

Preservice Elementary Teachers' Perceptions of the Learning and Teaching of Civil Rights

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Although civil rights have been a major part of United States history, it is often taught within a limited scope in elementary classrooms. As preservice elementary teachers have the potential to build the foundation of youth's participatory citizenship, this study aimed to investigate elementary preservice teachers' perceptions, attitudes, experiences, and background knowledge about civil rights in order to gain insight as to how they understand the content and teaching of civil rights. The findings indicate that while preservice teachers primarily and appropriately viewed civil rights as a matter of equality for all citizens, a majority of participants were unable to recognize significant figures other than those that textbooks commonly mention as contributing to the advocacy of civil rights. Moreover, the data suggested that the topic of civil rights should mainly be taught during middle school – or even later during college. As the study revealed that elementary preservice teachers entering their education program methods courses have contradicting ideas about learning and teaching the topic of civil rights, suggested activities and strategies are offered for preservice teachers to better understand civil rights and create lessons that reflect the diversity in their classroom.

Keywords: elementary preservice teachers, civil rights, United States history, social studies, perceptions

Introduction

Civil rights, the basic human rights that every United States citizen has under the laws of the government, are protected by the U.S. Constitution and laws such as the Civil Rights Act of 1964 that established that regardless of race, nationality, or religion, no person should experience discrimination. Yet, this philosophical stance has been challenged over the centuries with matters centered on diversity and inequality. In an era of diversified classrooms, cultural movements, and growing tensions, it is vital that elementary preservice teachers build the foundation of their future young students' civil rights knowledge and understanding of how historical individuals took enormous steps to acquire and safeguard civil liberties (Hubbard, 2019). However, given that it is daunting for some teachers to incorporate cultural history into lessons, particularly when there is a breadth of

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academic content standards that methodically need to be met, the textbook has often become teachers' main source of instruction (Gautschi, 2018).

Although textbooks may advance students' background knowledge of basic facts, textbooks have the tendency to weaken interpretations of civil rights significant leaders, events, and issues (Jimenez, 2020). Since a majority of preservice students who enter university teacher programs were they themselves educated within a standard-based curriculum, the study's aim was to explore how elementary teacher candidates perceive civil rights and what they bring with them into their social studies and English language arts methods courses by investigating: a) What are elementary preservice teachers' attitudes towards civil rights? b) What is elementary preservice teachers' background knowledge about civil rights? and c) What are elementary preservice teachers' previous experiences learning about civil rights? The results of the study provided university methods instructors the groundwork to strengthen or enhance preservice teachers' ability to learn and teach civil rights.

Literature Review

Curriculum and Instruction

The National Council for the Social Studies (2018) stresses the need to assist educators and students into becoming well-informed citizens in order to establish and maintain democracy. Giroux (2016), a staunch supporter of democratic education, promotes the notion of critical pedagogy and how the classroom can be the setting for students to engage in dialogue when connected to class, gender, ethnic, and racial issues, and as a result, students can become motivated to take civic action. Ladson-Billings (2021) expresses that students have improved potential to understand civil rights when exploring the topic in a more personal and intense manner, particularly through literary primary resources that depict authentic examples of individuals who have experienced injustices. Yet, due to teacher and student pressure to prepare for high stakes testing on prioritized subjects such as STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics), particularly in the elementary classroom, the subject of social studies and the topic of civil rights in English language arts is often given less attention (Oakes, Lipton, Anderson, & Stillman, 2018).

Though the current education system is built around state standards that do require students to learn about the topic of civil rights, there are often shortcomings. For example, Eargle's (2016) study found that social studies state standards failed to include African American history, despite the State reported they did. Similarly, Asian Americans were found to be absent from a list of numerous state standards, thus undermining Asians' contributions to the narrative of the United States (An, 2016). Further, Krueger (2019) determined that history state standards often failed to recognize Native Americans' cultural history and instead represented them as savages, warriors, and indigenous people from the past who lived in tipis. Preservice educators' perceptions, understanding, and experiences often impact

how they will instruct their future students (Vesperman & Caulfield, 2017). For these reasons, preservice teachers, or soon-to-be teachers, who most likely have been taught under a standards-based curriculum, may find it challenging to learn and teach the concepts of civil rights. They may also experience difficulty in evoking civic engagement from their future students if they enter their teacher education program methods courses unaware about the content of civil rights and the goals of social studies and language arts.

Preservice educators who express disinterest in any subject they were required to learn during their K-12 schooling, often feel disconnected from the subject, even when becoming practicing teachers (Kessler, 2021). To exemplify, Streit's (2018) research that examined preservice teachers' detachment in learning found that teacher candidates who fell into this grouping often lacked mindfulness, or the awareness of what they were learning, primarily due to external factors in their lives. Chang's (2018) research explained that when disengaged preservice teachers begin teaching during their internship and are faced with instructional challenges such as standardized testing, conflicting personal beliefs, language/communication issues, and/or having a lack of content knowledge, they often find it difficult to cross over the line from "studenthood" to "teacherhood" (p. 48), and as a result, fall back on how and what they were taught in their prior schooling. Miller and Shifflet (2016), who investigated whether elementary preservice teachers' recollections of their previous schooling would steer their future teaching methods, found that when preservice teachers began to teach in their own classrooms, their instructional practices were often mirrored to their past teachers' style. Preservice teachers admitted that while in grade school, they were often exposed to traditional instruction (teacher-directed lecture with whole class instruction) rather than an active, problem-based learning approach as advocated in their education method courses (Miller & Shifflet, 2016). Since the topic of civil rights has a deep connection to the 1960s Civil Rights Movement, an era that beckoned lawful equity in all aspects of society, Schultz (2016) suggests that many preservice teachers might perceive "the Civil Rights Movement as ancient history" (p. 34), and therefore may choose not to learn or teach the topic in their future classroom.

Other preservice teachers might feel leery about discussing culturally relevant or controversial topics as they may find the content inappropriate for the elementary setting, insensitive to students, and objectionable to parents or school administrators (van Kessel, Jacobs, Catena, & Edmondson, 2022). Swalwell and Pellegrino's (2015) investigation on how teachers make curricular decisions in a unit of study on civil rights found that educators who reviewed photographs from a compilation of 25 historical figures only selected photos of figures who they themselves were familiar with or whom they believed their students would recognize (such as Ruby Bridges, the first African American child to desegregate an all-White elementary school in New Orleans, Louisiana) and discarded the images of figures who they were not familiar with or which they felt were too explicit (such as the photograph of Gordon, the enslaved individual whose back exposed deep cuts and scars) and would distress young students. Tatar and Adiguzel's (2019) study that examined the inclusion of controversial topics in the

classroom concluded that topics such as human rights and gender were often missing from lessons. Ho, McAvoy, Hess, and Gibbs (2017) found that although most scholars appropriately report the use of discussion as an instructional approach for students to learn about and reflect upon the context of civil rights, what tends to be missing in their research literature is the importance of emotions. As Jeffries (2018) suggests, educators might prefer to “have the Disney version of history, in which villains are easily spotted, suffering never lasts long, heroes invariably prevail, and life always gets better” (para. 7). Consequently, a teacher’s decision to incorporate topics is often based on how they personally feel about the content (Adams & An, 2020).

When the topic of civil rights *is* taught, it may be in a manner that inadequately portrays culture, class, or significant historical figures (Nygren & Johnsrud, 2018). Banks (2013) refers to this reduced teaching method as the “heroes and holidays” approach (p. 74). For example, a class may hold a multicultural festival that is highly enjoyable, but inadvertently highlights only the outward surface culture of diverse countries. The same could be said when students are taught a few lessons filled with little more than facts about heroes such as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. – and only during Black History month. Rozich’s (2016) autoethnography explains how she, like other educators, dutifully taught students the required standards, but eventually realized how her lessons lacked substance. For instance, after asking her students to choose an important historical leader from a list that included individuals such as Eleanor Roosevelt, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and Cesar Chavez, students primarily selected Dr. King. After questioning students why they did not select other leaders from the list, students reported that it was because they “did not know those other people” (Rozich, 2016, p. 82). As all students are vulnerable to racial, class, linguistic, and gender oppression (Banks & Banks, 2019), it is important to also highlight the lesser-known significant figures who contributed to civil rights irrespective of teachers’ personal beliefs, particularly since students are more than willing to learn about significant figures that interest them or are just like them (Kleczej-Siara, 2019). Critical historical gaps expressed in these examples reveal the incomplete view of history by which students are taught and tested (Hughes & Drake Brown, 2021). Therefore, it is important for students and preservice teachers to understand the experiences of a variety of individuals who sacrificed their lives for freedom and how civil rights impacted people’s lives in the past and impact lives in the present.

Methodology

Setting and Participants

The study was conducted at a large, urban university in south Florida which had recently earned the distinction of being a Hispanic-serving institution with at least 25% Hispanic undergraduate, full-time equivalent student enrollment. According to the university’s diversity data report, the participant demographics reflected a diverse student population. With over 4000 students enrolled in the

college, Whites (49%) made up the majority of the college's enrollment, followed by Hispanic (23%), Black (21%) and Asian (2%) students. Participants in this study consisted of 27 (out of 57) elementary preservice teachers who were enrolled in the university's College of Education's four required university teacher-preparation courses: two undergraduate social studies methods courses and two undergraduate English language arts courses that teach the topic of civil rights. Since preservice teachers are required to take and pass these courses prior to the end of their student-teaching semester, most of the participants were within one to three semesters from graduating. Although most participants were in their twenties to early thirties, there were also a few who made a career switch into the field of education and were in their early thirties to mid-forties.

Instrument

As the study was to examine elementary preservice teachers' perceptions, attitudes, and experiences regarding the topic of civil rights, to arrive at a measurable finding, a mixed-method study design was employed using a Qualtrics online survey. The investigators determined that a self-created survey was better suited to their research objectives since it would adhere closely to the study's prespecified inquiries (Braun et al., 2021). A conceptual model helped simplify the task of item selection and categorization and provided a rationale for the inclusion of each item. The following checklist initially served as a systematic guide for researchers to categorize themed responses, organize notes, and compare survey results (see Table 1).

Table 1. Civil Rights Data Collection-Themed Checklist

The meaning of civil rights
Knowledge about civil rights
Importance of civil rights
Teaching civil rights
Connecting past civil rights issues and movements to the present
Discussing social differences
Readiness to teach civil rights

The survey appeared in Qualtrics, a computer survey system which was freely available to all preservice teacher-students, thus ensuring that the investigators would likely yield a representative sample of the population of interest. To gain insight as to what students think, understand, and feel about civil rights prior to fully engaging in the topic during their semester courses, the survey was administered online during the first week of class. Since respondents were asked to express their experiences and opinions about civil rights issues, the investigators believed that respondents were more inclined to offer in-depth information if the survey was administered online and responses were anonymous, as the Qualtrics survey system was created to do.

The survey included 23 questions: eight Likert scale-type questions (extremely to not at all) and 15 free response questions. The online survey took

approximately 20 minutes for respondents to complete. While the quantitative data highlighted the marked answers and the qualitative data emphasized the coding of key words and themes within the free response questions, both sets of data were interconnected. Throughout the survey, researchers kept analytical memos, calculated and analyzed participants' responses, noted keywords and themes that frequently appeared, and thematically organized the data.

Table 2. Coding Categories

FR: Free Response question LS: Likert Scale response					
Background Knowledge of Civil Rights N = 11 questions			Ability to Teach About Civil Rights N = 12 questions		
Category	Question	Question Type	Category	Question	Question Type
Defining Civil Rights Civil Rights Leaders & Their Methods	What are civil rights?	FR	Curriculum & Civil Rights	What are the goals of civil rights?	FR
	What are the purposes of civil rights?	FR		Which civil rights topics should be taught by preservice teachers?	LS
	How knowledgeable are you about civil rights?	LS		When should civil rights be taught?	FR
	Name and explain leaders of past civil rights movements.	FR		Can teaching about civil rights movements overcome injustices that exist today?	FR
	What methods and techniques did civil rights leaders use to fight for their civil rights?	FR		Do you think it is important to avoid controversial civil rights topics in classroom discussions?	FR
Civil Rights Local or International	Has media influenced our students' knowledge about civil rights?	LS	Materials, Tools, & Strategies will Use to Teach Civil Rights	What sources of information will you use to teach about civil rights?	FR
	How are civil rights movements related to the goals of democracy?	LS		What materials and instructional tools were used by your previous teachers to teach you about civil rights?	FR
	Should global perspectives be included in discussions about civil rights?	LS		What were the most effective strategies your teachers used to teach about civil rights?	FR
Civil Rights Impact	Has learning about civil rights movements made you concerned about civil rights issues?	LS	Knowledge of Civil Rights	How will the teaching of civil rights impact your future classroom?	FR
	Evaluate how civil rights impacted your personal life?	FR		Do you think you are prepared to teach about civil rights?	LS
	How has learning about civil rights encouraged you to discuss racial, religious, ethnic, class, gender & other social differences with others?	LS		Will you be interested in learning more about civil rights?	FR
				Would you be interested in attending civil rights workshops?	FR

Each question was divided into one of two categories: the first category, Background Knowledge of Civil Rights, was separated into four subheadings: a) definitions of civil rights, b) major leaders of civil rights issues and movements, c) civil rights issues and movements, and d) the personal impact of civil rights in personal lives. The second category, Ability to Teach About Civil Rights, was

separated into three categories which included: a) application of civil rights content in the curriculum, b) previous civil rights instruction, and c) teaching about civil rights (see Table 2).

To ensure data triangulation and interrater reliability, the researchers first analyzed participants' survey responses (calculations and coding analysis), created a collection of detailed and varied notes on participants' responses during each analysis, and then compared the first analysis of data results to the second. To validate the study's findings, a data meeting was held where researchers discussed and confirmed the study's results. This process reduced the possibility of misreading the results and established reliability in our findings.

Limitations

Although participants in this study consisted of 27 preservice teachers, the sample size was limited to the number of preservice teachers/students enrolled in these specific courses; however, the participant demographics reflected a diverse student population large enough to gain results.

Due to the differences in age and backgrounds, it was difficult to determine if participants' level of content knowledge was a result of having been previously taught about civil rights in their K-12 schooling or post-secondary courses. However, as the sample population was large enough to determine an overall picture of how preservice teachers perceived civil rights and the extent of their knowledge about civil rights, the researchers did not divide respondents by age.

Results

Preservice Teachers Define Civil Rights

Approximately half of the survey questions were related to elementary preservice teachers' background knowledge about the historical, social, and the political aspects of civil rights. Within these questions, three focused on the respondents' ability to define and address the purpose of learning about civil rights. When asked to define civil rights, 52% of the participants reported that civil rights ensured that citizens would be treated with equality or fairness under the law (43% of responses specifically mentioned that civil rights should be granted exclusively to American citizens). Respondents also made reference to how it was vital that young students are taught to appreciate the historical implications of civil rights, that it is the responsibility of all educators to ensure that future generations of Americans would be educated about the civil rights, and that a society which supports civil rights should embrace a high level of social justice and personal freedom. Furthermore, respondents reported that civil rights complemented the American notion of independence and individualism, and that civil rights leaders risked their lives so that future generations of Americans could live freely and independently in an open society.

When participants were asked to rate their background knowledge of civil rights, 70% of the respondents reported that they were only moderately knowledgeable about civil rights while 15% admitted to being slightly knowledgeable. It was noted that only 4% of respondents felt extremely knowledgeable and 11% felt *very* confident in their knowledge about civil rights.

Preservice Teachers Identify Civil Rights Leaders

From an extended list of significant civil rights leaders, respondents were asked to select the ones they were familiar with and to describe their contributions to civil rights. The list of leaders included, but was not limited to, Rosa Parks, Bayard Rustin, Mahatma Gandhi, Malcolm X, Susan B. Anthony, Caesar Chavez, and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Fifty-one percent of the respondents recognized Dr. King, Jr. as a civil rights leader who advocated nonviolence within society and demanded social change. Other leaders included Rosa Parks and Malcolm X who received 17% and 10%, respectively, while leaders such as Mahatma Gandhi and Susan B. Anthony were mentioned by less than 4% of the respondents. Other leaders such as Bayard Ruskin, Philip Randolph, and Harriet Tubman were noted by less than 1% of preservice teachers. When asked to identify these leaders and their contributions, many preservice teachers only identified them in abbreviated form (e.g., MLK or Rosa) or simply used one- to two-word descriptions to explain who these leaders were or their contributions to civil rights (i.e., Alice Paul women's rights).

Researchers then provided respondents with an extended list of methods of dissent used by civil rights leaders that included, but were not limited to, nonviolent protests, sit-ins, marches, boycotts, speeches, going to jail, or expressing themselves through art and music. Approximately 35% of the respondents equally listed nonviolent protest and protest as the most important techniques. Methods such as boycotts were less frequently cited, and practices such as speeches, civil disobedience, or going to jail were rarely noted (see Table 3).

Table 3. Which Techniques Did Leaders of Past Civil Rights Movements Support?

<i>n</i> = frequency of 27 participants' "check all that apply" responses								
<i>Responses</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Responses</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Responses</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>
Nonviolent protesting	8	33.75	Protests	10	37.04	Peace	1	3.70
Civil disobedience	2	7.40	Speeches	1	3.70	Jail	1	3.70
Equality	1	3.70	Boycotts	2	7.40	The arts	1	3.70
Sit ins	4	14.81	Civil discourse	1	3.70	Open-mindedness	2	7.40
Voices	1	3.70	Political lobbying	1	3.70	Marches	3	11.11
Violence	1	3.70	Education	2	7.40	No response	3	11.11

Preservice Teachers Recognize Civil Rights Issues

The next set of questions sought to evaluate preservice teachers' ability to connect past civil rights issues with more contemporary issues related to democracy. Fifty-two percent of respondents believed that democracy is extremely related to civil rights; however, the remaining half were dispersed among mostly to slightly. A follow up question that asked preservice teachers whether learning about civil rights movements made them concerned about issues acknowledged that 37% of participants were extremely concerned while 33% were mostly concerned about preserving their civil rights. In response to whether learning about civil rights had encouraged preservice teachers to discuss racial, religious, ethnic, class, gender, and other social issues with others, 44% reported they were extremely encouraged to discuss aspects of civil rights. However, the other half of respondents were either mostly encouraged (19%) or moderately (22%) encouraged to discuss civil rights issues (see Table 4).

Table 4. Participant Responses to Extremely to Not at All Questions: n =27

Question	Extremely		Mostly		Somewhat		Slightly		Not at All		No Response	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Are the civil rights issues and movements related to the goals of democracy?	14	51.86	7	25.93	2	7.40	2	7.40	0	0.00	2	7.40
Has learning about civil rights movements made you concerned about civil rights issues?	10	37.04	9	33.33	3	11.11	1	3.70	0	0.00	4	14.81
Has learning about civil rights encouraged you to discuss racial, religious, ethnic, class, gender, and other social differences with others?	12	44.44	5	18.52	6	22.22	0	0.00	0	0.00	4	14.81

An additional question was asked about whether participants felt that global perspectives needed to be included in discussions about civil rights. The percentage breakdown reflected that nearly half (54%) of the participants believed that global perspectives are extremely important to civil rights; however, the other half of the respondents believed global views were only moderately or slightly important.

Preservice Teachers' Previous Education on Civil Rights

Preservice teachers were then asked to reflect on their previous schooling experiences when learning about civil rights. Questions focused on the materials and instructional tools used by the respondents' former teachers that helped them learn about civil rights. While nearly half of the respondents (48%) mainly

reported that their teachers used documentaries and movies, 35% of the participants also acknowledged that their teachers relied on textbooks.

When reflecting on the quality of instructional formats used by preservice teachers' former teachers to teach about civil rights, 37% of the respondents stated that whole-class lectures were the most effective instructional format used to help them learn about civil rights. In contrast, 42% of the respondents listed problem-based learning (a method that involves group work and active learning) as their least effective instructional strategy used by their former teachers. It is not clear if preservice teachers thought these methodologies were the most effective for their teachers at that time or whether preservice teachers believed that these instructional methods were the best techniques currently used by teachers, however, respondents did report that traditional lectures were more effective when compared to other instructional formats.

Preservice Teachers Reflect on Civil Rights

To gain insight of preservice teachers' background knowledge of civil rights, respondents were asked to consider the impact of civil rights to their own lives. The most frequent free response answers centered on issues such as job inequalities, civil liberties, government policies, and aspects of discrimination. Responses included: "I am a lesbian . . . there is still a concern of what parents might think about having a gay person in the classroom," "Civil rights is knowing that no one has the right to discriminate against me," "Without civil rights, I could be banned from certain places and from voting because I am Jewish," and "As a woman, I am still paid less than my male counterparts and I think that that is discriminatory" (see Table 5).

Table 5. How Do Civil Rights Impact your Personal Rights?

<i>n</i> = frequency of 27 participants' "check all that apply" responses					
<i>Responses</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Responses</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>
Aware of my rights	2	7.40	Freedom of decision	1	3.70
Freedom of speech	1	3.70	Voting	1	3.70
Privileges	1	3.70	Religion	1	3.70
Aware of government	2	7.40	Economics	1	3.70
Gender discrimination	4	14.81	Access	1	3.70
Discrimination of self	3	11.11	Respect	1	3.70
Discrimination towards others	2	7.40	Human trafficking	1	3.70
Race	1	3.70	Job	3	11.11
Happiness	1	3.70	Freedom of life	1	3.70
I do not know	1	3.70	No response	1	3.70

Application of Civil Rights Content in the Classroom

Approximately 38% of the participants' free responses noted that the goal of civil rights instruction was primarily to teach students to treat each other civilly, stand up for themselves, and defend their opinions and beliefs. A follow up question asked preservice teachers about the most developmentally appropriate time to teach students about civil rights, upon which 26% of participants reported

that elementary-age students between the 4th through 6th grades can be introduced to the topic of civil rights. However, a slightly larger number of the respondents (33%) believed that the topic of civil rights should not be taught during elementary, but during middle school. Most notable was that 11% of preservice teachers felt that it was better to teach students about civil rights in high school – and even later during college (see Table 6).

Table 6. When Should Civil Rights be Taught?

<i>n</i> = frequency of 27 participants' responses															
Birth-PreK		Primary (grades K-3)		Intermediate (grades 4-6)		Middle school (grades 7-8)		High school (grades 9-12)		College/university		Not at all		No response	
<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
1	3.70	3	11.11	7	25.93	9	33.33	3	11.11	1	3.70	0	0.00	3	11.11

Preservice teachers were also queried about the benefits of teaching civil rights to overcome injustices that exist today. A majority of the respondents (83%) agreed that teaching about civil rights can help overcome injustices faced by society. Preservice teachers noted that “through education, young people will learn from past mistakes,” “. . . apply useful techniques to real world problems,” and “. . . learn new ways to engage children in historical lessons which will positively impact their lives.” Several respondents suggested that parents play a critical role in the lives of students: “parents must serve as positive role models for their children” and “. . . involve their children in the civic activities with the goal of raising strong citizens who will actively support their communities.”

Curricular Decisions Preservice Teachers will make to Instruct Future Students

When participants were asked to identify the most effective forms of literature to teach civil rights, 47% of the participants primarily listed biographies, oral histories, diaries, and poetry. While adult literature, newspapers, and magazines appeared to be somewhat effective, respondents' least favorite source of literature was digital texts.

An additional question asked preservice teachers whether they would avoid teaching controversial topics within the classroom. Nearly half (49%) of the participants felt it was important to talk about issues related to civil rights and 29% believed that these discussions can encourage students to think critically; however, the other remaining responses chiefly centered on how it depended on the age of their students and what students' parents thought.

Preservice Teachers' Professional Desire to Enhance their Knowledge of Civil Rights

While 65% of the participants reported that they were interested in becoming involved in extracurricular activities either at school or within the community to further their interest in civil rights, 35% were less enthusiastic about participating

in civil rights-related activities. Although a slim majority of preservice teachers commented how they would like to engage with others in the community to extend their knowledge about civil rights, there was a substantial number of respondents who rejected the idea of taking part in school or community activities surrounding the topic.

When asked: How will the teaching of civil rights impact your future classroom? Elementary preservice teachers' accounts were varied. Responses such as "Civil rights will make . . . [students] aware of the past," ". . . understand adversity," ". . . think critically," and ". . . empower students" each scored 14%. Despite participants' word choice in expressing their views, nearly all of the 27 participants' responses suggested that the teaching of civil rights would have a positive impact on students.

Discussion

Attitudes towards Civil Rights

The study's findings revealed that elementary preservice teachers primarily and appropriately define civil rights as a matter of equal rights for citizens and believe that the purpose of civil rights is to be aware of the historical events in order to understand the struggles associated with adversity. Though participants reported that an important impact of civil rights mainly centered on issues of discrimination, it is not known if they have or have not experienced discriminatory practices; however, nearly all participants expressed their concern about future threats. While there were a few respondents who were more pessimistic of civil rights impact and expressed that they were overwhelmed by the history of injustice, others suggested innovative instructional practices such as cross-cultural workshops and programs, and story-telling events to help students learn about and hear stories of survival and resilience.

Preservice elementary teachers were all-encompassing in their view of the importance of learning and teaching the topic of civil rights, yet there were several unexpected and contradictory results. For example, a majority of the participants reported that they were willing to discuss aspects of civil rights in their future classrooms but when asked what is the most developmentally appropriate age for students to learn about civil rights, nearly half of the total respondents reported that the topic should be delayed and taught during middle school, high school, or even later during college. This conflicting response may suggest the reality of Swalwell and Pellegrino's (2015) study findings that expressed how many teachers would rather avoid the topic of civil rights and contentious issues with students in the classroom, feel that the content may be too graphic to be taught at an earlier age, or that older students are more capable of handling the harsh details and events connected to the topic of civil rights.

Background Knowledge

Although a majority of the preservice teachers' responses centered on how they wanted their students to recognize and appreciate the sacrifices of previous generations of civil rights leaders and see them as positive role models, respondents demonstrated limited knowledge of civil rights leaders and their contributions as they mainly focused on traditionally recognized leaders. Aside from Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Rosa Parks, and Malcolm X, no other civil rights leader appeared to be significant. When participants were asked to provide information on the leaders, most respondents did not go into detail or make meaningful connections with the leaders and their contributions. This quandary correlates with Rozich's (2016) study that suggests that it is likely students are not familiar with lesser-known civil rights leaders because they were never taught about them – or not taught enough about them. It also appeared that respondents were unfamiliar with the extent of techniques used by civil rights leaders since nonviolence, a method of protest directly connected to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., was mainly reported as a technique used by civil rights leaders. These responses correlate with over three-fourths of the preservice teachers acknowledging that they possessed only limited knowledge of civil rights. The self-reported information is significant in light of the preservice teachers' instructional goals of successfully preparing their future students to understand the historical implications of civil rights. The examination of how certain terms and descriptions of civil rights were acknowledged while others were avoided revealed which topics needed to be further developed in university instruction.

Experience in Learning Civil Rights

When participants were asked to reflect on the materials and methodologies used by their former teachers to teach about civil rights, many elementary preservice teachers reported that their previous teachers relied on textbooks (materials which have been found to offer limited opportunities for students to develop higher-order thinking skills) (Tarman & Kuran, 2015) and movies (which have the power to teach but are created to entertain). When respondents were asked about which sources of information they planned to use in their future classroom to teach about civil rights, they appeared to rely on the same traditional methods their former teachers depended on when reporting that lectures (often associated with textbook usage) and documentaries/movies were most effective. Preservice teachers found these methodologies more appealing than the ones being taught in their university methods courses. Most unanticipated was that a majority of participants viewed problem-based learning as the least effective means of instruction. This may be tied in with the research done by Miller and Shifflet (2016) of how preservice teachers tend to perceive past teachers' instructional methods as effective or ineffective ways to learn, are influenced by their former teachers' instruction, and are inclined to teach in their classroom as they were taught during their previous schooling.

Implications

For preservice teachers to reach their teaching goals, they must acquire an in-depth understanding of civil rights history, learn how to incorporate the aspects of civil rights into not only social studies lessons, but all lessons, and gain confidence in teaching the topic. Echoing Ladson-Billings (2021) approach, university instructors must help preservice teachers find a sense of purpose in, engagement in, and relatedness to teach the topic. We present a few suggested strategies and activities for elementary preservice teachers to engage in during their education methods courses.

To begin, it is important to go beyond the commonly taught textbook narratives of civil rights events and leaders, and learn to teach in a more in-depth manner that focuses on not only well-known significant figures such as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Rosa Parks but also cross cultural individuals such as Native Americans, immigrants, and women who are absent or overlooked in the curriculum but who contributed to the cause (Theoharis, 2018). It is essential that preservice teachers learn to integrate literature (e.g., autobiographies, diary entries, ethnographies, passages from documents, picture books based on historical research, significant figures' penned poetry and speeches, etc.) that genuinely express a leader's life, emotions, and stance on civil rights. These sources will also allow students to compare events such as the 1960s Civil Rights Movement to present-day movements and activists. Preservice students can learn how to retrieve, examine, and analyze primary sources such as photographs and documents (e.g., excerpts of speeches and newspaper articles) that reflect an individual's call for civil rights. Since the use of technology is an essential tool for student learning and teacher instruction, preservice teachers can search the vast number of archived primary sources at internet sites such as the National Archives: 100 Milestone Documents located at <https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/list>, the National Archives: Digital Photography Collection at <https://www.archives.gov/research/alic/reference/photography>, the Library of Congress: Digital Collection at <https://www.loc.gov/collections/>, and the Smithsonian Institution Archives at <https://siarchives.si.edu/>. To highlight women's rights activists, sites such as the National Women's History Museum at <https://www.womenshistory.org/womens-history> can offer images, teaching strategies, and stories of women who advocated for justice.

Preservice teachers should be encouraged to create inter- and multi-disciplinary based lesson plans that infuse various subjects. For example, geography has a profound connection to the cause and effect of historical events in terms of where events took place and how place determines one's rights (e.g., states and district laws are determined by borders). Maps can be used to analyze characteristics of place (physical features, demographics, rural versus urban, etc.) and compare past and present maps to decipher whether aspects of civil rights in certain areas have changed or stayed the same. Music can be integrated to reflect lyrics that pertain to civil rights issues such as Marvin Gaye's 1971 classic song "What's Going On," decipher which present-day songs are considered protest songs, or for students to write their own songs about social injustices taking place today. Visual art such as paintings, illustrations, and political cartoons that portray civil rights

concerns can be analyzed (e.g., who was the artist and what was his/her message?). Since the study suggested that many preservice teachers lacked interest in having their future students engage in problem-based learning (or perhaps lacked the confidence in their ability to practice this strategy), group activities can focus on applying content knowledge and comparing multiple perspectives on past to present civil rights issues. For example, students could conduct research about how figures such as W. E. B. DuBois and Booker T. Washington fought for the same cause but differed in their methods used to achieve their aspirations (Clabough, 2021). To gain a sense of historical significance, drama can be used in role-plays, or acting out scenes that describe the setting, characters, and issues during an event. Scripts can be written by students.

As many preservice teachers' responses described civil rights knowledge at the recall level (Tarman & Kuran, 2015), it is essential that they practice the skill of asking and/or responding to higher level questions (particularly open-ended questions that evoke more than one- or two-word responses). The use of graphic organizers such as the "I See," "Think," and "Wonder" chart draws on critically thinking about the social (race, ethnicity, class, gender, etc.), economic (equal pay, housing, etc.), and political (laws, restrictions, and Supreme Court Acts) facets of civil rights within a framework that also encourages further inquiries.

Preservice teachers' interest in discussing controversial issues in the classroom – but fear of repercussions from administration and parents – expresses the need to practice conducting discussions that are supported with researched information and approached with sensitivity to make sure that students do not feel uncomfortable. Civil rights dialogue can also be achieved by having students conduct oral histories, or interviews, with community members who have knowledge or experience of civil rights issues (e.g., attorneys, protestors, or individuals with personal civil rights stories) or invite guest speakers into the course to share their stories. Preservice teachers can also be taken on field trips to local community historical and heritage sites where guides (or the teachers themselves) thoroughly explain the history of an event or issue.

To enhance elementary preservice teachers' knowledge about civil rights, workshops can enable learning opportunities; however, since attending in-person workshops may be too time consuming for preservice teachers as many juggle schoolwork with personal responsibilities and COVID-19 has limited unnecessary traveling, it is important for method course instructors to consider alternative opportunities such as developing online learning modules and webinars.

Conclusion

The study offered insight into how elementary preservice teachers care about civil rights, recognize the importance of civil rights in their lives and their future students' lives, and have the desire to equip their students with the knowledge to empower and defend themselves when confronted by others. However, as the study revealed, preservice teachers are in need of support in preparing to teach this important topic. Through the enhancement of the curriculum with engaging

strategies and activities, elementary preservice teachers can set the groundwork for their future students' participatory citizenship, create meaningful lessons that teach civil rights, and instill a classroom environment that represents the diversity in their future classroom. Preservice teachers, as well as students, will be offered a more authentic view of civil rights and human history when focusing on the people who faced, or still face, injustices, and who took up the mantle of freedom in hopes that future generations would benefit from their struggles and advocacy.

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