other terms that tend to be more focused on language learning.

In a similar study, Spitzman and Balconi (2019) explored how pre- and in-service teachers integrated social justice and humanizing pedagogies into lesson plans for English as a second language students. They found that participants' lack of self-reflection, curiosity, and prior knowledge and experience with intercultural perspectives led them to fail to model intercultural practices and connect lesson content to MLs' cultural and linguistic backgrounds. In addition, the participants could not provide structured in-class opportunities for dialogue to foster MLs' cooperative learning, allowing them to practice English while learning to be respectful of diverse perspectives and viewpoints. Spitzman and Balconi (2019) suggested that participants of their study "assume[d] that intercultural competence develops naturally and [was] not worth lesson time and attention, or it [was] simply not part of the curriculum" (p. 12). Consequently, they recommended that social justice orientations be included as required components in teacher preparation programs so that future teachers can develop self-awareness and critical thinking to transform curricula and instructional practices and take action against social injustices that impact MLs in education. Social justice and humanizing orientations in graduate teacher preparation programs result in teachers' increased self-confidence to take on leadership roles, inspire other teachers to work with marginalized communities, co-create curriculum and lessons to promote humanizing and emancipatory teaching and learning practices, and become agents of change in their classrooms, schools, communities, and districts at large (Aronson, 2020; Crosby, 2018; Heineke et al., 2022; Ortega, 2021). Another benefit of such mentoring initiatives promoted by graduate teacher preparation programs is that they help reduce high attrition rates in the teaching profession, particularly among novice teachers (Hayden & Gratteau-Zinnel, 2019).

A study conducted in undergraduate teacher preparation programs found that preservice teachers involved in a professional development project for teaching MLs viewed teaching as "an objectifiable craft" (Gay & Kirkland, 2003, p. 182), focused solely on strategies and techniques that could be universally applied to all students. In addition, preservice teachers perceived teaching MLs as a neutral act focused on developing students' language skills without considering their cultural and linguistic differences or examining the larger political, historical, economic, and social contexts that impact MLs' schooling experiences (Dantas-Whitney & Waldschmidt, 2009). Consequently, preservice teachers associated MLs' negative classroom experiences with language barriers, displaying superficial knowledge of social and cultural issues that sustain monocultural and monolingual dominance in education.

For this reason, studies that sought to examine preservice teachers' development of social justice and humanizing pedagogical orientations to teach MLs were grounded in experiential learning through service learning, field experiences, and community-based projects (Leiva et al., 2021; Lund & Lee, 2015; Nguyen & Zeichner, 2021; Nieto, 2018). What these studies have in common is the perception that service-learning, field experiences, and community-based projects help future teachers understand and engage with social justice issues and humanizing pedagogical methods by immersing themselves in MLs' schools, whether through observation, teaching, or community involvement. These opportunities provided preservice teachers with insights into developing curricula and lessons that address the needs of students from different backgrounds and improve teacher preparation programs. For example, Leiva and her colleagues (2021) found that preservice teachers could no longer "associate social justice with traditional activities done in a language teaching methodology course" (p. 10) after participating in a service-learning project teaching children in vulnerable communities. Preservice teachers in Lund and Lee's (2015) study in Canada developed greater awareness of power and privilege that negatively impact immigrant children and youth, and developed cultural humility toward these students after participating in a service-learning project conducted in partnership with community agencies serving immigrant children and youth. They also learned to identify and appreciate immigrant students' strengths and develop attitudes that counteract deficit-model thinking about these students. In this context, cultural humility refers to an ongoing stance of self-reflection and self-critique, including attention to power imbalances and a commitment to learning with (rather than about) communities (Tervalon & Murray-García, 1998). In teacher preparation, this concept is significant because it shifts the focus from "mastering" cultural knowledge to examining how preservice teachers' positionalities shape what they notice, how they interpret students' experiences, and how they approach culturally responsive teaching (Hook et al., 2013).

In a study conducted with preservice teachers of English as a foreign language in Vietnam, Nguyen and Zeichner (2021) found that community field experiences combined with reflexive tasks and group assignments helped participants identify inequalities present in children's families, ethnic groups, and geographical locations that impact their schooling opportunities and experiences. Consequently, preservice teachers moved from a content-based to a socially just and transformative teaching approach that embraced multidimensional views of student learning. Likewise, Nieto (2018) found that preservice teachers developed a commitment to develop alternative curricula after participating in community-based projects. They learned to appreciate students' cultural contexts and funds of knowledge and include them in the curriculum and class materials through reflections, problem-posing, and creative activities. As a result, preservice teachers can envision the possibilities of

emancipatory education through the implementation of an inclusive learning environment that responds to the community's needs and unique dynamics.

Ultimately, critical educators who aim to teach MLs with a humanizing, social justice orientation must move beyond taken-for-granted constructions about students' racial/ethnic, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds to understand power struggles and relationships that deeply impact their schooling experiences (Darder, 2016). Such social justice and humanizing pedagogical orientations and related knowledges must be included in teacher preparation programs to challenge "more traditional and technical forms of teacher education that conceptualized teaching as a set of skills—not a body of knowledges" (Kincheloe, 2017, p. 505). Pre- and in-service teachers must gain a better understanding of their roles as teachers, learning to examine how knowledge is constructed and how this impacts teaching and learning. In other words, it is important to understand the epistemologies that determine theories and practice (praxis) in teacher education (Bartolomé, 2003; Silva, 2011). Only then can teacher preparation programs prepare excellent teachers grounded in scholarly, democratic, and rigorous communities of practice (Kincheloe, 2017). Consequently, future teachers can feel empowered to become agents of change in their classrooms (Freire, 1998, 1970/2018).

Theoretical Framework: Critical Pedagogy

The critical pedagogy lens guided our study in investigating preservice teachers' perceptions of their role in teaching MLs as a matter of social justice. Originating from the Frankfurt School, critical pedagogy is a framework that analyzes the role of schools in perpetuating systems of oppression, inequity, and social injustices (Darder, 2016; Freire, 1998, 1970/2018). Critical pedagogy tenets maintain that societal transformation and human emancipation can be achieved through critical consciousness, which combines critical reflection and dialogue about the way power structures and dominant narratives reproduce social injustices and inequities (Freire, 1970/2018; Giroux, 1981, 2014; hooks, 1994, 2017; Vossoughi & Gutiérrez, 2017).

We centered our study on Freire's (1970/2018) work because his conceptualization of critical consciousness and dialogic education offers an appropriate lens for examining how preservice teachers learn to name and respond to inequities rather than relying only on generalized commitments to fairness. In the context of multilingual teacher education, Freire's emphasis on reflection and dialogue is particularly useful for interpreting whether (and how) preservice teachers begin to connect their instructional choices to power relations and the conditions shaping MLs' schooling experiences. Moreover, Freire helped us attend to moments in participants' reflections where they moved toward (or avoided) engagement with structural questions about marginalization, responsibility, and social change.

Through the lens of critical pedagogy, we sought to examine the development of preservice teachers' perceptions and understanding of their potential transformative role in their future MLs' learning experiences as a matter of social justice (Freire, 1970/2018). The goal was to investigate how preservice teachers develop critical consciousness to challenge dominant narratives that ultimately impact the learning experiences of MLs in the U.S. school system (Giroux, 1981, 2014; Wiggan, 2011). The implications of this study are in its ability to invite teacher educators and preservice teachers (our participant group) to (a) reflect on their backgrounds, attitudes, knowledges, and practices to produce socially just practices in education, (b) adopt transformative practices that critically examine the forces that shape and perpetuate the current social order, and (c) become agents of social change in their classrooms to improve the educational practices and experiences that impact minority students (Freire & Macedo, 1987; Gatto, 2005; Halpern, 2019; Vossoughi & Gutiérrez, 2017).

METHOD

A longitudinal, qualitative case study approach was used to investigate preservice teachers' views on their preparation to teach MLs, with a focus on promoting social justice and humanizing pedagogies over the course of one academic semester (Derrington, 2019; Stake, 2005). The case was bounded by space and time in an upper-level undergraduate Foundations of ESOL course in a full 16-week academic semester, providing real-life context for developing preservice teachers' perceptions of teaching MLs as a matter of promoting social justice and humanizing pedagogy in education (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Stake, 2005). The longitudinal approach enabled the researchers to focus on changes in preservice teachers' perceptions of teaching MLs, as they developed their knowledge of social justice and humanizing pedagogies in education (Corden & Millar, 2007; Saldaña, 2003). The researchers used six time points to examine participants' perceptions of teaching MLs as a matter of social justice across different course assignments, ensuring consistent participation and data collection over time (Saldaña, 2003). During the 16-week academic semester, the researchers adjusted the readings and prompts for class discussions to accommodate changes observed in participants' experiences and perceptions of social justice and humanizing pedagogies in teaching MLs over time (Corden & Millar, 2007). These adjustments included adding short,

complementary readings and using more structured reflection prompts that asked students to examine how their own backgrounds and experiences shape their interpretations of teaching MLs and, in turn, how they might teach in culturally responsive ways. These adjustments were intended to support more explicit self-reflection and culturally responsive reasoning in later reflections; however, most participants did not move toward deeper structural analysis.

Participants

After receiving approval from our university's institutional review board (Protocol ID #2020-10), a purposive sample of 27 volunteer preservice teachers was selected for the study. The volunteer participants were enrolled in an upper-level undergraduate Foundations of ESOL course offered by the College of Education at a Southwest Florida university in Fall 2023, co-taught by the researchers. At the end of the academic semester, the students were invited to participate in the study by being asked to consent to use their coursework data for a research project: 27 agreed to participate, one did not respond, and five declined to participate. The consent form ensured volunteer participants' rights to refuse participation and to prevent any information from being published without their consent. Volunteer participants' names and identifiable data were omitted to ensure confidentiality and anonymity. Participants were 25 females and two males; their ages ranged from 19 to 37 ($M = 21$); 23 were monolingual, and three were bilingual (e.g., American Sign Language, Spanish, and Hebrew). They self-identified as White (19), White Hispanic (2), White/Native American (1), White/Jewish American (1), Hispanic/Latino (2), African American (1), and one did not respond. Participants' majors were Early Childhood Education (3), Elementary Education (14), Child and Youth Studies (8), Integrated Studies (1), and Psychology (1). Two participants indicated that their minors were in Gender Studies and Education.

Case Study Setting

The study was conducted in the fall of 2023 in an upper-level undergraduate Foundations of ESOL course, which introduces the teacher standards for ESOL endorsement required for teacher education candidates in Florida (FLDOE, n.d.). The course was offered at the College of Education of a Southwest Florida university and aimed at teaching second language acquisition theories, principles of bilingual education, ESOL policies, and cultural issues. The following list describes students' main assignments and activities during the course:

1. Online discussions about second language acquisition theories and bilingual education models. These discussions were organized as weekly Canvas discussion-board activities. Students posted an initial response to an instructor-provided prompt and replied to peers in the discussion forum.
2. Reflections about readings on topics like language differences or disability, teacher attitudes and culturally responsive teaching, multilingual education, humanizing pedagogies that include students' backgrounds into teaching, and social justice.
3. Case studies that were produced and analyzed by the students based on their field experience observations in local K–12 schools. They identified areas for improvement and offered recommendations to teachers based on their coursework readings and observations. This was a required individual assignment that count as part of their first internship at local schools. Students posted a brief description of their case in a Canvas discussion forum so peers could analyze it using course concepts; however, each student submitted their own written analysis as an individual paper through Canvas (visible only to the instructor)
4. A research-based paper where students analyze cases about challenges experienced by MLs in public schools.

Next, the researchers outlined the six time points used to trace students' perceptions of teaching MLs as a matter of social justice and toward a humanizing education.

- (a) Weeks 1 to 3: In a series of reflection questions presented in a survey format on Canvas and a discussion post, students described their initial viewpoints and hesitations about teaching MLs, including their expectations for the course. They also submitted reading reflections about the dangers of single perspectives and bias concerning MLs in the U.S. K-12 education system.
- (b) Weeks 4 to 6: Students learned about the factors that affect teachers' attitudes toward teaching MLs and about culturally responsive teaching and multicultural education to counteract existing bias and avoid microaggressions against these students.
- (c) Weeks 7 to 9: Students learned and engaged in online discussions about second language acquisition theories and models of bilingual education as alternatives to monolingual and monocultural curricula and learning experiences.
- (d) Weeks 10 to 12: Students learned about ESOL policies, the over- and underrepresentation of MLs in special education classes, and the role of parental involvement in MLs' education and family literacy programs to support multilingual families in local schools and communities.

- (e) Weeks 13 to 15: Students finalized their 8-week field experience observations in local K-12 schools. They produced case studies about an ML's experience, in which they observed and analyzed other classmates' cases based on the coursework readings. Their final report included recommendations to teachers and administrators based on their analysis.
- (f) Week 16: Students submitted a research-like paper analyzing pre-determined cases of ML's challenges in K-12 schools. Students responded to an open-ended reflection concerning their perceptions of teaching MLs before and after taking the course.

Data Collection and Analysis

Multiple data sources were collected during a 16-week full semester in a Foundations of ESOL course. These included participants' responses to online discussions, reflection papers, a field experience project, and a final research-like paper. These assignments revealed participants' understandings, perceptions, beliefs, and experiences regarding social justice and humanizing pedagogies in teaching MLs (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Stake, 2005). In addition, participants responded to open-ended questions administered at the beginning and end of the semester that captured their opinions, feelings, attitudes, and concerns about teaching MLs (Denzin & Lincoln, 2006). It is important to note that the open-ended reflection questions were presented to students in a survey format on Canvas to conveniently organize them for students who took the course fully online and asynchronously; therefore, they were not intended to produce quantitative results.

We organized and categorized the data using analytic coding (Richards, 2015). Initial coding began with broad, descriptive codes that captured participants' expectations about teaching multilingual learners, moments of discomfort or uncertainty, expressions of responsibility or neutrality, and references to empathy, care, or fairness. Through iterative rounds of analysis, we clustered related codes, refined the initial categories, and developed the thematic structure reported in the findings, using constant comparison within and across data sources rather than a linear progression from codes to themes. We later refined the initial categories into relevant themes, using interpretive and reflective processes that combined our knowledge of the literature and the theoretical framework guiding our study with our positionalities in relation to it (Braun & Clark, 2021; Miles et al., 2014). Triangulating data sources and perspectives contributed to the findings' credibility, accuracy, and trustworthiness, as we analyzed the data separately to compare our interpretations and analyses (Patton, 2015). In other words, given our dual roles as instructors and researchers, we took steps to minimize any perception of pressure or influence on students' participation. Importantly, the assignments and activities used as data sources were part of the course design prior to the development of the research project; thus, they were not created for research purposes. In this context, the students were informed about the study and invited to provide consent during the final week of the semester, after all coursework had been completed and graded.

Finally, we resorted to external audits to validate the trustworthiness of our findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Specifically, we shared our thematic categories and representative excerpts with two ESOL/teacher-education faculty members who were not involved in the study. They reviewed the alignment between the excerpts and our interpretations and provided feedback on clarity and coherence; we used their comments to refine the themes and strengthen the links in the final report.

Researchers' Positionalities

The first and second authors were co-instructors in the course, with similar research agendas in multicultural/lingual teacher preparation and language education. Drawing on long-standing work in multicultural/lingual education, immigration and teacher preparation, and on our own experiences as international and multilingual educators, we approach this study from an explicitly humanizing and social-justice-oriented stance, while remaining reflexive about how our instructional roles and commitments to asset-based views of MLs shape the design of the course and our interpretation of preservice teachers' narratives. The third author, a doctoral student specializing in Multicultural/lingual Education, served as a teaching assistant in the course. Although the authors' familiarity with the topic and the course could influence their interpretation of the findings, it also enabled them to understand the participants' experiences deeply.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Three themes were developed: (1) the expectations about teaching MLs, (2) awareness of the challenges faced by MLs, and (3) narrow perceptions of MLs. Each theme presented a nuanced picture of the participants' viewpoints, revealing a complex interplay between well-intentioned inclusivity, cultural awareness, and practical readiness. The findings suggest that, while there was general recognition of the importance of inclusive and

culturally responsive teaching, there was a noticeable disparity between preservice teachers' good intentions and their practical readiness to teach in diverse settings.

The composition of the participant group also calls for closer reflection on these patterns. As described in the participants' section, the class was predominantly monolingual and White, which may have shaped the way participants engaged with humanizing pedagogies. For many, MLs remained an abstract category, and reflection tended to stay at the level of general commitments to fairness, kindness, or "treating all students the same." In contrast, participants who identified as bilingual, non-White, or former English learners often drew on their personal or familial experiences of linguistic marginalization when interpreting the scenarios. These participants were more likely to articulate the emotional, relational, and institutional dimensions of being positioned as linguistically deficient, moving beyond surface-level affirmations toward more situated and critical reflection. This pattern may suggest that experiential proximity to linguistic marginalization may affect how preservice teachers engage with humanizing pedagogies, not by determining their willingness to reflect, but by affording different resources for making sense of the scenarios and their implications for practice. This perspective is consistent with scholarship in multicultural education that highlights how dominant cultural and linguistic positions can render inequities less visible when they are experienced as normative (Gay, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Theme One: Expectations about Teaching MLs

The expectations surrounding the teaching of MLs in the U.S. educational system, as voiced by preservice teachers, present a multifaceted view that ranges from well-intentioned inclusivity to a lack of reflective depth and practical preparedness. The amalgamation of their perspectives underscores the challenge of balancing the theoretical understanding of multiculturalism with its concrete application in diverse classroom settings, primarily through the lens of native-born American preservice teachers.

Several participants emphasized the role of a teacher as a promoter of social justice and cultural responsiveness. Participant 11 articulated this viewpoint, stating that "being a multicultural teacher requires you to promote social justice, to be culturally responsive, and to inform students about real-world issues regarding social justice and multilingual student stereotypes." This perspective aligns with the emphasis in the literature on the importance of social justice orientations in teacher preparation (Aronson, 2020; Crosby, 2018; Goodwin & Stanton, 2022) and highlights a recognition of the broader societal context within which education occurs and the responsibility of educators to foster a more empathetic and informed society. The importance of unbiased teaching and equitable education was another recurrent aspect. As Participant 3 noted,

I hope to create a culturally aware classroom in which all my students accept one another for the way they are and learn to appreciate each other's differences. It is important for teachers to have no biases when beginning to teach so they can give all their students the best education, no matter where they come from or what their background is.

This perspective underscores the necessity for teacher education programs to broaden a teacher's cultural lens and instill a deep-seated respect for the diverse backgrounds of MLs. However, this participant (as well as others) did not go into detail about what it would mean to be mindful of one's own bias, evincing a lack of depth and underestimating the elusive nature of bias.

However, most participants' perspectives also revealed an American-centric view, often emphasizing the functional integration of MLs into U.S. society rather than celebrating cultural pluralism and bilingualism. The statement from Participant 12, saying, "I do agree that it is important to teach multilingual students because they will need to learn how to function in society if they are in the U.S.," exemplifies this attitude, suggesting a focus on assimilation rather than cultural exchange. This aligns with the concerns raised by Nieto (2018) and Lund and Lee (2015) about the limitations of monocultural perspectives in teacher education. Although, at face value, statements like these are well-meaning, they implicitly place U.S. culture over the MLs' culture. Specifically, participants in our study tended to rely on generalized commitments and "universal" strategies rather than examining how power, privilege, and institutional conditions shape MLs' schooling experiences. This orientation reflects the limitations of monocultural perspectives highlighted in these studies.

By contrast, Participant 5 remarked, "With teaching multilingual students, we don't have to always include diversity into everything," reflecting a divergent viewpoint and indicating a lack of appreciation for the nuances of cultural diversity in education. Furthermore, responses regarding ESOL varied significantly, ranging from viewing them as essential to MLs' integration and success to perceiving them as irrelevant to their personal teaching experience. Such discrepancies highlight a gap in understanding the comprehensive role of ESOL in fostering an inclusive educational environment. Participant 11 was especially sharp when she said, "Honestly, ESOL means nothing to me, as it does not relate to me at all." This reflects a broader issue in teacher preparation programs that

often fail to integrate a comprehensive understanding of multicultural education beyond language acquisition (Heineke et al., 2022).

The critical finding was the preservice teachers' limited reflection on their own positionality as educators and as U.S. citizens. Their responses often did not deeply engage with the unique challenges faced by MLs or critically examine their own biases and assumptions as native-born educators. This lack of introspection points to a crucial need for more focused training in self-awareness and critical pedagogy within teacher preparation programs.

In summary, while preservice teachers generally agree on the importance of inclusive and culturally responsive teaching for MLs, there is a noticeable gap between their good intentions and their practical readiness to teach in diverse settings. This disparity underscores the need for teacher education programs to go beyond theoretical knowledge, emphasizing practical, real-world training and self-reflection. Such an approach is vital to adequately prepare teachers for the complexities and nuances of diverse classrooms, ensuring they can effectively bridge the gap between intention and practice in multicultural education (Darder, 2016; Freire, 1970/2018).

Theme Two: Awareness of Challenges Faced by MLs

The second theme delved into preservice teachers' perceptions of MLs' complex experiences, particularly those adapting to new linguistic and cultural environments. It explored their depth of awareness of the social, emotional, and academic obstacles these students face, as well as their readiness to adopt culturally responsive and equitable teaching practices. As Participant 7 aptly said: "Awareness is just the first step."

Of the 33 participants, 19 did not acknowledge the school's responsibility to support MLs. Instead, they tended to focus on individual students and their families, reflecting a concerning lack of understanding of the institutional role in facilitating MLs' success. This was compounded by misconceptions, such as one participant's erroneous belief that a student from Puerto Rico was in the U.S. "illegally" and others mistaking Brazil as a Spanish-speaking country in Central America. It is important to note that these responses were collected from an assignment in which participants were asked to observe a specific ML in class. This reflects a concerning gap in understanding the institutional responsibilities highlighted by Heineke et al. (2022).

Participant 11 shared a misperception of the role of English language support: "I think ESOL does not benefit multilingual students; it gives them a crutch to lean on. They should be working hard to learn English and fit in with the other students." While this was perhaps the most forceful quote among participants, this perspective was not much different from others, who tended to prioritize assimilation over linguistic and cultural support. This perspective aligns with a deficit mindset, as critiqued in the literature for failing to recognize MLs' strengths and cultural assets (Freeman et al., 2021; Gorski, 2012). Conversely, some preservice teachers recognized the educational system's failures in addressing the needs of MLs. For instance, Participant 4 remarked,

No one wants to be treated like they are not important or worthy of an education. Sadly, I have seen this happen in classrooms often. Countless times, I have seen teachers ignore multilingual students who need help. I once had a teacher stop me from helping them because 'they can do it on their own, just like everyone else.' This thought process is asinine because a student who doesn't speak or read English will not be able to complete a worksheet that is in English. It frustrates me to no end that teachers think that just because someone comes from a different country, they can't learn.

This highlighted the neglect MLs often face, exacerbated by a systemic lack of resources and support. This discrepancy underscores the varying levels of awareness among preservice teachers about the systemic challenges faced by MLs (Spitzman & Balconi, 2019). However, the awareness of the need for culturally responsive practices varied. Participant 15 commented that "multilingual students will achieve more when their teacher is the same background as they are," which reflected a limited understanding of multicultural education and subtly reinforced a homogeneous approach rather than embracing and addressing students' backgrounds.

Among the responses acknowledging the need for schools to adapt, several highlighted specific challenges and initiatives. For example, Participant 9 noted, "The setting of this classroom is not working out for this child. The aunt is blaming the school system and complaining that they are not helping him." Participant 6 shared a situation involving the school's principal, who said that "he did nothing to learn about the student or her culture. When speaking to the parents, he did so in English and barely bothered using a translation app." Similarly, Participant 21 shared that "the teacher strictly prohibits the use of Spanish when the student is in her classroom. This poses a great linguistic challenge for the student." Another one stated,

I believe schools should not reject students based on a language barrier. Schools need to take inspiration from each unique case and alter the way they function to make accommodations. Every child deserves a chance to learn and succeed in a way that is good for them. (Participant 13)

This recognition of systemic barriers and the need for adaptability aligns with findings from studies advocating for a more equitable approach to education (Leiva et al., 2021; Nguyen & Zeichner, 2021). This perspective underscored the essential principle that educational institutions should be adaptable, prioritizing the diverse needs of their students over a one-size-fits-all approach. However, the realization of such inclusivity was often hindered by resource limitations, as highlighted by Participant 8: “The issue here is this school; they do not provide translators. The main problem is that the school is not providing enough resources and support to help this student succeed.” This gap in resource allocation, particularly in specialized areas like science, impedes the academic success of MLs, underscoring the need for schools to proactively address these deficiencies. However, not even ten participants recognized the institutional shortcomings in accommodating the diverse needs of MLs as the main cause.

In conclusion, the second theme revealed a spectrum of awareness and readiness among preservice teachers regarding the challenges MLs face. While some demonstrated empathy and a readiness to adopt culturally responsive practices, others lacked depth in understanding these students’ unique needs. The responses highlighted the necessity for teacher education programs to emphasize not only multicultural awareness but also practical strategies for addressing the specific challenges MLs face. This includes a stronger focus on systemic support, resource allocation, and cultural competency training, ensuring that future educators are well-equipped to navigate and positively impact the multifaceted landscapes of diverse classrooms.

Theme Three: Narrow Perceptions of MLs

The final theme depicted participants’ reflections and suggestions regarding teaching strategies and accommodations for MLs drawn from a specific prompt. The focus was on examining preservice teachers’ perceptiveness regarding MLs. This theme critically explored how these future educators conceptualize the challenges and needs of MLs, particularly scrutinizing the depth, practicality, and applicability of their proposed strategies and approaches. The responses, in general, reflected a somewhat foundational awareness and a willingness to engage with the complexities of teaching MLs. For instance, Participant 4 summarized this issue:

Using Critical Race Theory allows the teacher to take what everyone brings to the classroom (background, culture, customs) and enhance it for their multicultural education. Celebrating all students’ differences in their uniqueness can allow for more engagement in the classroom. If students feel accepted for who they are, they are more likely to engage in their learning process than if they were isolated. Finding what makes every student special is what can make a classroom environment the most beneficial.

However, most of the participants’ responses showed an evident gap in the depth and practicality of their approaches, though well-meaning. This could be seen when Participant 5 talked about multicultural education and its integration into teacher preparation:

When I become a teacher, I will pay very close attention to every assignment I make and make sure it will work for every student and that it doesn’t favor one type of person over another. I will also pay attention to each of my students, learn about who they are, and talk to their families to gain insight into their lives.

While acknowledging the need for cultural consideration, this response did not specify how to address the unique challenges MLs face. Nevertheless, this participant recognized the importance of considering cultural diversity from the outset of educational planning, a crucial starting point for addressing the needs of MLs.

Similarly, Participant 29 emphasized the importance of recognizing diverse backgrounds in shaping teaching strategies, stating, “When teachers understand the concepts of equality and equity, they can help their students thrive in the classroom.” While this understanding did not seem to extend into concrete, actionable plans tailored for MLs, this approach laid the groundwork for more specific strategies that could be developed with further training and experience.

Relatedly, a recurring theme in participants’ responses was the distinction between equity and equality in education. Many of them acknowledged that while equality provides the same resources to all students, equity involves understanding and catering to the unique needs of each student, especially MLs. Participant 13 noted, “Equity is different from equality when teaching multilingual students because equity aims for equal outcomes while equality focuses on providing equal opportunity,” reflecting an emerging awareness of differentiated approaches needed in education (Nieto, 2018).

Though perhaps not enough to consider this a breakthrough in their perceptions, it highlighted a growing awareness among preservice teachers of the need for differentiated approaches in education. This situation gave the impression that the participants’ responses, though factually and politically correct, seemed flat and shallow,

lacking reflexivity. After all, these topics were part of the class's readings and discussion posts, so the participants had the resources to provide a more profound response.

Some participants also discussed their understanding of microaggressions and their impact on MLs. They recognized that microaggressions—often subtle and unintentional—can significantly affect students' educational experiences and self-esteem (Sue & Sue, 2013). For instance, Participant 2 recalled witnessing microaggressive behavior, such as a teacher “talking to students who have a Spanish or mixed culture background like they are babies.” She also mentioned being “excited to learn about their country” and “adjust to their learning environment,” indicating a surface-level engagement with the cultural dimensions of MLs' experiences. While this showed a certain level of understanding, she fell short of translating this awareness into effective teaching methodologies. However, her eagerness to learn about different cultures and adapt to various learning environments could be an asset in building rapport with MLs. This awareness, though not fully developed into effective teaching methodologies, indicates a starting point for deeper engagement with the cultural dimensions of education (Dantas-Whitney & Waldschmidt, 2009).

The strategies suggested by Participants 14 and 30, involving “collaborative activities” and “adding culturally relevant topics into the curriculum,” might help bridge the gap between traditional teaching methods and the needs of MLs. They show an initial attempt to make the curriculum more accessible and engaging for students from diverse backgrounds. Similarly, Participant 33 emphasized the need for professional development for ELL activities:

The school should be providing professional development strategies and opportunities for its staff. These training sessions should focus on how to work with ELL students. Integrating these diverse activities in the classroom and curriculum helps the bilingual or monolingual student see their cultural identity being represented and validated in the classroom. This helps foster a sense of belonging and community among students.

She was the only participant to comment on this, and that reflected an essential understanding of the importance of continuous learning in teaching. Although Participant 33 framed this as professional development for practicing school staff, her comment also aligns with a broader point reflected across the dataset: learning to teach MLs is not a one-time outcome of a single course, but an ongoing process that develops over time—after all, effective teaching of MLs requires specialized skills and knowledge that develop over time. Furthermore, Participant 16's idea of having students interview each other to discuss their communities was a promising approach to fostering peer connections. This approach could help MLs share their experiences and backgrounds, enhancing mutual understanding and respect among peers. Nonetheless, it may not be sufficient to address the broader educational and cultural challenges faced by MLs.

Finally, Participant 27 suggested that “Having a curriculum for multilingual students that uses simplified language input would be very beneficial, as it would allow them to have the most condensed and concise directions possible.” Her suggestion to use simplified language input in the curriculum for MLs was a well-intentioned approach aimed at enhancing comprehension and ease of learning. This idea recognized the language barriers that MLs face and proposed adapting teaching methods to make instructions more accessible.

In this study, the longitudinal patterns observed across the six time points throughout the semester, as participants' responses showed modest shifts in tone and language about teaching MLs but limited movement toward deeper, structural reflection consistent with humanistic approaches such as critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970/2018). For example, in early-semester reflections (weeks 1–3), participants' reflections commonly emphasized uncertainty and broad intentions, such as wanting to be fair, kind, or to “treat all students the same,” often framing MLs as a generalized group rather than engaging with the institutional and relational conditions that shape their schooling experiences. By the end of the semester (week 16), some participants expressed more compassionate and care-oriented dispositions and used course language with greater ease, adopting what can be described as a vocabulary of care. These shifts suggest an emerging form of awareness grounded in empathy and concern for students, consistent with previous studies (e.g., Halpern, Trunfio, & Aydin, 2024). Such shifts occurred even when reflection did not consistently extend to naming structural inequities or systemic forms of linguistic marginalization and remained limited to discussing strategies for improving the teaching of English (Halpern, Aydin, Halpern, Franz, & Parks, 2025). At the same time, for many participants, responses remained at a surface level across time points, relying on generalized commitments to equity rather than developing more situated interpretations of multilingual learners' experiences. Overall, deeper reflection appeared more frequently when participants connected prompts to personal or familial experiences of linguistic marginalization, which helped contextualize why surface-level engagement persisted despite the course's focus on humanizing pedagogies and social justice, as discussed in relation to participants' backgrounds and experiential distance from the experiences of their future MLs.

In essence, while participants demonstrate a basic awareness of the importance of cultural inclusivity and respect, their responses may lack the depth needed to understand and address the specific educational, cultural, and social needs of MLs. This perception of shallowness highlights the need for more comprehensive training and education for future teachers, equipping them with the skills and knowledge to holistically support and engage MLs. Nevertheless, the willingness of these preservice teachers to learn and grow suggests potential for development, particularly with proper guidance and professional development opportunities (Kincheloe, 2017). Furthermore, these participants may have been “trained to answer correctly” but not to critically reflect, probe, and explore these matters more deeply.

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CONCLUSION

This research on preservice teachers’ perceptions of teaching MLs as a matter of social justice and toward a humanizing pedagogical perspective presented several key findings with important implications for teacher education. Firstly, there is consensus among them on the importance of inclusive, culturally responsive teaching. However, this is often not matched by a deep understanding or practical readiness to address the unique challenges faced by MLs. This disparity highlights the need for teacher education programs to go beyond theoretical knowledge, emphasizing practical, real-world training and self-reflective practices.

Their responses also indicate a limited reflection on their own biases and assumptions, suggesting the need for focused training in self-awareness and critical pedagogy. Furthermore, there is a notable absence of depth in understanding the specific educational, cultural, and social needs of MLs. This points to the need for more comprehensive training and education for future teachers, equipping them with the skills and knowledge to holistically support and engage MLs.

It is important to acknowledge this study’s limitations. First, the study was conducted in a specific institutional and instructional context, which shapes how the findings should be interpreted. Most participants had limited personal experience with language learning and with continuous interaction with individuals from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Therefore, despite the readings and prompts provided in the course, this likely shaped what participants noticed (and what they did not notice) when responding to the assignments. Second, the fully online, asynchronous course format limited opportunities for real-time interaction among students and instructors, which reduced our ability to observe in-the-moment reactions, ask follow-up questions, and collect additional observational data. Third, the dataset did not include interviews, which would have allowed for deeper probing of how participants made sense of the course content over time and whether (or how) their reflections translated into shifts in how they envision teaching MLs in the future. Finally, as a qualitative case study, the findings are context-bound and not intended to be generalizable; instead, they offer insights that may inform similar teacher-education settings (Stake, 1995).

Based on these limitations, future research could examine similar pedagogical approaches in face-to-face or hybrid course formats that allow for dialogic interaction, in-class experiential learning, and follow-up questioning, making it possible to capture participants’ in-the-moment reactions during discussions and activities. Studies could also incorporate longitudinal interviews (e.g., early-, mid-, and end-of-semester) to explore how preservice teachers interpret course concepts over time and to better understand why some reflections remain at the level of general intentions while others become more situated and analytic. Additional designs could follow preservice teachers into subsequent coursework, field experiences, or early teaching placements to assess whether the emerging awareness and “vocabulary shifts” observed in this study are carried into their actual instructional decisions when teaching MLs. Finally, future studies could intentionally include more participants with varied linguistic and cultural backgrounds, including former English learners, to explore how different experiences shape engagement with humanizing pedagogies and culturally responsive teaching across contexts.

The study’s findings provide implications for research, policy, and practice. First, explicit, intentional, and consistent attention to humanizing pedagogies and social justice is needed in teacher preparation programs as they prepare future teachers to understand the structural and systemic issues that shape MLs’ schooling experiences in U.S. K–12 contexts. The reason for this is that developing culturally responsive practice involves ongoing opportunities for guided reflection and application; thus, it cannot be accomplished through stand-alone coverage

in one semester. In fact, previous publications have noted that a one-semester course is unlikely to fully develop preservice teachers' culturally responsive teaching practices or to support preservice teachers' deeper reflection on the systemic forces shaping MLs' schooling experiences (Halpern, Trunfio, & Aydin, 2024; Villegas & Lucas, 2002; Warren, 2018).

While the findings suggest that participants developed greater awareness and adopted more culturally responsive language over time, this shift did not translate into deeper engagement with the systemic dimensions of cultural and linguistic marginalization (Darder, 2016; Halpern, Trunfio, & Aydin, 2024). Therefore, teacher preparation programs may benefit from designing learning experiences that more intentionally connect preservice teachers' backgrounds and experiences to their instructional decisions and to explicit discussion of the structural conditions shaping MLs' learning experiences (Darder, 2016; Gay, 2018). Creating opportunities for preservice teachers to examine how their own backgrounds inform what they notice, how they interpret students' experiences, and how they design instruction may support movement from emerging awareness toward more culturally responsive practice (Gay, 2018; Halpern, Aydin, Halpern, Franz, & Parks, 2025; Warren, 2018).

From a policy standpoint, this study's findings highlight the importance of program-level conditions to make teacher preparation focused on humanizing pedagogies possible. This includes creating curricular space across the program (rather than treating the work as a stand-alone, theoretical topic), supporting faculty development, and implementing structures that encourage continuous attention to teaching MLs (Villegas & Lucas, 2002). In other words, if teacher preparation programs expect preservice teachers to move beyond good intentions and surface-level commitments, the program needs to provide repeated opportunities to revisit these issues, apply them to instructional decision-making, and receive feedback over time (Warren, 2018).

Finally, this study contributes to ongoing discussions on teacher education programs by showing that, even in a Foundations of ESOL course where the instructors' dispositions and commitments shaped intentional attention to humanizing pedagogies and social justice, preservice teachers may develop a more culturally responsive vocabulary and emerging awareness. By tracing reflections across six time points, the study's findings indicate where preservice teacher learning appeared to shift over the semester and where participants' reflections remained centered on general intentions.

In conclusion, teacher education programs must provide proper guidance and professional development. This will ensure that future educators are not only aware of the complexities of teaching in diverse classrooms but are also well-equipped to bridge the gap between intention and practice in multicultural education. The ultimate goal is to prepare educators who can enrich the educational experiences of all students, fostering an environment of inclusivity, respect, and mutual learning.

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Ethical Statement

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There are no competing interests to our knowledge.

Author Contributions

Author contributions are not listed, as all authors contributed collaboratively to the work

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