

# Critically Redefining and Repositioning Media Texts in Early Childhood Teacher Education: What If? And Why?

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*Given the prevalence of popular media in the lives of young children today, early childhood teacher education stands to benefit from fostering critical media literacy practices. Through the use of critical media literary practices, early childhood teacher educators can facilitate a process whereby preservice teachers learn how to critically reposition cartoons and other media texts, transforming them into tools for more equitable teaching. Offering a situated representation of this phenomenon, this article features a semester-long qualitative study in which a teacher educator engaged preservice teacher educators in critically reading the texts and contexts of media, while simultaneously discussing inequities in education and society. Findings indicate that such media texts can serve as codifications of generative themes whereby preservice teachers can start acknowledging and addressing issues of inequity. Implications point toward the power and possibilities of early childhood teacher educators engaging preservice teachers in making curricula more accessible and equitable by repositioning popular culture media texts in early childhood classrooms.*

Preschoolers Malya and Annie are dancing to the tune of “I Like to Move It” (version performed by hip-hop artist Will.i.am) in their classroom. This is a favorite tune in the preschool classroom as the children are very familiar with the characters and storyline from the movie *Madagascar* (Soria, Cheng, Darnell, & McGrath, 2005) and its sequel *Madagascar: Return 2 Africa* (Soria, Swift, Darnell, & McGrath, 2008). They sing the words and rock their bodies. In addition to dancing and singing to Will.i.am’s version of “I Like to Move It” (originally by Morillo & Quashie, 1994),<sup>1</sup> they engage in pretend play, becoming Alex the lion, Marty the zebra, Melman the giraffe, and Gloria the hippo. As they do so, it becomes clear that Marty and Gloria employ different linguistic features than do Alex and Melman. Alex and Melman are speakers of mainstream American English, whereas Marty and Gloria are speakers of African American Language. This becomes even more evident as 4-year-old Don becomes Marty, intertextually employing linguistic features

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<sup>1</sup>Due to copyright issues, the lyrics of “I Like to Move It” could not be reprinted here. To access the full version of the song (which may further enhance your understanding of this article), please consult the album *Madagascar: Escape 2 Africa—Music From The Motion Picture* © 2008 DreamWorks Animation L.L.C. or search “I Like to Move It” by Will.i.am. on the Internet.

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of African American Language in play. The children are “knowers” of the *Madagascar* movies as evidenced by their play, which brings to life multiple features, scenarios, and interactions from the *Madagascar* movies. They know that even though Marty is a zebra who has half white stripes and half black stripes, his speech patterns, gestures, and interactions personify African American communication. This play engagement in which children display overt and covert knowledge of the *Madagascar* movies sheds light onto the power and possibilities of children’s popular culture media texts as sites for learning.

Many studies have documented the paramount role of popular culture in the lives of young children (e.g., Dyson, 1997, 2003; Marsh, 2000). Media texts are often at the center of children’s play and friendships, thus informing “peer cultures” (Dyson, 1997, 2003). As such, they are significant to young children. Yet researchers have not addressed the place and legitimacy of such media texts in the early childhood teacher education classroom. If such media texts are so important in children’s social worlds, why aren’t they a more integral part of early childhood teacher education classes?

We recognize that there is a strain of cultural conservatism in early childhood education, historically (cf. Goodwin, Cheruvu, & Genishi, 2008) as well as contemporarily (cf. Mallory & New, 1994). With regard to popular culture and media technology, the National Association for the Education of Young Children (2012) has adopted key points from the American Academy of Pediatrics (2001), which discourage screen media and screen time for young children and recommend limited screen time for older children. These recommendations may have some bearing on why early childhood education researchers and teacher educators have not addressed the use of media texts in the classroom. Yet, given the authenticity and meaning of such texts in the lives of young children (Dyson, 2003; Lindfors, 2008; Marsh, 2000), we propose that it is important to include them in the early childhood teacher education curriculum. This article seeks to address this issue by investigating how media texts can be critically repositioned in the teacher education curriculum and looking closely at the advantages of such practice.

Given the importance of such texts in the lives of young children, in a semester-long study, first author Souto-Manning sought to reposition media texts in her early childhood teacher education classroom. Through an initial survey, she found that preservice teachers largely underestimated the importance of media texts and bodies of knowledge in the lives of young children. Further, they indicated that such texts were not part of classroom learning, some indicating their belief that it detracted from the learning that should be going on in infant to kindergarten classrooms. In looking at the benefits of such texts in the teacher education classroom, we found that when critically repositioned, such texts can serve as starting points to address what preservice teachers identified as “difficult issues.”

### **African American Language: A Situated Representation of a “Difficult Issue”**

There are many issues deemed “difficult” by (mostly White) preservice teachers and teacher educators, many of which align with dimensions of multicultural education: race, gender, class, language, sexuality, ability. Over time, in both authors’ classrooms in predominantly White institutions of higher education, one of the topics frequently deemed difficult by the preservice teachers was African American Language (AAL). This difficulty seemed to be mostly due to preservice teachers’ lack of familiarity, their limited knowledge, and the impact of negative societal perceptions of AAL. AAL is a topic that is often avoided by preservice teachers and teacher educators (cf. Haddix, 2008). AAL thus serves as a situated representation of a “difficult topic,” and as such can shed light onto the many topics that may be addressed in the teacher education classroom by critically employing children’s

popular culture as texts to engage in hard conversations regarding issues of inequity. Hence, here we focus on the issue of language differences and believe that it sheds light onto other social issues. Within language differences, we specifically focus on African American Language. We decided to focus our examples on African American Language because it is often seen by preservice teachers as wrong or broken English (Baugh, 1999), and not a worthy and full language such as Spanish (Cross, Devaney, & Jones, 2001).

This “difficult issue” is treated here as a situated representation of a larger phenomenon (Dyson & Genishi, 2005) representing the attitudes of families and society at large toward African American Language (Haddix, 2008, 2010). Researchers have documented that bringing AAL to the forefront of the curriculum, thus validating students’ linguistic backgrounds, is not an easy practice for teachers who are not proficient in AAL (Isenbarger & Willis, 2006). According to data presented by the U.S. Department of Education Institute of Education Sciences (2008), we can affirm that in early childhood education this issue (African American Language as a relevant yet often avoided topic) is compounded due to the glaringly different demographics between teachers and children. Young children are increasingly of color, members of low-income families, and multilingual, while about three-fourths of early childhood teachers in the United States are White, middle-class, mainstream American English monolinguals (U.S. Department of Education Institute of Education Sciences, 2008).

Due to ethnocentric perceptions (Souto-Manning, 2010a) and linguistic misalignments (Souto-Manning, 2010b), teachers from White, middle-class, and monolingual backgrounds may have grown up thinking that African American Language is “lazy” or “incorrect” English (Baugh, 1999). By not addressing such a mistaken conception in their own classrooms, teacher educators contribute to the marginalization of African American Language speakers in early childhood education classrooms.

According to Chouliaraki and Fairclough (1999), language and educational practices have the power to serve as sites for either colonization (when students are expected to espouse a specific set of beliefs) or for appropriation and transformation (when diverse perspectives are considered and become tools for recognizing and challenging the status quo). We posit that not addressing “difficult issues”, such as African American Language, in the early childhood teacher education classroom is akin to promoting colonizing perspectives and practices via the nondisruption of stereotypes and misinformation.

While some studies have documented African American speakers in early educational settings (cf. Dyson, 2008; Dyson & Smitherman, 2009), issues related to AAL have not been examined in early childhood teacher education. To disrupt common beliefs and discourses that continue to promote deficit perceptions and ethnocentric views of diversities in terms of race, class, gender, language, sexuality, and ability and the normalization of White, middle-class, mainstream American English practices, we propose that early childhood teacher educators take responsibility for addressing these issues in their classes. Otherwise, through our silence we as teacher educators will continue to propagate inequity in early education and beyond. We see the critical appropriation of media texts as offering possibilities, serving as sites for acknowledging inequities, and opening possibilities for the transformation of beliefs and practices. We hope that this situated representation sheds light onto the ways that media texts can be incorporated in the early childhood education classroom and the advantages of critically repositioning such texts.

### **Critical Media Pedagogy Theoretical Framework**

We approach the redefinition and repositioning of popular media texts from a combination of theoretical perspectives. We combine critical media literacy and critical pedagogy

to create a critical media pedagogy theoretical framework that situates schools within societies and considers the ways in which media texts serve as forces that influence and shape education. By doing so, we recognize the ideological nature of such texts (critical literacy) and the need to provide students in our teacher education programs with tools to interrogate the underlying assumptions they promote. Using this framework, we challenge the concept of “culture-free” learning (Grant & Sleeter, 1996) and acknowledge that all learning is influenced by cultural differences and by the context in which it takes place (Freire, 1970; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Nieto, 1999). Furthermore, we see all media texts as being built upon socioculturally and historically situated bodies of knowledge (Banks, 2004; Gutiérrez, 2008; Vygotsky, 1978). This theoretical framework supports Morrell’s (2002) assertion that “popular culture can help students deconstruct dominant narratives and contend with oppressive practices in hopes of achieving a more egalitarian and inclusive society” (p. 72).

We use critical media literacy as a frame for exploring how individuals and groups engage in the analysis of textual images (print and nonprint) as a means of both pleasure and critique (Alvermann & Xu, 2003; Dyson, 2006). By taking up the ways we interact with popular media texts as a form of entertainment, while also questioning how media representations position people in our society, we are encouraging preservice teachers to investigate multiple perspectives that inform our beliefs about particular groups of people. We foreground the need to maintain active stances in constructing positions to take up in reading texts. In doing so, as individuals and groups, we can work to make sense of and problematize power codes present in the media.

This framework also draws on critical pedagogy as it seeks to move away from the model of education based on depositing knowledge in students’ brains like money into banks (Freire, 1970). “Learning is co-constructed through social interactions. Hence, critical educators realize students enter classrooms and schools with specific bodies of knowledge that are socioculturally and historically located” (Souto-Manning, 2010c, p. 11), and some of the shared bodies of knowledge among students are media texts. Within this framework, literacy is seen as expansive (in terms of pedagogy) and socially constructed (interactionally and dialogically), and this social construction has the potential to erect barriers for some students while providing advantages for others.

Critical pedagogy together with critical media literacy comprise a framework that informs the work of teacher educators facilitating a process whereby preservice teachers grow as critical thinkers capable of reading and rewriting media texts. This framework foregrounds the perspectives and histories of the participants, thus engaging in education that has the potential to be transformative. It also makes visible the ideological nature of teaching and literacy learning. We posit that early childhood and university classrooms are spaces where literacies and identities are intertwined with positions of power. As preservice teachers come to see inequities stemming from unbalanced power relations that limit the academic potential of some students, they may transform their beliefs, and potentially rework their teaching practices.

Informed by this framework, in this study, we take the perspective that engaging preservice teachers in critical media literacy through critical pedagogy allows them to (a) experience how texts can be sites of exclusion, (b) collectively raise questions about how this further marginalizes groups in our society, and (c) begin designing ways to contest these manifestations (Morrell, 2004). We recognize that although such media texts are slow to infiltrate the “official” early childhood education curriculum, they are present in the everyday lives of young children. We agree with Torres and Mercado’s (2006) call for the inclusion of a critical media literacy framework in teacher education programs, yet we propose that doing so from a critical pedagogical perspective adds to the depth of

understandings. We propose that this framework is especially important in early childhood teacher education, given the need for teachers to build upon the strengths and interests of diverse children (Genishi & Goodwin, 2008) and capture their engagement with popular media texts and 21st-century literacies.

Building upon such strengths and interests could expand the toolkit beginning early childhood teachers have available as they come to learn from and critique media texts. This process could support new understandings and open up space for them to acknowledge and examine the ways popular culture media texts can contribute to how students in our society are marginalized and/or advantaged. Building on these experiences, early childhood teachers could then translate these understandings into curriculum and teaching through critical pedagogy. By addressing the many ways popular culture media texts work in our society within the classroom, early childhood teacher educators can support preservice teachers in constructing more sophisticated and informed ideas that move beyond binary textual knowledge (good or bad; right or wrong). Further, in considering these issues from more informed perspectives, they can move towards transformative conceptions of literacy practices that address how textual knowledge works and apply such ideas in their work with children.

This framework is particularly significant given Marsh's (2000) documentation of the potential that popular culture has for young children to engage in a variety of authentic language and literacy practices. Early educational settings continually fail to incorporate children's popular culture texts in their "official" curriculum content (Luke, 1993). We believe that the critical incorporation of popular culture texts in the teacher education curriculum can serve as invitations for preservice teachers to tackle issues that make them uncomfortable, especially "difficult issues" of power and privilege.

### ***Why Popular Culture Media Texts?***

Scholars have suggested that media texts can serve as bridges between the home and larger society (Alper, 2012; Marsh, 2003; Street, 2009) and that without adult guidance, problematization, and communication, the media can become one of the most authoritative sources of information (Austin, 2009; Livingstone, Van Couvering, & Thumin, 2008). Thus, popular culture texts should be framed as sites to be read and rewritten. Silencing serves to perpetrate stereotypes; thus, by shutting these texts out of the teacher education classroom and not discussing the media that is part of children's everyday lives, teacher educators are unknowingly contributing to the creation of stereotypes. Teacher educators can use a variety of texts to question the narratives and counternarratives sponsored by popular media text designers. In doing so, teacher educators are drawing on children's interests and background knowledges to discuss "difficult issues" (e.g., gender, race, class, language).

"Dominant social and cultural groups have been able to establish their language, and their knowledge priorities, learning styles, pedagogical preferences, etc., as the 'official examinable culture of school'" (Lankshear, 1997, p. 30). Using only traditional texts in early childhood teacher education classes helps maintain the status quo, embracing a canon constructed historically mostly by White, middle-class educators (Marsh, 2000). The traditional canon privileges the practices of White middle-class mainstream American English-speaking monolingual homes and establishes success in a "White-ified" manner (Kinloch, 2007). At the same time, such texts disadvantage children of color and children from traditionally marginalized backgrounds, effectively excluding them. If we are to embrace multicultural education in working with preservice teachers, teacher educators

must start by rethinking how the materials and texts in early childhood classrooms serve to reify systems of inequity.

Rethinking texts and materials involves learning about the knowledge and texts with which children from a variety of backgrounds are familiar. Many studies have documented the potential of popular culture in the early years (Dyson, 1994, 1996, 1997; Marsh, 2000). According to Marsh (2000), the role of popular culture must figure strongly if we are to truly honor what children know and build on their strengths. For many children in the United States and throughout the world, popular culture is a major part of their lives, providing a source of pleasure, entertainment, and information (Fiske, 2010). As such, it informs play (e.g., pretend play with cartoon characters) and the production of toys, which become artifacts related to popular culture to be sold in stores and marketed with fast food meals (e.g., Alex and Marty dolls from *Madagascar*, clothing and backpacks from *Blue's Clues*, Buzz Lightyear action figures and games from *Toy Story*). While the acquisition of artifacts is linked to socioeconomic status, the knowledge about and pretend play involving popular culture is easily accessible and often intertextually woven into the narratives created and enacted by young children.

In an attempt to acknowledge and value children's everyday narratives and interests—often informed by media texts—we seek to secure a place for media texts in early childhood teacher education programs. In doing so, we disrupt dominant discourses which position media texts outside of the teacher education classroom. Thus, this article provides a situated representation of how the critical incorporation of such texts into the early childhood teacher education curriculum can provide entryways to discussing and revising “difficult issues” in authentic and meaningful ways.

## The Study

Given the importance of media texts (e.g., animated cartoons, songs, video games, toys) in the lives of young children, this article addresses the following question: How can early childhood teacher educators engage preservice teachers in making multicultural curricula more accessible, meaningful, and authentic through the use of popular culture texts? Seeking to address the above question in depth, the article pursues the following subquestions: (a) in what ways can a teacher educator reposition children's popular culture (i.e., cartoons) to critically address issues of inequity in an early childhood teacher education classroom? and (b) what are the affordances of such repositioning within this particular setting?

## Data Collection

Data were collected over the course of one 15-week semester within the context of a three-credit hour course focusing on language and literacy in the earliest years (birth to kindergarten). In this course, Souto-Manning worked with a group of preservice teachers at a large predominantly White, research-intensive university, focusing on the students' understandings of children's popular culture in early childhood curricula. The students taking the class were enrolled in initial certification programs in early childhood education and early childhood special education. The class was mandatory in these initial certification programs, but participation in the study was voluntary. The broader community in which the university was located was urban and presented a much lower level of income than was represented across the university and in Souto-Manning's class.

The inquiry we explore in this article reveals one slice of classroom life for this group of preservice teachers and one teacher educator during the course of one semester.



In Souto-Manning's classroom, there were 23 students. All students were women and at least three-quarters of them self-identified as having grown up in an economically comfortable household. Three students self-identified as Latinas. Three students self-identified as African or African Americans. Three students self-identified as Asians or Asian Americans. Fourteen self-identified as White. Students' ages ranged from 19 to 54. Nearly half of the students self-identified as Americans and around three-quarters identified mainstream American English as their first and (commonly) only language. Souto-Manning is a Latina early childhood teacher educator, a sequential bilingual speaker of mainstream American English (her second language). Price-Dennis (second author), while not present in Souto-Manning's classroom, is an African American teacher educator who displays linguistic competence and performance in mainstream American English and African American Language. Price-Dennis engaged in data analysis, putting together data packets with Souto-Manning, and specifically looking at covert instances in the data related to AAL. The data packets were comprised of student coursework, lesson plans, excerpts from interviews, and field notes that were grouped by themes the class explored during the course of the semester (e.g., AAL and homelessness). Price-Dennis collaborated with Souto-Manning in designing interview questions that addressed issues represented in the data collected over the semester.

As they analyzed media texts, preservice teachers were invited to consider questions such as: What are the potential strengths of this cultural media text?; What is silenced or ignored by this media text?; How can this cartoon be used to support the children whose culture is most greatly reflected in it?; and How can this cartoon be used by children who may not understand or relate to the culture most greatly reflected in it? In analyzing the data packets, Souto-Manning and Price-Dennis were guided by the ways in which preservice teachers addressed these questions. In addition to looking at the media texts identified by preservice teachers, in analyzing the interactions and artifacts, Souto-Manning and Price-Dennis looked at how preservice teachers identified strengths and pinpointed silenced (or ignored) issues. They paid particular attention to how preservice teachers negotiated the use of specific media texts to support children as tools for promoting multicultural and antibias education.

As preservice teachers and teacher educators addressed questions regarding texts, they acknowledged that any media text does not have to be inclusive of all areas of diversity—and often will not be. Yet, repositioning media texts such as cartoons as codifications of generative themes and engaging in critical media literacy practices may allow teachers and teacher educators to critically review and revise the role of media texts in the classroom curriculum while at the same time opening up possibilities for change through naming and problematizing inequities.

Throughout the semester, students in Souto-Manning's language and literacy early childhood education course were introduced to popular culture media texts from a critical perspective. Their perceptions, reactions, voices, and narratives were documented via field notes and journal entries (by the preservice teachers themselves and by Souto-Manning, the teacher educator). Souto-Manning's lesson plans with retrospective interpretive notes also served as sources of data. In the beginning of the course, she conducted a survey regarding preservice students' perceptions of media texts in early childhood education classrooms (discussed earlier in this article). After the course was over and grades were turned in, focal students were interviewed. These interviews generated additional data.

Interviews sought to gain insights into preservice students' perspectives of media texts as tools to address what we have identified as "difficult issues." Focal participants were chosen according to their normative perceptions of schooling and society as well as their

discomfort and resistance to discussing issues related to diversities. Five focal students were selected, but only four (due to logistical issues) were interviewed. All were female in their late teens or early twenties. Two were White, one was Asian American, and one was African American. Interviews lasting approximately one hour were conducted after grades were turned in so that preservice teachers would feel more comfortable authentically expressing their perspectives on media texts as tools to address “difficult issues.” Souto-Manning conducted and audio-recorded all interviews in the first month of the semester following the study—approximately 5 weeks after the course ended.

Souto-Manning’s pedagogy was based on generative themes related to reading the word and the world in the process of problem posing. Generative themes came from the documented experiences of children in the preservice teachers’ practicum placements. To be able to access these generative themes (e.g., gendered identities, racial privilege, income-related assumptions, and language difference including code-switching practices such as Spanglish), preservice teachers paid close attention to the children in their practicum placements and kept journals in which they recorded their observations and interpretations. In doing so, these preservice teachers experienced the fluidity of the roles of teacher and learner (Freire, 1970) as they sought to document those media texts that were intertwined in children’s play and interactions as well as those that were displayed on artifacts (e.g., backpacks, t-shirts). Ayers (2001) proposed that such a teacher–learner stance “allows us to transform whatever sense of certainty and cultural superiority we might bring to school into a genuine search for the history and meaning behind specific practices” (p. 77). This stance was evident in some participants’ journal entries, for example: “I can’t believe that I’m learning how to be a teacher from little children,” “I never thought I’d come to college to write down what children say when they play . . . so important to get to know children,” and “I thought I knew what children liked and what they were like. Guess what? I don’t!!”

The preservice teachers’ understandings of children’s popular culture texts as well as their own narratives of the ways in which children in their practicum placements talked about, embodied, and used media texts were documented via narrative journaling. While there were no specific prompts, preservice teachers were told that they should bring together readings and observations in a way that highlighted their learning journeys. These included “a-ha” moments, times in which they were not sure of what they had observed and/or read, and times in which the readings and observations conflicted with each other or with preservice teachers’ beliefs. In addition to documenting the narratives in class via audio memos and written notes, Souto-Manning paid particular attention to classroom interactions and events that involved media texts. She took note of what students did and later engaged in adding to those field notes retrospectively after each class session ended. Later, she added her interpretations of students’ actions and interactions. These perceptions from the teacher education class were documented via journal narratives recorded immediately after each class meeting. Such interpretations served as a starting place for Souto-Manning to plan the next class. As Hankins (2003) proposed, this narrative method comprises the writing, the reflection, and the record itself. In Agar’s (1980) words:

You learn something (“collect some data”), then you try to make sense out of it (“analysis”), then you go back and see if the interpretation makes sense in light of new experience (“more analysis”), and so on. The process is dialectic not linear. (p. 9)

As the teacher educator in the course, Souto-Manning assumed the role of participant/observer in the classroom. She recorded classroom dialogues and media literacy



lessons through ethnographic documentation and field notes (Spradley, 1980). Data sources included field notes, student write-ups, students' reflective journal entries (with a minimum of 10 entries including observations from practicum placements with interpretations reflecting on readings), an initial survey regarding preservice teachers' beliefs and attitudes about media texts in the early childhood education classroom. Finally, Souto-Manning conducted retrospective targeted debriefing interviews after the end of the semester, once grades had been recorded.

### ***Data Analysis***

As teacher educators of color committed to issues of social justice and equity, we brought critical lenses to our analysis. In order to guard against any bias or preconceived notions, we identified themes based on careful data analysis. Procedurally, after the data collection was complete, we made data packets (Rogers & Mosley, 2006) for each of the learning episodes. Packets were bound by the topic (or "difficult issue") being addressed rather than by a specific media text. We use the term learning episode to encapsulate how this theme was addressed in multiple classroom interactions, in order to track student learning across time and space (and not the artificial bounds of class sessions). In doing so, we chose to include specific episodes in more than one data packet. We took all the observational and interpretive journal entries (authored by preservice teachers and the teacher educator), field notes, and supporting materials and analyzed each packet separately.

We conducted preliminary retrospective analysis as we read and reread the primary data separately. Initially, we engaged in open coding (Miles & Huberman, 1994). We began a list of categories that were relevant to our research question. We then combined our codes and focused on those that were prevalent across data packets. Finally, we discussed our interpretations (especially where they differed) and interviewed focal preservice teachers in order to enrich our data and clarify and complete our analysis. The three primary categories were: (a) redefining and repositioning media texts; (b) identifying and questioning social issues represented in media texts; and (c) disrupting prejudice, in terms of actions and beliefs beyond the media text.

Analytically organizing the data this way helped us see the connections across topics, the learning process, and the changes in perspectives and beliefs held by preservice teachers. Here we present one issue that epitomized the emotional "hot point" (Cahnmann-Taylor, Souto-Manning, Wooten, & Dice, 2009) in the data, a rendering of original issues which highlighted emotional points and language used in other narratives in our dataset. The text and context of Souto-Manning's classroom led us to identify African American Language as an issue that was both significant and at the center of sustained explorations throughout the semester. Thus, the examples portrayed in the findings come primarily from this data packet. Within this data packet, we identified representative narrative events that were present across data packets. Such narrative events were twice interpreted—at first separately and then within the context of the data packet. To take a closer look at the narratives, we employed discourse analysis as we sought to identify larger institutional discourses (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999) and agentic positionings in everyday narratives.

### **Findings**

How can teacher educators reposition children's popular culture (e.g., cartoons) to critically address issues of inequity in early childhood teacher education classrooms? And what are the affordances of such repositioning? Critical teacher educators can reposition children's

popular culture texts at the center of the “official” teacher education curriculum and critically address issues of inequity with preservice teachers by drawing on children’s interests to reveal and question inequities represented in these texts. Yet, to do so is not a simple endeavor. It requires collaboration between preservice teachers and teacher educators as preservice teachers engage in kidwatching (O’Keefe, 1996) and learn from children about the texts they take up in their daily lives.

This study shows that when popular culture texts, as situated representations of children’s peer cultures, are placed at the center of the teacher education curriculum, they can serve as codifications of societal generative themes representing pressing and oppressive issues. Again and again, as we looked at all the events involving media literacy texts, there were social issues in the media texts young children were bringing to their classrooms which were noted in preservice teachers’ journal entries, field notes, and teacher educator journal entries.

Findings point toward the power and possibility of problematizing what counts as a valid and worthy text in the early childhood education classroom. Such texts also serve to represent important social issues. Everyday texts that authentically matter in the lives of young children offer possibilities to name and start addressing issues of inequity. Further, findings point towards the possibilities afforded by reenvisioning and revising popular culture texts, such as cartoons and movies as tools for addressing “difficult issues.”

As we read across data packets, we found that in addition to questioning inequities at large, children’s popular culture media texts also served to question preservice teacher beliefs, naming and problematizing inequities in a nonthreatening way. We read preservice teachers’ statements with regard to media texts embedded within their reflective journal entries as nonthreatening ways for entering authentic dialogue regarding topics they had previously avoided. Below is a representative remark:

I always thought that black people spoke wrong. Period. I had it all figured out and thought that when I start teaching there would be no place for wrong English in my classroom. I would teach them correct English. If anyone told me otherwise, they’d be literally out of luck. But when I saw the way that Marty in Madagascar spoke and contrasted it with Sid, the Science Kid I decided I needed to think about languages . . .

This preservice teacher is referring to 4-year-old Sid, the main character of the television cartoon *Sid, the Science Kid*. Despite his African American identity, Sid speaks only mainstream American English, in contrast to Marty who speaks AAL in the *Madagascar* movies.

By spending time learning with children and realizing that the young children were sophisticated experts on their preferred media texts, preservice teachers started to recognize some of the strengths of young children beyond academics and saw the importance of acknowledging their own selves as cultural beings. The preservice teachers realized the children’s deep understanding and performance of pragmatics as they code-switched during play. This unsettled power relationship assumed by many of the preservice teachers (i.e., teacher as knower/expert, student as recipient of knowledge/novice) served to challenge the teacher–learner binary so often present in classrooms (Freire, 1998).

The findings below are presented as representative narrative events. From a critical media pedagogical perspective, we analyzed the texts produced, employing discourse analysis to unveil larger discourses (e.g., mainstream American English as superior to African American Language) that shaped the narratives constructed and highlight empowering positionings.

***Critically Revisioning Cultural Media Texts as Tools for Addressing “Hard Issues”***

The opening vignette portraying preschool children dancing to Will.i.am’s “I Like to Move It,” more commonly associated by young children with the *Madagascar* movies, was initially documented by one of the preservice students, Donna (a focal student). Donna, a White middle-class preservice student in her early 20s who had grown up in the suburb of a large urban area, had reacted strongly to African American Language in the context of the preservice class. She said that African American students would always fail academically if we were to trick them into thinking that African American Language (AAL) is “proper and correct.” Based on journal entries and field notes, regardless of the fact that Donna had read about AAL (e.g., Baugh, 1999; Dyson, 2008) as a language to be honored in early childhood classrooms and beyond, she was unable to associate her conceptualization of linguistic correctness with power in society. She did not see how institutional discourses (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999) which positioned mainstream American English as the preferred and so-called “Standard” language framed her own conceptualization of AAL. At first, she wrote:

One of the biggest things that stood out to me this week was the use of [AAL] in classrooms. I don’t know if I can agree with the readings. They are not realistic to me in my own classroom. It just seems wrong English to me. In Genishi and Goodwin, chapter two [Dyson, 2008], a specific example is illustrated of a girl who speaks African American Language and her writing is, if you ask me, wrong. Mrs. Kay, the classroom teacher, is conferencing with the girl, and notices she has a missing word in the sentence “I got it from my mommy and is big”. The author notes that, the girl is not missing a word, in AAL “it is big” is said “it’s big” and pronounce[d] “iz big”. The teacher asks the girl if her sentence sounds correct, but the child does not understand because clearly to her it does sound correct. . . . The book calls for educators to accept this type of language, but I am left with a lot of questions about this approach. I don’t think I can teach something I don’t know or agree with. I can’t bring this [AAL] to the classroom or it will make many parents upset. I would be upset if my child’s teacher was teaching it. I can even get in trouble for causing this kind of a situation . . . I understand that white people live in a world of privilege. This is something I completely agree with and understand. However, if teaching all children means changing this, why would we accept AAL? By accepting this form of writing, then we are limiting the students who use this language . . . I do not agree with accepting AAL.

In the excerpt above, Donna embraced the institutional discourse of African American Language as not acceptable and as disadvantaging children who spoke it. She also openly acknowledged how beliefs and values embraced by families who do not speak African American Language (such as her family) came into play in her decision-making within the classroom. While feeling strongly threatened by African American Language, Donna’s main opposition was in bringing it into the classroom. She asked, “How am I supposed to bring this to the classroom? I just can’t!” Nevertheless, without knowing, Donna had documented young children of a variety of racial and linguistic backgrounds employing African American Language in their play, as a character trait (a sophisticated representation often introduced in the upper elementary grades). As Souto-Manning read Donna’s journal

entry, the narrative captured by the opening vignette, Souto-Manning responded to it. In her response, Souto-Manning invited Donna to look closer at the lyrics of the song “I Like to Move It.” In doing so, Donna came to see that the children themselves had used a movie’s character and its soundtrack to bring African American Language to the classroom. She realized that she did not have to bring AAL to the classroom herself, she just had to see the rich linguistic practices the children in her practicum placement brought to their play engagements.

The song, which was repeated by the preschool children several times each day, displays features of African American Language. For example, it uses “she like” as opposed to the mainstream American English “she likes.” In African American Language, the final *s* in verbs is not added after he and she. Thus, one would say, “I like, he like, she like, we like.” The verb remains unchanged. Another example of this feature is “your feet is sore” where the verb again remains unchanged. An additional characteristic of AAL is the dropping of the *g*, as in *jumpin’* and *dancin’*. While there are many other features of African American Language, these examples illustrate how familiar resources can illustrate that multiple languages are present in our world and in our local communities. After unveiling such linguistic features with Donna, Souto-Manning recognized that this resource—introduced by the children—could be repositioned in the teacher education classroom from the periphery to the center of the “official” curriculum. By doing so, she invited preservice teachers to engage in multicultural learning, considering a variety of points of view and positionalities while challenging what counts as curriculum in the early childhood teacher education classroom and making it more thorough and inclusive.

In regard to African American Language in popular animated movies and cartoons, they explored *Madagascar*, *Sid the Science Kid*, *Little Bill*, and *The Proud Family*. These particular cartoons were selected because of their mainstream popularity and representations of people of color on a broad spectrum (skin color, language use, socioeconomic). Preservice teachers in Souto-Manning’s class noticed that while the *Madagascar* character Marty (played by Chris Rock) employs features of African American English, on the other hand, Sid the Science Kid (who appears to be African American), employs solely mainstream American English at home and at school. The group also discussed the silencing, in mainstream cartoons and young children’s movies, of code-switching practices in which so many African American children engage. As the class moved from African American Language specifically to the broader topic of linguistic variation, we considered *Go Diego Go!*, *Dora the Explorer*, and *Maya and Miguel*. In doing so, students came to recognize the marked absence of linguistic variety beyond mainstream American English in mainstream cartoons. Such absence conveyed a clear message to children regarding the privilege of mainstream American English over other languages and dialects. As Tonya (an African American working-class woman and a focal student) voiced: “It’s like you don’t exist. . . . Your voice is not heard.”

Donna came to position herself agentively in light of the possibility of employing cartoons as texts in the classroom to explore issues that were hard for her, such as African American Language. Even though she employed hedging (e.g., “I don’t know if I can agree”), she positioned herself strongly against legitimatizing African American Language in the early childhood classroom. She framed herself as not having agency, as not being able to change the situation.

After Souto-Manning and the preservice teachers engaged in a discussion of the possibilities afforded by cartoons as a situated representation of children’s popular culture within the context of AAL, Donna added to her journal an entry from which the following passage was excerpted:

I can use the texts children bring to the classroom to question issues that are difficult for me. Just because they are difficult for me they shouldn't be banned from the classroom. I can ask questions and with the children come to see the differences not as right or wrong. Just as differences.

After revisioning cartoons as tools to discuss issues, Donna positioned herself as an agent of change: "I can use the texts children bring to the classroom to question issues that are difficult for me." Further, she framed herself as a more equitable part of the classroom community as opposed to being the sole voice determining what happened in terms of curriculum and teaching in her early childhood classroom.

Across the data packets, other preservice teachers wrote and talked about how popular culture texts such as cartoons opened the doors to addressing issues of race, class, gender, sexuality, language, and ability. Collectively, the preservice teachers conveyed that cartoons were not as threatening as overtly political texts. They were more willing to uncover the social issues represented by popular media texts than those in overt political texts, and could critically reposition such media texts from the periphery to the center of the curriculum. Preservice teachers in Souto-Manning's class displayed an understanding that cartoons and other media texts can also serve as entryways to engaging parents in rethinking stereotypes without being "in your face." As Becky (a White, middle-class, preservice teacher in her early 20s and another focal student) voiced in a debriefing interview:

Parents cannot say that I am bringing this language, African American language, to the classroom. They know their children like this cartoon or that. I think we early childhood teachers can take advantage of these resources. They are already there. We explore issues that are often thought of as only being relevant when the children are older, like language bias, gender and professions

...

### *Media Texts as Challenging the Status Quo in Early Education*

As illustrated above through the use of the animated *Madagascar* movies, Souto-Manning employed media texts, such as cartoons, as codifications of generative themes (Souto-Manning, 2010c) identified by preservice teachers. Preservice teachers identified these generative themes in their placements, becoming keenly aware of important and relevant issues to the children in their early childhood classrooms. Upon identifying themes relevant within and across classrooms based on preservice teachers' journal entries, Souto-Manning engaged in codifying themes through media texts common in those classrooms. Then, Souto-Manning brought those codifications to the teacher education classroom as situated representations of wider phenomena in society. She asked about preservice teachers' knowledge of such media texts and realized that very few preservice teachers knew more than the general storyline or main characters of a variety of cartoons. She then decided to divide the class into small groups of four or five to explore the many issues that could be made visible in each cartoon. Thus, as a class, over several meetings, preservice teachers divided into groups according to shared knowledge of cartoons to discuss ways of framing such media texts in early childhood classrooms.

As the teacher education class delved deeper into the world of children's popular culture, preservice teachers were asked to go back to their journals and identify instances in which children were intertextually employing media texts in their play. If they could not find such instances, they were invited to pay closer attention as they observed children in their placements and document preferred cartoons, especially those that served a social

function in peer culture, bringing together fantasy and friendship (Paley, 1986). From their collective notes, preservice teachers developed a list of cartoons that shaped interactions in their practicum placements. From this list, Souto-Manning and her 23 preservice students identified social issues represented and silenced by such media texts. As the classroom community, Souto-Manning, and the preservice teachers learned more about cartoons as tools to address issues of inequity in the early childhood teacher education classroom, preservice teachers found themselves unfamiliar with the cartoons that were of interest to the children in their classrooms. Preservice teachers tried to gain access to storylines and characteristics via YouTube and other websites, yet the children in their internship classrooms were able to provide much more nuanced details, thus challenging the teacher–learner binary so often present in early education.

Cassie (a 19-year-old Asian American middle-class preservice woman and a focal student) said that she could not fully understand the play events and interactions in which children in her internship classroom engaged until she knew more about the cartoons they watched. Cassie conveyed that much of the signification observed in play was based on the assumption of a shared background and knowledge of certain media texts. Young children’s peer culture was an important asset to be tapped by teachers who wanted to build on what children already knew, including the background knowledges they brought to the classroom and put into play. Cassie said that by getting to know a child’s home(s) and communities, one might still not know the child well. Cassie and many other students recognized the importance of friendships that were developed in sites that blurred what adults called real and fantasy worlds. Tonya said:

Teaching with cartoons is hard. I always thought I’d know more than the children do. But now with cartoons, it’s just not happening. They know so much. Not only about what the characters said and did but also about the relationships. Like, I thought I knew a lot about Dora. I even knew about Diego (you know, Dora’s cousin), but I didn’t know about Alicia. How do they know all that? They also know about toys that go with the cartoons, what they say, what they do. It’s a lot. I don’t know if I will ever know as much as they do. I know I can use cartoons to tackle hard issues, but even that is hard. It’s just so frustrating because I cannot plan the way I want. My plans just seem incomplete and inadequate.

Despite Tonya’s initial discomfort with children as teachers and teachers as learners, a feeling shared by many early childhood preservice teachers, she came to recognize how important it was to position children as authentic experts in the classroom. She said:

If I expect children to be learners, I have to show them that I am a learner too. A great opportunity is through cartoons. I don’t know as much as they do. There’s no pretense. Their role as teachers is real.

Over time, Tonya became more comfortable embracing the unknown and positioning herself as a learner. While initially accepting the institutional discourse of teacher as expert and lesson plans as static, Tonya’s experiences started challenging such understandings from an experiential perspective. This development was indicated by Tonya’s uncertain agentic positioning and frustration (first excerpt above), which was later replaced with a resolve to position herself as having the responsibility for showing students that she was a learner too (second excerpt). Such a trajectory in terms of agentic position was a significant finding as



we coded preservice teachers' journal entries across data packets. Overall, preservice teachers indicated that media texts were both effective as tools for addressing issues of injustice in society as well as sites for the deconstruction of preservice teachers' beliefs regarding teacher–learner binaries. These findings point toward the possibility of using popular culture media texts to foster more equitable understandings in early childhood teacher education classes and to promote more equitable practices and perspectives in early educational settings.

## **Implications**

The implications from this study provide insights for teacher education programs as they work to establish curricula that foster critical conversations about issues related to race, language, and curriculum design. Future research could address how preservice teachers are employing critical media pedagogy in their classroom practices and its impact on student engagement and learning. Such studies would allow teacher education programs to better understand the challenges their students will face when working to incorporate critical media pedagogy in a variety of settings, particularly spaces that are tied to restrictive and/or prescriptive curricula. Research of this type would also provide insight into how students learn to make decisions that disrupt common or normalized assumptions about developmentally appropriate early childhood curriculum and who benefits from maintaining such a stance.

We believe that future studies should also examine young children's engagement in critical media pedagogy in early childhood classrooms and beyond. The following questions have the potential to inform the work of teacher educators from various theoretical perspectives: How do young children participate in critical media learning engagements in the classroom? In what ways do early childhood teachers perceive critical media pedagogy informing their teaching and learning processes? In what ways and to what degree does engagement in critical media pedagogy influence student learning? What ethical obligations do early childhood teachers have to their classroom students when engaging in this type of teaching? What ethical obligations do we teacher educators have to our preservice teachers and the young children in their classrooms when encouraging this type of commitment in our teacher education programs? Conducting such studies would provide data about the effectiveness critical media pedagogy has socially, politically, and academically for students in the classroom.

Implications for practice point toward the need to rethink the legitimacy of texts within curricula in teacher education and to invite preservice teachers to rethink what counts as legitimate in the early childhood education classroom. Legitimizing media texts in the early education classroom can serve to democratize access to texts, while challenging static and prescriptive notions of curriculum (Genishi & Dyson, 2009), consequently deconstructing the notion of a traditional canon and opening up possibilities for more inclusive and multicultural curricula.

The use of media texts can serve to honor children's interests and background knowledge in authentic ways. Because the children are "knowers" of these media texts in terms of stories and characters, they have ownership, agency, and voice. There is also a sense of community because much of the expertise and knowledge about cartoons is shared by children. Based on findings from this study, we believe that through critical questioning, teacher educators can help teachers reread and revision popular cartoons, thus coming to recognize issues that are often positioned as "hard" or "difficult" in society and often lead to inequities. It is nevertheless important to note that any text will be incomplete,

and there always will be opportunities for problematization. In terms of language, the data generated two examples. In *Madagascar* and *Madagascar: Return 2 Africa*, the characters don't code switch, and there is an assumption that African American speakers are African American, which is not a full and accurate portrayal. In *Dora The Explorer*, we hear Spanish sprinkled throughout Dora's English coupled with a generic and stereotypical Latina representation.

Critically bringing children's interests syncretically together with difficult social issues and dimensions of multicultural education through media texts can serve to re-mediate (Gutiérrez, Morales, & Martinez, 2009) the frequently large disconnect between teacher education and early childhood classrooms. After preservice teachers identify texts that draw shared interest, teacher educators can position such texts at the center of their classrooms as codified representations of inequities in early childhood classrooms and in society. Thus, multiple texts that are well known to children can generate powerful educational experiences.

As early childhood teacher educators think about critically revisioning the role of media texts in the early childhood teacher education classroom and beyond, it is important to collaborate with preservice teachers. Such collaborations may involve inviting preservice teachers to pay close attention to children in an effort to identify which cartoons are most relevant, leading them to learn more about the cartoons, learn more from the children, and address questions which critically unveil some of the issues portrayed by a media text. The interests of the children, when combined with social issues, make approaching such topics less threatening. Since media is such a large part of contemporary childhoods, we propose the critical use of media in the early childhood teacher education classroom. To facilitate investigations into these new literacies (Lankshear & Knobel, 2003), we urge teacher educators to consider incorporating critical media literacy into their core early childhood curricula.

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