

Article

Exploring the Lived Experiences of Middle Grades Teacher Candidates Engaging in Critical Consciousness to Inform Equity-Oriented and Responsive Teacher Education

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Abstract: To inform equity-oriented and responsive middle grades teacher education, the current article is a qualitative study of the lived experiences of middle grades teacher candidates enacting critical consciousness in their first semester in a two-year equity-oriented middle grades teacher preparation program. Equity-oriented and responsive middle grades teacher education is defined as professional learning for middle grades preservice and inservice teachers that advances their development of critical consciousness, develops their capacity, knowledge, and skills as culturally and developmentally responsive teachers of young adolescents, and attends to their cultural and historical locations, pedagogical needs, interests, and concerns. Using a phenomenological research tradition and theories of critical consciousness and culturally relevant pedagogies, researchers closely examined 20 participants' narratives and annotated reflections on how they "read the world" as perceived through the lenses of their cultural and historical locations and their descriptions of their experiences with critical incidents of perceived injustice as documented in Justice Journals. Two major themes emerged in participants' data regarding their lived experiences of engaging in critical consciousness: (1) noticing and commenting on systems of oppression and (2) describing responses and strategies in connection to instances and patterns of injustice. Within the theme of noticing and commenting on systems of oppression, three sub-themes included (a) gender socialization, (b) classism, and (c) racism. Within the theme of describing responses and strategies in connection to instances and patterns of injustice, analysis revealed four sub themes: (a) responding to discomfort, (b) critiquing/distancing, (c) stopping, and (d) feeling blessed. These themes and sub-themes represent teacher candidates' lived experiences of engaging in critical consciousness, primarily focused on critical awareness, critical reflection, and critical analysis. Implications for developing equity-oriented and responsive middle grades teacher education are provided.

Keywords: middle grades education; middle level education; equity-oriented teacher education; responsive teaching; social justice teacher education; responsive teacher education; critical consciousness; phenomenology



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1. Introduction

According to the Merriam-Webster's dictionary, the word "responsive" derives from ... the Latin *responsus* combined with the suffix *-ive* which turns verbs into adjectives. *Responsus* is a form of *respondere*, which means "to answer" and is the source of English's *respond*. *Responsive* enters the language with the meaning "giving response" or "answering." ... Nowadays, it variously describes people or things that immediately respond or react to something, such as "a responsive audience." [1] (§2)

Our teaching and research concentrate on responsive approaches to middle grades teacher education that prepare educators to create respectful, safe, welcoming, and inclusive learning environments for young adolescents, or youth aged 9–15. Grounded in equity-oriented approaches to professional learning [2–4], we define equity-oriented and responsive middle grades teacher education as professional learning for middle grades preservice and inservice teachers that advances their development of critical consciousness [5], develops their capacity, knowledge, and skills as culturally and developmentally responsive teachers of young adolescents [6–13], and attends to their cultural and historical locations, pedagogical needs, interests, and concerns [14–18].

As critical, equity-oriented teacher educators, we argue that equity-oriented and responsive teacher education supports middle grades teachers in developing critical consciousness, consisting of critical awareness, critical reflection and analysis, and critical action [5]. Critical consciousness is essential for middle grades educators to enact responsive, anti-oppressive, and equity-oriented practices in their classrooms, schools, and communities—practices that are both culturally responsive [6,8,10–12,19–22] and developmentally responsive [6,7,9,22–24].

With regard to developmental responsiveness, we look to Lesko’s contingent and recursive conceptualizations of adolescent development that challenge more traditional, linear conceptions of development [25,26]. In her landmark book, *Act Your Age! A Cultural Construction of Adolescence* [25], Lesko describes a different way of thinking about development that has implications for what it means to be responsive to young adolescents and, we contend, also has implications for what it means to be responsive to middle grades preservice and inservice teachers.

I think that if we assumed that growth and change are *contingent*, we would need to specify the contingencies and that would lead us to examine and document multiple micro-contexts. I also think that a conception of growth and change as *recursive*, as occurring over and over as we move into new situations, would reorient us. Rather than the assumption of cumulative and one-way development that is now in place in both science and popular culture, a recursive view of growth and change directs us to look at local contexts and specific actions of young people, without the inherent evaluation of steps, stages, and socialization. (pp. 195–196)

We argue that responsive middle grades teacher education assumes that growth and change are contingent and recursive. To be responsive to preservice and inservice teachers, teacher educators must examine and document micro-contexts that influence teachers’ growth and change and the recursive nature of growth and change in new situations. Attention to contingencies acknowledges that equity-oriented and responsive teacher education does not happen in a vacuum. Equity-oriented teacher educators must be responsive to the tenor of the times, recognizing and supporting teacher candidates and teachers to enact equitable practices that are needed given what is going on in the spaces where they will be working. For example, in the context of a large research-intensive university in the southeast U.S. where this study took place, many of the field placements are based in high-poverty communities where marginalized students, many of them Black and Latino, encounter increasingly conservative curricula that recent state legislation requires to avoid “divisive concepts” [27]. A state-level certification agency in the region has moved to completely remove the terms “diversity,” “equity,” and “inclusion” from teacher education standards [28]. It is in this politically charged environment that we seek to provide equity-oriented and responsive teacher education that we hope will support middle grades teachers in finding ways to push back, talk back, and disrupt for equity [29].

Through qualitative and phenomenological inquiry intended to foster social justice [30–33], this research explores the lived experiences of 20 middle grades teacher candidates engaging in critical consciousness in their first semester of a two-year equity-oriented teacher preparation program at a large research-intensive university in the southeast. Drawing upon theoretical concepts proposed by Freire [5], Ladson-Billings [11,12], and Muhammad [34],

this study explores issues related to the lived experiences of teacher candidates engaging in critical consciousness early in their middle grades teacher education journey and explores implications for equity-oriented and responsive middle grades teacher education.

2. Background

Equity-oriented and responsive middle grades teacher education prepares and supports educators in creating and sustaining safer and more equitable learning environments for young adolescents. Equity-oriented and responsive education for middle grades teachers is responsive to educators' cultural and historical locations [15], their funds of identity [35,36], how they experience the world [36,37], how they experience injustice [38], and what their lived experiences can tell us as teacher educators about how to support them in being culturally and developmentally responsive to and advocates for young adolescents.

Indeed, equity-oriented and responsive teacher education seems particularly relevant for middle grades educators given the necessity that they must be prepared to be responsive to their young adolescent students. During early adolescence, youth are paying increasing attention to how issues related to equity, justice, and fairness play out in their everyday lives [6,29,39]. Young adolescents are also more likely than younger children to be engaged in considering how various aspects of their social identities (e.g., gender, race, ethnicity, class) influence their experiences relative to their peers [40,41].

The 2022 Revised Association for Middle Level Education (AMLE) Specialized Professional Association (SPA) Standards for Middle Level Teacher Preparation "... continue their unique stance on young adolescent developmentalism but place an even greater and much needed emphasis on cultural awareness and responsiveness and social justice" [42] (p. 3). In the AMLE vision statement, *The Successful Middle School: This We Believe*, authors Bishop and Harrison [6] make a compelling case for specialized, equity-oriented, and responsive preparation for middle grades teachers:

Effective middle grades teachers and administrators are specifically prepared to work with and advocate for young adolescents through specialized middle grades professional preparation ... Preservice teachers ... engage in ongoing critical reflection that challenges their assumptions, biases, and stereotypes, in order to help them unlearn deficit perspectives about historically disenfranchised and marginalized students, families, and communities. Together, clinical experiences and university courses prepare teachers to implement equitable practices in middle grades classrooms and move teaching from good intentions to effective action, thus developing their ability to become advocates for change. (pp. 25–26)

Our study responds directly to the call for research on equity-oriented and responsive teacher education in the *Middle Level Education Research Special Interest Group (MLER-SIG) Research Agenda* [43]. Specifically, the *MLER-SIG Research Agenda* calls for research exploring, "How do we create critical consciousness in teacher candidates and middle grades teachers?" [43] (p. 5). In *The Successful Middle School* [6], the authors also call for middle grades educators who "... are critically conscious of the fact that students' multiple and intersecting identities influence their experiences, opportunities, and perspectives. Therefore, their practices and policies are just and equitable" [6] (p. 3). The study also responds to recommendations to (re)design programs in line with a vision for equity-centered, clinically based teacher preparation [44].

Social justice teacher education research has paid a great deal of attention to the impact of particular programs, courses, and field experiences during preservice education [14,45–51]. In summarizing the extant research literature, Leonard noted, "Primarily, teacher researchers examined how the new professionals apply, enact, translate, and implement the justice-oriented philosophies espoused by their preparation programs as well as seeking to inform their respective programs' future work with new waves of preservice teachers" [16] (pp. 3–4). Few studies have examined the lived experiences of teacher candidates engaging in critically conscious work. How do they describe the systemic issues that they notice through critical awareness? What do they have to say about their critical reflection and critical analysis

of the systemic issues they notice? What responses and strategies do they experience in enacting their critical consciousness?

Leonard's 2022 study of a novice middle grades teacher's balancing act to enact her equity orientations through antidotes to white dominant culture [52,53] opens the door for the study described in this article. Leonard's research [16] immerses the reader in the complex, nuanced, and often challenging reality of a white novice teacher aspiring to live out responsive critical consciousness—through and including critical action—in a context reflective of white dominant cultural norms.

Derived from a larger study, the phenomenological inquiry shared here explores preservice teachers' lived experiences of engaging in critical consciousness as they move through their first semester in the context of a middle grades teacher education program that purports to be equity- and social justice-oriented. As teacher educators, we seek to be critically conscious of and responsive to how our teacher candidates' multiple and intersecting identities influence their perceptions and interactions with the world. In particular, our study explores the research question: What are teacher candidates' lived experiences engaging in critical consciousness in an equity-oriented middle grades teacher education program? Implications from the study can inform equity-oriented teacher educators' efforts to develop and sustain nuanced, responsive approaches to preparing and supporting critically conscious middle grades teachers who will, in turn, be responsive to their young adolescent students.

3. Theoretical Perspectives

Based on Freire's conception of critical consciousness in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* [5], we define critically conscious work as

- developing critical awareness of an issue, which is often sparked by critical curiosity,
- engaging in critical reflection on and analysis of an issue, and
- taking critical action intended to counter oppressive social forces.

Our definition also reflects our examination of the multiple ways that others have taken up the idea of critical consciousness [31,54–57].

To frame our practice as critical pedagogues who seek to counter-hegemonic oppressive narratives in learning environments [5,16], we draw on culturally responsive teaching approaches [10–12,20]. We define culturally responsive teaching “as that which honors and builds from students' diverse backgrounds, teaches students to engage with the world critically, and positively impacts student development and achievement” [22] (p. 290).

To consider how teacher candidates (TCs) engage in critically conscious work, we also draw on Muhammad's [34] equity framework for culturally responsive teaching, a multi-layered Historically Responsive Literacy Framework (HRLT) that centers identity development as crucial to building equity orientations. Muhammad states, “Identity is composed of notions of who we are, who others say we are (in positive and negative ways), and whom we desire to be” [34] (p. 67). In her guide to antibias and antiracist work in schools and communities, Kleinrock [58] argues that antibias and antiracist educators should start by creating space for students' identities. Encouraging teacher candidates to get to know themselves, essentially to start with self, offers concrete and relatable access to the idea of viewing students, families, and communities through an asset lens [58] (p. vii).

4. Mode of Inquiry

In keeping with the emphasis on honoring individuals' diverse backgrounds and identities that is crucial to critical consciousness [5], and culturally and developmentally responsive teaching [6–13,20], we use a mode of inquiry, phenomenology, that centers exploring the essences of a phenomenon as experienced by those involved in it [59]. We define the phenomenon of interest as *engaging in critically conscious work*, and our study seeks to explore the essences of this phenomenon from the lived experiences of middle grades teacher candidates. Methodologically, phenomenology is “‘discovery orientated’—in other words, it is concerned with revelation and disclosure, not explanation and prediction

... ” [60] (p. 4). Phenomenology uses a “new eyes” perspective such that researchers approach participants’ experiences of a phenomenon as if the researchers are seeing it for the first time, using a fresh perspective—even blissful ignorance—to ask questions absent of preconceived notions and assumptions that the researchers have all the knowledge. A phenomenological study of teacher candidates’ lived experiences can provide insights that transcend what Lewis [31] describes as the “intellectualist bias” in research on social justice teacher education. Lewis calls for a “phenomenological turn in educating white preservice teachers” [31] (p. 1) that delves into educators’ embodied realities of critical consciousness and social justice orientations.

As teacher educators engaged in equity-oriented and responsive teacher education, we look to van Manen’s description of using phenomenology in education research for guidance:

... when we raise questions, gather data, describe a phenomenon, and construct textual interpretations, we do so as researchers who stand in the world in a pedagogic way ... pedagogy requires a phenomenological sensitivity to lived experience [that contributes] to one’s pedagogical thoughtfulness and tact. [61] (pp. 1–2)

5. Researcher Assumptions

In keeping with qualitative research traditions generally and phenomenology specifically, throughout the research process we examined researcher assumptions and biases about the topic of supporting the development of middle grades teachers’ critical consciousness [62]. Drawing on the concept of bracketing as used in phenomenological research [63,64], we met on a weekly basis during the data collection and data analysis described below to identify and examine the impact of our assumptions on data collection and interpretation. We note that our values, privileges, and preconceptions shape our analysis [65]. The first author, Gayle Andrews, is a white, middle-class, cisgender, and heterosexual female who grew up in the rural south. For more than 20 years, she has worked extensively with middle grades teacher candidates at a large research-intensive institution of higher education in the southeast, a third career that followed a second career focused on improving middle grades schools across the country through grant and contract-funded projects. She holds a core belief that middle grades teachers are positioned to serve as critical change agents for social justice and equity. The first author has prior relationships with all of the participants, having served as their instructor for one course in the teacher preparation program at the time of this study. The second author, Susan Leonard, is an Asian-American, middle-class, cisgender, and heterosexual female who grew up in a white home. Her transnational identity of being part of a minoritized population growing up in a white household generates a reflexivity of pain and privilege (Hurd, 2019). The second author has been a middle grades educator and teacher educator for 14 years, with all of that experience in the southeast and with educator peers and teacher candidates who are predominantly white. Although the second author identifies school as a setting where she has always been successful, her position as the only Asian American in nearly every education setting has been fraught with discrimination and marginalization. Leonard’s dissertation research [16]—grounded in Freire’s work [5] on critical consciousness and Okun’s [52,53] explication of white dominant culture—formed the foundation of the theoretical frameworks that guide this study.

Both authors operate with the assumption that equity work, specifically the work of enacting critical consciousness, is both non-linear and messy. We also agree with the rationale that Broido [66] provides in analyzing her choice to use phenomenology in studying how college students develop as social justice allies:

This study was shaped by my belief that people’s realities are largely constructed; that is, people’s perceptions of their experiences are their realities. I also believe that to work effectively with students, understanding how they perceive the world and their experiences is critical. [66] (p. 5)

6. Data Sources and Analysis

6.1. Participants and Setting

The study involves 20 teacher candidates enrolled in a middle grades teacher education program at a land-grant, flagship research-intensive public university in the southeast United States. The teacher candidates, defined as university students enrolled in a teacher preparation program, include two Master of Arts in Teaching (MAT) students and 18 undergraduates. The 20 participants include 1 female of Chinese descent, 15 white females, and 4 white males. The predominance of white teacher candidates in the program reflects ongoing and longstanding trends in public school teacher demographics [67,68].

Over the course of two years, teacher candidates move through the middle grades program as a cohort, enrolling in a shared core course offered by middle grades faculty each semester and completing a minimum of three extensive and semester-long field experiences. Each semester that teacher candidates are in the program, they are required to review and sign a Middle Grades Program Statement of Commitments that includes the following language:

To cultivate and sustain a more equitable world, the Middle Grades Education program commits to:

1. *embodying and modeling social justice-oriented curriculum design and related experiences that position youth and educators to build positive, supportive, humanizing relationships with and among youth, families, and communities;*
2. *advocating with and for youth to embrace their power and possibility to create a more equitable world; and*
3. *engaging individually and collectively around practices, structures, and systems using critical reflection and analysis to inspire critical action.*

The data represented in this paper highlight the lived experiences of the study participants in their first semester of the program, fall 2021. We invited the teacher candidates to participate in this study in January 2022. We recruited participants from the entire cohort of 23, and 20 agreed to participate. Although all of the participants had signed the program's Statement of Commitments when they began the program in August 2021, we did not presume that they were, indeed, committed to developing critical consciousness.

6.2. Data Sources

We use two primary data sources for the phenomenological inquiry described here, both collected in fall 2021 over the course of four months during the participants' first semester in the middle grades education program:

1. Teacher candidates' narratives and annotated reflections on how they "read the world" as perceived through the lenses of their cultural and historical locations [15,69];
2. Their descriptions of their experiences with critical incidents of perceived injustice as documented in Justice Journals (C. Chandler, personal communication, 12 October 2021). The Justice Journals were intended to nudge teacher candidates to pay attention to the "significant in the taken-for-granted" [61] (p. 8), noticing the everyday injustices that might previously have gone unnoticed. Exercising critical awareness led to reflection and analysis in their Justice Journals. What did they notice? How did they analyze what they had noticed given their perceptions of their positionality and agency?

See Table 1 for more details on the assignment descriptions for the Narrative, Parts 1 and 2, and the Justice Journals.

Table 1. Data Sources.

Cultural and Historical Locations Narrative, Part 1 DUE about one month after the start of the semester	<p><i>Our cultural and historical locations are all of the identity categories and ideologies that have historically and currently influence our perceptions of and interactions with the world, whether we are aware of them or not. We carry the assumptions we have (that stem from our cultural and historical locations) with us as we are making new meaning and having new experiences. By thinking about where we come from and the sociocultural locations in our community contexts that have influenced us thus far, we can more easily recognize our assumptions, judgments, questions, sense-making, etc., and work toward understanding multiple, alternative perceptions and perspectives. The following prompts are to stimulate your thinking and writing of this essay; please DO NOT use all of the prompts below. Choose whichever prompts speak to you and delve deeply into those locations you see influencing how you currently perceive and interact with the world. Where and with whom do you feel most “normal?” Why? Where and with whom do you feel accepted and respected? Where and with whom do you feel marginalized? Disrespected? How do these feelings impact how you perceive the world around you today? In what ways has body image played a role in your life? How do you perceive other people regarding their bodies, and how might others perceive you, regarding your body? How does the way you think others perceive you based on your body impact your experiences in different communities/contexts? To what religious groups do you identify? How does that influence how you live in the world? What gender category do you claim? How has that affected your experiences in the world and/or in school? Are you heterosexual? Homosexual? Bisexual? Pansexual? Asexual? How has that influenced your daily experiences in life, work, school? What geographic region are you from? How do you see that impact on your lived experiences? What language(s) do you speak? How has that affected your personal/school life? What dialect(s) do you speak? How has that affected your personal/school life? What violations have you experienced in your life? How has that affected your personal/school life? In which social class(es) were you raised? How did this impact your opportunities in education, travel, extra-curricular activities, etc.? How did this impact the social network(s) to which you had access? What allowances or challenges were inherent within this material upbringing? How does this impact how you perceive and interact with the world around you today? Which race(s)/ethnicities do you identify with? How does this impact your status in different parts of society? In what ways are you positioned in predominantly white contexts? How does this position change when you enter a context where whiteness is not so apparent? How does this impact how you perceive the world around you today? What kinds of books/texts are you drawn to and why? Do you often see yourself represented in media? In what ways? Do you see yourself represented in texts? In what ways? How has your relationship to texts and media influenced how you perceive and interact with the world around you today? What was your family structure growing up? Caregivers? Parents? Extended relatives? What roles did those people and that family structure play in your becoming of who you are currently? How does this impact how you perceive and interact with the world around you today? What traditions and customs did you experience growing up? Food, dress, habits, living, sayings, gift traditions, holidays, celebrations, modes of thinking? Did any of these customs or traditions diverge with your schooling experiences? How? How has that affected your personal/school life?</i></p>
Cultural and Historical Locations Narrative, Part 2: Annotations DUE at the end of the semester	Teacher candidates were asked to “annotate” their narratives, selecting a minimum of five quotes from their original narrative and writing a commentary for each highlighted quote that provided an analysis of how their experiences connected to societal systems and/or discourses.
Justice Journals Min. 5 entries with due dates spread over 2 months starting mid-semester	<p>The purpose of this task is to help you further discern instances of injustice in your everyday life—things that happen to you, by you, or to others not by you. The goal is to become more attuned to the everyday instances of injustice that occur consistently and ubiquitously. Eventually, we will begin to think about how these moments might also affect the students in your classrooms. The main goal here is to describe the moment:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➔ What did you witness or experience that seemed unjust? ➔ Describe in detail what happened. In essence, the imagery here should offer someone who was not there a chance to experience what happened—to hear it, feel it, see it, smell it, whatever it! ➔ Write a description without placing judgement. ➔ Remove all identifying information or use pseudonyms.

6.3. Data Analysis

Middle grades teacher candidates described and annotated their cultural and historical locations over nearly 170 single-spaced pages of narrative, and they documented over 100 critical incidents in their Justice Journals. Their narratives and Justice Journal entries provided rich descriptions of their lived experiences in engaging in critically conscious work.

Our data analysis included coding each participant's narrative with their annotations and each participant's Justice Journal entries. Each of us coded each artifact independently, systematically coding line by line as recommended for in-depth analysis of phenomenological data [33,64]. We used a combination of process and in vivo coding [69] to stay close to the participants/co-researchers' words as part of "attuning [ourselves] to participant perspectives and actions" [70] (p. 73). We held research team meetings weekly to compare notes from our research journals, examine our coding strategies, discuss emerging findings, and interrogate our respective efforts to "bracket" [71] our subjectivities. In *bracketing*, we sought to interrogate and challenge our values, biases, and assumptions about the phenomenon of interest—engaging in critically conscious work—and about the study participants.

To structure our data analysis, we drew upon Singh's [33] analysis of "contacts" with the participants in her phenomenological study. We conceptualize each of the participants' narratives as a contact and each participant's set of Justice Journal entries as a contact. As we analyzed the data from the participants' contacts, we used the following guiding analytic questions:

- What were the main descriptions of the phenomenon in this contact?
- What tensions, impossibilities, and/or contradictions did you notice in the participant's response?
- What are the specific issues of social justice related to the phenomenon that the participant shared? [33] (pp. 77–78).

7. Results

We identified two major themes within the data:

1. Noticing and commenting on systems at work in the participants' own cultural and historical locations narratives and in their experiences of instances they identified as demonstrating injustice in their Justice Journals.
2. Describing responses the participants associated with their experiences of engaging in critically conscious work.

We present the themes and related subthemes in the following sections, providing participant data to illustrate the themes as appropriate.

8. Noticing and Commenting on Systems

Phenomenological data analysis generated several emergent themes regarding systems important to the participants' lived experiences of engaging in critically conscious work. These emergent themes most often reflect participants' critical awareness, their lived experience of noticing larger issues and systems at play in their own lives and the lives of others. Critical awareness represents a prerequisite for further engagement in critical consciousness, i.e., awareness is a prerequisite for critical reflection, critical analysis, and critical action [5]. We will highlight three sub-themes that influenced their lived experiences of critical consciousness: gender socialization, classism, and racism.

Gender Socialization

Overall, 16 of the 20 participants identify as cisgender females, and oppressive systems related to gender socialization around gender roles, gender capabilities, body image, and relationship expectations came up repeatedly in both their cultural and historical locations narratives and annotations and in their Justice Journal entries.

Many of the female participants described the impact of gender socialization in expectations for their positionality and power relative to men, expectations that diminished or dismissed their capabilities. Patriarchal gender norms permeated their experiences of their cultural and historical locations and reoccurred repeatedly in their everyday life experiences as young adults as reported in their Justice Journals. In a Justice Journal entry, Kristy described,

I am one of the only female umpires for little league baseball in my hometown. One night I was working with one of my male coworkers when one of the coaches questioned a play and requested that the male make the call instead of me because he assumed he knew more about baseball and was more prominent on the field than I was.

Across many contacts, female participants described hearing some variation of “girls shouldn’t . . . ,” in reference to everything from climbing a ladder or carrying a box to paying for their own meal in a restaurant or making decisions about car repairs. In a Justice Journal entry, Daisy shared an experience in her work context:

This last instance also occurred at my work. We have art pieces and wall hangings for sale that we keep up high on shelves around the store. Whenever someone buys or wants to look at one, we have to get out the ladder and climb up to reach them. I am very used to doing this and have no issue with doing it as I am fully capable and it is part of my job. One day a man came in and asked if he could get one of the paintings—I said yes and went to grab the ladder. While I was setting it up and began to climb up, the man made a comment about how I shouldn’t be doing that because I was a girl.

In an entry from her Justice Journal, Opal uses poetry to capture her lived experience of gender socialization:

*To me, not by me.
Young and insecure.
Curvy hips mean wanted attention
And thick thighs mean experience.
Short relationships—
If you can call them that—
End in disappointment
When the guy doesn’t get what
He wants.
Innocence and sincerity
Never seen
Because body is more important.
Little me
Will learn quickly
That the body speaks
Louder than words.*

Participants also described their experience of recognizing darker implications of gender socialization, up to and including violence. In her original cultural and historical locations narrative, completed in September 2021, Celeste had described her lifelong love of reading, particularly fantasy novels that featured female protagonists. When Celeste revisited her narrative for the Annotations task—noting and commenting on systems at work in her own cultural and historical locations—she returned to a passage from her narrative in which she had described a favorite character, Aelin, from the *Throne of Glass* series [72]. Celeste’s annotation appears in boldface:

I was able to relate to her [Aelin’s] frustration with the injustice she saw around her. She and many of the other characters struggled against mystical forces of evil, as well as everyday evils like racial and sexual discrimination and violence.

This comment about everyday evils holds true in our lives too, as women. There are so many instances of gender discrimination and violence against women and gender

non-conforming people that it is just normalized at this point. I chose to word it as an everyday evil, to emphasize the evil aspect of it. Just because things like catcalling are a normal experience in our lives, it is not okay and things like that need to be addressed.

Male participants also commented on gender socialization as part of their lived experience. In an annotation (in boldface) to his cultural and historical locations narrative, Aaron described a critical reflection and analysis regarding a potential source of his father's addiction.

My parents are not divorced from each other but I was largely raised by my stay-at-home mother. My father was very career-driven and spent most of his time at work, sleeping, or drinking.

I believe my father was negatively influenced by toxic masculinity in the sense that he disregarded his health to provide for the family as the sole breadwinner. I once asked my dad why he decided to drink in the first place. My father responded to that question by saying that his dad drank, and his dad's dad drank. To him, drinking was a part of his masculinity. I am luckily not afflicted by this addiction and I relate it to seeing how it has been a part of my father's life.

9. Classism

Daisy was one of several participants who described their lived experience related to socioeconomic status, in particular the experience of classism. In her cultural and historical locations narrative Part 1 (the original narrative submitted early in the semester), Daisy characterized her background as "lower middle class," indicating that her family did "not struggle with necessities . . . but money was tight more often than not." She indicated that the lack of resources to fund "luxuries" did not bother her growing up. In transitioning to college, however, things changed.

My class did not ever bother me and make me feel inferior until I got to college

Freshman year, I lived with a girl that came from a much higher social class than me. She often bragged about her father being a millionaire, and she would put me down for not being able to afford certain things. She never had to work during high school or college, and her parents paid for her to have the nicest clothes, car, vacations, etc. She would often laugh when I told her that I could not afford to go on a shopping spree with her or eat out for dinner every night, and would make negative comments about people who wore certain clothes, drove certain cars, or had to budget money.

Daisy's annotation (in boldface below) on the above section of her original narrative describes critical awareness, reflection, and analysis of classism as an oppressive system she experienced. She notes that she has imposed classism on others by judging them for what they can and cannot afford. She takes up the charge to avoid imposing classism on others because she "never wants to make anyone else feel the way I felt."

This instance and the way I have grown up demonstrates the class system. My friend who was in a higher socioeconomic class than me was able to make me feel inferior for not having as much spending money as she had. She judged others based on materialistic things and their wealth. After thinking more about how she made me feel, I realized there have also been many instances where I have judged others for how they handled their money/what material items they were able to afford. I never want to make anyone feel the way I felt, especially because I am very fortunate for many other reasons, and will never experience the systemic poverty issue due to the seeds I have planted from my race and upbringing.

Racism

In their annotations on their narratives, many participants indicated their awareness of systemic racism and, since nearly all of the participants were white, that noticing of racism often came up in the context of recognizing their own privilege. In an annotation (in boldface) on her cultural and historical locations narrative, Amelia dug into the roots of the socioeconomic privilege she had described in her original narrative.

As I grew up, my parents became more successful in their lines of work, placing my family in the upper-middle class by the time I was 12 years old. The socioeconomic position of my family contributed largely to the privileges I experienced (and still experience).

Whiteness or white privilege plays into the socioeconomic position of my family. Socioeconomic status encompasses wealth, income, and education. Because my parents were both able to attain 4-year degrees, I have the privilege. Because my parents have stable, high incomes I have privilege. Because my mom's income was sufficient enough to support our family of 6, my dad was able to retire to help with childcare. That is an exact example of socioeconomic privilege. And if I really want to look into the past, because my family is white, my great-great-grandparents weren't historically oppressed and enslaved. My parents were given a fair start at making their way in this country.

Like many of the participants, Lawrence is from a rural and predominantly white community in the southeastern state where the university is located. In a passage from his original cultural and historical locations narrative, he describes his love for home. In the related annotation (in boldface), he analyzes the contrast between what he thought was true of everyone and what may be a more nuanced take on who is respected and why:

I love my home and my hometown friends, but coming from a small town, my scope on the world was probably somewhat close-minded in high school. I did not know anything other than living in a rural setting where everyone knew everyone else. It taught me to always be kind to others because you knew you were going to see them again at some point.

Here, I see some more examples of white privilege in my life. Growing up in an almost all-white community, I never recognized that white people are often treated better than people of color. I always just assumed that if you treated others with respect, then you would be given that respect back in return more times than not. However, that is not true for many people of color. They have to deal with systemic racism in many parts of their everyday lives.

10. Describing Responses and Strategies Associated with Critical Consciousness

Data analysis revealed a variety of strategies, emotions, and other actions/responses that teacher candidates used to describe and make sense of their lived experiences of engaging in critical consciousness. This section features four of the subthemes the participants identified: responding to discomfort, critiquing/distancing, stopping, and feeling blessed.

10.1. Responding to Discomfort

Over and over again, when someone else did or said something that they identified as problematic, participants described responding to their own discomfort with silence or laughter. In his first Justice Journal entry, Aaron shared an experience:

*Recently, I found myself having a conversation about COVID around the world with an elderly woman as we sat in the backyard of the stereotypical white, middle class, family home enjoying our hamburgers. The conversation made its way to how India was hit hard with a second wave after a religious holiday. She said, and I quote, "Indians live like rats." Dead silence. I was **dumbfounded**. I didn't know what to say.*

The in vivo code (Saldaña, 2014) that we applied to this passage—**dumbfounded**—could have been applied as a code to several instances when participants described not

knowing what to say in moments of their own critical awareness of injustice. One of Daisy's Justice Journal entries reported an instance when an older white woman expressed concern for Daisy's safety in working with a Black male colleague at a retail store at night. Daisy recounted the exchange and her critical reflection:

"Are you alone here with him?" I was confused, and just nodded yes. "I cannot believe they have a young pretty white girl working here alone at night with a black man. Don't you feel unsafe? I would never want my daughter doing this," she questioned me.

*I was at a **loss for words**. This co-worker is one of the best people I have ever met and I had never thought that way about him. I was disgusted that this woman would assume that and say that to me. I am upset that I just stood there and did not say anything, but I was genuinely shocked and speechless. I just shook my head and said no. I decided to check the lady out quietly, and I never told my friend what she said. It hurt me so much to hear someone speak of my friend that way and assume something about him based on his race, I would never want to tell him and allow him to experience the pain as well.*

Loss for words became the in vivo code we used for Daisy's entry, a code that overlaps with the idea of feeling **dumbfounded** in the face of bias.

10.2. Critiquing/Distancing

In critical reflection and analysis of their experiences, participants often used critiquing as a strategy, meaning they would critique something they noticed or experienced as unjust and, in some instances, distance themselves from something or someone they considered problematic. Ava critiqued colonized curriculum in a Justice Journal entry:

*I started listening to an audiobook, Howard Zinn's *The People's History of the United States*, on the way to my Monday morning school placement. Zinn talks about emphasis, and he says that historians and schools don't usually emphasize the fact that Columbus committed Genocide against Native Americans; it isn't necessarily that they always lie or say that it didn't happen, but that they skim over it or treat it as unimportant.*

Ironically, when I walk into the classroom, European explorer names are pasted on the bulletin board with descriptors, and Christopher Columbus is first. The only mention of slavery is, "Setbacks he experienced: His slaves rebelled against him." So, fifth graders are indeed learning that Columbus had slaves, but they are learning it through the lens of Columbus's experience with them/how the slaves affected his experiences, rather than the other way around.

In an example of distancing herself from someone who said something she found problematic, Ella described an experience from high school in her Justice Journal:

It was my freshman year of high school and I was sitting in the cafeteria with a few other girls. We were sitting in the section where freshmen were supposed to sit, so it was a fairly small area.

"She really does not need that can of coke," one of my friends said as she pointed to the table behind me.

I looked back and saw that it was a girl sitting by herself and eating her lunch. I felt so guilty that someone I considered my friend would even say something like that. I knew she was making a rude comment about the girl's weight, and I quickly snapped at her saying that it wasn't right. To this day I still think about that encounter and can only hope that the girl never heard what my "friend" had said. I no longer communicate with that "friend".

In her cultural and historical narrative, Amelia described her experience attending a private school that offered a curriculum focused on "unconventional" topics. In her annotation (in boldface) regarding that passage, Amelia offered a critique of the expectations for public schools that seem to limit opportunities to address similar topics:

We had a class called Seminar which gave us the opportunity to cover more unconventional topics in education. We learned about white privilege, unconscious bias, body positivity, healthy relationships, etc.

Here again, classism worked in my favor. Because my school was subject to the U.S. education system, they were able to teach us about things that matter. They didn't necessarily have to strictly follow common core standards or worry about end-of-the-year testing.

In her cultural and historical locations narrative, Cynthia indicated that her social class privileged her with attending "good schools." In her annotation (in boldface) on this passage, Cynthia critiqued her own description of her privilege, complicating the dimensions of privilege associated with race that she had not mentioned in the original narrative.

Because of the social class I grew up in, I was privileged to attend good schools that prepared me to further my education career. If not for the location of where I lived, I could have gone to a school somewhere in Georgia that was located in a low-income area. I could have been a student that slipped through the cracks and didn't receive the form of education I needed.

When I read this, I see that I do not recognize my white privilege or that the educational system's school-to-prison pipeline is at work. One of the "cracks" in the educational system that fails the students, specifically minorities, is the school-to-prison pipeline. Educational inequality and harsh policies have caused students of minorities to become incarcerated at higher rates than students not in a minority. My cultural and historical location is not in a minority. The school-to-prison pipeline is not something I ever had to worry about, as a student. The school-to-prison pipeline is something that I need to learn more about for myself, as a teacher, and my students. It is important that I am aware of the inequalities that my students face so that I can work and try to provide as many supports to them as possible.

In establishing a priority for herself to learn more about the school-to-prison pipeline, Cynthia seems to be moving into critical action.

10.3. Stopping

Connected to moving from critical awareness and critical reflection to critical action, some participants articulated their experiences or intentions to stop seeking acceptance from others whose values do not align with the participants' equity orientations and stop themselves from engaging in perceptions and actions that reinforce oppressive systems. In another poetic Justice Journal entry, Opal describes her own journey:

*Who are we
To assume anything
About another person.
Sexual orientation.
Gender identity.
Feminine or masculine
Qualities.
No assumption or
Identification about
A person should affect
How we
Treat them
Look at them
Interact with them
Help them
Talk to them*

*If negative or hurtful.
I find myself sometimes
Trying to guess and
Make assumptions ...
Unnecessary
Assumptions ...
About a person.
I have to take a step
Back, think about
What I am doing,
And stop.*

10.4. Feeling “Blessed” as Preexisting Condition of Critical Consciousness

In their cultural and historical locations narratives, written at the beginning of their first semester in the middle grades education program, most of the participants described themselves as feeling “blessed.” When we, the authors, get down to the essence of the participants’ lived experience as they started the middle grades program, “feeling blessed” represents such a saturated theme from the data that it seems likely to apply to those entering the profession from within a similar demographic: white, cisgender, heterosexual, Christian, early 20s, brought up in the south. Lawrence’s opening sentence for his narrative, written in early September 2021, offers the quintessential example from the data of this subtheme: “If I had to use a single word to describe the circumstances surrounding my life thus far, I would use the word blessed.”

That bedrock sense of feeling “blessed” seems likely to undergird how the participants take up critical consciousness: critical awareness, critical reflection, critical analysis, and critical action. Indeed, we could link this sense of feeling blessed to the literature on whiteness—the ideology and way of being in the world that is used to maintain the system of white supremacy [3,53]. Kincheloe and Steinberg [73] argue that the power structures that maintain whiteness are “so well hidden, so far removed from everyday consciousness, that even those who benefit from it are sometimes unaware of its existence” [73] (p. 6). By invoking the term “blessed,” the participants seem to acknowledge that their privileged identities are, to some degree, unearned reward. However, being “blessed” by some deity could also help them to feel absolved of responsibility for those who are not blessed. As we continue to learn from the participants’ descriptions of their lived experiences engaging in critical consciousness, we hope to discover more about how this sense of unearned reward shapes their critical awareness, reflection, analysis, and action.

11. Discussion and Implications

The purpose of this phenomenological inquiry is to explore the lived experiences of middle grades teacher candidates engaging in critically conscious work [5] in an effort to better inform university and school-based teacher educators and others supporting equity-oriented and responsive teaching and learning in the middle grades. Ultimately, this study of equity-oriented and responsive middle grades teacher education is significant because it connects to and benefits from a legacy of attention to the importance of specialized teacher education for the middle grades [6,24,74–77]. It also contributes to a growing body of literature on equity-oriented middle grades teacher education [22,78–80].

Crenshaw’s work on intersectionality [81,82] examines “how identity and positionality produce particular realities and lived experiences” [83] (p. 30). The participants’ lived experiences of engaging in critical consciousness seem inextricably bound to their multiple identities (e.g., gender, class, race) and their positionality as described in their annotated cultural and historical locations narratives and Justice Journal entries. In their examination of how the middle school concept has—and has not—acted as a means of supporting marginalized students, Vagle and Hamel [83] describe the connections between and among intersectionality, lived experiences, and larger systems and forces:

In some of her work, hooks [84,85] has called for ongoing collective public discourse that illuminates how race, class, and gender intersect and produce lived experiences of injustice, particularly situated within our nation's capitalist, White-supremacist, patriarchal systems and structures. The verb *produce* here is of particular significance, as it can help us see that lived experiences are not happening in a vacuum, nor are they static. Lived experiences are always, already produced by broader social and political forces that are much bigger than the individual and are difficult to get one's hands around. In this respect, it is not only important to listen to the voices of young adolescents, but it is also important to treat these voices as intersecting identities based on histories and presence of privilege and marginalization. This also means it is important to think systemically as well. [83] (pp. 30–31)

If we substitute *middle grades teacher candidates for young adolescents*, then we can consider our participants' lived experiences engaging in critical consciousness as *products* of their identities and histories. Given that, as teacher educators, we are called to think systemically about forces and systems impacting their lived experiences and the related implications for our efforts to offer equity-oriented and responsive middle grades teacher education.

As a recent synthesis of data from the National Center for Education Statistics [67] points out, while the public school teaching profession remains largely populated by white educators, public school student demographics demonstrate increasing racial and ethnic diversity. Data from the most recent Title II report on teacher preparation programs, drawn from the 2019–2020 school year [86] (U.S. Department of Education, 2020), provide insight into the demographic composition of the future teaching force, indicating that the majority of public school educators will continue to be white and female. The juxtaposition of a largely white, female, middle-class, and monolingual population of educators with a student population characterized by increasing diversity [87] makes it likely that educators will work with children and youth whose cultural and historical locations [15], experiences, and identities (e.g., race, ethnicity, religion, language, culture, ability) differ in significant ways from the educators themselves.

This demographic context of a majority white and female teaching population with an increasingly diverse student population is nested in a network of societal systems that always, already influence, and are influenced by our actions [14]. A substantial body of research [12,34,39,88–90] highlights the oppressive nature of many of those systems, given that the network of societal systems support white supremacy culture [52,53]. In a study of the challenges faced by educators attempting to disrupt for equity, DeMink-Carthew et al. [29] contend, "Centering racial justice in education requires a significant paradigm shift from a system that has long benefited those with white privileged identities to one that centers the needs of those with marginalized identities".

Diaz [79] argues for attention to preparing responsive educators in middle grades teacher education:

The increase of students with minoritized identities as the numerical majority in schools and the disproportionate number of White educators is a call to teacher educators to prepare middle school educators to transform the way they view students and encourages all of us to view students from an asset framework. [79] (p. 40)

If responsive middle grades teachers view their young adolescent students from an asset framework, then it seems likely that equity-oriented and responsive middle grades teacher educators should also seek nuanced understanding of the preservice and practicing educators with whom they work. Teacher educators can then use that nuanced understanding to guide decisions about how to prepare and support responsive middle grades teachers who will recognize and celebrate students' strengths and design responsive and equity-oriented teaching and learning that integrates and builds on those strengths.

It is in light of these demographic and hegemonic realities that we explore the lived experiences of middle grades teacher candidates engaging in critically conscious work in a predominantly white institution and preparation program. The perspectives and voices of our participants can inform our efforts to support middle grades educators in enacting justice-oriented, anti-oppressive practices in their work as educators and citizens [79]. To support learning, we must understand the learners.

12. Strengths and Limitations

The study's sample size limits the generalizability of the findings, although generalizability was not the primary goal of this phenomenological study. Rather, the goal was to give voice to the experiences of middle grades teacher candidates engaging in critical consciousness. As social-justice oriented researchers, we seek to "connect ... findings to action and advocacy" [32] (p. 123). A strength of this study is that it offers potential recommendations for teacher candidates, practicing teachers, teacher educators, and others who seek to support equity-oriented and culturally and developmentally responsive teaching and learning in middle grades classrooms. Through this study, we intend to honor and empower teacher candidates by listening to, validating, and valuing their lived experiences. Another strength of the study is that our mode of inquiry supports this goal for as Lewis [31] argues:

Phenomenology is a powerful method for returning to the first person, embodied dimension of experience as a way to critique certain false problems in science, psychology, and philosophy that deny relevance to how things feel or how things are perceived. [31] (p. 130)

Phenomenology for social justice [33] often focuses on marginalized populations whose perspectives and stories are not often told. To address another limitation of the study—that nearly all of our participants identify as white—we ask ourselves: So, why should we claim the use of phenomenology for social justice to examine the lived experiences of a largely white population of teacher candidates as they engage in critically conscious work? Although the study is limited by the assumptions and biases of the researchers engaged with the data, part of the bracketing we both continue to do as we conduct this study is to recognize our own tendencies to judge what we perceive as deficits in critical consciousness among our study participants. In keeping with focusing on assets as the foundations for learning, we endeavor, instead, to seek opportunities for connection to the care, compassion, and, even, ego that brought participants to teaching as a career. For example, given that many of our participants report "feeling blessed" as a fundamental asset that teacher candidates bring to their experience of the world, how can we problematize that sense of unearned reward in ways that inform our program design and allow us to tap into the teacher candidates' oft-stated desire to make the world a better place?

13. Conclusions

In an interview about their landmark work on culturally sustaining pedagogies, Paris and Alim [90] highlight the realities of "becoming" that our participants describe in their lived experiences of engaging in critical consciousness:

Being and becoming a culturally sustaining educator is dynamic; it's about critically learning with community; it's about, together, sustaining who youth and communities are and want to be; and it's about doing all of that with respect and love. [90] (¶14)

Ultimately, any interventions to support the development of teacher candidates' critical consciousness are less likely to have an impact if we ignore who the teacher candidates are and how they experience their own efforts to develop critical consciousness. James Baldwin [91] perhaps put it best: "Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced." Yes, as teacher educators we are likely to continue to work with a population of predominantly white and female teachers and teacher candidates.

Without also facing how white preservice and practicing teachers experience efforts to do critically conscious work, we are necessarily limited in our own attempts to support them in those efforts. For example, the participants often reported responding with silence and even laughter in the face of noticing or experiencing bias. One implication of that lived experience could be charging teacher educators with helping teacher candidates and practicing teachers move to critical action by offering resources and opportunities to develop and practice language for calling in and calling out bias [92] and using the power of teacher talk to support responsiveness and equity in classroom spaces [93,94].

Middle grades educators confront a stubborn status quo—steeped in white supremacy culture [52,53]—that offers many challenges to their efforts to enact critical consciousness in support of equity-oriented and responsive teaching and learning [29,95,96]. As Love [89] argues eloquently, “Too often, we think the work of fighting oppression is just intellectual. The real work is personal, emotional, spiritual, and communal” [89] (p. 51). Learning from teacher candidates’ lived experiences of engaging in critical consciousness will help scaffold “compassionate, critical justice-oriented teacher education” [97] that begins with an examination of the self [21] by centering teachers’ identities as a way to “start here, start now” [58] with responsive, anti-bias, and anti-racist practices.

Future research studies could follow middle grades teacher candidates as they enter the classroom as novices in the profession, building both on this study and Leonard’s [16] research in her dissertation, *The Balancing Act: A Novice Teacher’s Equity-Oriented Antidotes to Critical Issues in a Middle School*. Similarly, future research studies that explore the lived experiences of middle grades administrators and more experienced teachers engaging in critically conscious work could prove important to informing how to sustainably design and offer equity-oriented and responsive middle grades professional learning for practicing school, district, and state administrators and teachers. Such research could prove to be particularly vital to supporting equity-oriented and responsive professional learning for those who enter middle grades education but did not experience specialized middle grades teacher preparation.

As for the next steps for the larger research project represented here, our data collection and analysis continue through the 2022–2023 academic year as participants complete their final year of the two-year initial certification program. We have added individual interviews, the most common data sources in phenomenological research [33]. The data analysis already conducted on the participants’ narratives and Justice Journals has influenced our interview questions.

This study exploring middle grades teacher candidates’ lived experiences of engaging in critical consciousness provides rich information upon which teacher educators may draw to design equity-oriented and responsive teacher education. Middle grades educators, such as those in this study, have the capacity to develop and enact critical awareness, reflection, analysis, and action to support equity-oriented and responsive education for young adolescents. As teacher educators, we bear the responsibility for designing equity-oriented and responsive programs, courses, field experiences, and job-embedded professional learning that recognize, support, and nurture middle grades educators’ critical consciousness. As Opal reminds us,

*Who are we
To assume anything
About another person
I have to take a step
Back, think about
What I am doing,
And stop.*

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