

# Teaching About and For Social Justice

## Exploring the Implementation of Equity Literature Circles with Pre-Service Teachers

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Volume 27, Number 1, 2025

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1116483ar>  
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.20360/langandlit29687>

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Publisher(s)

Language and Literacy Researchers of Canada

ISSN

1496-0974 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Robertson, J. & Sivia, A. (2025). Teaching About and For Social Justice: Exploring the Implementation of Equity Literature Circles with Pre-Service Teachers. *Language and Literacy / Langue et littérature*, 27(1), 69–90.  
<https://doi.org/10.20360/langandlit29687>

### Article abstract

Teaching for social justice is an explicit goal of most teacher education programs. However, this mandate has been criticized by scholars who claim that social justice is an undertheorized and vague concept that is often disconnected from methods courses that focus on content-specific pedagogies. This study seeks to address this disconnect by exploring how an Equity Literature Circles (ELC) framework within a literacy methods course can enhance teacher candidates' (TCs') understanding of the relationship between literacy instruction, diversity, and social justice. Drawing on the perceptions of ten TCs enrolled in a teacher education program in western Canada, data for the study was generated from classroom artifacts, an individual survey, and a focus group interview. Upon analysis of the data, the findings suggest that an ELC framework is an effective instructional strategy for enhancing TCs' understanding of intersecting aspects of diversity, equity-focused literacy instruction, and teaching about and for social justice.

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***Teaching About and For Social Justice:  
Exploring the Implementation of Equity Literature Circles with Pre-  
Service Teachers***

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Within teacher education programs in North America, there is a strong focus on social justice as it relates to diversity, equity, human rights, and global citizenship (Adams, 2016; Cochran-Smith, 2020; Egbo, 2019; Goodwin & Parity, 2019; Ragoonaden et al., 2015; Sivia, 2019). Preparing aspiring teachers to become advocates for social justice reflects a socio-political commitment of post-secondary education programs to address inequities and transform K-12 classrooms into more inclusive spaces for students who have been historically marginalized based on multiple social markers of diversity, including race, culture, ethnicity, language, socioeconomic status, gender, sexual orientation, religion, or (dis)ability. This focus on social justice in teacher education also reflects many of the Calls to Action in Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) report (2015) that speak to the need for "post-secondary institutions to educate teachers on how to integrate Indigenous knowledge...into classrooms" and to share "best practices on teaching curriculum related to residential schools and Aboriginal history (p. 7). As Jan Hare (2020) suggests, as a result of the TRC, "teacher education has become a critical site for reconciliation in both policy and practice" (p. 20).

While most teacher preparation programs today prioritize teaching for equity and social justice, this agenda has come under criticism. Social justice has been described as a concept that is "widespread but undertheorized and vague" (Cochran-Smith et al., 2009, p. 347) within teacher preparation programs. Goodwin and Darity (2019) contend that there is an absence of shared understanding among teacher educators regarding the goal of social justice. Another controversy associated with the social justice agenda in teacher education is that it ignores pedagogies related to "subject matter knowledge and teachers' responsibility for student learning" (Goodwin & Darity, 2019, p.348). Collins et al. (2019) posit that these criticisms are rooted in "a false dichotomy" (p. 158) that suggests that a strong commitment to social justice advocacy somehow diminishes the focus on content, curriculum, and pedagogies, when in fact these two aims are inherently connected and should be explored seamlessly throughout the teacher education curriculum.

This study seeks to address these issues of ambiguity and disconnectedness regarding social justice-oriented pedagogies in teacher education. Specifically, this study aims to examine how an Equity Literature Circles (ELC) framework within an English

Language Arts (ELA) methods course can enhance pre-service teachers’<sup>1</sup> understanding of the relationship between literacy instruction, intersecting aspects of diversity, and their own evolving identities as equity-seeking educators and social justice advocates.

### *The Need for Transformative Pedagogies in Teacher Education*

Student populations in North American K-12 classrooms are becoming increasingly more racially, culturally, and linguistically diverse (Dharamshi, 2019; Heineke & Papola-Ellis, 2022; Lopez, 2019). As a result, a focus on diversity has become critical to advancing goals related to equity, diversity, and inclusion in teacher education. A vast body of scholarship exists that provides teacher educators with conceptual frameworks related to critical race theory (Aronson et al., 2020; Sleeter, 2017; Taylor et al., 2016); culturally responsive (Gay, 2018; Hammond & Jackson, 2015), culturally relevant (Ladson-Billings, 2014; 2021), culturally sustaining (Alim & Paris, 2018; Paris, 2012), and linguistically responsive pedagogies (Lucas & Villegas, 2013; Villegas & Lucas, 2007); and decolonizing practices that forefront Indigenous worldviews, values, and histories (Battiste, 2013; Deer, 2013; Hare, 2020; Madden, 2015).

Race, culture, language, and ethnicity are undoubtedly important factors in the design of equity-centred teacher preparation programs. However, to meet the goals related to social justice in teacher education we must also consider the significance, complexity, and “intersectionality” (Crenshaw, 1991) of students’ “multiple social markers of identities” (Pugach et al., 2019, p. 206), including gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, religion, and (dis)ability. Students with diverse identities based on these markers are often marginalized and are frequently the target of discrimination and oppression. Heineke & Papola-Ellis (2022) propose that identity is influenced by a variety of factors, and that educators should adopt an “intersectional lens” in order to “probe overlapping systems of privilege and oppression based on identity factors, particularly in an education system designed by and for White, English-dominant, middle- to upper-class stakeholders without disabilities” (Heineke & Papola-Ellis, 2022, p. 29).

Teacher educators today are responsible for developing the capacity of future teachers to “view and respond to their students – in all their complexity” (Pugach et al., 2019, p. 206). This requires that pre-service teachers critically reflect on issues related to equity, diversity, Indigeneity, and social justice, and that they continuously examine the relationship between pedagogical knowledge and socially just practices in classrooms. It also calls on aspiring teachers to consider their future roles as social justice advocates who “teach ‘against the grain’ of taken-for-granted practices and policies” (Cohran-Smith, 2020, p. 51) by confronting assumptions (their own and others’), policies, practices, and coercive power structures that produce and reproduce inequities in schools and societies.

The challenge in this work is that pre-service teachers in Canada today “remain a fairly homogenous group (i.e., middle-class, White, women, and monolingual)” (Dharamshi, 2019, p.29). Given this reality, if we want future teachers to become social justice advocates who strive to transform systems of oppression in their classrooms, then teacher educators must themselves enact transformative teaching practices that enable pre-

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<sup>1</sup> Both ‘pre-service teachers’ and ‘teacher candidates (TCs)’ are terms widely used in Canadian contexts to describe post-secondary students enrolled in Bachelor of Education (BEd) or teacher education programs. Both terms have been used interchangeably throughout this paper.

service teachers to understand the lived experiences of groups who have been historically marginalized. Transformative pedagogy in teacher education requires that pre-service teachers “develop a stance towards teaching and learning which foregrounds experiences and a worldview that may not reflect their own” (Dharamshi, 2019, p.29) in order “to center multiple ways of knowing and develop a sense of critical consciousness and agency” (Lopez & Lindy Olan, 2019, p. viii). One way to do this work is through the power of story.

### *The Power of Story in Understanding Diversity and Social Justice*

Influenced by the work of literacy scholars over the past few decades, this research study is grounded in the conceptual understanding of literacy as an embedded social and cultural practice that is shaped by time, place, beliefs, culture, and power relations (Barton, 2007; Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; Gee, 2012; Papen, 2022). Through this lens of literacy as social practice, we agree with other scholars who have found that literacy methods courses can provide powerful and authentic spaces for pre-service teachers to explore diversity through story and culturally responsive literacy practices (Menna et al., 2020; Vaughn & Massey, 2017). English Language Arts (ELA) methods courses have the potential to become spaces that provide pre-service teachers with opportunities to “conceptualize literacy and enact literacy pedagogy in ways they did not experience in their prior schooling” (Menna et al., 2020, p.3). In particular, the centering of inclusive children’s literature can provide aspiring teachers with powerful windows and mirrors (Bishop, 1990) to learn about multiple dimensions of diversity and to critically reflect on their “own lives and experiences as part of the larger human experience” (Bishop, 1990, p. 1). As Hare (2020) points out, pre-service teachers who lack deep knowledge of Indigenous-settler colonial histories need curricula that are “linked to Indigenous peoples’ present” (p.26) and give “primacy to Indigenous voice and perspectives that humanize this history” (p.27). Youth literature represents part of a growing collection of Indigenous resources that can invoke empathy and responsibility among teacher candidates (TCs) as they learn about Indigenous cultures and histories through the “experiences, voices, and knowledge of Indigenous people and communities” (Hare, 2020, p. 27). As researchers and teacher educators, we agree with other scholars (Flores et al., 2019; Hare, 2020; Wexler, 2021) that critical, contemporary children’s literature can act as a powerful springboard for pre-service teachers to consider the place of social justice and equity in their practices as future teachers.

### *The Literature Circles Framework*

Harvey Daniels’s (2002) Literature Circles (LC) framework was developed as a cooperative reading strategy with the goal of enabling K-12 students to have more meaningful and sophisticated discussions about literature (Eeds & Wells, 1989). Unlike the whole-class novel study approach often used in intermediate and secondary classrooms, the LC framework features a variety of literary choices and prioritizes reader response (Tompkins, 2003) rather than traditional comprehension questions. Within the LC framework, students choose a text that interests them from among a curated selection, then work in small reading groups (4-6 students) over extended periods of time to read, reflect on, and discuss a common text with their peers.

The LC framework is grounded in Vygotsky's (1980) view of learning as a social process, with small groups of students actively engaging in "grand conversations" (Brownlie, 2019; Eeds & Wells, 1989). During these social interactions, students analyze a text, share their responses to the story, negotiate meaning, and reshape their understanding of the text as they encounter the authors' perspectives and the perspectives of other readers in their group. These "grand conversations" among students are personal, conversational, and student-led, with turn-taking occurring naturally and students taking responsibility for shaping the direction of the discussion. Teachers participate only as facilitators, asking questions in response to students' comments and scaffolding learning as required to guide and mediate students' understanding of the text. A key goal of literature circles is for students to make "text to self" connections between the characters and events portrayed in the novels and their own lives (Gilles, 1993).

Eeds and Wells (1989) viewed literature circles as a powerful reading strategy to move students beyond making meaning of a text through efferent responses commonly used in literacy comprehension assessments towards deeper aesthetic responses and an "understanding of what they are bringing to and taking away from a text" (Collins et al., 2019, p.159). Students who engage in literature circles demonstrate higher levels of comprehension, engagement, and critical understanding of a text (Eeds & Wells, 1989; Klages et al., 2007). Given this emphasis on a deeper engagement with literature that prioritizes both efferent and aesthetic engagement with text and "text to self" connections, we believe that literature circles offer a powerful instructional framework for pre-service teachers to learn about diversity and social justice issues that affect youth today.

#### *Using Literature Circles (LCs) in Teacher Education*

A small number of studies conducted in teacher education programs in the US have focused on the use of LCs to develop pre-service teachers' understanding of social justice issues. Howlett et al. (2017) recommend LCs as an effective instructional strategy to introduce multicultural literature within elementary methods courses. Heineke's (2014) study suggests that using LCs with culturally relevant children's literature enables pre-service teachers to explore and reflect on the lived realities of diverse English language learners. Roberts (2020) suggests that LCs are a powerful strategy for developing cultural awareness, culturally relevant pedagogies, and critical consciousness among pre-service teachers, noting that LCs can create space to "transgress white supremacy, and to embrace multitudes of differences, contradictions, and complexities in schools" (p. 229). Madhuri et al. (2015) used LCs in secondary teacher education to "provoke targeted discussions and reflections about race and social justice" (p. 67) and noted that participation in the LCs enabled pre-service teachers to make personal and insightful connections to topics related to race and class, to discover new terms and concepts required to talk about social justice issues, and to question and deconstruct "previously-held beliefs and stereotypes" (p. 68). Davis & Bush (2021) found that LCs featuring multicultural novels can be successful in fostering social activism and improving preservice teachers' "ability to facilitate literary discussions around issues of social justice" (p. 283).

Similarly, Wexler (2021) conducted a qualitative study to examine how a literature circle framework can help elementary pre-service teachers understand contemporary issues related to social justice. Building on sociocultural theories of learning (Lave & Wenger,



1991; Vygotsky, 1980) and San Pedro's (2018) theory of culturally disruptive pedagogy, Wexler (2021) introduced the concept of *equity literature circles* – a literacy framework that intentionally challenges pre-service teachers to (re)consider previously held beliefs and to engage in meaningful dialogue on topics related to race, privilege, social justice, and equity that they may have never “encountered in literature or openly talked about before”(p.470). The results of Wexler's (2021) study suggest that using *equity-centred* LCs in an elementary methods course can provide pre-service teachers with “an entrance into conversations about social justice” (p. 469), allowing them to “consider additional perspectives, question their own understandings, and think about how social justice and equity matter in their practices as future teachers” (p. 472). The current study builds on Wexler's concept of using equity-focused LCs with pre-service teachers to teach about and for social justice within a literacy methods course.

The research on the use of LCs to explore equity and social justice issues with pre-service teachers is promising. We wonder, therefore, why LCs are not becoming more widely implemented in teacher education. Are there specific limitations or obstacles that might be preventing teacher educators from implementing this framework in their courses? Madhuri et al. (2015) outline several concerns that need to be addressed in using LCs to foster understanding of social justice issues among teacher candidates (TCs). First, candidates need guidance in working through “sometimes new and shocking material” (p. 68) related to the challenges experienced by people from diverse (and often oppressed) minority groups. Second, racial and gender group dynamics may need to be addressed if certain candidates speak as experts within their reading groups, causing others to participate less. A final concern raised by Madhuri et al. (2015) related to “inaccuracies in candidates' critiques of the texts” (p.68) with some pre-service teachers challenging the “veracity of texts” (p.69) or becoming defensive about the views of authors, particularly those of equity-deserving minority groups.

Our review of the literature showed that the majority of studies on the use of the LC framework in teacher education took place in the United States, with only three of the studies (Davis & Bush, 2021; Roberts, 2020; Wexler, 2021) reporting empirical findings. Furthermore, the scope of these studies (with the exception of Wexler, 2021) was limited to exploring social justice issues related to race, culture and class. While these aspects of identity are important, we believe it is critical for teacher educators to develop a broader view of diversity and an understanding that their students' identities must be viewed through a lens of “intersectionality” (Crenshaw, 1991), recognizing that gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, religion, and (dis)ability are also markers of identity among today's youth. If we want teacher educators to teach about and for social justice, then developing this broader conceptualization of diversity is the first step in understanding systems of discrimination and oppression faced by youth from equity-seeking groups.

This research study contributes to the current scholarship on the use of LCs in teacher education by engaging pre-service teachers in an Equity Literature Circle (ELC) framework that prioritizes this broader conceptualization of diversity. Through a curated collection of Young Adult (YA) novels, participants in this study were able to explore themes related to Indigenous cultures and worldviews, transgender identities, systemic racism, refugee and migrant family experiences, hidden homelessness, and neurodiversity. Through this broadened “intersectional lens” of identities, the current study is designed to

examine the impact of an ELC framework on pre-service teachers' understanding of effective literacy practices and of issues related to equity, diversity, and social justice that affect youth and the larger society within the Canadian context.

### *Methodology*

The present study was conducted in a teacher education program at a university in western Canada. Classroom action research (CAR) was utilized as the research methodology for this study. CAR is described by Hendricks (2017) as “a form of action research that is conducted by teachers in their classrooms with the purpose of improving practice” and valuing “the interpretations that teachers make based on data collected with their students” (p.7). Mettetal (2002) reminds us that CAR represents a broad continuum that spans from “personal reflection at one end to formal educational research at the other” (p.1). As scholar practitioners, we believe that the CAR methodology aligns well with our research goals of implementing and then examining the impact of an ELC framework on TCs enrolled in an elementary ELA methods course. Specifically, we sought to inquire into pre-service teachers' perceptions regarding the effectiveness of the ELC as a way to enhance TCs' literacy teaching practices and deepen their understanding of issues related to diversity, inequity and social justice. We believe that CAR allows teacher educators to make changes to their practice with increased knowledge and confidence. When utilized as a methodology for formal educational research, CAR enables scholar practitioners to share their findings more widely across departments and institutions to benefit other postsecondary educators and students.

### *Ethics Board Approval*

The researchers submitted their research proposal to their university's Ethics Review Board in May 2022. Given that the principal investigator of this study was also the instructor of the elementary ELA course, the study proposal included detailed ethical considerations and protocols for protecting the privacy and rights of students who consented to participate in this research study. These protocols outlined that the co-investigator (a university faculty member from outside the teacher education program) would be solely responsible for recruiting participants, collecting all consent forms, managing the data collection from the online survey and focus group interview, and anonymizing the raw data with pseudonyms before data analysis by both researchers. The proposal also emphasized that participation in the study would be voluntary. Approval was granted by the Office of Research Ethics in July 2023.

### *Participants*

All TCs enrolled in the elementary ELA course were invited to participate in the study via an email that was sent to them in August 2022 prior to the start of the course. The email invitation included a letter from both researchers with detailed information about the goals of the research study and the protocols in place for protecting the privacy of participants. The informed consent form was also included in this initial communication. The co-investigator met with the TCs at the end of the first day of the ELA course on August 23, 2022 to answer questions about the study. Students were informed that they had two weeks to sign and submit their consent form to the co-investigator.

A total of ten TCs consented to participate in the study and all ten completed the online survey. Purposeful sampling was then used to select seven participants who responded “Agree” or “Strongly Agree” to Question 4 (*The fictional story in the novel I read enhanced my understanding of issues related to diversity, inequity and social justice that are relevant to youth today*) and Question 8 (*I consider the ELC framework to be an effective instructional strategy in my future professional work as a teacher and advocate for social justice* on the survey. These seven participants were then invited to take part in the focus group interview. It is important to note that during the ELA course in the fall semester, the principal investigator had no knowledge of which TCs were participating in the study.

### *Design of the Equity Literature Circles Framework*

Today, the field of children’s literature offers classroom teachers and teacher educators a variety of good quality YA novels that focus on contemporary topics related to social justice and provide compelling stories that reflect the lived experiences of youth. Given this variety, it is important for teachers and instructors to have specific goals and criteria in mind when selecting novels for literature circles.

In the current study, the course instructor selected six contemporary YA novels based on a specific set of criteria developed in collaboration with the teacher education librarian and local children’s booksellers working closely with K-12 schools. These criteria included: 1) YA novels exploring a broad conceptualization of diversity based on six distinct markers of identity (Indigeneity, gender, race, culture, socioeconomic status, and (dis)ability/neurodiversity); 2) authenticity of authorship (priority given to authors from the equity-seeking diversity group represented by the character(s) in the novels; 3) recent publications recommended by intermediate/middle school teachers who had used the novels with their own students; 4) topics relevant to the local context in which the teacher candidates would be completing their teaching practicum; and 5) books by Canadian authors.

After reading through a variety of YA novels recommended by local librarians and teachers, the instructor selected six novels that best met the first four criteria for the ELC project. Finding novels written by Canadian authors turned out to be more challenging. Only two of the novels selected were written by Canadian authors (David Robertson and Susin Nielson). Table 1 provides information regarding the diversity/social justice themes represented in each of the novels that were selected for the ELC assignment.

Table 1  
*Curated Selection of YA Novels for the ELC Assignment*

Title	Author	Diversity/Social Justice Topics
<i>The Barren Grounds</i> (2020)	David A. Robertson	Indigenous identities, stories, and worldviews, cultural oppression, community, family
<i>Melissa</i> (2022)	Alex Gino	Identity, transgender children and youth, gender roles, bullying, LGBTQ2+ advocacy, allyship



<i>Count Me In</i> (2020)	Varsha Bajaj	Immigrant experiences, systemic racism, hate crimes, power of social media, family
<i>Inside out and Back Again</i> (2011)	Thanhha Lai	Refugee and migrant experiences, war, assimilation, family heritage, identity
<i>No Fixed Address</i> (2018)	Susin Nielson	Hidden homelessness, poverty, shame, guilt, family, friendship, resilience
<i>Can you See Me?</i> (2019)	Libby Scott & Rebecca Westcott	Autism, neurodiversity, alienation, bullying, friendship, identity, writing, courage, resilience

The course instructor provided the class with an overview of the ELC assignment in early September 2022, which included a book talk that explained the topics explored in each of the novels. The TCs then chose one of six novels to read for the assignment based on their interests, experiences, or their desire to learn more about a topic that was new to them. The novels were distributed, the groups were formed, and the TCs had two weeks to read their novel. The six ELC groups met a total of six times, with each group taking a turn in leading/teaching a 20-30 facilitated dialogue on a specific story element (setting, vocabulary, characters, plot, themes, summary) and its connection to social justice issues or themes in the books. The ELC groups facilitating each session used modeling with examples from their own novel, guiding questions, prompts for discussion, and a variety of interactive reader response activities to enable the other groups to engage in small group conversations about these story elements and their connection to social justice within their groups' novel. Classroom artifacts generated throughout these sessions included PowerPoint presentations, images, inquiry questions, records of reader responses, and exit slips.

#### *Data Sources and Research Methodology*

Data for this study were generated from three sources: 1) classroom artifacts from the ELC assignment (from consenting study participants); 2) an individual, electronic survey (using Survey Monkey®); and 3) a focus group interview (using Zoom® video conferencing) with selected study participants. The data generated by classroom artifacts from consenting study participants provided a general sense of the participants' perceptions of the novels they read and their engagement in the ELC assignment overall.

The individual online surveys included short answer and Likert scale questions for which participants chose answers ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. The survey was an efficient way for us to generate data related to the participants' perceptions of the ELC framework as a literacy pedagogy and to identify participants for the focus group interview who indicated that the ELC framework had an impact on their understanding of diversity and who showed a strong interest in using the ELC framework in their future teaching practices. Purposeful sampling was used to select participants who responded "Agree" or "Strongly Agree" to questions 4 and 8. The focus group session, which included a limited number of open-ended questions (Creswell & Poth, 2018), was

video recorded and transcribed for data analysis purposes using Zoom® and Otter® recording and transcription tools.

### *Data Analysis*

Data analysis was conducted by both researchers after the completion of the ELA course. Saldaña's (2021) method of two-cycle coding was used in analyzing data from the online survey and the focus group interview. During the initial cycle of data analysis, both researchers independently read through the survey answers and raw data from the focus group interview to develop provisional codes and look for correlation and congruence between both sets of data. Then, through a process of open coding, each researcher analyzed words, phrases, and sentences from the raw data generated in the focus group interview to develop their own list of initial codes. For example, some of these initial codes included: choice, group work, connections, social justice, relevance, relatability, empathy, stigmas, marginalization, empathy, intersectionality of diversity.

In the second cycle of data analysis, focused coding was used to compare the two sets of initial codes and identify a shared set of the most frequent or significant codes (Saldaña, 2021). This process was followed by axial coding which allowed the researchers to compare codes across the two data sets, agree on a common set of the most salient and prevalent codes, and then cluster those codes into categories. For example, one shared set of codes included: exploring and reframing perspectives, development of empathy, and social justice through an intersectional lens. These three codes were clustered into the category of expanding understanding of diversity. This method of triangulation enabled cross-validation of the data and captured nuanced perceptions of the literature circles experienced by the participants.

### *Findings*

Survey data were analyzed to quantify patterns of responses by the study participants. At the outset, while only 60% of the respondents were assigned their first choice of books, 80% of them said they enjoyed reading the books they read for the ELC assignment. Furthermore, all ten of the respondents strongly agreed or agreed that reading these novels as part of the course was valuable and that they would use the novels in their own future teaching. In relation to the effectiveness of the ELC framework, 90% of the respondents strongly agreed or agreed that the ELC helped them develop and experience effective literacy strategies for elementary/middle school students, with only 40% of respondents "somewhat agreeing" that they would prefer to teach about diversity through novel study rather than the ELC framework. Of particular note in the survey findings is that 80% of respondents strongly agreed or agreed that the novel they read enhanced their understanding of issues related to diversity, inequity, and social justice that are relevant to youth today. Furthermore, 100% of respondents strongly agreed or agreed that the ELC framework would be an effective strategy for their future work as teachers and advocates for social justice. This evidence suggests a strong and favourable connection between the ELC framework and the development of both literacy instructional strategies and social justice consciousness among TCs.

Based on the data analysis of the online survey and the group interview, several key findings emerged from this study that provide important insights into how the TCs

experienced the ELC instructional design in their literacy methods course and how this experience may shape their future classroom teaching practices. The findings are presented in three categories that reflect how the ELC framework (1) expanded TCs' understanding of diversity, (2) enhanced their understanding of equity-centred literacy practices, and (3) deepened their understanding of teaching about and for social justice.

### *Expanding Understanding of Diversity*

As previously noted, seven participants were selected by purposeful sampling to participate in a focus group interview. During the interview, these participants talked about how the ELC assignment broadened their understanding of diversity, equity, and social justice. Teaching and learning about the novels in small groups provided the TCs with rich opportunities for critically reflecting on social justice issues and developing new understandings. Three aspects of the ELC framework that were powerful in shaping and reshaping the participants' conceptualization of diversity were opportunities for exploring and reframing perspectives, developing empathy, and viewing social justice through an intersectional identity lens.

Many of the participants stated that they valued the opportunity to engage in deep conversations during the ELC sessions, where they could share their own perspectives, explore other people's views on the novel topics and themes, and reframe their understanding of diversity. They also appreciated the interaction between the groups, with Jennifer remarking, "having that conversation, then sharing out about the different books was really a factor for me because I got to hear about the different books and the subjects and social justice issues that they cover." Audrey also talked about the intimacy of the small group discussions, which "made it easier to be personal, but also to offer other perspectives that maybe wouldn't be heard in a typical environment." Hannah appreciated that time was provided for these conversations, noting that it "wasn't rushed...because everyone went deep." In reflecting on the ELC assignment, Hannah shared "I think the takeaway was the idea of trying to inspire grand conversations, which I know was an objective of the literature circles. I think that is how this was for us, inspired in part by this experience."

Jennifer mentioned that the ELC assignment helped the TCs "develop critical thinking skills and open-mindedness for what other people are going through." Jennifer and other participants also commented that reading about the experiences of characters in the novels enhanced their capacity to "empathize more" with youth who may be marginalized or stigmatized because of their diverse social markers. Alicia understood that a key objective of the ELC framework was "to make us empathize more with people in those situations." She pointed out that using an ELC framework could have the same effect on students, saying "kids would connect with that right away and they would easily empathize with the characters." Alicia expressed her interest in using the ELC framework with her future students.

I could see the value of doing something this way, coming out of the topic of intersectionality and intersectional identities and making connections because there are so many different issues represented. Then students can start to see links between social justice issues and how they connect and intersect. (Alicia)

### *Enhancing Understanding of Equity-Centred Literacy Practices*

The participants in this study experienced the ELC framework from the unique vantage point of being both students and future teachers, which Hannah described as having “one foot in one world and one foot in another.”

I don’t think I ever did lit circles when I was in public school, so I was experiencing what that process is (as a student), but I also then had the teaching role – just sort of existing in two roles at the same time because we were expected to teach all of our fellow candidates about our particular assigned topic. (Hannah)

From their perspective as students, the TCs were able to share their appreciation for the learner-focused and collaborative aspects of this instructional design. Jennifer noted that the ELC framework allowed the TCs “to read at our own pace.” Others talked about the benefits of students having choice in selecting a book for the ELC assignment. Alicia noted that everyone was able to “pick something that they wanted to learn more about or that they could relate to.” Jennifer noted that she chose her novel to learn more about a topic that was new to her:

For me, I chose a book about a transgender youth specifically because I don’t have that much information on transitioning, and I don’t have anyone in my immediate circle or anyone I am comfortable with asking questions or learning about that. So, I went that way, and I found it very informative. (Jennifer)

Hannah pointed out that presenting the book choices ahead of time through a “book walk” was an important step since it allowed the TCs not only to select topics of interest but also to avoid a “social justice topic that might be triggering.”

Many of the participants mentioned the value of working in small groups, which allowed for self-paced learning, enhanced learner autonomy, and increased student participation for some TCs. Jennifer said that “the effective literacy instruction for me was being in a group.” Similarly, Ashley noted how much she benefitted from the opportunity to work collaboratively with her group to develop a lesson plan and then learn about other social justice issues:

Even though I only read one book, I was able to learn about each of the social justice issues represented because each group was sharing out what they did in the activities. This also made me curious and made me want to read and learn more about the other books. (Ashley)

Narinder noted the increased engagement and participation in the small group ELC discussions:

Everyone had a say in the discussion. I know in a large group setting it can be harder to make sure everyone is heard and can participate due to time or due to being nervous about speaking in front of so many people. In whole group

discussions, I'd have all these thoughts in my head, but I wouldn't say them.  
(Narinder)

From their teaching perspective, the participants recognized the work and planning required to ensure that an ELC framework is successful. Relevance and real-world connections were significant features of the ELC design for the study participants. Hannah noted that the books used for the ELC assignment in the literacy course had been “specifically curated” by the instructor with “social justice or equity issues in mind.” Alicia also noticed that that they were “brand new novels that were so relevant and could be relatable,” while Laura talked about the novels providing “real world examples” of social justice issues that affect youth today. Narinder also recognized that the equity issues represented in the novels were specifically relevant to their local context:

A lot of the social justice issues are very relevant to where we are...So, having a book about a local issue, especially one as important and prevalent as homelessness in the area we live in, was great because it got us thinking about issues in our communities. (Narinder)

For most participants in this study, the ELC framework was a new instructional design that they had not experienced themselves as students. Many of their responses focused on the value of the ELCs as an innovative pedagogy for simultaneously teaching students about story elements and enabling them to connect to important issues related to diversity and equity. Experiencing the ELC instructional design as a student, and then critically reflecting on it as future teachers, provided the participants with opportunities for what Hannah called “really great insights” and the opportunity to “unpack what is effective literacy instruction.” Alicia talked about the innovative opportunities that the ELC framework provided for connecting story elements to social justice, noting that “there was a creative side that I never saw in my own self. So, imagine seeing that in your students, the quiet ones, the ones you never see...seeing them glow.” The TCs also valued the opportunity to collaborate with their peers and were inspired by their experiences within their ELC groups, which Audrey believed allowed for deeper connections to the story, and “more ways to interact with the book and with each other.”

#### *Deepening Understanding of Teaching About and For Social Justice*

The participants talked about how the ELC assignment in the course had deepened their understanding of social justice. Jennifer pointed out that the ELCs had helped her gain “a deeper understanding and knowledge about different social justice issues” and the confidence to explore topics “that I thought were maybe a bit taboo or controversial.” She spoke about the importance of using ELCs to educate teachers, parents and the community about social justice.

It's about teaching the student, but it's also about teaching the parents. So, maybe changing their views or supporting them. Now the greater role of education, the greater role of ourselves as teachers. is beyond the classroom walls for sure.  
(Jennifer)

The TCs also talked about the applicability of the ELC framework across K-12 literacy instruction. Hannah said, “I think it could be done at any grade” and Laura agreed, saying “What I learned from this is the cross-curricular aspect of it.” Many of the TCs who were planning to teach in the primary grades shared ideas about using ELCs with picture books and other age-appropriate resources.

The TCs did express some concerns and cautions about using the ELC framework, with Audrey emphasizing that “you have to know your students in order to offer these opportunities” since some social justice issues may be triggering. Audrey recognized that their TC cohort had created a “safe space” for them to share insights and personal experiences about social justice issues during the ELC sessions and emphasized that the success of the framework in their own classrooms would depend “on the community you have created.”

Many of the participants emphasized the importance of authenticity and amplifying historically marginalized and silenced voices. Ashley acknowledged that this requires work on the part of the teacher, “researching each book that you choose to share with students and looking at whose perspective it is from and why.” Ashley valued that so many of the novels chosen for the ELC assignment had been written by authors from equity-seeking diversity groups who had authentic, personal connections to the social justice topics portrayed in the books.

It is so important when teaching about marginalized communities to make sure that their voices are heard. And this activity helped reinforce that. It also provided us with an example of how we can bring marginalized voices and social justice into our classrooms. (Ashley)

Alicia recognized the ability of the authors and characters in the novels to become powerful “guest speakers” in the classroom, so “that voice that was silenced is now going to be heard.”

For many of the participants in this study, the ELC assignment was a reminder of the need to shift away from the traditional literary canon in English Language Arts classes towards stories that reflect more diverse voices and contemporary social justice issues.

The equity circles kind of cemented for me that we’re in a new era, and books have changed. And we have to push the envelope as to what kind of books we’re offering, why we are offering them. It’s not because this one’s my favourite. It’s what are we trying to teach? (Audrey)

The program value of social justice for me is all about voice and representation, what stories are told and what stories are silenced, and the idea of making space for stories that haven’t been part of the dominant curriculum. (Hannah)

### *Discussion*

This study suggests that participation in an Equity Literature Circle (ELC) framework has the potential to expand pre-service teachers’ conceptualization of diversity,



enhance their knowledge, skills and understanding of equity-centred literacy pedagogies, and deepen their understanding of what it means to teach about and for social justice.

As Hannah pointed out frequently during the group interview, the ELC framework created the time, space, and inspiration for TCs to engage in meaningful “grand conversations” (Brownlie, 2019; Eeds & Wells, 1989) about texts that represent important sociocultural issues related to equity, inclusion, and social justice. The TCs were able to share their ideas and personal experiences, listen to other points of view from their peers and from the authors of the novels, and then, at times, reframe their own perspectives. Many of the participants recognized the value of small group discussions in the ELC framework for developing empathy and a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of students from marginalized social groups who evidence multiple vulnerabilities. The ELC framework also contributed to the participants’ understanding of the complexity and intersectionality of students’ identities (Crenshaw, 1991; Pugach et al., 2019) that influence and shape the lived experiences of youth in unique ways. Through this “intersectional lens” (Heineke & Papola-Ellis, 2022), the participants in the study enhanced their own understanding of diversity and began to think more deeply about their own future teaching practices and their roles as agents of change.

Valuing social justice as an over-arching goal in teacher education is one thing; but moving TCs towards transformative practices requires deliberate discourse that enables them to grapple with the significance of the full ranges of identities that students bring to the classroom. These kinds of discourses are necessary “to help clarify the role of social justice for TCs, and to help propel their socially just teaching practice forward (Pugach et al., 2019, p. 215). Many of the study participants had experienced more traditional, teacher-led novel study approaches as part of their own education, where they learned story elements through reading and responding to the same novel as a whole class. Experiencing the ELC framework allowed the TCs to recognize and develop more learner-centred and innovative approaches to teaching literacy; to understand the value of relevance and authenticity in selecting inclusive texts for instructional purposes (Heineke et Papola-Ellis, 2022); and to understand how issues related to diversity, equity, and social justice can be thoughtfully integrated into the literacy instructional design. These findings reflect key ideas in the scholarship related to the value of modeling culturally responsive and transformative literacy practices in teacher education (Flores et al., 2019; Menna et al., 2020; Vaughn & Massey, 2017) and the importance of thoughtfully embedding opportunities for TCs to learn and teach about social justice within courses that focus on content-specific curriculum design and teaching pedagogies (Collins et al., 2019; Dharamshi, 2019; Menna et al., 2020). As Hannah noted, the ELCs brought the core value of social justice in the teacher education program to the forefront for the TCs, “getting us engaged and talking about it.”

Perhaps the most compelling feature of the ELC framework in this study is that it provided the TCs with a deeper understanding of what it means to teach about and for social justice through the lens of social consciousness and critical literacy (Freire & Macedo, 1987; Vasquez et al., 2019). These pre-service teachers recognized the value and applicability of the ELC framework across grades, across the curriculum, and across communities as a transformative pedagogy that would enable learners to ‘read the word and the world’ (Freire & Macedo, 1987), developing critical consciousness in their

development as global citizens. Above all, the ELC framework was powerful in inspiring TCs to problematize the persistence of a colonial literary canon in the curriculum that continues to feature stories centred on White, monolingual, heterosexual characters from middle class families with stereotypical gender roles and without disabilities (Heineke & Papola-Ellis, 2022). The participants in this study recognized the critical need to bring more diverse voices and representations of diversity into the ELA curriculum and provide their own future students with opportunities to engage in critical conversations about diversity, equity, and social justice. As Narinder so eloquently stated:

You can use any book to teach about character or plot, but when you use a book that also involves real life issues, and social justice issues especially, you are preparing your students for what they will encounter when they leave the school system and, in their lives... This provides students with the skills that are necessary to help with those issues and allows educators to make a positive impact – beyond just teaching students about literary devices. When we do not educate students about social justice issues, we hinder change. (Narinder)

### *Considerations*

The findings of the current study must be considered in light of certain factors. The first is the limited number of participants. The study explored the perceptions of a small number of TCs who experienced the impact of an ELC instructional design. The findings are not generalizable to the larger population of pre-service teachers in Canada. However, the findings of our study do contribute to a small but growing knowledge base focusing on the use of literature circles as a potentially powerful instructional design to explore diversity and equity-focused topics with pre-service teachers.

A second consideration relates to time in terms of the impact of the ELC framework on future teaching practices. While the feedback provided in the surveys and group interviews suggests that the TCs believe that the ELC framework was a valuable and powerful instructional design for exploring social justice issues, this was an assignment that lasted only a month within a 10-month teacher education program during which TCs experienced a variety of powerful instructional designs. Longitudinal research that follows these teachers into the field would be valuable in understanding the long-term positive impacts of the ELC framework.

### *Conclusion and Recommendations*

Given the increasing diversity in classrooms today, and the inequities that continue to affect K-12 students from marginalized diversity groups, teacher education programs must commit to developing future teachers who demonstrate an equity stance and the ability to implement transformative pedagogies in their teaching practices. To meet the mandate of teaching for social justice, most teacher education programs in Canada provide opportunities for pre-service teachers to learn about systemic policies, practices, and power structures that perpetuate inequities in schools and society at large through required foundations courses. These courses are critical, but if we want future educators to teach *about* and *for* social justice in their daily interactions with students, in the resources they select, and in their teaching across subject areas, then teacher educators must also provide

opportunities for pre-service teachers to develop equity-driven pedagogical practices in their methods courses. Teacher preparation must “center on social justice teaching, not as an add-on or a contemporary trend, but as fundamental and inherent to the very act of teaching” (Goodwin & Parity, 2019, p. 75).

Using equity-focused children’s literature within a literacy methods course can be a valuable way of introducing pre-service teachers to diverse cultures and complex social issues that are relevant to their local teaching context and the broader world. But teaching for social justice must extend beyond exposing students to multicultural literature and books representing diverse topics and perspectives (Madhuri et al., 2015). Pre-service teachers need real opportunities to work closely with the texts through collaborative planning and mini-teaching opportunities with peers during class. Above all, education programs must engage aspiring educators in thoughtful and critically reflective conversations about diversity texts – (re)considering their knowledge and understanding of historical and contemporary topics and contemplating both their personal connections and their own biases related to social-justice issues.

#### *Recommendations*

We offer the following suggestions for teacher educators and scholars who wish to explore equity-focused literature circle designs in the future.

1. *Relevance matters.* The selection/curation of books for an ELC assignment is important and should be completed in collaboration with local post-secondary librarians, K-12 teacher librarians, and children’s booksellers who work in partnership with local schools. Recommendations help teacher educators locate diversity-focused books that feature topics and characters that are relevant to the local context and books that have been endorsed by K-12 teachers and their students.
2. *Further research is needed.* Based on our literature review using academic research databases through our university library and Google Scholar, there is a limited number of empirical studies focusing on the use of LCs to teach for and about social justice in teacher education in the US. No such studies have been conducted in teacher education programs in Canada. Continued research using the ELC design is recommended in other Canadian contexts in both elementary and secondary teacher education. In addition, we recommend that a French version of the ELC study (using contemporary *romans jeunesse*) be developed and studied in French teacher education programs in Canada. A French model of the ELC framework would benefit teachers working in French as a second language programs (French Immersion, Core French, Intensive French).
3. *Knowing your students is critical.* The use of the ELC instructional design requires that teachers have knowledge of students’ capacity to engage with social justice topics. Without the ability to anticipate triggers or deeper resonances with the stories in the books, educators risk further silencing or marginalizing students. Strong facilitation skills and the ability to develop trust and safety in the classroom are paramount in discussions about social justice topics.

An ELC framework holds great promise as an instructional design, one that enables pre-service teachers to engage in critical self-reflection, integrate socially and culturally responsive texts into their literacy practices, and invite their own future students into important conversations about diversity. This is valuable learning for aspiring teachers on their journey to becoming equity-minded teachers and social justice advocates in their classrooms and communities.

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**Awneet Sivia** is currently the Associate Vice President of Teaching and Learning, and has been an Associate Professor, Director, and Chair of programs in the School of Education at UFV. She is a passionate educator and researcher in social justice/antiracist pedagogy, science education, teacher identity, faculty development, and educational leadership. Awneet’s academic publications can be found in *Studying Teacher Education*, *In Education*, *Canadian Journal of Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, *Journal of Education*, and in books published by Brill, Sense, and Lexington. Her current research interests include decolonizing methodologies, rehumanizing science education, narratives of racism/antiracism in teacher education, leadership in online education, and early career faculty experiences. Awneet leads numerous institutional initiatives, including the Institutional Learning Outcomes, the AI Task Force, the Learning Management System Project, Changemaker Education, Indigenizing new faculty development, and policy revisions. She has been a speaker at TEDx Abbotsford and has been honoured with several provincial and national teaching awards, including the 3M National Teaching Fellowship.

### *Appendix A: Individual Survey Questions*

1. Which young adult (YA) novel did you read for the Equity Literature Circles (ELC) assignment?
2. The novel I read was my first choice and I selected it for personal/professional reasons.

3. I enjoyed reading this YA novel for the ELC assignment.
4. The fictional story in the novel I read enhanced my understanding of issues related to diversity, inequity and social justice that are relevant to youth today.
5. I see value in having elementary teacher candidates read (YA) novels as part of the required assignments for the course.
6. The design of the ELC experience was effective in enabling me to develop and experience literacy teaching strategies for elementary/middle school students.
7. I would use ELCs with my own elementary/middle school students.
8. I consider the ELC framework to be an effective instructional strategy in my future professional work as a teacher and advocate for social justice.
9. I would teach about diversity through whole class novel studies rather than ELCs.
10. Using the ELC framework has no bearing on my teaching for social justice, equity and diversity.

*Appendix B: Online Focus Group Interview Questions*

1. What is your understanding of Equity Literature Circles (ELCs)? How were they designed? How did you engage in this activity?
2. How did the ELC assignment impact your understanding of effective literacy instruction? What are some specific examples of literacy pedagogies that illustrate this impact?
3. Explain what impact, if any, the ELCs had on your planning and teaching practices?
4. What was impactful about them? How did this experience shape/influence your teaching practices?
5. How did the ELC activity connect with the program value of Social Justice? What are some examples of the connections you made? What supported or hindered those connections?
6. What value do you see as a future teacher in using ELCs? Where and how would you use this framework in your practice as an early career teacher?