Reframing for Social Justice: 
The Influence of Critical Friendship Groups on Preservice Teachers’ 
Reflective Practice

Nadia Behizadeh¹, Clarice Thomas¹, 
and Stephanie Behm Cross¹

Abstract
A primary goal of teacher preparation programs should be to develop the reflective and critical problem-solving capacities of preservice teachers, especially social justice–oriented programs that prepare teachers to work in urban schools with historically underserved youth. Through an analysis of participants’ biweekly posts to discussion boards, this qualitative case study examines common dilemmas for a group of 11 racially diverse undergraduate preservice middle school teachers and descriptions of their process during Critical Friendship Group protocols. Results reveal that most dilemmas revolved around relationships with others, curriculum and instruction, and perceived deficiencies of students. However, through the process of engaging in reflective conversations supported by classroom activities, some participants reenvisioned the initial dilemma, such as reframing deficiency views as pedagogical or relationship issues. In addition, all participants articulated benefits of the Critical Friendship Group meetings in their reflections. Implications for improving supports for critical, collaborative reflection during student teaching are discussed.

Keywords
critical friendship, preservice teacher education, professional learning communities, social justice, reflection, urban teacher education

It was so easy for me to believe that the student was just being lazy, but [the critical friendship group] helped me to think of possible underlying issues of the student’s behavior.

—Julia, Reflection 4

During student teaching, preservice teachers are often placed in a classroom by themselves to complete an extended, full-time teaching internship that involves gradual release of responsibility from the mentor teacher to the student teacher (Guise et al., 2017; Preston, 2017). Guise and colleagues (2017) referred to traditional student teaching models as often employing a “sink or swim” method, which may leave student teachers feeling overwhelmed and isolated (p. 2). In this hectic time period, if preservice teachers do not have time and space for critical reflection, negative characterizations of young adolescents in general (Petrone & Sarigianides, 2017) and negative characterizations of youth of color in particular (Howard, 2003; Muhammad, 2015) may be reinforced by field experiences without an opportunity to surface and examine subconscious biases and prejudices (Barnes, 2016). Our goal in this project was to examine what happens when a group of diverse preservice teachers completing their student teaching experience in urban middle schools are provided an alternative space to engage in critical, collaborative reflection. We argue that supporting preservice teachers in critical reflection is paramount for realizing social justice education.

Although social justice is a complicated and contested term (Bieler & Burns, 2017), we define social justice as achieving equality of access to desirable social outcomes, such as high-quality education, safe housing, financial security, civic participation, and sustained employment. Social justice in education requires that all members of a society have equal opportunity to learn. Importantly, opportunity to learn refers to access to rigorous, culturally relevant, critical, and engaging educational experiences that are not restricted by socioeconomic status (SES), race, gender, age, or other demographic categories (Haertel, Moss, Pullin, & Gee, 2013).

¹Georgia State University, Atlanta, USA

Corresponding Author:
Nadia Behizadeh, Assistant Professor of Adolescent Literacy, Department of Middle and Secondary Education, College of Education & Human Development, Georgia State University, P.O. Box 3978, Atlanta, GA 30302-3978, USA.
Email: nbehizadeh@gsu.edu
According to theories of social justice education (Adams, 2016; Rojas & Liou, 2017; Villegas, 2007; Villegas & Lucas, 2002; Zeichner, 2009), social justice pedagogy requires providing inclusive, collaborative classroom environments that connect with and sustain students’ cultures, identities, knowledge, and experiences; helping students explore social injustices and their own privileges, biases, and intersectionality; and considering how systemic inequities and discrimination (e.g., systemic racism) affect students.

For teacher educators, the development of social justice educators requires social justice teacher education in university spaces that aligns with the same principles of inclusion, cultural relevance, intersectionality, institutional critique, and self-critique. For example, preservice teachers who intend to work with historically marginalized students need to gain an understanding of the school-to-prison pipeline/nexus (Heitzeg, 2016; Meiners, 2011; Meiners & Winn, 2010; Winn & Behizadeh, 2011) to recognize when their actions contribute to this nexus and reduce students’ opportunity to learn, such as by removing students from classrooms through disciplinary procedures (Meiners, 2011). However, those who will teach major White populations also need to engage in social justice education to learn about and then help students examine privilege and the myth of meritocracy (Haviland, 2008; Powell, 1997). Positioning teachers as “change agents,” educators who strive to shift traditional school practices that undermine social justice goals, is a major component of critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970/2000) and social justice teacher preparation (Bieler & Burns, 2017; Rojas & Liou, 2017).

Thus, as teacher educators working in the heart of a major metropolitan area in the southeastern United States, with both a racially, socioeconomically, and gender diverse body of preservice teachers and an equally diverse body in our local schools, our goal is to provide space, structure, and support for critical reflection so teachers can be change agents for social justice in education. Having a network of critical colleagues (Lord, 1994) who ask probing questions about dilemmas during student teaching is one way to eliminate deficit thinking as well as the effects of systemic racism—and then reconsider or reframe the dilemma. To this end, we developed a capstone project for our preservice teachers who engage in student teaching. In this project, students met biweekly, either in person or virtually, in small “critical friendship” groups (Bambino, 2002; National School Reform Faculty [NSRF], 2012) and engaged in a structured discussion protocol (School Reform Initiative [SRI], 2016) designed to help them clarify their problems of practice, consider alternative factors that may be a part of the problem, and then determine next steps.

In this case study, we examine problems of practice of 11 diverse undergraduate preservice middle school teachers and their process for arriving at resolutions. Three research questions guided this study:

Research Question 1: What dilemmas do preservice teachers face during student teaching?
Research Question 2: How do preservice teachers resolve these dilemmas?
Research Question 3: How does participation in a critical friendship (CF) project influence preservice teachers’ reflective practice?

Although we did not include a question about race, due to the racial diversity of our participants and a continued call for diversifying the teaching force, we provide a brief analysis of our data by racial background in the discussion.

Conceptual Framework: Critical, Collaborative Teacher Reflection

Reflection within teacher education spaces has been studied extensively (e.g., Dewey, 1933; Schön, 1983, 1987; Zeichner & Liston, 2014). More than 80 years ago, Dewey (1933) pushed for “active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in light of the grounds that support it and the future conclusions to which it tends” (p. 7). Dewey conceptualized this as reflection on action, and Schön (1983, 1987) argued that teachers also reflect in action; in other words, teachers reflect on their intuitive knowledge while engaged in the act of teaching. Regarding the outcome of reflection, Clara (2015) revisited seminal works by Dewey and Schön and explained this well: “some reflections reach a conclusion—a clarified situation—which has direct implications for action (reflection in action), whereas other processes of reflection reach a conclusion—a clarified situation—which has no such direct implications for action” (p. 267). As we conceptualize reflection for our preservice teachers, we drew on the idea that reflection is a movement toward a clarified situation. This movement can often be tied to action, but action is not a required outcome of reflective thought.

Moving to critical reflection, Dewey (1933) emphasized that reflection includes open-mindedness, defined as the desire to listen to more sides than one, to give heed to facts from whatever source they come, to give full attention to alternative possibilities, to recognize the possibility of error even in the beliefs which are dearest to us. (p. 29)

Larrivee (2000) explicitly centered on “consideration of the ethical implications and impact of practices” (p. 294) as an aspect of critical reflection, while Thompson and Thompson (2008) emphasized the depth and breadth of criticality, stating depth refers to being able to look beneath the surface of a situation, to see what assumptions are being made . . . [while breadth] refers to the broader sociological context and includes
such factors as power relations, discrimination and oppression. (p. 321)

Thompson and Thompson’s (2008) focus on depth and breadth aligns with other scholarship on critical reflection, which we draw upon to further define these two dimensions. Regarding depth, Palmer (1998), Howard (2003), and Sams and Dyches (2017) highlighted the role of self-awareness in critical reflection, particularly teachers’ awareness of their own racial and cultural identities and how these identities affect interactions with students and teaching practice. The notion of breadth aligns with Freire’s (1970/2000) critical consciousness and McLaren’s (2015) critical pedagogy, both of which center reflection on oppressive societal systems. Importantly, in all of this scholarship, depth and breadth are intertwined; when teachers understand themselves, they can see the ways in which they participate in and/or are affected by oppressive societal systems. To achieve social justice in education—again, defined as providing access to rigorous, relevant, critical, and engaging educational experiences for all students, critical reflection that includes contextualization of dilemmas within historic and systemic injustice is required, particularly when working with historically underserved youth of color.

For our work, an additional component was added to the construct of critical reflection: collaboration. Building on the work of Dewey, Rogers (2002) suggested “reflection needs to happen in community, in interaction with others” (p. 845). This connects to Lord’s (1994) notion of critical colleagueship, or the ability to share classroom practices and surface concerns with other educators and then provide and receive constructive criticism. According to Lord (1994), “the point is to ask increasingly more powerful and revealing questions about the practice of teaching . . . [which] provides support for greater reflectiveness and sustained learning” (p. 184). Although Lord does not outline what these professional development spaces should look like, he suggested that these groups share important characteristics, including teachers owning the space, group commitment to the process, a connection to well-resourced institutions, such as universities, sustained relationships within the group, and mutual critique of practice.

Since Lord’s (1994) publication, many organizations have worked to create structures designed to engage teachers in this work. For example, the NSRF (2012) and SRI (2016) designed “critical friendship” groups that have the characteristics suggested by Lord, and this is the structure we utilized in our study. Returning to the literature on critical reflection, our intended goal was to position our preservice teachers as “critical colleagues” or “critical friends” to support one another in grappling with issues of equity and help each other realize social justice education. Thus, our conceptual framework in designing the critical friendship (CF) project and analyzing our data was critical, collaborative reflection, defined as collaborative engagement in deep and broad analysis to arrive at a clarified situation, especially as it relates to the consideration of alternatives to personal beliefs and the ethical consideration of historically rooted structures and systems within schooling.

**Literature Review**

**Student Teaching in Urban Middle Schools**

Student teaching (or practicum) is a widely accepted component of preservice teacher education (Anderson & Stillman, 2011; Darling-Hammond, 2006). Yet Grudnoff (2011) found that “although first-year teachers consistently viewed student teaching as a very important part of their preparation for teaching, their student teaching experiences did not always prepare them adequately for entry into the profession” (p. 229). This may be related to “pitfalls of experience” in teacher education (Feiman-Nemser & Buchmann, 1985) or particular types of “inappropriate learning” that arise as teacher candidates tend to trust what is most memorable in personal experience, have trouble making connections between university coursework and field experiences, and struggle when placed in classrooms that are not necessarily set up for mentoring new teachers.

These pitfalls of experience in learning to teach are even more complex and important to address when teacher candidates are working in urban schools, broadly defined by Milner (2012) as schools that have challenges “in terms of resources, qualification of teachers, and academic development of students” (p. 560). Regardless of population density, schools characterized as urban often have large populations of linguistically and culturally diverse students who are non-White and/or whose primary language differs from standard American English (Behizadeh & Jackson, 2016; Milner, 2003). Several studies indicated that preservice teachers often enter teacher certification programs with negative beliefs about students in urban schools (Çelik & Amaç, 2012; Hampton, Peng, & Ann, 2008). In their review of the role of field placements in learning to teach, Grossman, Ronfeldt, and Cohen (2011) found that “learning to teach in urban schools can be extremely challenging, in some cases perpetuating negative attitudes and even reducing the likelihood that teachers will continue to work in similar kinds of settings” (p. 318). According to Anderson and Stillman (2011), we know very little about how to use student teaching to cultivate a knowledge base specifically applicable to teaching in urban, high-needs schools where the need for well-prepared teachers is arguably greatest.

Our focus on preparing preservice teachers to work in urban middle schools complicates our analysis because literature suggests that teachers may have deficit views of young adolescents in general. While teacher certification in middle grades education was designed to address specific developmental needs of adolescents (Preston, 2017), some scholars suggest a need for preservice teachers to reconfigure
their view of early aged teenagers (Petrone & Sarigianides, 2017; Sarigianides, Lewis, & Petrone, 2015; Thein, Beach, & Johnston, 2017). Thein and colleagues (2017) explained,

From a sociocultural perspective students are not just “adolescents” who are self-focused and immature, “struggling readers” who are disengaged with literature, or “behavioral problems” who are expected to be perpetually disruptive. Instead these labels become ways in which students are positioned—positionings that can be transformed through a shift in stance toward students and instruction. (p. 72)

Describing changes to their teacher preparation coursework, Petrone and Sarigianides (2017) structured several interventions to help preservice teachers and inservice teachers identify and reject dominant discourses that typically position adolescents as deficient. Sarigianides and colleagues (2015) encouraged preservice teachers to rethink adolescence and how this group is socially constructed, as well as how deficit views of adolescence intersect with racism, sexism, ableism, heteronormativity, and other socially entrenched biases. Preston (2017) posited that programs should offer student teachers a space to reflect on problems of theory and practice including how to address deficit ideology in middle grades. Because of the overlapping potential sources of deficit views of students in urban middle schools, we were careful in our analysis to limit our interpretations to the data, yet race and age are two salient sources of deficit thinking according to the literature.

The Role of Critical, Collaborative Reflection in Student Teaching

Some researchers have pointed to the importance of strong social capital, or relationships with others, during student teaching (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012; Leana, 2011). Grossman et al. (2011) have suggested, for example, the importance of mentor teachers. However, many researchers have documented missed opportunities for learning when student teachers enter the field excited to try out new pedagogical approaches but are placed with a mentor teacher who offers limited opportunities for cycles of implementation and reflection (Grudnoff, 2011; Valencia, Martin, Place, & Grossman, 2009). Also, aligning with earlier work by Kinsella (2009), Gelfuso and Dennis (2014) found that the presence of knowledgeable others helped focus conversations on teaching and learning but that critical reflection did not necessarily occur.

The notion of critical reflection is especially important considering that preservice teachers enter the field with thousands of hours spent in an “apprenticeship of observation” (Grossman, 1991; Lortie, 1975) during their own schooling experiences that often reifies traditional schooling practices that social justice teacher preparation programs are seeking to change. In addition, teacher candidates may reinforce or develop deficit views during student teaching experiences. Cochran-Smith and colleagues (2016) concluded that “once teacher candidates’ perceptions of diversity were formed through life experiences, exposure to new experiences alone was not likely to reconfigure those perceptions without the aid of guided reflection” (p. 497). Lasatrapes and Negishi (2011-2012) found that an 18-hr tutoring requirement in an urban field placement allowed teacher candidates to consider varied perspectives and to reflect on other teachers’ classroom practices but failed to help candidates make connections to larger issues of systemic inequities. In considering criticality during practicum experiences, Tessema (2008) posited that “reflection is a dynamic, multilayered, non-predictable, social process” (p. 357, emphasis added) and suggested the importance of dialogical relationships between student teachers and teacher educators. In short, time and space for reflection alone is not enough; collaborative structures and scaffolds for criticality are required. This literature emphasizes the benefits of collaborative reflection with others and suggests that to achieve critical, collaborative reflection, more support is needed. Importantly, noticeably absent from the literature is how teacher candidates themselves can serve as reflective partners for one another. In addition, the bulk of teacher preparation literature emerges from elementary and high school settings, and our study offers analysis of reflective practice for middle school educators.

The Role of Race in Critical, Collaborative Reflection

Much of the teacher preparation literature centers on White teachers due in part to a predominantly White teaching force in the United States (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). A number of scholars advocate for White preservice teachers in the United States to engage in critical reflection especially as the student population continues to diversify in terms of cultural and racial background (Howard, 2003; Hussar & Bailey, 2013; Milner, 2003). For White teachers working in majority White settings, Haviland (2008) highlighted the importance of critical reflection so teachers can understand how they may participate in oppressive systems, including by avoiding discussion of race and racism.

In response to the continued racial homogeneity of teachers, there is a consistent call for recruiting more teachers of color, particularly in schools serving students of color (Brown, 2014; Irizarry, 2007; Sleeter, 2001; Villegas, Strom, & Lucas, 2012). Some researchers have suggested that a more diverse teaching force in the United States may increase implementation of culturally relevant and socially just teaching practices (Irizarry, 2007; Kohli, 2008; Sleeter, 2001) and “decrease a sense of alienation that students of color . . . often experience in schools” (Villegas et al., 2012, p. 285). However, other researchers have noted the vast within-group diversity of teachers of color (Brown, 2014; Carter, 2006; Kohli, 2014).
and cautioned against essentializing teachers of color as possessing a more critical stance than White teachers. Brown (2014) posited that the pervasiveness of Whiteness and racism in society and in teacher preparation programs may undermine the potential for preservice teachers of color to leverage their unique experiences when teaching students of color. As Kohli (2014) pointed out, “being a person of color does not guarantee you immunity from seeing the world, or parts of the world, with a perspective that privileges white culture” (p. 372), suggesting a need for critical reflection by preservice teachers of color. Regarding critical, collaborative reflection, empirical research by Bristol (2015) and Kohli (2008, 2014) suggests that creating a space for teachers of color to examine their cultural community wealth (Yosso, 2005) may help combat the damaging effects of racism.

Thus, the literature suggests that all preservice teachers may benefit from critical, collaborative reflection. In addition, much of the literature has focused on racially homogeneous groups of preservice teachers, often primarily White, and our study is situated within a growing body of literature that answers Sleeter’s (2001) call for studies focused on strategies that prepare strong White teachers and teachers of color working in collaborative, reflective spaces.

### Method

To understand how engagement in a CF project can support critical reflection during student teaching, we chose our “Critical Issues in Middle Grades Education” course to conduct a case study. This course was selected because it is the only required course taken concurrently with student teaching. Qualitative case study is a research approach that focuses on a unit of study, most notably, a program, a classroom, or a class project (Merriam, 2009). We utilized an embedded single-case design (Yin, 2014) with the primary unit of analysis being the CF project, and the embedded units of analysis being 11 preservice teachers who participated in the project. Case study methodology provides a space for researchers to focus on a specific phenomenon and gain a deeper understanding of a particular case (Yin, 2014). This case study analyzes the influence of the CF project on preservice teachers’ reflective practices in the context of their student teaching placement.

### Instructors, Participants, and Course Descriptions

Regarding instructor identities, the first author, Nadia, grew up in a middle class household, identifies as a woman of Persian and Irish descent, and is a recipient of White privilege. The second author, Clarice, identifies as an African American woman from a working-class background. The third author, Stephanie, who was not an instructor yet periodically joined class sessions for support, identifies as a White woman from a middle class background. We include this information to aid in contextualizing the CF project. Our participants consisted of seven women, three men, and one participant with nonbinary gender identity. They self-identified as African American (four), White (two), Irish American or Irish-White (two), Biracial/White (one), Venezuelan Trinidadian (one), and one who preferred not to respond (see Table 1). This diversity contrasts with an overwhelmingly White teaching force from preservice teachers to teacher educators (U.S. Department of Education; 2016). Also in Table 1 we included our participants’ self-identified gender, SES, and their description of their students’ race and SES. We provide this information to intentionally complicate our analysis. Teacher and student identity is complex, and we are not attempting to make causal connections between one facet of identity and beliefs/actions (e.g., saying a teacher expressed a deficit view because the teacher is White and the students are Black.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>SES of participant</th>
<th>Race of participant</th>
<th>Majority race of students</th>
<th>SES of students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alaina</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blake</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Mid</td>
<td>Irish-White</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Camille</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Midhigh</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denver</td>
<td>Nonbinary</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Biracial/White</td>
<td>Diverse</td>
<td>Mid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dylan</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Mid</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Mid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Julia</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Mid</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lily</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Mid</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Mid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>London</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Irish American</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Mid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Martin</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Mid</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miley</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tatianna</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Venezuelan/Trinidadian</td>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>Diverse</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. All data in this table come from our participants’ descriptions of self and their student population. Information not provided by our participants is marked not available (N/A). SES = socioeconomic status.
Each preservice teacher was already placed in a middle-level classroom (Grades 4-8) for student teaching and was teaching across at least two content areas. Preservice teachers reported daily to their mentor teachers’ classrooms and were expected to take on full responsibility for planning and teaching by the end of the semester. The student teaching assignments were located in a large metropolitan area, with the school compositions ranging from affluent suburban to underresourced urban. Student populations included predominantly White, predominantly African American and/or Hispanic, and diverse student populations that included a mix of racial backgrounds (see Table 1). Although our participants represented most of their students as from a middle SES background, according to data from our field placement office, the majority of student placements were in “high-need” schools, defined as schools serving communities with high poverty rates (U.S. Department of Education, 2010), which often included high percentages of student of color.

All undergraduate students enrolled in one section of the course (taught by the first two authors) were invited to join this study, and 11 students out of 15 total students in the course agreed to participate. The course was designed to be taken concurrently with student teaching during the final semester of our teacher preparation program, and the major assignment was the CF project.

Description of the CF Project and Instructor Supports

In the CF project, preservice teachers have an opportunity to engage in critical, collaborative reflection. The class was divided into four groups of three to five members, with group membership based in part on each individual’s preference for group members and the instructors’ desire for racial and gender balance. Drawing specifically on the SRI definition of CF, these groups were designed to help teacher candidates “address issues of educational equity and excellence for all students” through sustaining adult learning communities that (a) maintained a consistent membership and met regularly across the semester, (b) established a set of norms, and (c) used protocols or structured conversations (SRI, 2016).

Participants first stated a dilemma of practice and posted it on a discussion board; these were generally about one page, double-spaced, and students had models of past dilemmas for their reference. When groups met, they engaged in virtual or face-to-face conversations in which one presenter would first describe their problem for the group. Most groups chose to meet virtually using free video conferencing applications such as Skype or Google Hangouts. Next, the group members would ask clarifying questions to gain a thorough understanding of the problem. After this step, group members would ask probing questions to help the presenter think deeply about the dilemma and explore the broader context of the dilemma. Finally, group members would take up the presenter’s dilemma as their own and explore what might be influencing the dilemma and possible next steps. The process was repeated for each group member. Once CF groups met and discussed their dilemmas, they posted reflections on the discussion board. Similar to the initial dilemma post, these reflections were about one page, double-spaced. After dilemmas and reflections were posted, the instructors read them and wrote feedback to each group.

Based on teaching previous sections, we redesigned the course to include more instructor support for the CF project. In particular, during the first two in-class meetings, all three authors modeled the process for the CF protocol (drawing on the SRI, 2016 Consultancy Protocol) including what constitutes a dilemma, how to ask probing questions—including difficult and somewhat delicate questions around personal biases, as well as broader contextualization of the dilemma, and then provided time for students to practice the process. In these meetings, we presented criteria for a dilemma, including it being something that was consistently coming up, not easily resolved, does not depend on others to change, and is valued and important to the individual and to others (SRI, 2016). Then, we talked specifically about probing questions as compared to clarifying questions and gave our preservice teachers a handout with samples of each question type. We also highlighted the affordances of asking probing questions, and how it could lead to deeper reflection and reframing of issues. For example, one preservice teacher brought up an issue with student discipline, and we prompted others to ask questions such as, “What does it mean to have ‘good control?’” or “How does your experience as a student affect your interactions and perceptions of your current students?” The goals of this exercise were to model the CF process and demonstrate reframing an initial dilemma.

In addition, CF groups were supported throughout the course. Periodically, we selected excerpts from the discussion board to facilitate whole class discussions. For example, in email correspondence between the two instructors the first author wrote,

I chose these pieces based on Camille’s dilemma. I thought in class we could discuss the articles and then do a fishbowl with her dilemma, if she is willing. We can also pay attention to probing questions and debrief those after.

In this way, the CF work was embedded in a larger structure: the classroom community. In this community, dilemmas, including those with deficit views, were examined with the support of the instructors.

Data Sources and Collection

Our data sources were discussion board posts, with each participant posting between four and five total dilemmas.
and between four and five reflective summaries. At the end of the course, we identified students who had given consent to be in the study and extracted their posts from the discussion boards. We assigned each student a pseudonym and used pseudonyms on all study documents. In addition, students wrote about their identity and described their students for a class assignment and these data were used to create Table 1.

Data Analysis

All data were coded using Strauss and Corbin’s (1998) methods of open, axial, and selective coding, and the final coding scheme is represented in Tables 2 to 4. First, the first and second authors read through all data in their entirety to get a sense of the whole, jotting a few notes related to the research questions (Creswell, 2014). Then, these authors open coded all discussion boards independently. The goal was to apply one code per dilemma, and in rare cases when students articulated two or more separate dilemmas, the authors determined based on the participant’s emphasis which one was primary. The first two authors then met and compared their lists of open codes, condensing similar codes and eliminating repetitive codes. Next, the revised coding scheme was applied to the full discussion boards, again independently. Finally, the first two authors met and examined the coded data together and identified entries that had been coded differently and negotiated which code fit best, refining codes as necessary. This resulted in 100% agreement between the first two authors on the applied codes.

In the final phase of analysis, the third author read a subset of data selected to represent a range of codes assigned by the first two authors. After an initial discussion to clarify code meanings, intercoder agreement, also referred to as interrater reliability (Armstrong, Gosling, Weinman, & Marteau, 1997), for these data was 93% (agreement on 28 out of 30 codes) and ultimately reached 100% based on additional discussions, providing evidence that these codes represented the phenomena under investigation.

Limitations

As instructors of this course, we were constrained in the sources of data we could use. Based on our institution’s rules regarding ethical research with students, we could not know who was in the study until after the course was over, so it was not possible to engage in observations or interviews. We also did not want to intervene in the CF meetings. Thus, this study focuses on our participants’ posted dilemmas and reflections. Yet even though the data sources are limited, we argue that this study helps us identify some of the benefits and issues with our project implementation—and that it can help other teacher educators create or modify supports for critical, collaborative reflection.

Table 2. Dilemma Code Frequencies.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dilemma codes and subcodes</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Relationships with others at student teaching site</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preservice teacher and student(s)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>relationship (6)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preservice teacher and mentor teacher relationship (6)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preservice teacher and administrator relationship (1)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curriculum and instruction</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived student deficiency</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work–life balance</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Troubled student (often including misbehavior)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classroom management</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher lack of knowledge</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standardized, high-stakes testing</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative faculty attitudes toward students</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. There were 53 dilemmas and 1 primary code was assigned to each, resulting in 53 final codes. Percentages were calculated out of 53 total codes.

Findings

Our findings are divided into three major sections. The first two sections analyze the entire data set and establish trends related to Research Questions 1 and 2 around common dilemmas and resolutions to these dilemmas. The third section focuses on our third research question regarding the influence of the CF project.

Dilemmas

Table 2 organizes the dilemma codes by frequency. Out of 53 total codes assigned to 53 dilemmas, 13 (25%) of the dilemmas revolved around relationships with others at the student teaching site, 12 (23%) of the dilemmas concerned issues with curriculum and instruction, and another 10 (19%) were about issues with students that positioned the students as lacking or deficient. These three codes represent approximately two thirds of the dilemmas. One other code, work–life balance, was assigned six times (11%), five dilemmas (9%) were coded as troubled student/misbehavior, four dilemmas (8%) were coded as classroom management, and three codes were only used one time, representing 6% of the dilemmas. The next paragraphs illustrate these codes with examples from the data.

Relationships with others. The primary code of relationships with others was dominant in our analyses, representing fully one quarter of the dilemmas. Within this primary code, about
half revolved around the preservice teacher’s relationship with the mentor teacher (11%), which was often positioned as a conflict, and about half revolved around the preservice teacher’s relationship with students (11%).

**Mentor teacher relationships.** Regarding mentor teacher relationships, three of the six examples of this code occurred in the first dilemma. For example, Camille wrote, “I am beginning to have discipline problems during second period and I did not have them before my mentor teacher started to constantly undermine me in front of the students” (Dilemma 1). Similarly, Blake expressed,

I’ve been having a lot of issues with my mentor teacher being extremely abrasive toward me, and flat out rude. When she gets flustered, she’ll call me out and embarrass me in front of students, treating me like one of them. (Dilemma 1)

Both Camille and Blake articulated that their mentor teachers were undermining their authority, and this was a major initial issue. Other students were more concerned about forging stronger connections with their mentor teachers, such as Julia who wrote that she was not feeling connected, explaining, “Although we are almost a month into our placements, I still haven’t had the opportunity to sit down with her to discuss the students, their class culture, or most importantly my student teaching assignments” (Dilemma 1). Interestingly, all three of these initial dilemmas about mentor teacher relationships led to a reflection that voiced a desire to demonstrate capability to the mentor teacher to improve the relationship.

**Relationships with students.** This subcode under relationships was applied six times, four times for situations where preservice teachers indicated they desired better boundaries with their students and twice regarding a perceived lack of connection with students. For example, London noted the need for boundaries with her students, writing, “This student, however, has glopped onto me. Everywhere I go, she is right there next to me as if we were classmates” (Dilemma 1). All four of the dilemmas on a need for boundaries were resolved by revising classroom management plans.

The other two examples of this code were about a lack of connection, such as Martin’s second dilemma about a student he suspected as having Asperger’s syndrome. Martin wrote that the student “exhibits very little ‘affect’ regarding his academic success or the things that are happening around him” (Dilemma 2). Martin continued by asking, “[H]ow do I as a responsible and interested adult in [the student’s] environment respect his space and communicate effectively with him.” Julia’s final dilemma offers another example of a lack of connection. Julia wrote, “I want to know how to connect with male students, the same way I do with females. I know it won’t be the exact same, but are there any strategies I could use?” (Dilemma 5). Both Martin and Julia cited the help of group members in identifying next steps, which were to seek professional development for Martin and to raise awareness of her gender bias for Julia, neither of which were prominent reflection codes.

**Curriculum and instruction.** The primary code of curriculum and instruction centered on issues with planning, differentiation, dealing with difficult topics, and students not engaged, with differentiation needed being the dominant focus. Related to dealing with difficult topics, in their third dilemma, Denver wrote, “In 4th period, in particular, one student gave a speech that began with ‘Illegal immigrants are like locusts.’” Denver noted that the assignment, to give a speech on a current civil rights topic, “obviously” generated sensitive topics, and Denver detailed how some students cried when they stayed after class to share their personal stories regarding entering the country illegally. Denver ended the post, stating,

[T]hroughout the rest of the week I’ve noticed a sort of wound in the classroom community. I am unsure if I should just let time diffuse this or if it should be readdressed in some sort of way that ties into curriculum.

Two curriculum and instruction dilemmas focused on the need to plan more effective lessons. For example, London explained, “I soon learned not every student knew what an herbivore, carnivore, or omnivore was, and because I created my entire lesson plan thinking students knew these terms already, it quickly became a very difficult day of teaching” (Dilemma 3). London was indicating that her students were unprepared, but the lack of preparedness was not due to students’ lack of work ethic; instead, London centered the issue on her planning.

Most of the dilemmas in the curriculum and instruction category were focused on issues related to differentiation (five out of 12). Miley posted twice about the need for differentiation in her classroom, in Dilemmas 2 and 5. In the second dilemma, she wrote, “While my advanced class was able to read the instructions both written on the board and their worksheet, my 2 inclusion periods seemed to have a difficult time.” She explained further toward the end of her post,

When it came time to answer questions, students would look for the answer in their text, but would give up after not being able to find the answer word for word. I guess what my issue here is that I need new techniques to use in scaffolding my students so they can become more independent. I’m tired of constantly having to repeat myself or have students ask a question that they would easily find if they used their brains a little more.

Miley’s post included a suggestion of an underlying deficiency view when she wishes her students “used their brains a little more.” However, Miley centers this dilemma on her
need for new techniques to assist her students in developing their independence.

**Perceived student deficiency.** In addition to a tone suggesting a deficit view of students in some of the curriculum- and instruction dilemmas, another 10 dilemmas explicitly positioned students as deficient. However, this high number was in part due to Camille’s four out of five dilemmas being focused on student deficiency, including the statements “I can’t tell if they really don’t understand or if they are just being lazy” (Dilemma 2) and “So this week my dilemma is that my students are the definition of LAZY and my mentor teacher enables them to be” (Dilemma 3). Most participants centered at least one dilemma on student deficiency, with the exceptions of Martin, Blake, London, and Denver (although Denver used deficit language). For example, Julia asked her group,

> [W]hat do you do with students who don’t pay attention during the mini lesson, then are completely lost when it comes time for them to do their individual work, or with students who want you to spoon feed them every answer without attempting to try on their own? (Dilemma 2)

Similarly, Tatianna bemoaned the lack of intrinsic motivation of her students, stating, “Honestly, these kids expect a reward like a ‘donut party’ or candy every time they do something they are expected to do as a student” (Dilemma 3). In the most troubling example in this category, in part due to the racial dynamic of a White teacher working with mostly African American students, Dylan wrote,

> I’m sitting here as a teacher that is trying to go out and teach America’s youth and make them better, but I’m starting to see that some kids are not as fit as others and I see the realization of social Darwinism right in front of my eyes. I try to combat this as best I can by making my math socially relevant, but at what point is it the fault of the students on the front of motivation, cognitive abilities, and value of education? (Dilemma 3)

In this excerpt, Dylan situates the problem within intrinsic deficiencies of his students and their cultures, and we return to Dylan’s case in the section on reframing and examine how his participation in the project may have helped him to reframe this dilemma.

**Other dilemma codes.** Three other dilemma codes cited more than once, work–life balance (6), troubled student (5), and classroom management (4), are not explored in detail here but are referenced in the next section. In particular, the code of “troubled student” is particularly relevant for our focus on reframing deficit views because often in these cases the pre-service teacher represented a misbehaving student as in need of help, rather than intrinsically deficient.

**Reflections: Resolutions**

Table 3 organizes the resolution codes by frequency. There were 50 reflections, but two were double-coded as having two primary resolutions, resulting in 52 final resolution codes. Out of these 52, 11 (21%) were coded as no action, 10 (19%) as revise curriculum and instruction, eight (16%) as develop relationships with students, and seven (14%) as revise classroom management plan. The last six codes occurred five or less times: demonstrate capability to others (10%), include community building activities (8%), seek professional development (6%), increase professionalism (4%), raise awareness of bias (2%), and leave the profession of teaching (2%).

**No action.** Twenty-one percent of reflections did not arrive at any next steps or plans for action. We coded this as “no action.” Importantly, this code sometimes meant that students were frustrated or seemed to be giving up, but more often, it meant the process of reflection was helpful in of itself.

As an example of this latter orientation, Blake posted in his last dilemma about a work–life balance issue. He explained, “I guess the biggest difficulty I’m having isn’t classroom teaching related, but is the stress of graduation approaching, and looking for a job” (Dilemma 5). Then, in Blake’s final reflection he wrote,

> Meeting with Camille and Alaina really helped me calm down, and focus on the fact that we’re almost done! I can’t believe I’m only looking at weeks until graduation, and they reminded me about how much we’ve gone through to get here, and to enjoy what’s coming.

For Blake’s dilemma, the “solution” was feeling he was not alone through the process of reflection. He pointed out in his reflection, “That really is the best thing about this [CF] group, you know other people are going through the same things as you are” (Reflection 5).

In another example, Denver first posted about the issue of students not being engaged by the curriculum at the end of the semester and then noted that other teachers also seemed to have checked out after state tests were completed. Then in their reflection, Denver decided that they did not need to revise curriculum or do anything other than commit to making changes in the future. Denver wrote,

> When my group members took my dilemma on as their own, my favorite solution was to simply not follow suit and refuse to fall into the cycle in my future. I can’t change how other teachers run their classrooms and I can’t change the fact that standardized testing has education by the neck. (Reflection 5)

Denver’s reflection indicates that they expanded their perspective from the original dilemma focused on a lack of engagement to include a consideration of the impact of
standardized testing on the current educational system. Thus, even though they decided not take action immediately, Denver did exhibit reframing of their initial dilemma to include a broader contextualization of the dilemma.

As can be seen in these excerpts, both Blake and Denver note how their group members helped them to reflect on the issue. In fact, 10 out of the 11 total no action codes were also paired with the code “CF process helpful,” which is explored in the section on process codes.

**Revise curriculum and instruction.** Another 10 reflections were coded as “revise curriculum and instruction.” These were often closely connected to the dilemma code, such as the match between Alaina’s second dilemma coded “curriculum and instruction: differentiation needed” and her second reflection coded “revise curriculum and instruction: differentiation strategy.” Others were less connected, such as Dylan’s fifth dilemma coded “standardized/high-stakes testing” and his reflection coded “revise curriculum and instruction: develop engaging lessons.”

For example, Julia posted about her lack of knowledge in specific content areas being an issue. Then, in her reflection, she articulated she was going to demonstrate capability to her mentor teacher and focus on revising curriculum and instruction to create engaging lessons plans. These two responses are related; Julia realized that she *did* possess the pedagogical knowledge based on her coursework, and she also realized that she was spending adequate time reviewing the content so that she was prepared. After detailing her commitment to being more creative in her lesson planning, she wrote,

> I also need to be confident in the time I spent preparing for my lesson. I know I worked hard at trying my best to understand the material, and I know I didn’t get up in there in front of those students without first preparing. (Reflection 2)

For Julia, producing engaging lessons was one way to demonstrate her capability to her mentor teacher, and both of these resolutions were grounded in her realization that she did have the skills and resources to be successful, a realization at which her group helped her arrive.

**Develop relationships with students.** Another major next step in reflections was to develop relationships with students. Out of the eight examples of this code, four followed initial posts articulating a deficiency view of students, three followed dilemmas about a troubled student, and one followed a post about a lack of engaging curriculum. Also, connecting to the following section on process codes, seven out of the eight reflections in this category indicated that the CF process was helpful, and four of the eight reframed the initial dilemma. Because of the overlap between this resolution code and the process categories, we analyze three examples in the section on process codes and offer two examples here.

Tatianna’s first instance of posting about a troubled student and then resolving to develop relationships exemplifies this code. Importantly, posts about troubled students did not position the students as deficient, but rather portrayed the student as struggling with various contextual issues such as poverty, homelessness, or a difficult home life. Although our preservice teachers often included misbehavior in their descriptions of these students, the misbehavior was portrayed as a symptom of the student’s struggle, rather than a character flaw. In her third dilemma, Tatianna wrote about a young woman who was bullying other students and had also disclosed that she was highly sexually active. Tatianna concluded, “I’m very concerned about my student and the path that she is headed down” (Dilemma 3). In her reflection, Tatianna decided that the first step in helping this student was to build a stronger relationship. She explained,

> So now that I think about it, it makes me understand that it just takes time for her to open up. Some solutions that the group came up with: Playing a “what would you do game” to get a “feel” for where she stands on certain things, Talk to her and tell her that, “no matter what I’m always here if you need to talk.” (Reflection 3)

Other students wrote similar sentiments to Tatianna’s, such as Lily’s reflection on a student she initially viewed as deficient. Lily stated, “In summary, I stated that I [am] going to have a conversation with the student about my willingness to help and see if her behavior changes” (Reflection 3). Lily added to this resolution, “Also, I will try to view the students from my own perceptions and not on the negative perceptions of other teachers who have already given up on her,” suggesting that her intention is to not give up on the student she initially portrayed as having “a lack of motivation and desire to learn” (Dilemma 3).

**Revise classroom management.** The final major reflection code was revise classroom management, which was assigned seven times. Three of these codes were assigned to Dylan’s

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 3. Reflection Code Frequencies: Resolutions.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Resolution codes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No action</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Revise curriculum and instruction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Develop relationships with students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Revise classroom management plan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demonstrate capability to others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Include community building activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seek professional development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase professionalism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raise awareness of bias</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leave the profession of teaching</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. There were 50 reflections and one primary resolution code was assigned to most; two reflections were double-coded, resulting in 52 final codes. Percentages were calculated out of 52 total resolution codes.
reflections, indicating that this may have been one of his major issues during student teaching. In particular, Dylan had two dilemmas coded as “preservice teacher-student relationships” which he resolved by deciding to revisit his classroom management plan and establishing boundaries in his classroom. For example, in his first dilemma, Dylan described how a number of his female students were flirting with him and making inappropriate comments such as “wanting to have [his] firstborn” (Dilemma 1). In his reflection, he concluded,

I need to be stern with all students, both boys and girls alike, and treat no one differently. I have already started this by setting clear expectations while monitoring the halls (which really need it because the seventh-grade hallway situation is out of control). (Reflection 1)

Although this is an appropriate resolution, even more interesting to us is how he arrived at this resolution. In the next section, we examine two process codes: “CF process helpful” and “reframing,” both of which were applied to Dylan’s first reflection.

Reflections: Process Codes

**CF process helpful.** Out of 50 reflections, 38 (76%) contained some indication that the CF process was helpful to the preservice teacher (see Table 4). We included explicit statements of the process being helpful, such as “After meeting with my group this week, I feel like they have helped me to redirect my focus in the right position” (Julia, Reflection 4) and statements about elements of the CF process that were helpful, such as “Talking aloud to others about her dilemma helped me come to terms with what I’m facing with my mentor teacher” (Lily, Reflection 1). Other examples of this code include “After hearing the comments and suggestions from my peers I have come to a few very reasonable ideas that will try to implement” (Martin, Reflection 3) and, “Ultimately, I found this discussion very helpful. I will keep the solutions and probing questions in mind as this mystery unfolds” (Tatianna, Reflection 5). However, more interesting than the perceived helpfulness of the CF process is how the process shaped reflections, especially the reframing of dilemmas.

**Reframing.** The code for “reframing” was reserved for when preservice teachers explicitly articulated in their reflection a shift in their perception of the dilemma. There were 13 instances of explicit reframing, and as we looked at patterns across the coded data, we realized that this code was always paired with the process code of “CF process helpful.” In one example, Lily posted in her second dilemma about negative faculty attitudes toward students. She explained how teachers at her placement were “showing a disdain for their job and the students they are supposed to be teaching and helping equip with knowledge.” Lily added, “My problem is that it completely deflates all this excitement for the profession that I come with daily” (Dilemma 2). Then, in her reflection, Lily started her post with “This week’s discussion helped me a great deal to clarify my dilemma,” a comment that acknowledges a shift in how Lily perceived the dilemma. We coded her reflection as “No action” because she decided she cannot change the negative faculty attitudes, but instead of focusing on this external problem, she decided to focus on what she could do in her classroom:

It was pointed out to me that it will be critical for me to not feel bad about removing myself from conversations where the talk about the kids and the profession is negative. The teachers in my environment are on their way out and that’s okay. I need to remember what I’ve learned and pull from the passion for teaching and for students in general. (Reflection 2)

Lily added a note about the process, stating, “It was very helpful to hear the encouragement from my group mates during the reflection discussion.” In addition, she concluded with a comment about how discussing her group members’ dilemmas benefited her, writing, “I also gained insight by working through the other dilemmas of my group mates.” Lily was able to reframe her own dilemma based on group feedback, but she also gained insights that may help her problem-solve future dilemmas.

Returning to Dylan’s first dilemma about his female students flirting with him, along with his decision to be firm and address inappropriate behavior, he also admitted that the issue was not the student, but his own enjoyment of the attention. He wrote, “After some reflection, I found that I enjoyed the attention that I was getting and I was letting it get to my head.” Importantly, he was able to shift his view from the inappropriate behavior of his students to his own inappropriate enjoyment of his students’ attention based on his group’s feedback.

As a final example of reframing with CF support, Blake reframed a classroom management issue regarding his students interrupting lessons with off-topic questions about religion and science. He focused on one student in particular, “Sue,” who he said “lives for making my life difficult.” Blake then asked his group, “How do I stop these incidents from happening, because it’s taking away from learning.” This question could have been answered by enacting stricter consequences, but Blake was able to reframe the issue from a

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 4. Reflection Code Frequencies: Process Codes.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Process codes</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CF process helpful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reframing</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Two process codes were applied to the reflections: “Reframing” and “CF process helpful.” Percentages for these two process codes were calculated out of the total 50 reflections. CF = critical friendship.
classroom management issue to a community building issue. Blake reflected,

After meeting with Camille and Alaina, they really gave me some great ideas about how to address the issue I’m having with my students, and the conflict with science and religion. First, they wanted to know some more information about the class. (Reflection 4)

Referring to Sue, the student who seemed to be instigating the issues, Blake provided more information about her, including the fact that she was from a lower SES than most of her peers. Blake then wrote,

Camille and Alaina both thought that Sue is acting out because of her insecurities, and that she is drawing attention to herself in a negative way on purpose, because she doesn’t want students to look negatively at her because of her clothes, or her intelligence.

Thus, the problem was no longer how to stop Sue’s misbehavior and her negative influence on the other students, but rather how to help Sue feel more secure so she did not have to act out. In Blake’s reflection, he drew on his group members’ feedback to reframe the situation.

Reframing student deficiency. In addition, looking at the relationship between reframing and student deficiency, five instances of explicit reframing followed a dilemma coded as “student deficiency,” and all five of these reflections cited the CF process as helpful. We offer three examples of student deficiency reframed through CF support, followed by an example of a failure to reframe. First, Dylan’s reflection following his dilemma referencing “social Darwinism” indicated a significant shift that appeared to be influenced by the feedback from his group members. Dylan wrote, “I am able to use some of the probing questions that I asked and that my colleagues asked to reflect upon my own dilemma. I believe that the problem is starting with the whole standardized testing system” (Reflection 3). Although Dylan did reframe, due to the concerning nature of his initial post, we also assigned course readings on institutional racism for the next class session.

In a second example of reframing student deficiency, Julia initially posted in Dilemma 4 about how unmotivated her students were. However, she changed her views in her reflection, stating, “After meeting with my group this week, I feel like they have helped me to redirect my focus in the right position” (Reflection 4). Referring to a specific student, Julia noted,

Some of the questions and comments that shifted my thinking toward this matter was: What else do I know about this student outside of literacy? I realized that I didn’t really know too much about him apart from my class. I also haven’t inquired about him to any of his other teachers. This was basically taking me back to Step 1 which is getting to know my students.

Julia articulates a very clear process of reframing that was inspired by the questions and comments of her group members. She concludes her reflection with a powerful statement that we used to open this article: “It was so easy for me to believe that the student was just being lazy, but this helped me to think of possible underlying issues of the student’s behavior.”

In a third example of reframing, in Alaina’s third dilemma she describes how her gifted students are unorganized, immature, and lazy. She goes on to suggest they should be demoted from the program because they refuse to accept the additional help she offers them. However, in her reflection she assumes more accountability when she states,

This had me thinking that I had completely drifted away from that personal and social dimension of the classroom when I began making this dilemma about students not turning in work instead of considering what is personally preventing them from turning in work. (Reflection 3)

This demonstrates a clear reframing of the problem from a student deficiency view to considering other possible causes for the issues. Alaina reflected on her role as the teacher, and how she can engage in more conversations with her students and other teachers to reconceptualize the problems she mislabeled as student-centered deficiencies.

Contrasting with these examples of reframing are two reflections following Camille’s third and fourth dilemmas about student deficiency. Although Alaina and Camille have the same third dilemma (lazy and unorganized students) and engage in the same group discussion, Camille says there is no action she can take while Alaina reframes the dilemma as perhaps students having external issues that are affecting their school performance. Camille wrote, “The laziness of my students is becoming a major problem. If anything is even mildly challenging they just shut down” (Dilemma 3). Similarly, in her fourth dilemma around an unmotivated student Camille wrote,

As he is capable of doing the work I want him to succeed but I am not hand-holding these students because no one holds your hand through life and this baby mentality is really starting to get to me. (Dilemma 4)

Camille does not reframe this focus on student deficiency even though she notes that all the suggestions posed by her group were great. However, she ultimately does not believe they will be beneficial. She concluded, “I left the meeting this week feeling like I cannot be the only person who cares, my students need to care about their success too” (Reflection 4).

These comments suggest a continued deficit view of students in spite of the support and probing questions from her group members.

Discussion

In this study, two thirds of the dilemmas revolved around relationships with others, curriculum and instruction, and
deficit views of students. Indicating the range of concerns, other dilemmas focused on work–life balance, troubled students, and classroom management. Examining participant reflections, four primary resolutions emerged: no action, revise curriculum and instruction, develop relationships with students, and revise classroom management plans. In addition, we found that 76% of the reflections indicated that the process was helpful to the participants, which suggests that this project was perceived positively by preservice teachers, rather than being perceived as a cumbersome assignment. Yet a generic statement of “helpfulness” would not be a useful finding unless this structure indeed guided participants to apply a critical lens and reframe deficit views, a key requirement for preparing social justice educators.

Across our data, 26% of the reflections indicated reframing in which participants reenvisioned the initial dilemma. Out of the 10 dilemmas that positioned students as deficient, half of these were reframed with the support of the CF process. Thus, regarding our third research question about the influence of participation in a CF project, the CF structure provided a space for participants to engage in collaborative reflection that appeared to yield raised awareness and increased criticality. In particular, the practice of asking probing questions, which we worked on in class meetings throughout the semester, may have helped push conversations from venting frustration that tended to seek a source to blame (such as unmotivated students) to the level of critical reflection that included depth (examining assumptions, biases, etc.) and breadth (considering the broader context, such as effects of high-stakes testing and discipline policies). In addition, as noted in our methods, we also engaged in whole class discussions on readings that addressed common dilemmas, as well as periodic modeling of how to ask probing questions. This supportive context and curriculum for the CF project may have also contributed to reframing. Yet ideally, all dilemmas expressing deficit views would be reframed, and we suggest modifications to this CF project design in the next sections.

Returning to literature examining racial identity and teaching, the racial identities of our preservice teachers did not affect their likelihood of experiencing certain types of dilemmas more than others. Preservice teachers of color were just as likely to express deficit views of their students as their White colleagues. Of course, our data are limited to what our participants self-reported, and some of our participants may have chosen to not reveal deficit thinking. In future work, pairing analysis of reflective discussion boards with observational and interview data would help to triangulate our findings, a point we discuss below. Furthermore, according to commentary in reflections, participation in the CF project was equally helpful to all of our preservice teachers, regardless of their gender, racial background, or SES.

Although some of the deficit language in these dilemmas may have originated from a deficit view of adolescents in general (Petrone & Sarigianides, 2017), because our participants were primarily working with youth of color and the literature indicates a tendency for preservice teachers to enter teacher preparation programs with deficit views of students of color (Çelik & Amaç, 2012; Cross, Behizadeh, & Holihan, 2017; Hampton et al., 2008), we believe many of these deficit views are “a form of contemporary racism in US schools” (Yosso, 2005, p. 75). Yet we do not want to oversimplify the complexity of our data or reduce the complexity of our participants’ identities regarding race. To attempt to unravel the nuanced intersections of teacher identity and student identities (including language background, special education status, gender, sexuality, etc.) with teacher beliefs and practices would require in-depth, individual case studies or narrative inquiry with our participants. The purpose of our study was to examine the CF project as a case, and we believe that this study does offer evidence that critical, collaborative reflection, through a structure such as CF groups, can be a powerful practice in reframing problems of practice, including interrupting deficit views of youth—and youth of color in particular.

Implications for the CF Project

Improving the CF project has required a long-term commitment by the instructors to reflect on how the project functions. In the first year that this project was assigned (2 years prior to the current study), we identified a lack of instructor oversight of the process as a problem and were able to implement better oversight in subsequent years, including instructors regularly commenting on discussion boards, assigning classroom readings that addressed common or concerning dilemmas, and engaging in classroom discussion on these readings. Then, reflecting on this study, one modification we have already made is responding more forcefully to deficit views during whole class meetings. In a more recent iteration of this project, the instructors included an intervention on deficit ideology early in the semester. This intervention included a guest lecture from a young man who went to an underserved, urban intensive school (Milner, 2012) reflecting on his schooling experiences and how he was pushed into the school-to-prison nexus. In addition, preservice teachers were asked to examine their school’s culture and their own biases and write a series of short reflections to strengthen their critical lens with the support of instructors. These changes were designed to support both depth and breadth of critical reflection so that our preservice teachers could better understand themselves, their students, and the oppressive structures of schools.

Even with these changes to the CF project, a future goal is to monitor the quality of interactions during meetings without interfering with the authenticity of the project. One recommendation moving forward is to have graduate students who are trained in the protocol support students in asking probing questions and reframing during the initial session. Asking graduate students to institute this additional support and aid in data collection may provide better insight into how
the groups function, without creating a sense of guardedness that could happen if instructors joined. In addition, providing opportunities for our preservice teachers to evaluate their growth and analyze responses at multiple points during the semester could yield insight into the impact of CF group participation, both for instructors and for preservice teachers.

Also related to group functioning, we intend to study the effects of using online video conferencing versus face-to-face formats. Although we did not collect data on the issues or benefits with selected formats, comments from participants who chose to meet online suggested that technical issues, such as poor Internet connectivity or interrupted audio or video, may have periodically detracted from their ability to communicate with and support one another. On the contrary, a number of preservice teachers expressed relief and appreciation at being able to meet online and skip the commute to campus, an affordance that may have allowed them to be more emotionally and intellectually available to their peers. Thus, similar to Fishman and colleagues’ (2013) findings in their comparison of online and face-to-face professional development formats, there may have been issues and benefits with both approaches that balanced each other out. Specifically related to critical reflection, further research is needed on how the use of online video conferencing may help or hinder reflective practices.

Finally, as mentioned earlier, to improve our research design, we also will add interviews after the course ends with our preservice teachers, as well as potentially with mentor teachers and supervisors, so that they can directly respond to themes from our data analysis and offer their own analysis of the complex factors influencing how dilemmas were resolved and/or reframed—or not. Furthermore, because our preservice teachers are now required to submit videos of their teaching during student teaching, we intend to add these videos as a data source that can provide more insight into each participant’s context and pedagogy. These additional data will then allow us to revise the CF project to better meet the needs of our preservice teachers.

**Implications for Teacher Preparation Programs**

This study has highlighted some benefits of critical, collaborative reflection through a CF structure. For other programs considering embedding a CF project as a support during student teaching, instructors need to be trained in the protocol. We recommend at least one instructor be formally trained by an experienced CF professional development provider (e.g., SRI, 2017), and then having all instructors and graduate student facilitators engage in local training and discussion of theory, research, and protocols of critical, collaborative reflection. Moving beyond the CF project, the development of criticality needs to be supported throughout teacher preparation programs. Affirming diversity and resisting deficit views cannot be the purview of one diversity course and a few projects. Teacher preparation programs need to “create ample opportunities early in the program for candidates to examine critically their taken-for-granted beliefs in relation to classroom actions” (Villegas, 2007, p. 374). In addition to revamping our courses to support greater criticality, we have developed a series of “signature experiences” around social justice education that includes the CF project as well as a series of discussions on culturally responsive classroom management (Weinstein, Curran, & Tomlinson-Clarke, 2003), a field trip to a local community-based organization working for social and economic justice, the school-to-prison nexus, speaker and reflective assignments already referenced, and a viewing of a film on intercultural dialogue. Each cohort engages in these experiences during their final year in our program.

Furthermore, programs serving a diverse student body cannot assume candidates of color come prepared to teach from a social justice platform and enact culturally responsive pedagogy, or that any racial identity equates with a particular set of beliefs or practices. However, although this did not surface in our study, the literature suggests that candidates of color may need additional supports when facing institutional racism in the university and unpacking past experiences with racism. Thus, in addition to continuing to refine and improve the CF project, major current and planned initiatives for our own program that may be relevant for other programs are:

1. Embedding multiple field experiences paired with critical, collaborative reflection structures prior to student teaching and engaging mentor teachers and community members in these experiences. Milner’s (2003) race reflective journaling and Howard’s (2003) sets of reflective questions can be useful tools to incorporate.

2. Creating a series of “signature experiences” around social justice throughout the program, including particular readings, activities, and visits to local non-profits working for social and economic justice.

3. Engaging in critical, collaborative reflection ourselves, including (a) examining how our program supports our preservice teachers of color and what ways we can better identify and sustain their community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) as well as how our program supports our White preservice teachers and how we can help them unpack their privilege, all while honoring the unique and intersectional identities of our preservice teachers. Furthermore, we want to move past a Black–White dichotomy and a race-centered view of diversity and support the experiences of our preservice teachers who identify as Asian, Latino, bi- and multiracial, queer, and/or differently abled.

The first two recommendations relate to Zeichner’s (2006, 2009) proposal for expanding traditional teacher education by integrating coursework with local schools and
communities, while the third ensures that we ask one another probing questions that can uncover our own biases and institutional barriers.

**Conclusion**

Past scholarship has highlighted how negative attitudes about youth can endure if the student teaching environment does not support criticality, especially for preservice teachers working with students of color. In particular, teachers who fail to interrogate inequitable institutional structures and their own biases are likely to reify deficit views (Brown, 2005; Winn & Behizadeh, 2011). The incorporation of a CF project into our initial teacher preparation program provided a space and structure for a diverse group of preservice teachers to engage in collaborative reflection and to push each other to think critically about themselves, their schools, and the educational system writ large, and subsequently reframe deficit views of students as well as other dilemmas that misidentified the source of the issue. This heightening of criticality is imperative if preservice teachers are going to realize the mission of social justice teacher preparation programs and become change agents who provide rigorous, critical, engaging, and culturally relevant and sustaining educational experiences for youth.

**Declaration of Conflicting Interests**

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

**Funding**

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

**References**


**Author Biographies**

**Nadia Behizadeh** is an assistant professor of adolescent literacy at Georgia State University. Her research interests include authentic and culturally sustaining writing instruction for youth, problem-and project-based literacy learning, sociocultural writing assessment, validity of writing assessment, and social justice teacher education.

**Clarice Thomas** is a doctoral candidate in the teaching and teacher education program at Georgia State University. Her research interests include narrative research of experiences within the school-to-prison nexus, equitable education for African American students, preservice teacher preparation in urban education, and qualitative research methodology.

**Stephanie Behm Cross** is an assistant professor of teacher education at Georgia State University. Using case study and narrative inquiry, her research focuses on preservice teachers’ experiences in urban settings, the impact of urban teacher residencies on teachers and school leaders, and the pervasiveness of Whiteness in initial teacher preparation programs.