Critical Moment but not Critical Literacy:
Perspectives on Teaching about President Obama

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This manuscript describes the findings of an examination of 21 pre-service teachers and one literacy course instructor within the context of a program focused on urban teacher preparation. Using inductive thematic analysis of multiple data sources, the research team identified three themes. First, general agreement existed amongst the pre-service teachers that Barack Obama’s 2008 election was a critical, important moment in U.S. history with consistent rationales for why they should include information about President Obama’s life and work as part of the curriculum, especially for African American students. This theme comprised three trends: the importance of teaching civics, the historical importance of the first African American president, and the importance of President Obama as a role model. Second, pre-service teachers enacted and responded to barriers to teaching critical literacy about the Obama presidency. This second theme also comprised three trends: a reluctance to detract from President Obama’s positive image, an unease in teaching politics, and the references to developmental issues related to the ages of the kindergarten children they taught. Third, inconsistencies occurred amongst pre-service teachers’ understandings of critical literacy.

Key Words: presidents, presidency, elementary, President Obama, critical literacy, pre-service teachers, qualitative method

Introduction

One Wednesday in February 2010, small groups of kindergarteners, each guided by a pre-service teacher, were everywhere in their school: on the rug in their classroom, at desks, on the hallway floor. All were reading and talking about President Barack Obama. As a relatively new president, Obama was highly celebrated in this African American school and neighborhood. In one of the school’s central hallways, a larger-than-life painted mural of him spanned the wall.

The urban-focused teacher preparation program’s partnership with this elementary school allowed for Laura, the literacy methods instructor, and her students, to take over the teaching in three kindergarten classrooms for 30 to 45 minutes each Wednesday afternoon throughout the spring semester. The kindergarten classroom teachers rotated social studies and science, focusing on one standards-based theme for two weeks before changing content areas. For this two-week period, the content area was social studies and the theme was the U.S. President.

To introduce the theme of the U.S. president to kindergarteners, Laura and her students took an “about” approach. This approach is common when tackling complex subjects with young children such as the kindergarteners in this classroom and is used to deepen, expand, and build upon their initial understanding of a topic. By learning “about” rocks, for example, children can be encouraged to take an inquiry approach to the subject of rocks, raising questions, exploring information, and constructing an understanding of rocks that can develop with subsequent encounters. In this vein, Laura and the pre-service teachers designed opportunities
for kindergarteners to construct their knowledge of the U.S. president by studying Mr. Barack Obama through discussions involving children’s books focused on him. While these discussions started out broadly, in many cases they grew more focused as students engaged with information about: President Obama’s personal history, his stated aspirations, and his political trajectory. In this way, lessons were designed for both pre-service teachers and kindergartners: to co-construct knowledge concerning the 44th president in particular and to build knowledge relative to the U.S. President as a concept.

Because of its vitality in teaching within a democracy, critical literacy had long been prioritized in the pre-service teachers’ literacy methods courses. Critical literacy “focuses on creating readers who are aware that texts position people in certain ways and serve some interests but not others” (Lewison & Leland, 2002, p. 108), emphasizing that all texts are authored from specific viewpoints formed within socio-historical contexts. Working from this pedagogical approach, teachers ask students to examine how language relates to issues of knowledge, justice, and equity (Lewison, Flint, Van Sluys, & Henkin, 2002; Short, Schroeder, Kauffman, & Kaser, 2002). Therefore, the topic of the current U.S. President—both the broad concept of the presidency and particular information about Barack Obama as a civic leader—seemed a particularly promising opportunity to integrate critical literacy and social studies content since social studies content strongly focuses on participation in civic life (Reidel & Draper, 2011; Soares & Wood, 2010; Wolk, 2003). A critical literacy framework offered a way for pre-service teachers to engage kindergartners in conversations about the information they constructed concerning President Obama using the texts around them, i.e., the children’s books. The pre-service teachers were instructed to implement the pre-selected standards from the school district’s social studies instructional guides to frame their work with the kindergartners.

This project was not the first time critical literacy and social studies have been merged. Critical literacy was employed by Candace Kuby (2011) to simultaneously examine the Rosa Parks story and investigate playground injustice. In another case, a middle grades classroom teacher made her literacy curriculum more critical, in part, by incorporating social studies topics (May, 2011). The integration allowed for increased flexibility and time devoted to the teaching of social studies, a subject that is often squeezed out in response to the high-stakes nature of the literacy and mathematics state exams (Wills, 2007; Wills & Sandholtz, 2009). Approaching a social studies topic from a critical literacy perspective, therefore, afforded a unique synergy for these kindergarten classrooms.

This study reports on 21 pre-service teachers’ experiences as they responded to teaching African American kindergarteners the U.S. President as a concept and President Obama’s personal history and political life, using informational texts. Findings are considered within the context of a teacher education program dedicated to preparing teachers for urban, high poverty settings (see Williams, May, & Williams, 2012, for more information on this program). The study was conducted with the following research question: How do pre-service teachers in an urban teacher preparation program respond when asked to teach kindergarteners “about” President Obama from a critical literacy perspective?
Conceptual Framework

Two distinct literatures guided this study: (a) work that focuses on teacher development as it relates to critical pedagogy and (b) research and practitioner-oriented literature on teaching about the president.

Preparing Teachers for Critical Pedagogy

Education is, at its core, political (Apple, 1979; Ayers, 2004; Freire, 1970; Giroux & McLaren, 1994). Much of U.S. cultural dialogue is transmitted through schools (Spindler, Spindler, Trueba, & Williams, 1990) in ways that ask students to accept the transmission rather than to think critically (Bain, 2006; Journell, 2010; Parker, 2011b; Williamson, 2006). Because the teacher acts as a sociocultural, sociohistorical mediator (Bartolomé & Macedo, 2001), educators with a critical consciousness are needed (Bartolomé & Balderama, 2001; Rodriguez, 2008) for, at times, participating in a democracy requires productive engagement with emotional, uncomfortable (e.g., race, gender, religion) issues. As noted by Walter Parker (2006): “civic consciousness and behavior do not fall from the sky; they are formed at the intersection of study and engagement—reflection and action—in public settings where difference and conflict are plentiful and treated as assets” (p. 13).

Incorporating controversial issues. Though important, the inclusion of controversial issues into classrooms is infrequent (Hess, 2004, 2008) as “many teachers are reticent to embrace teaching as an inherently political act” (Irizarry & Kleyn, 2011, p. 24). Most teachers have learned to avoid any mention of certain topics. Some of these silenced topics include politics and religion; other omitted areas include student relevant experiences such as migration and incarceration (Greene & Abt-Perkins, 2003). Given the complexities surrounding definitions of what constitutes a controversial issue, the inclusion of such topics might even be less than the already low reported prevalence. An issue can be controversial to one teacher but not another as demonstrated in the case of religion in Wayne Journell’s (2011b) study of six teachers teaching the 2008 election. At other times, controversial has been interpreted to mean current events (Richardson, 2006) rather than taboo topics.

Educating for a democracy. Reticence to discuss important issues is a problem because educating for a democracy calls for teaching in ways that ask students to think critically (Dewey, 1916). In literacy education, this stance means teachers must go beyond teaching basic decoding and comprehension skills; they must work to develop students’ abilities to be critically literate as well. We know this is possible because considerable evidence exists indicating that teaching critical literacy can be successful with even very young children (Husband, 2010, 2012; Kempe, 2001; Kersten, Apol, & Pataray-Chind, 2007; Leland, Harste, & Smith, 2005; Vasquez, 2004). The nature of critical literacy necessitates that it take place at the level of classroom interactions. Thus, critical literacy rests on the ability of the teacher to set up an environment in which its development can flourish amongst learners (see, for example, Fecho, 2000). Not only must the teacher be willing to allow controversial issues into the classroom, she must also be proficient in pedagogical practices that allow for students to engage in democratic discourse for in order to learn how to participate in a democracy, students must engage in deliberative democracy (Hanson & Howe, 2011; Parker, 2010).

Controversial issues and pedagogical practices. High-quality discussions of controversial public issues are possible (Hess, 2002), but they best occur within learning environments carefully developed to foster productive exchanges. Teachers often implement
specific discursive structures to scaffold these discussions. As Terence Beck (2003) states, “Young students can successfully deliberate about public problems when scaffolding is firmly in place” (p. 343). Specific structures such as Structured Academic Controversy (Parker, 2011a), the seminar (Parker, 2006, 2010), and deliberation or shared problem-solving (Parker, 2006, 2010) have also been offered as support for discussions focused on democratic engagement. And, just as we cannot take for granted a teacher’s willingness to engage in critical discussions, neither can we presume that no pedagogical support is needed to guide student discussions.

The complex nature of classroom-based instruction involves multiple factors that influence a teacher’s ability to guide discussion. The strength of disciplinary knowledge, for example, seems to affect pre-service teacher willingness to use the pedagogical content knowledge endorsed in their university methods courses (Fitchett, Starker, & Good, 2010; Monte-Sano, 2011). Deirdre Kelly and Gabriella Brandes (2011) found that even when a teacher preparation program supports a particular practice such as a discussion facilitation stance, pre-service teachers can leave with a wide variety of beliefs about which stance is most appropriate. Though all of the pre-service teacher participants in the Kelly and Brandes study showed commitment to social justice, they also indicated five distinct preferred facilitation roles with stances diverging according to the possibility and desirability of teacher neutrality. External obstacles such as prepackaged curricula also can impede ability to engage students in democratic discourse (Fitchett et al., 2010).

**Teacher disclosure.** Further influencing the inclusion of controversial issues in teacher development is lack of agreement over the most appropriate teacher disclosure of personal perspectives. Though many teachers tend to attempt neutrality (Hess, 2002; Journell, 2011b), some follow Kelly’s (1986) advocacy for committed impartiality in which teachers disclose their perspective but avoid advocacy for their view (e.g., Journell, May, Stenhouse, Meyers, & Holbrook, 2012). In other work, researchers find this role inadequate, promoting instead: inclusive and situated engagement: ‘inclusive’ to signal a concern to attend to the perspectives of excluded minorities; ‘situated’ to signal that all teachers (or knowers) are located within a particular landscape of identities, values, and social situations from which they view the world; and ‘engagement’ to signal the need to make their viewpoints open to critique as well as to model reasoned inquiry and action. (Kelly & Brandes, 2001, p. 451-452).

**Teacher development.** Taken together, the role of controversial discussions in social studies classrooms, the connection between content area knowledge and effective teaching strategies, and the complicated nature of teacher disclosure point to the need for research in how teacher preparation programs can support pre-service teachers in developing—and implementing—critical literacy. While some literature exists on how teacher educators can develop critical literacy teaching strategies in pre-service teachers (see for example, Dozier, Johnston, & Rogers, 2006), and how to develop civics pedagogical content knowledge (Silva & Mason, 2003), much more information is needed. Attention is especially important given pre- and in-service teachers’ reluctance to engage with ideologically-charged topics (Assaf & Dooley, 2006; Fitchett, Starker, & Good, 2010) Though difficult in itself, a willingness to engage in important topics is not sufficient. Teachers also must have the pedagogical abilities to facilitate student discussion on these topics. To those ends, we examine how one group of pre-service teachers, enrolled in a teacher preparation program emphasizing culturally relevant pedagogy
(Ladson-Billings, 1995), responded when asked to consider critical literacy as a viable pedagogy for engaging kindergarteners in discussion about President Obama’s life and presidency.

**Teaching about U.S. Presidents**

The election of the U.S. President forms a dominant cultural narrative cycling through American children’s lives every four years. The president is representative of democratic governing structures, a symbol that becomes part of children’s understandings of themselves and their society and of themselves within society. The topic of the U.S. presidents, therefore, provides an ideal opportunity for the teaching of critical literacy in a democracy. Very little is known, however, about how U.S. presidents, as a subject, are taught to young children. Existing practitioner-focused literature for teachers focuses on how elections are taught to younger (Cruz & O’Brien, 2012; Gandy, 2004; Haas, 2004; Haas, Hatcher, & Sunal, 2008; Journell et al, 2012; Mulrey, Ackerman, & Howson, 2012) and older students (Cousins, 1984; Eaton, 2004; Haas & Laughlin, 2002; Lopez, Kirby, & Sagoff, 2005; Risinger, 2007), but little professional literature written for practitioners is available on how presidents are taught at any age (for an exception, see Peer & Haas, 2002). The research on how presidents are taught is even scarcer.

Our review of literature on teaching about U.S. Presidents yielded the following information. Practitioner resources for classroom teachers tend to focus on: (a) the role and duties of the President, (b) the lives, speeches, and policies of specific Presidents, (c) resources and materials about Presidents, or (d) attention to political parties, campaigns, and elections. Within these four categories, the information often is presented as fact-based, gleaned from historical records and archives (e.g., The American Presidency Project). Occasionally, teaching activities invite students to examine the reported status quo of the Presidency. Some teaching activities ask students to examine the lack of information about Presidents who did not fit the norm (e.g., “Ms. President” at PBS Teachers). Other examinations focus on aspects of specific Presidents who did not fit an accepted norm (e.g., Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s physical disability). Still others focused on a single event in the life of a President (e.g., Clinton’s impeachment; Haas, & Laughlin, 2000).

Select research studies examine teachers’ presentation of elections and politics within the context of history, democracy, citizenship, or curriculum standards (Journell, 2008; 2011a). While teaching about selected Presidents often is part of state standards, the nature of the standards leaves many questions about how teaching and learning play out in individual classrooms. In the state of Georgia, for example, the kindergarten social studies standards ask teachers to teach “Presidents’ Day (George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, and the current president)” (Georgia Department of Education, 2004, p. 6). Teaching towards this standard could lead to countless classroom practices.

While relatively limited literature exists on how teachers address topics related to the Presidency, even less is available regarding how aspiring teachers are taught to teach about Presidents and the Presidency. Considering the need for more literature relative to teaching children about politics, coupled with scant research on teaching related to the President, this study utilized a critical literacy framework to examine how pre-service teachers consider teaching the current President.
Method

We present the findings of an examination of 21 pre-service teachers within the context of a program focused on pre-Kindergarten through fifth grade urban teacher preparation. Of the students, 91% were female (typical nationally for elementary teacher preparation programs). Individuals self-identified as follows: 47% African American, 5% Asian American, and 47% European American (non-Latino). Students ranged from 22 to 41 years with an average age of 26.5. When the pre-service teachers entered the program, they began with a course where they examined, critiqued, and engaged in issues related to the sociocultural and sociopolitical contexts of teaching and learning (for more information see Williams, May, & Williams, 2012). Afterwards, the first author, Laura May, taught four literacy-related courses over three semesters; this manuscript reports on the literacy course in the third and final semester.

In the program, the four distinct literacy courses are taught cumulatively, each building on the previous. As course instructor, Laura (identified as European American) theoretically situated herself within a critical perspective and saw critical literacy as central to teaching across subject areas. As a result, critical literacy was included in the course content from the first semester, was present in class discussions, and undergirded course assignments. During all courses, critical literacy was a constant topic; it was incorporated most fully and explicitly, however, in the final course in which data for this manuscript was collected. The pre-service teachers read about and participated in multiple course discussions on the topic in addition to the weekly critical literacy lesson plans they wrote and taught to their small groups of kindergarteners. Prior to the lessons on President Obama they taught to the kindergarteners, pre-service teachers also participated in a presentation led by Laura of findings from the research team’s close critical look at books written about the current President (May, Holbrook, & Meyers, 2010).

This course took place at a partner elementary school with a high (97%) African American student population. Though located in a state that gave its electoral votes to former Senator John McCain, the county in which this school is located voted overwhelmingly for Barack Obama. The vast majority of African Americans (98%) in this state voted for Obama (Real Clear Politics: Election Review, Part 2: The South Atlantic); there is no evidence indicating that this neighborhood diverged from that trend.

Data sources and analysis. Each pre-service teacher taught a critical literacy-based lesson to a small group of kindergarteners weekly. Laura worked in collaboration with the kindergarten teachers to select topics of study. Pre-service teachers then planned lessons designed to engender critical literacy with their small group of kindergartners around a related informational children’s book. For the two lessons on President Obama, each pre-service teacher began by showing the front cover of a picture book about him and asking her group of kindergarteners to tell her everything they thought would be in the book based on what they knew or had heard about him. Acting as scribe, the pre-service teacher wrote down everything the kindergartners said on a large piece of cardstock. She then engaged the students in an interactive read-aloud (See Appendix for listing of books.), a teacher-led read-aloud that allows for spontaneous student comments and questions (Barrentine, 1996; Oyler, 1996; Oyler & Barry, 1996; Maloch & Beutel, 2010; Sipe, 2002). Following the read-aloud, the pre-service teacher guided the kindergarteners in looking back over their original list of predictions of what the books conveyed about President Obama. Together, they noted examples of when the books: (a)
included topics they predicted, (b) included topics they had not considered, and (c) did not include topics they had listed. As a part of this work, the pre-service teachers asked the kindergarteners to consider the author, what they would want the reader to think about President Obama, and how they might make decisions about which information to include. The kindergarteners then made individual lists of pictures and words of the information they would select were they to make a book about Obama.

Our work drew heavily on grounded theory methods because, like Charmaz (2005), we believe “grounded theory can supply analytic tools to move social justice studies beyond description, while keeping them anchored in their respective empirical worlds” (p. 508). Multiple data sources were collected including: (a) in-class written responses by pre-service teachers to questions designed to prompt their thinking about the teaching of critical literacy and the topic of President Obama, (b) participant observer field notes from the instructor, and (c) transcriptions of a formal interview with each pre-service teacher at the end of the semester (see Appendix for interview protocol). (It is important to note here that the prompting questions for the in-class written responses were in “about” format, designed broadly to see how pre-service teachers would take up the assignment to teach content related to President Obama without being overly directive.) Following data collection of the first two sets, we undertook an inductive thematic analysis (Ezzy, 2002). In this initial analytic phase, we independently open-coded all data line-by-line using margin notes to create temporary codes related to President Obama (e.g., education, family, geography, role model, work, etc.). Each researcher, using critical interpretive frames, independently constructed these codes. In a subsequent meeting, the codes were collapsed into the following categories: personal life, political science, success, role model, child development, pedagogy, race, religion, and nationality. All team members agreed that two themes reached data saturation: (a) there was general agreement that Obama’s election was an important moment in U.S. history, and (b) most pre-service teachers preferred not to invoke critical perspectives in this setting around this particular topic. We used this information to craft the interview questions asked at the end of the semester and listed in the appendix. Following transcription of the interviews, the research team used this data set to further examine pre-service teachers’ perspectives on teaching about President Obama to African American kindergarteners, comparing to previously examined data and engaging in further coding. We continued to conduct regular team meetings in which we undertook the process of selective coding, discussed connecting ideas within the data to arrive at our main themes and, ultimately, developed the story of our research (Ezzy, 2002, p. 92).

Findings

The research team identified two themes saturated within the data sources. First, general agreement existed amongst the pre-service teachers that President Obama’s election was a critical, important moment in U.S. history with consistent rationales for why elementary teachers should teach about President Obama’s life and his presidency, especially to African American students. Second, pre-service teachers enacted and responded to barriers to teaching critical literacy about the Obama presidency. Third, inconsistencies occurred amongst pre-service teachers’ understandings of critical literacy.
President Obama’s Election was a Critical, Important Moment in U.S. History

Pre-service teachers in our study generally agreed that teaching about Barack Obama was an important topic to include in elementary curriculum and instruction, particularly when situated in an urban elementary school. As indicated by the first author’s field notes, “when I told the topic to the class, some were incredibly excited. There was no observable resistance” (FN 1/27/10). Two of the pre-service teachers had attended the President’s inaugural events with their families; these women had strong emotional ties to the event. One indicated her willingness to bring in artifacts with the following statement: “I will be able to bring my personal visit to the Inaugural Address and weekend events as a connection, and bring in my photo album to open discussion” (1786775, quick write, 2/4/10). While this pre-service teacher did not elaborate in this quick write response what connections she hoped kindergartners might make between her photos and their knowledge about President Obama, she does indicate that she saw her personal experience as a way to engage kindergartners.

Even those pre-service teachers who had not supported Obama’s election, however, expressed their support of teaching about him, especially in this particular urban neighborhood school context in which the majority of students were African American. These explanations tended to take three forms but were not distinct. First, from a civics point of view, pre-service teachers indicated it was important for children to know about the U.S. government and the role of the President. Second, the historical aspect of Barack Obama as the first African American president was cited often as a reason to teach about him. Third, the opportunity to use President Obama as a role model for this group of African American kindergarteners was appealing to these pre-service teachers.

Teaching of civics. For many pre-service teachers, the importance of the presidency’s civic function provided a worthy rationale for teaching about Barack Obama, although for most, that meant using the office of the President as a way of teaching the branches of government. Only one pre-service teacher indicated civics meant anything beyond basic U.S. governmental structures.

When a child listens to the world around them, and they’re aware of what’s going on, it really just brings your lesson up a notch because if they’re a child that is aware of political issues and is aware of those types of things, it’s really thinking on a critical level. (100511, interview, 5/6/10)

Though a focus on issues can foster the sort of civic practices that prepare students to participate in U.S. political life, most pre-service teachers talked and wrote about civics in terms of the structures of the U.S. government. This type of description can be seen in the following statement:

It is important for the children to begin learning how our country is run, set up, and organized. Also, Barack Obama is our current president and all the students should know who he is, what position he holds in the government, how his position affects the country and world, how his position affects all of our lives. (1798757, quick write, 2/4/10)

In other words, Barack Obama himself was not the topic of interest, but rather his role as the leader of the executive branch. The need for U.S. schoolchildren to understand how the federal government worked merited inclusion of the current president into the curriculum. Statements such as “it’s important to talk about President Obama because he is now one of the Presidents of U.S. and is part of U.S. history” (1779463, quick write, 2/4/10) filled the rationales.
Historical importance of the first African American president. Some pre-service teachers also were interested in teaching about Barack Obama because of the general recognition that he is the first African American president. As one pre-service teacher put it, “Obama has made history by being the first Black president of the U.S. It took long enough!” (1778450, quick write, 2/4/10) Within this subset of statements, many indicated that President Obama’s historic role warranted his inclusion into the curriculum for all U.S. school children. At times, this rationale was even taught as the primary lesson of the tutorial session, “the more we went through the lesson plans and all that, the more that they were getting the overall concept of okay, oh well, you know it’s a Black president more than it’s a president” (100514, interview, 5/6/10). Many pre-service teachers who cited Barack Obama’s historical importance, however, conflated this historic first with the neighborhood setting. They contextualized the rationale within the context of their instructional audience as can be seen in the following statement:

It is important that the kindergarten students at [this Public Elementary School] learn about Barack Obama because he is the first Black president. It is important especially considering the population of the school that they see someone with colored skin in a position of importance. (1103708, quick write, 2/4/10)

Teachers are more likely to engage students in discussions of contemporary social and political issues (i.e., controversial issues) if they are in racially homogeneous classrooms (Campbell, 2005). This tendency was heightened by the race-related historic event for these pre-service teachers.

[This Public Elementary School] was a predominantly Black school, and I was comfortable. I don’t know how I would [transcend] that to a different type of culture or classroom because I’ve never done it. You know what I mean? So I mean I want to hope that I can take these same traits that I learned and skills and apply it anywhere. But, it was much easier to do it when I’m talking about Obama or whatever other issues with a group of black students (100501, interview, 5/6/10).

So, according to the pre-service teachers, it was especially important to teach content about President Obama in neighborhoods like the one in which they were teaching: predominantly African American. Furthermore, pre-service teachers, regardless of background, indicated that because all of the kindergarten students were African American they were more comfortable teaching the topic because of perceived support for this particular politician.

President Obama as a role model. In addition to historic quality, the characterization of Barack Obama as the first African American president also was indicated as important because of the opportunities it provided for African American kindergarteners to see that “a person who looks like them can be president” (1768968, quick write, 2/4/10). The pre-service teachers found alluring the opportunity to provide students with a visual example to accompany the idea that children’s opportunities are limitless. One expressed this idea in the following way:

For years, teachers have told students that you can be whatever you want to be when you grow up, especially or even President. However, when this was told to a Black child, did they really believe it? Now that they have someone that looks similar to them, then they can at least conceptualize it. (1126116, quick write, 2/4/10)

Barack Obama’s ascendancy to the presidency as an African American supported pre-service teachers’ you-can-be-anything message and, according to many pre-service teachers, served as a means to inspire children into their own future greatness.
President Obama’s work ethic also was an important factor in his attractiveness as a role model. A definite rags-to-riches aspect pervaded many comments. Statements such as “[h]e has proven through education and perseverance that anything can be done” (1791056, quick write, 2/4/10) and “[i]t will be important for students to connect with President Obama and understand that when he had hard times studying, he would have to keep working” (1791056, quick write, 2/4/10) seemed to convey the idea that anyone can overcome obstacles, so long as one works hard enough. Advantages such as the private schools Mr. Obama attended and the graduate degrees of his mother were not mentioned.

Pre-service teachers also expressed connections the children might have to Barack Obama’s upbringing such as, “Kids should learn about Obama’s early life to see the connections they have with him.” (1805380, quick write, 2/4/10) When they were specific about the connections, they referenced Obama’s absent father, his involved grandparents, and his single mother. Other aspects of President Obama’s childhood (e.g., extra study time at home) were discussed at other times, but not when pre-service teachers talked about connections these particular kindergarteners could have with the President.

Part of positioning Barack Obama as a role model involved highlighting his family and his public, visible role. Quite a few groups spent time talking about how he gives a lot of speeches.

He’s giving a speech. And [kindergarten student] says yes, it’s like a speech you know. I’m Fannie Lou Hammer and enough is enough. …they had talked about it in class, about Black History Month and Fannie Lou Hammer. And so, [that kindergartner] was able to connect that Fannie Lou Hammer gave a speech and so did President Obama. (100512, interview, 5/6/10).

It was not uncommon for the kindergarteners to connect President Obama to others taught as African American heroes. “So one of the students right away you know he even acted like [Martin Luther King, Jr.] was who we were talking about instead of Obama.” (100515, interview, 5/6/10). President Obama’s role-model status was tied to his African American identity and his visibility in the office of the president. These characteristics worked in tandem with pre-service teachers’ elevation of Barack Obama’s importance as a topic through which to teach African American kindergartners about the presidency while highlighting him as the first African American president in U.S. history.

**Presumed Barriers to Implementing Critical Literacy when Teaching about Obama**

While pre-service teachers were in agreement about the importance of and reasons for teaching about President Obama, they also concurred in their reasons against using critical literacy as a lens when teaching content about him. They repeatedly described three barriers to using critical literacy with young urban children in both written responses and interviews: (a) reluctance to say anything negative about President Obama, (b) developmental questions about what the children could comprehend, and (c) unease in discussing politics.

**Reluctance to detract from Barack Obama’s image.** Pre-service teachers were protective of Obama’s image. The rationale that President Obama was an ideal teaching topic in this particular school because of his role-model status also made pre-service teachers hesitant to say anything that could be considered negative about the president to African American kindergarteners. When asked if there were anything about President Obama they would be uncomfortable discussing, their responses were filled with comments about his personal history.
such as the following: “with kindergarteners one should not talk about his drug use and smoking” (1768968, quick write, 2/4/10). Statements related to policy were also prevalent, including the following: “I would be uncomfortable mentioning some of President Obama’s promises before the election that he has not carried out.” (1803293, quick write, 2/4/10) Such comments indicated pre-service teachers’ tentativeness towards addressing what they perceived might be controversial topics in regards to the president.

Unease with “teaching” politics. Although many pre-service teachers found it completely appropriate to discuss Barack Obama’s current family life and his journey to the White House, on the whole, they were reluctant to discuss the politics surrounding Obama as President. Unease with talking about politics seemed to come from two distinct sources.

First, many pre-service teachers did not feel it was appropriate for teachers to talk about politics in the classroom. As one pre-service teacher noted in her interview, “I just try to stay away from politics and religion.” (100514, end interview) Another stated, “I don’t like to talk about politics. I don’t care if it’s President Obama, [state republican governor]. You know I would rather stay out of it. It’s not very comfortable for me to talk about because I tend to get very—I’m opinionated about it and I know I am. So I would just rather keep my mouth shut. (100503, interview, 5/6/10).

This discomfort with discussing topics of a political nature was prevalent throughout the data. Even those few students who were willing to bring political issues into the classroom seemed to be working from the understanding that it was possible to be neutral as in the following interview response:

I think with things like that, you just state the facts. Of course you have to be knowledgeable what you’re talking about first, and then just present it to them as is and let them form their own opinions…I just allow them to be free thinkers and make up their own thoughts about what’s going on in the world. I’m just there to present it. (100503, 5/6/10)

The pre-service teachers were not at all comfortable disclosing their personal beliefs as is often recommended in the literature (Journell et al, 2012; Journell, 2011b; Kelly, 1986). As discussed in the conceptual framework, the issue of teacher disclosure is not a closed issue. The decision especially seems important, however, when teaching this topic in this particular neighborhood for “the decision whether to disclose one’s views on controversial political issues holds even greater weight when those issues carry racial, sexist, or religious undertones” (Journell, 2011b, p. 383).

Second, many pre-service teachers stated their preference was to avoid political conversation about Barack Obama not because they thought it was inappropriate, but because they did not feel that they knew enough about the topic. As one pre-service teacher said, “I don’t know enough about [Obama] to go into depth. The students will probably know more about him than I do.” (1779563, quick write, 2/4/10). These pre-service teachers possessed a self-recognition of a content gap much like that found in other studies (Bohan, Doppen, Feinberg & O’Mahony, 2008; Doppen et al., 2011; Sanchez, 2010). Although the pre-service teachers also seemed to recognize they could address the issue through their own inquiry (Sanchez, 2010), they tended to see this, too, as an obstruction to quality teaching. As one pre-service teacher stated, “Maybe some difficulty for me would be just getting a full wealth of resources and doing my research beforehand…I think that doing the research might be a little challenging.” (100700,
interview, 5/6/10). Because of discomfort talking about politically-charged topics as well as uneasiness with their own understandings of current political events, pre-service teachers avoided certain aspects when teaching about President Obama. Their own discomfort was not their only concern. They also considered how successful the young learners would be with the more political discussions.

**Developmental issues.** An important part of the context was that teaching took place in kindergarten classrooms. Some pre-service teachers had high expectations for the children for critical thinking. As one participant wrote, “I think age 5/6 is a perfect time to begin prompting students to think critically about what they read, and may help some learn the language to challenge texts in their work.” (1786775, quick write, 2/4/10) A few even thought being younger would allow for more critical literacy.

I think that’s kind of innate to young children…[older children could be] in this kind of school mode now and so they personally kind of turn it off because now they’re taking input instead of giving out. (100507, interview, 5/6/10)

Another stated, “they have a good sense of what’s fair and what’s not. So that’s sometimes even easier with them.” (100517, interview, 5/6/10). Not all pre-service teachers shared these high expectations for the young learners. Many had questions about appropriateness because of assumptions about the developmental capacity for kindergartners to be involved in related conversations. For example, one pre-service teacher noted

I think that kindergarteners will actually have a pretty good understanding of families and may be able to relate to Obama’s childhood; that he didn’t get to see his dad a lot, that his grandparents were very important to him, etc. I think the challenging thing for this age is when you start talking about politics. (1790880, quick write, 2/4/10)

From this viewpoint (that arguably could be considered deficit), Mr. Obama had a family situation these urban children could relate to; political matters, however, would be beyond their grasp.

Others found critical literacy as a whole too difficult for five- and six-year-olds as can be seen in the following statement:

I see the importance of the tenets of critical literacy. However, some may be too advanced for kindergarteners to understand. But the surface of critical literacy can be implemented. You can ask the class what they know, think, or have questions about concerning Barack before reading the text. (1798483, quick write, 2/4/10)

Another stated,

Older kids you can kind of make those connections and really have them dig into it and really start that conversation. But kindergarteners or not even first grade I’m sure and you know younger, lower elementary kids, starting the conversation is difficult because they want you to give them a lot or they want—they’re quick to answer without really thinking about it and figuring out what they want to say. (100514, interview, 5/6/10)

What these pre-service teachers felt the young children could do fit easily into instructional practices not necessarily related to critical literacy (e.g., KWL charts). The pre-service teachers envisioned teaching about President Obama as fitting within the curriculum’s emphasis on selected presidents and as a connection African American students could make to the first “Black President”, but not from a critical literacy standpoint. Their expressed ambivalence might be further explained in the subjects’ understanding of critical literacy, which we discuss next.
Defining Critical Literacy

Pre-service teachers indicated they felt proficient in and comfortable with teaching critical literacy. Some understood the concept, as demonstrated in the pre-service teacher’s definition below:

Not just walking on the words…like really critically analyzing what is on the page, what pictures are they showing us and why did they choose this to show us. Why did they choose those words? Why did they only talk about this and they didn’t mention this? Asking why I would say and really try to get into okay who is writing this and for what purpose. (100505, interview, 5/6/10)

Another pre-service teacher responded through the use of an example:

I wouldn’t say that the social studies books are lying to us, but I would say that they definitely slant their point of view. And I would definitely say they make omissions that would be helpful to have a better understanding of the history…I mean what they say about slaves. They lived in a cottage. Things were kind of tight, but they were happy to be with each other…okay maybe they were happy to be with each other and things were tight, but maybe that’s not a blatant lie, but it omits quite a lot just the language that is in the book. (100502, interview, 5/6/10)

When asked to define and discuss critical literacy, however, many of the pre-service teachers provided responses indicating an absence of a clear understanding of what critical literacy was or how to best implement it. When we interviewed the students at the end of their program, all but three indicated “agree” or “strongly agree” to the each of the statements related to proficiency and comfort engaging in critical literacy instruction. In the same interview, however, a little less than half of the pre-service teachers were able to define critical literacy in a way that was consistent with course discussions and readings. The word critical proved problematic; many of them conflated critical literacy or how language relates to issues of knowledge, justice, and equity (Lewison, Flint, Van Sluys, & Henkin, 2002) with critical thinking, or the clear and reasoned support of claims (Temple, n.d.) Given that both of these terms were used often in their coursework and rarely in their field placements, we find this confusion understandable. For example, one pre-service teacher said the following,

I’m not sure how I feel about a topic like President Obama being a critical analysis discussion for kids. It seems too serious and possibly would lead to their confusion. There are too many other factors involved with why you need to be critical of this subject in the first place (i.e., race, stereotypes). If that’s the purpose, then fine. But if it’s to teach critical analysis, maybe not. (1803299, quick write, 2/4/10)

While the pre-service teacher was supportive of using critical literacy with the subject, she did not feel it should be used to teach critical thinking. Others interpreted the word critical to mean crucial or foundational. This group used the term to refer to critical (i.e., important) skills for reading and writing proficiency (e.g., phonics) in their definitions such as the statement provided by one pre-service teacher: “I believe critical literacy is just a meshing of the phonics and the phonetics and the syntactic skills” (100511, interview, 5/6/10).

Ultimately, the constant thread of critical literacy across three semesters of course instruction—including one full course meeting; intensive readings; several in-class discussions; and multiple regular supported, monitored tutoring sessions—did not necessarily yield pre-service teachers who would effectively implement critical literacy with their future students.
the whole, the faculty in the urban teacher preparation program shares educational philosophies; so, teacher education is often conducted with a critical perspective in mind. The faculty members did not, however, always use the same term to describe this work. The first author used the term “critical literacy” and sometimes “culturally relevant pedagogy”. Other faculty used various terms that come from their own content-area disciplines. It is feasible that pre-service teachers would confuse the terms critical thinking and critical literacy while still understanding the underlying concept of both. This issue is in need of further study.

Discussion: Critical Moment but not Critical Literacy

Our findings prompt consideration of practical and theoretical implications for teacher educators, pre-service teachers, and teacher preparation programs committed to an integration of social studies content and critical literacy. In our investigation, we found that pre-service teachers were in agreement that Barack Obama’s election and presidency constituted a critical (i.e., important) moment in U.S. history but were hesitant to either model or to ask kindergarteners to engage in critical literacy that would propel them to question the role texts played in their understanding of not only Obama but the presidency in general. Instead, pre-service teachers pushed against such examinations, often preferring a narrative that presumed a factual and biographical approach to teaching the 44th president and his office. They resisted (Garrett & Segall, 2013), questioning the appropriateness of taking up the life and presidency of President Obama in critical ways, suggesting reasons relative to the developmental stage of kindergartners; their own background knowledge; and the assumed sociopolitical context of their field placements, as reasons why a critical literacy analysis was not practicable.

As stated earlier, educating for a democracy requires that students be allowed to participate in democratic discourses. This sort of participation requires active engagement in educational environments in which they examine how language is used discursively to shape the information they receive, the questions they ask, and the positions they may take. Such examinations are intended to lead not only to a deeper understanding of how the society operates but also to increase students’ own agency within that society. This level of learning requires a willingness on the part of teachers to wade into controversial topics, outfitted with pedagogical practices that support students as they grapple with complicated sociopolitical currents. For teacher educators, our challenge becomes how best to cultivate pre-service teachers’ commitment to, and facility with, the instructional strategies and professional dispositions necessary to create such educational settings for their students. We do not pretend this challenge is simple for anyone involved, understanding that it will take time and, as H. James Garrett and Avner Segall (2013) acknowledge, “teacher educators might have to come to terms with the impossibilities of teacher candidates immediately changing sociopolitical circumstances for their students” (p. 300).

The intent of the teacher preparation program in this study, in part, was to support the development of critical literacy instructional practices and dispositions in pre-service teachers. After a three-semester emphasis on critical literacy that included readings, discussions, and activities, pre-service teachers reported feeling proficient and comfortable regarding teaching through a critical literacy lens, yet they sometimes confused that lens with critical thinking. Pre-service teachers also expressed tensions related to teaching not only about Barack Obama but the necessarily politically charged term of any President. In their responses, the pre-service teachers
pointed to a hegemonic undercurrent made visible by President Obama’s election, his cultural narrative of “the presidency.” Our study suggests that by expressing hesitancies or flat-out refusals to “talk about politics,” pre-service teachers were able to engage in coursework and teach from their own supposed neutrality. They worked from the stance that they could successfully teach students about the presidency by, as noted in the data, just “stat[ing] the facts” and “present[ing]” the information. Rather than taking up Kelly and Brandes’s (2001) charge to use controversial topics as a vehicle by which “to model reasoned inquiry and action” (p. 452), the pre-service teachers signaled their commitment to the possibility of an objective view of the U.S. presidency, denuded of the tussles and debates of a modern democracy. More research needs to be done in this area, but we maintain that by taking an assumed neutral stance toward the presidency, pre-service teachers (and other adults) actually perform political acts that communicate messages to their students about citizens’ relationships to their elected officials, including their presidents.

In addressing the Obama presidency in particular, pre-service teachers often focused on his racial identity. President Obama’s racial identity is often pointed to as causing a rupture of presidential tradition; hence, pre-service teachers’ focus on him as the “first African American president” and therefore a suitable topic for African American students. His role as an inspiration was a common theme. This theme of president-as-inspiration, however, points to the need for a deeper discussion around the positioning of the Obama presidency within a critical literacy and social studies curriculum. Pre-service teachers saw Mr. Obama as inspiration for African American children in particular. As a President who, according to research participants, “looks like them,” he could “[lift] them up” so that they could “conceptualize” a future in which attaining the presidency was possible. Pre-service teachers did not examine, however, how he also shared characteristics common to most 20th century presidents (i.e., male, Protestant, married with children), or question how his cultural capital in the form of education and sociopolitical connections contributed to his election. These characteristics, which placed Mr. Obama well within dominant power structures, were left unmentioned. Left unspoken also were the racial and classist connotations underlying comments related to the assumption that the students in their partner school, which had a population that was 97% African American, would find Mr. Obama’s absent father and single mother relatable without actually knowing this was the case. Rather than assign deficit orientations to the pre-service teachers here, we acknowledge the social and political complexities of the assigned teaching and discussion topic. That is, we recognize “the importance of learning to live with the ambiguities of race work in teacher education” (Garrett & Segall, 2013, p. 300).

While the appropriateness of teaching about the life and presidency of President Obama to African American children was frequently expressed in the data, it is not clear if pre-service teachers saw corresponding value in other non-African American students connecting to President Obama or critically examining the function of the office via his presidency. We would not want to detract from the very real need to fortify African American students in a way curricula frequently does not do, but we also argue that critical literacy cannot be relegated to non-dominant student populations only. Uncritically heralding Barack Obama as a role model for specific groups of children leaves unasked questions about not only race, but also gender, class, sexual orientation, ability, and power relations within the U.S. democracy that would benefit all children irrespective of the groups to which they belong. By narrowing Mr. Obama’s
life and presidency as critical subjects value to only certain students, future teachers risk missing
the opportunity to engage all students in conversations about their society.

Linking President Obama’s importance to his racial identification raises another
implication for critical literacy practices: it threatens to sanitize him in ways that make his
relevance in U.S. history more palatable to mainstream sensibilities. The hard work of critical
literacy within a social studies curriculum requires not so much specific conclusions but certainly
engagements that can lead to complicated discussions. Highlighting Mr. Obama’s race while
diminishing other cultural characteristics (i.e., class, education level, marital status, gender, etc.)
makes some conversations possible while sidestepping others. Presenting select versions of
Barack Obama’s story risks a “heroes and holidays” approach of teaching the presidency, in
which social change is a hero’s quest that few can achieve (Meyers, Holbrook, & May, 2009).
Indeed, a recent examination of children’s books about President Obama found many instances
in which his story is being constructed to support traditionalist notions of social change as the
product of key figures and dominant structures, eliding the crucial role of prolonged community
organizing movements (May et al., 2010).

Conclusion

Using critical literacy applications to teach social studies content is a natural fit and
worthy endeavor. This study merging critical literacy through the use of informational texts
about President Obama illuminated the potential of such coupling to produce powerful learning
opportunities for pre-service teachers and elementary students. Doing so also brought to light the
ongoing challenges of developing a conceptual understanding of critical literacy within the
context of the U.S. presidency. Despite the confusion of what critical literacy meant, pre-service
teachers in this study were clear in articulating what they would or would not teach regarding
President Obama. They were reticent to address politics and more comfortable presenting
sanitized elements of his presidency and personal story. We, therefore, see a need for continued
examinations of how we, as teacher educators, continue to sanction discussions that presume,
FALSELY, the neutral nature of curricula, regardless of who is the president.

As we reflect upon the findings of this study, we consider the role of teacher educators in
the development of future teachers and the constraints and affordances within which the entire
teacher preparation enterprise operates. Critical moments in history are rarely comprised of a
singular event but a series of moments and movements that lead to significant change.
Developing critical literacy teachers, likewise, requires considerable time, opportunities for
reflection, and feedback. These factors are especially important when the instructional content is
perceived political in nature, as in the complicated discourse surrounding the U.S. presidency.

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**Appendix A**

Likert and semi-structured interview protocols:

1) Given your understanding of culturally responsive pedagogy, please let me know whether you strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree with the following statements on your proficiency and comfort:
   a. I am proficient in planning and implementing literacy instruction that is culturally responsive.
   b. I am comfortable in planning and implementing literacy instruction that is culturally responsive.

2) How do you define critical literacy?

3) What grade levels do you feel it’s appropriate to teach critical literacy?
4) Given your experiences teaching critical literacy with kindergarteners at Public School, what went well?
5) Given your experiences teaching critical literacy with kindergarteners at Public School, what was difficult?
6) How comfortable are you teaching political issues such as the economy or healthcare or any other political issues?
7) Given your understanding of critical literacy, please let me know whether you strongly agree, agree, or disagree with the following statements on your proficiency and comfort:
   a. I am proficient in planning and implementing critical literacy instruction that is culturally responsive for all grade levels.
   b. I am comfortable in planning and implementing critical literacy instruction that is culturally responsive for all grade levels.

Appendix B

Writing a Text: Tell your students, “Now you are going to write about President Obama. Which information would you put in your (book, list, picture—depending on your group)?”

Reading a Text:

1. Show your students the cover of your Obama book. Say something like “Take a look at this book. Let’s make a list of all the information we think might be inside it.”

2. Teacher read-aloud of the book, or, if it’s long, pre-selected segments. As you read aloud, make space for students to comment on the text or images.

3. Of the things we thought would be in this book, which ones were actually there?

4. Of the things we thought would be in this book, which ones were not there?

5. What was in the book that we did not think would be there?”
Appendix C
Children’s Books Used

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