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English education as democratic armor: Responding programmatically to our political work

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to illustrate the ways in which attention to programmatic vision and coherence – rather than foci on individual courses – might advance the work of justice-oriented, critical English education in important ways. The authors propose that consciously attending to the work of English education on the programmatic level can better enable English educators to cultivate democracy-sustaining dispositions in preservice teachers. Using Grossman *et al.*'s (2008) definition of “programmatically coherence”, the authors illustrate how one interdepartmental partnership is working to create a shared programmatic vision for English education.

Design/methodology/approach – Drawing on Cornel West’s call for the development of a three-piece democratic armor – Socratic questioning, prophetic witness and tragicomic hope – the authors describe their programmatic vision for cultivating democracy-sustaining dispositions in preservice teachers. They show how this shared vision constitutes the foundation for the organization, purpose and sequence of the four-semester cohort program. Finally, the authors describe

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how this vision helps facilitate meaningful and purposeful symbiosis between field experiences and university coursework.

Findings – In an effort to promote replicability regarding programmatic coherence, the authors share structural aspects of their program as well as pose generative questions for colleagues who are interested in approaching the work of critical, democratic English education from the programmatic level.

Originality/value – Addressing the challenges of teacher preparation – especially in this polarized and pitched historical moment – requires shifting the focus from individual courses to a more expansive view that might enable English educators to consider how courses within a program might *collectively* advance a particular vision of critical and democratic English education.

Keywords Partnership, Teacher education, Democratic English education, Political work of teaching, Preservice English education, Programmatic coherence

Introduction

Schools – and all of the teaching and learning that goes on within them – are inherently and unavoidably political spaces, not in the partisan sense where ideological agendas and camps are staked out and argued from, but in the sense that Hess and McAvoy (2015) discuss in their work on the political classroom: “We are being political when we are democratically making decisions about questions that ask, ‘*How should we live together?*’” (p. 4, original emphasis). The understanding that our work as teachers and teacher educators is political is not new. What is new, however, is the polarized and increasingly toxic zeitgeist in the USA. Compounding the political, economic and social pressures are the continued evaporation of public funding for universities and schools, steady decrease in colleges of education, and public attacks on “liberal” professors. While these trends were certainly under way before the 2016 election, since the election the quality of civic discourse has declined, especially in schools (Costello, 2016). The Southern Poverty Law Center, a nonprofit dedicated to tracking hate groups and racism, has called this “The Trump Effect” (Costello, 2016; see also www.splcenter.org/hatewatch). For people teaching K-12 and for those educating future teachers, this is an especially precarious and anxiety-ridden historical moment.

In this essay, we argue that addressing the challenges of teacher preparation, especially in this challenging historical moment, requires that we expand our understanding of the work to include not only our

own class or classes in English education but rather also consider our work programmatically. More specifically, we propose a deliberate and collective effort to imagine and develop programmatic coherence. Grossman *et al.* (2008) argue that although coherence is a crucial aspect of good teacher education, it is not typically explored as a salient programmatic feature. Drawing from relevant scholarship on coherence (Tatto, 1996; Hammerness, 2006), they argue that coherence has:

A shared vision regarding teaching and learning, conceptual and logistical organization of coursework around those aims and goals, and courses and clinical experiences designed to support, reinforce, and reflect those shared ideas. (Grossman *et al.*, 2008, p. 282):

Using these core tenets of coherence to structure the essay, we describe the efforts of one English education program to educate[1] English teachers who are critically minded, politically astute and democratically oriented.

To situate our work on programmatic coherence within a larger body of relevant scholarship, we begin with an overview of the literature on democratic and critical English education. Next, we explain how our shared vision for English education draws from and works toward Cornel West's vision for a three-piece "democratic armor": Socratic questioning, prophetic witness, and tragicomic hope. And because, as West argues, these three moral pillars must undergird our citizenry if democracy is to flourish against corruption and hate (West, 2004, p. 21), we think of West's pillars as central to the types of *dispositions* we cultivate in our English education students, referring to these as "democracy-sustaining dispositions". Next, we describe how this shared vision informs the conceptual and logistical organization of coursework. In this section, we catalog the sequence of courses (semester-by-semester) of our program and share illustrative vignettes from select courses and experiences throughout the two-year program. We then describe how we aim to create critical symbiosis between our university coursework and our students' clinical experiences in local schools. Finally, we offer concrete suggestions aimed at helping other program conceptualize, design and enact a more critically coherent English education program.

Review of the literature

The fields of secondary English and English education have historically been rich sites for democratically oriented work. In secondary English, some of this work has explored the unique potential for American Literature to develop students' critical lenses related to voice, power and silence (Petronne and Gibney, 2005) and to engage students in critical debate of "the American Dream" (Hurst, 2013). Other research and scholarship in has focused on the role of writing for advocacy (Barton, 2005), activism related to policymaking (Easton, 2005) and "inside-out" community writing projects aimed at promoting civic participation with 9th grade Latinx and Chicanx students in Arizona (Saidy, 2013). Other researchers have focused on the democratic potential of teaching Young Adult (YA) literature. For example, Wolk (2013) advocates for the inclusion of more YA literature in English classes as a way promote democracy and social responsibility. Taking a more critical approach to the selection and inclusion of YA literature, Thein *et al.* (2013) offer an in-depth analysis of the differences between two versions of the same story: *The Other Wes Moore: One Name, Two Fates* (for adults) and *Discovering Wes Moore* (written for adolescents). The authors call for a more critical analysis of the difference between *versions* of texts and challenge teachers to be critical consumers when selecting a particular version of a text.

As with the scholarship aimed at secondary English classrooms, the scholarship in English education also attends to issues of power, social position and critical pedagogy. In English education, some of this work has focused on helping preservice teachers bridge the "demographic divide". For example, Barnes (2016) created a class assignment called a Community Inquiry Project in which English education teacher candidates (TCs) formed groups to explore and interact with different communities. Findings from a sample of three students' reflections at the end of the semester show that as TCs' contact with the community increased, they "demonstrated at least a first step in the direction of critical multiculturalism" (2016, p. 169).

Other research in English education has focused more urgently and more explicitly on systemic racism and has called for more pointed and critical work on helping preservice teachers better understand the ways in which the media perpetuates racial stereotypes so that they can be more prepared to confront and analyze those messages. In

their recent article, Baker-Bell *et al.* (2017) describe how the uncritical consumption of mainstream media creates, circulates and reifies stereotypes of “dangerous Black youth”, and argues that these depictions “reinscribe and reinforce white supremacy, which leads to anti-blackness” (p. 132). The authors argue that by advancing a “healing pedagogical framework” (one that is defined by the acknowledgment of racial wounds) and by supporting the development of critical media literacy in English education, we might better equip novice teachers to address racial injustice, despite the discomfort and despite the feelings of vulnerability that accompany these difficult conversations. To facilitate this work in the field of English education, they provide a series of four thoughtful, critical and ready-to-implement lesson plans for teacher educators. They write, “by not addressing racial injustice, we risk reproducing racial inequality in our classrooms and preparing our youth to be passive and silent bystanders in the face of it” (p. 148).

Less typical in the research on English education is attention to the *programmatic* level of teacher preparation. McBee Orzulak *et al.*'s (2014) study of how the University of Michigan's English education program deliberately attended to the coherence of their courses contributes important insights how we might not only educate English teachers for the theoretical foundations they need to be effective, but how we – again, as a *program*, rather than a single course – might also attend more carefully to how we educate teachers for the practical day-to-day of instruction without sacrificing the theoretical and interpersonal aspects of teaching. As a way to programmatically respond to students' feelings of overwhelm related to learning to teach, McBee Orzulak *et al.* (2014) devised a “lesson architecture” within their program's three-semester sequence for English education (used both within teaching methods courses and supervisory spaces). This evolved as the authors implemented, observed and noted areas of growth in the lesson architecture, most notably in the area of what the authors call “interactional awareness” which “invites consideration of how each practice is actualized through classroom talk” (McBee Orzulak *et al.*, 2014, p. 91). They write:

With particular regard to our dilemmas about choosing a beginning point to help students access the complexity of theory-driven ELA practice, we see interactional awareness as a tool for helping the students and future teachers we work

with to develop equitable instruction by understanding how their interactions can open and close opportunities for learning. (p. 86)

Shared vision

According to Grossman *et al.* (2008), having a shared vision is central to programmatic coherence. Developing a shared vision for our program required that we consider both the pragmatic and aspirational aims of our work, such that we could structure coursework and clinical experiences around these goals. In addition to the professional vision of our program – namely, that our graduates are well-prepared to teach *all* students effectively – we also agreed that effective teaching requires engagement with the political nature of the field. Because preparing teachers for an educational landscape that is constantly in flux seems a Sisyphean task, we wanted to ensure our students were equipped to weather professional storms with a strong, democratically oriented foundation in place. To this end, Cornel West's (2004) text, *Democracy Matters*, pushed us to consider the necessity of providing our students with a “democratic armor” comprising three pieces: Socratic questioning, prophetic witness and tragicomic hope.

The first of these, Socratic questioning, “requires a relentless self-examination and critique of institutions of authority, motivated by an endless quest for intellectual integrity and moral consistency” (p. 16). In practice, Socratic questioning takes various forms, including perspective taking, critical self-reflection and *parrhesia* (fearless speech) (West, 2004, pp. 213-214). Prophetic witness, on the other hand, tempers the “profound yet insufficient rationalism” of Socratic methods through a commitment to “the passionate fervor and quest for justice of the prophetic”. Prophetic witness, in short, is a relentless commitment to justice, one similar to “the social commitment that often gives passion to teaching” described by Graff (1992, p. 148). Finally, the essence of tragicomic hope, for West:

Is dangerous – and potentially subversive – because it can never be extinguished. Like laughter, dance, and music, it is a form of elemental freedom that cannot be eliminated or snuffed out by any elite power. (p. 217)

Without these pillars in place and nurtured by its citizenry, “no democracy can flourish,” wrote West (p. 21). These pillars are recursive, and are balanced by virtue of their interdependence. “We need a bloodstained Socratic love and tear-soaked prophetic love fueled by a hard-won tragicomic hope”, said West (p. 216).

West’s ideas are ones we have sought to enact in our English education program. As such, Socratic questioning in our program takes the form of encouraging a culture of self-reflection, both among the program faculty and in our classes. It is evident in our work to bridge theory, policy and practice, such that our students feel empowered and entitled to speak truth to power. Our understanding of West’s notion of prophetic witness suggests that it is important for our students to encounter “the other” to dismantle their beliefs (often deficit ones) about youth who come from different racial, cultural and/or linguistic backgrounds. This requires, then, that we orchestrate experiences for our students to work with diverse youth and that we provide adequate space for students to critically reflect on these encounters. Tragicomic hope, a hope that persists despite substantial odds, is the affective and moral lens through which we cast the meaning of our work. Within our program, we see evidence of tragicomic hope in the increasingly agentic stances our students assume as they progress in the program, marked by patience, flexibility and even joy.

Within our program, the pillars of Socratic questioning, prophetic witness and tragicomic hope outlined by West are conceived of as *democracy-sustaining dispositions* that inform our shared vision for English education. Central to our program mission is helping teachers see that their work is not that of a solitary actor laboring behind a closed door (Britzman, 1986), but rather a part of a collaborative and growth-oriented profession. Through our collective attention to these democracy-sustaining dispositions, our programmatic vision – *teaching is a political act* – is not only emphasized, but is infused into every aspect of the program.

Operationalizing our shared vision through programmatic coherence

Developing and sustaining programmatic coherence not only requires that the individual courses within a particular program reflect

a shared vision for teaching and teacher education, but also requires that courses deliberately and systematically reinforce and expand that vision. In this section, we describe the programmatic infrastructure that shapes and defines our English education program and then offer three illustrative vignettes that show how our courses aim to cultivate democracy-sustaining dispositions in our preservice teachers.

Over the years, a cadre of English education and English faculty, supported by numerous graduate students in both departments, has worked in active partnership to create shared responsibility for the preparation of English education students. This partnership was initiated over 20 years ago by an English professor, Robert (second author) and a former English education professor who sought to collaborate on the work of teacher preparation. It has since been sustained by those in tenure-line positions in both departments.

There are several structural mechanisms that make this partnership possible. First, the program is based on a cohort model. Each February, Robert and Rachael (second authors) from the English Department and Lauren and Sarah (first and second author, respectively) from the Department of Teaching, Learning and Teacher Education (TLTE) interview up to 35 prospective secondary English students for between 22 and 24 spots in the two-year program (See Appendix 1 for interview questions). The interview questions are formulated around the areas that we agree are most important for teaching English, focusing on four distinct areas (in addition to GPA and transcripts): reasons for wanting to teach, reasons for wanting to teach *English* as a discipline, approach to collaboration and experiences working with – and/or being open to working with – students from diverse backgrounds. In conjunction with the applicant's transcripts, letters of recommendation and required essays, these interviews allow us to select preservice teachers whose commitments to teaching English and commitment to teaching all students are equally robust. Moreover, the interview process enables us to interact with students who on paper might not appear to be a good fit but in person demonstrate the kind of openness to growth and critical perspectives we value. The process of interviewing also strengthens the partnership we have with one another as a program as we annually revisit our mission and the larger programmatic vision.

Students are admitted in the spring and begin their program in fall of junior year. In the first weeks of class, our cadre of English and

Education professors hosts a “Meet and Greet” where we formally welcome the cohort, explain and describe the sequence of courses and clinical experiences in the program, describe our vision for our English education program and field questions. The semester sequence is as follows (*asterisks indicate that there is a concurrent and related clinical requirement):

- (1) Spring of Sophomore Year
 - Apply to program
 - *Interview process*
- (2) Fall of Junior Year:
 - *Reading Theory
 - *Composition Theory
 - Linguistics for the Classroom Teacher
- (3) Spring of Junior Year:
 - *Methods I
 - Literature for Adolescents
 - *Informal Mid-Program Interview*
- (4) Fall of Senior Year:
 - Methods II
 - *Practicum (daily teaching for 10 weeks in [District] Public Schools)
- (5) Senior Year:
 - *Student teaching (Semester-long)
 - Student Teaching Seminar
 - *Final Programmatic Requirement: Capstone presentations (in TED talk format)*

Finally, to maintain a shared sense of how our students are doing, we meet monthly to discuss our shared cohort of preservice teachers, problem-solve areas of concern and consider different and/or additional ways we might respond to our students’ needs, especially when it comes to teaching linguistically, racially and culturally diverse learners. This is a vital part of our program’s coherence because it engages in what Lowenstein (2009) calls a “parallel practice” wherein we model the kinds of teaching and learning that we want our own students to practice (see Gatti, 2016). Moreover, these monthly meetings allow us to make changes in our own courses or in clinical expectations if that is what we feel our students need.

Taken together, the initial and mid-program interviews, as well as the intentional sequence of courses, enable our program to infuse West's democratic armor into the very structure of our program. They allow us to signal these values recursively and coherently throughout the program, and ensure that students have both the time and the space needed to cultivate democracy-sustaining dispositions. The initial interviews are spaces in which prophetic witness and tragicomic hope are foregrounded, as students are asked to detail their commitment to social justice as well as their enthusiasm for a notoriously difficult profession. The course sequence is designed to harness and deepen students' inquiry skills and is structured to ensure that students experience and are able to apply familiar concepts in new contexts and situations. Regular, monthly meetings provide an opportunity for reflection as we consider the relative effectiveness of our approach, and as we plan future collaborations across courses.

In the vignettes that follow, we describe a few critical moments that highlight the ways in which the coherence of our program – organized as it is around West's ideals – combines with similarly focused pedagogical moves and invitations, and ultimately provides evidence of our students' development into democratically oriented practitioners.

Vignette one: critical policy writing and reflection in reading theory

The Preliminary Informed Position Statement assignments (PIPS for short) are written and revised for Robert and Rachael's English department courses – Reading Theory and Practice and Composition Theory and Practice – in the first semester course block. These PIPS are structured to invite preservice teachers into the political work of English Studies. In accordance with West's call for a “relentless self-examination and critique of institutions of authority, motivated by an endless quest for intellectual integrity and moral consistency” (p. 16) and fearless speech that “unsettles, unnerves, and unhouses people from their uncritical sleepwalking” (p. 16), these major projects ask preservice teachers to speak back to public policy statements and justify their positions with professional support.

Both PIPS assignments start with existing policy documents and invite preservice teachers to reflect critically on those policies to offer their own visions of what those policies ought to be, supported by their own experience and their professional reading. In Robert's

Reading Theory and Practice course, the PIPS project is the creation of a policy statement for an aspect of reading, modeled on the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) position statements. The preservice teachers' assignment is to draft a policy statement on a currently debated reading issue, justifying their position with appropriate professional support. Preservice teachers also looked at local position statements generated by the Nebraska Writing Project Advisory Board (2012-14), and the newly adopted English Language Arts State Standards for Nebraska (2014).

Both PIPS assignments immersed preservice teachers in the intellectual work of West's Socratic questioning and prophetic witness. As the projects were developed over the course of the semester, the content of these projects tended to enrich over time, as preservice teachers engaged in "critical self-examination" of their own writing/reading practices. As the assignments involved positioning their own ideas amid a rhetorical field of other positions (some officially sanctioned by the Nebraska Department of Education, others advocated by recognized leaders in the profession), preservice teachers almost naturally engaged in West's "critique of institutions and authority" (p. 16).

One example of this work is Jennifer's[2] Reading PIPS, entitled "Reading for Social Justice: The Call and Strategies for a Socially Just Reading Classroom". This policy statement was explicitly modeled on NCTE's (2014) "Resolution on the Need for Diverse Children's and Young Adult Books" and Heather Bruce's (2013) "Subversive acts of revision: Writing and Justice". It argues for an approach to literature teaching that emphasizes diversity and critical examination of existing social biases. Jennifer's central paragraphs read:

While insulating curriculum with works like *Romeo and Juliet*, *The Odyssey*, *1984*, and *Lord of the Flies* exposes students to historically valued texts, heavy focus on these stories amplifies the perspectives and works of historically privileged groups [. . .] Not only should students read texts that relate to their lives directly, but they should also read works from multiple diverse perspectives and groups they may not necessarily be included in. Equal representation is a necessary component for social justice education, especially when a group has no representation in a particular classroom [. . .] No matter the context, literature from diverse authors

representing diverse perspectives is essential. If students are to think critically about justice and further develop a critical consciousness, they must first be exposed to the positions of others as well as the value and validity of others' perspectives. This exposure will help students identify power imbalances, learn to empathize with individuals of different social groups, and critically examine their own privileges and disadvantages.

Jennifer's PIPS developed from her own experience with a school curriculum that had been dominated by "historically valued texts", so she was in part speaking against the schooling she herself had received. In the first semester block of courses, she was drawn to Christensen's (2009) *Teaching for Joy and Justice*, especially the idea of selecting texts that "tell [. . .] students that they are alive, that they matter, that teach lessons about human connection, about building a civil society" (p. 165). This project thus immersed Jennifer in a healthy and extended institutional critique along the lines suggested by West. She was able to see her own schooling as a product of a particular ideological position. In response to that experience, she explored a different political agenda for literature teaching. Following the model of the NCTE policy statements, she makes some moves toward public, professional advocacy for positions she holds at this time. While she expects these positions to mature and clarify in the remaining three semesters of the preservice education program, we can see the beginnings of a politically aware self-positioning in the profession.

Vignette two: tragicomic hope through experiential education in composition theory

For West, democracy is "more a verb than a noun" (68), and a rich experiential component of the teacher education program at our university allows us to present tragicomic hope as a *doing* for novice teachers. For the first semester of the program, Rachael and Robert engage the cohort in a collaboration with one of the most diverse high schools in Lincoln, a vibrant school enriched by refugee and immigrant students, as well as a diversity of socioeconomic and racial backgrounds. This partnership offered new experiences to interact across difference for many of the preservice teachers, as the vast majority is white and

most come from homogenous, rural communities. Many of these preservice teachers were tracked into high-achieving classes and have a love of English rooted in past classroom success, fueled by the ways their home discourses are valued in school. It is therefore important for our preservice teachers to interact with students who have been actively minoritized, and to explore how the education system impacts these students. As West explains, prophetic witness involves taking a direct look at injustice, to “shatter deliberate ignorance” and “stir up in us the courage to care and empower us to change our lives and our historical circumstances” (p. 114). By fostering semester-long, one-to-one relationships with high school students, we sought to encourage personal investment – a key ingredient in the “courage to care” that West calls for. It was important for us, as an English education team, to ground the cohort *from the beginning* in the experiences of those youth who are often most marginalized in the education system, reflecting West’s argument that the starting point for social thought should be the experiences of those most vulnerable in society.

The cohort’s composition theory and reading theory courses are scheduled back-to-back, and on most Thursdays, this block of time was allocated to meeting at the high school. First, the preservice teachers participated in reading groups with a literature class, exploring *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* (Chbosky, 2012)[3] with young readers. During the next period, the preservice teachers hosted workshops with a composition class. These meetings transitioned from activities led by the high school teacher to lessons designed by the preservice cohort, as the groups explored using a different lens to interpret the novel (e.g. race, class, gender) and a different aspect of the writing process (invention, drafting, revising, editing) each week. During the final period, preservice teachers met with the two high school teachers during their planning break for reflection.

The partnership stressed constant shuttling between action, reflection and revised action, as there were multiple weeks at the school site. Pragmatism is rooted in this stance of open-ended experimentation and revision (Dewey, 1916, 1938), and prophetic pragmatism folds in the ethical imperative to pursue pragmatism with a focus on justice. The reflection sessions with the high school teachers were invaluable in contextualizing challenges in light of justice issues and collaboratively brainstorming new strategies. Rachael, the English education cohort, and the collaborating high school teachers used this

action-reflection-revision structure to foster *tragicomic hope*, the ability to look with realism at injustices and entrenched problems in education, but still move forward in hope.

One example of tragicomic hope in development occurred with a preservice teacher, Cassie, who was paired with a high school composition student, Miguel. Miguel was older than the other students because there had been a composition test required for graduation a few years before, and though the test had been abolished, Miguel was grandfathered into the requirement. He had taken composition three times and failed the test each time. Now in a class with those who were younger and had different assignments, Miguel was clearly frustrated and sometimes resistant to Cassie. In the reflection sessions, Rachael and Cassie framed Miguel's resistance not as individual disrespect but as a reaction to a problematic standardized test that was clearly failing to support Miguel. The impact of this standardized graduation requirement was laid bare. Yet within this structural frame, they also explored approaches to working with Miguel, drawing from class texts to emphasize the importance of building personal relationships, focusing on student strengths and allowing student voice.

Miguel was struggling in particular with a process essay required as part of his exam. He had written about his passion for boxing, but the prose was unclear and he was unwilling to revise. One afternoon, Rachael turned to find Cassie standing next to Miguel, holding a boxing stance. In Cassie's words:

I stood up and placed my feet where Miguel's paper told me to place them. I threw my arms up and balled my hands into fists the way he described verbatim. Miguel would watch me and study my actions, like a coach to a novice athlete. I was his model boxer, learning orthodox and southpaw stances, jabs and hooks. In different sections where it wasn't clear from the writing what I was supposed to do, Miguel would highlight that as a section that needed more clarity. It was engaging for Miguel because he had the opportunity to be the teacher, instead of him being taught.

Cassie used this experience not only to deepen awareness of power and the meaning of standardized tests for marginalized students, but also to practice ways of agile movement within problematic

institutions, seeing this problem not just as a cause for despair, but for doubling down on commitment, action, and yes – as West would put it – *joy*, as Rachael witnessed Cassie shaking with laughter as Miguel tried to teach her a southpaw stance. In that moment, she captured the indomitable spirit of tragicomic hope.

Cornel West argues that Socratic questioning, prophetic witness, and tragicomic hope are “democratic armor” that can be used to fight nihilism resulting from market moralities (p. 217). It stands to follow that if we want students to use this armor, we must give them opportunities to try it on and move around in it, not just read about it. In this sense, the experiential component of teacher education programs has the potential to support students in doing prophetic pragmatism.

Striving for symbiosis in university coursework and fieldwork

Field experiences often constitute the beating heart of teacher education programs. Grossman *et al.* (2008) explain, “What may matter most are not the number of hours but the extent to which these assignments that link coursework and fieldwork are well-constructed” (p. 283). In each of the four semesters of our English education program, our students are involved in at least one field experience. Some of these take place in English courses (Composition Theory and Reading Theory) and others take place in Education courses (Young Adult Literature, Methods I and Methods II).

In students’ first semester, they engage in an online reading partnership with a rural school in northwestern Nebraska as well as a reading and composition practicum at North Star High School jointly run by Robert and Rachael. In students’ second semester of the program, they complete a 10-week apprenticeship in an English Language Learner[4] (ELL) classroom at Northeast High School. In third semester, students complete a 10-week teaching practicum where, in pairs or solo, they observe one period in a cooperating teacher’s classroom and then teach one class on their own under the supervision of their mentor. Finally, students have a semester-long, full-time student teaching experience in a middle or high school. This experience is accompanied by a student teaching seminar where student teachers critically reflect on their student teaching experiences in online and in-person meetings. Rather than being stand-alone experiences

for preservice teachers, each field experience is connected to the content of the course and the vision for the program.

One of the most important features of our field experiences is that Sarah, a Professor of Practice and former public school teacher in LPS, places all of our English education students. The significance of this feature cannot be overstated. Not only does Sarah have relationships with dozens of people in the district, but she also has an ability to think about what individual students in our program need in terms of mentoring and can make placements accordingly. Grossman *et al.* (2008) refer to this as “programmatically control over field experience” (p. 283) and explain that it is one of the most important features of programmatic coherence. When one or more person from the program is able to thoughtfully consider where and with whom preservice teachers are placed, the shared vision for teaching and teacher education is more likely to cohere the university and school’s messages and values.

These field experiences have evolved in number and nature over the past few years in response to student feedback and the changing demographics of our community. For instance, several years ago, evaluations from the Methods II course (taught by Lauren) revealed that many students felt unprepared to teach English Language Learners (ELLs) effectively. In an effort to respond to students’ needs through enacting Lowenstein’s (2009) “parallel practice”, the following year Sarah collaborated with local teachers and administrators to develop an informal, 10-week ELL practicum to be completed in conjunction with Methods I and Young Adult Literature (taught that year by doctoral student Jessica, first author)[5]. In these field experiences, preservice teachers immerse themselves in ELL classrooms as supportive apprentices alongside their cooperating teachers, periodically composing reflections and dialogue in their university Methods classes in service of sense-making and scholarly applications.

Vignette three: engaging theory and practice in mid-program interviews

Understanding what our students need, where they are growing and what they are struggling with is central to teaching them. One of the ways we do this is via a Mid-Program Reflection and Interview (see Appendix 2 for mid-program interview questions). John used his

mid-program reflection to consider the first half of his ELL practicum experience where he experienced a reflective *opening* that evoked *attentive care*. The opening he created involved a classroom moment where he realized a blind spot he was not aware he had in his professional development – and, in this identification, proceeded to open up vs pin down definitively his developing understandings through close observation and reflection. He moved from local to global perspectives as he realized this local Shakespearean moment extends a global understanding for him about the ELL population, an understanding he might not have gleaned if simply read in a book:

I think the most surprising bit of this practicum was watching Alice not pull her punches with the students. She treats them like the young adults they are and doesn't baby them, which I appreciate immensely [. . .] Alice was reading Shakespeare with her class, something that even fluent English speakers have a hard time with, and her students were getting it. Sure, sometimes they had to define a word or two, or maybe had a difficult time expressing what they wanted to say, but they *understood* it. I think that just reinforces everything we've read up to this point: ELL students aren't children trapped in the bodies of high schoolers; they're intelligent young adults who understand the material but maybe don't yet have all the tools needed to express what they know. I think that seeing the sharp wit and intelligence of these kids makes me more prepared to teach them, as I've never before interacted with an ELL classroom. It's one thing to read all about an ELL population in a book, but it's another to observe the class itself.

Noting the overlaps between the theory he had encountered in his Methods course and the teaching practice he observed, John was able to recognize deficit-based approaches to teaching English Language Learners – approaches that he perhaps has previously internalized – and depart markedly from them as he rethinks what is possible in an ELL classroom.

Another preservice teacher, Hope, used the mid-program reflection and interview to share some of the biggest changes she had undergone thus far in the program as a thinker, learner and novice teacher:

I've learned from working in my practicums [sic] and exploring teaching methods that impactful teaching is student-centered, not subject-centered, and is about developing understanding, enabling identity formation, fostering empathy and critical thinking, dismantling and reconstructing power in the name of justice [. . .] I've also become far more committed to working with diverse youth. Though I've always valued multicultural, inclusive education, the "diversity" I revered was a highly decontextualized ideal. I wanted to abolish racism and sexism. But I had no idea how to do that—it wasn't until taking these courses, exploring the power structures of the "-isms" by reading Freire, Christiansen, and Appleman and having class discussions over these texts, that I began to realize just how deeply embedded in our society injustice truly is.

From an early, less complex notion of learning to teach – to transmit her love of the subject to others – Hope described turning her attention toward bearing witness to injustice as she considered her role in supporting students as they "unpack and combat" inequality.

Hope's growth was not simply the consequence of her university coursework; rather, there were several programmatic opportunities that facilitated Hope's growth in evolving her early inclinations toward social justice pedagogy into a lived, informed reality. Fieldwork was an integral part of this.

Conclusion: towards coherence in English education

In this essay, we have illustrated how one cadre of English Educators has worked to actualize the kind of programmatic coherence that Grossman *et al.* (2008) advocate for teacher education. While West's "democratic armor", comprising Socratic questioning, prophetic witness and tragicomic hope, has helped us to articulate the shared vision for our program that Grossman *et al.* (2008) suggest is central to strengthening teacher preparation, we recognize that this need not be the *only* vision for English education in the USA and around the world. Our shared commitment to cultivating democracy-sustaining dispositions in our preservice teachers is a reflection of our own values and

hopes. In another program, perhaps that shared vision is centered on critical literacy, or social justice, or cultural pluralism (Macaluso *et al.*, 2016). We would argue that the only requirement for this kind of programmatic work is that the shared vision for English education advances the democratic potential of public schools for all students. As Britzman (1986) writes:

While experience is always instructive, the issue is whether the instruction empowers human agency or replicates the status quo. Prospective teachers need to participate in developing critical ways of knowing which can interrogate school culture, the quality of students' and teachers' lives, school knowledge, and the particular role biography plays in understanding these dynamics. Without a critical perspective, the relationships between school culture and power become "housed" in prospective teachers' biographies and significantly impede their creative capacity for understanding and altering their circumstances (p. 454).

In thinking of how English education programs might deliberately pursue the work of programmatic coherence as a political act, we draw on Britzman's challenge to create opportunities for prospective teachers to develop "critical ways of knowing" via programmatic experiences that resonate with a shared vision regarding the larger purposes of teaching and learning.

In the interest of promoting increased attention to the concept of coherence, we offer a few starting points for what we hope will be an ongoing dialogue at our readers' respective institutions:

- Assemble a team and reflect on your current program. Who are your colleagues in the English Department? The Education Department? Meet with them to identify which classes are taught, by whom they are taught and at what point in preservice teachers' program. What trends, overlaps, redundancies or gaps do you see? How are you able to trace students' development at different points in your program?
- Discuss goals and values with your colleagues. Which skills, knowledge, and dispositions are most valued by your program? Where, in the program sequence, are there structured invitations

to develop these? Where are the gaps and how might you address them?

- Be explicit with prospective students about what you value as a program. What is the most important thing you want your English education students to come out of your program knowing, believing and being able to do? In our program, we communicate our values through the interview and through the required essays that students write for admission.
- Get involved in district professional development. How is professional development in English Language Arts handled in your district? What might you be able to do to help create meaningful professional development experiences for English teachers? This kind of work helps build relationships between the university and schools.
- Start small. If you have one teaching methods course and believe that two would be preferable, what might you do to advocate for or create that course?

These questions are vital ones. As university budgets shrink around the globe and as, in the USA especially, teacher preparation programs face increased scrutiny from a variety of neoliberal stakeholders, it is as important as ever to work across disciplinary divides to align our work with a vision that is meaningful and ultimately sustaining for our students and for ourselves. In so doing, we are tragically hopeful about the future of English education.

Notes

1. When referring to the work of English education, we have chosen to use the word “educate” rather than “prepare” or “train.” The word “educate” suggests a more holistic and multidimensional approach to the work we do in teacher education. We understand that this risks redundancy, but believe it is an important distinction to make. We thank our anonymous peer reviewer for offering this suggestion and this language.
2. All student names – secondary students and preservice teachers – are pseudonyms. Additionally, each of the preservice teachers whose work we cite in this essay has granted us permission to do so.
3. We are aware that this title has been critiqued due to its centering of white, middle-class experiences. We have explored the substitution of a more inclusive text,

such as Angie Thomas's *The Hate U Give*, but at present text selection for General English 11 courses in our district are controlled by an oversight committee. The text selection will be reconsidered in the next English 11 revision cycle.

4. In the USA, English Language Learners are students whose home language is not English. Nebraska is one of the top ten states in the country for refugee resettlement, something that is reflected in the demographics of the district. According to Lincoln Public Schools statistics, 7.7 per cent of students are English Language Learners. The three most common home languages in the district are Spanish (25.4 per cent), Arabic (21.6 per cent) and Kurdish (17.8 per cent).
5. Initially, this took place in both middle and high schools. As of 2017, however, the practicum has moved entirely to one of the district's most diverse high schools. This majority white, working class school was undergoing its inaugural ELL program year during the bitterly contentious presidential election.

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Further reading

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- Thomas, A. (2017), *The Hate u Give*, HarperCollins, New York, NY.

Appendix 1

Admission interview for English education:

- Academic Preparation and Potential for Success within the Program 0 1 2 3 4.
The candidate displays exemplar academic progress and achievement, as evidenced by having taken a range of liberal arts courses as well as courses in the discipline of English, including literature, writing, rhetoric, linguistics and literacy; attaining a GPA that is commensurate with the expectations of a professional program endorsement in Secondary English; and involvement in nonclassroom academic experiences (e.g. study abroad, U-Care work, student organizations):
- Commitment to the Profession of Teaching 0 1 2 3 4.
The candidate shows an understanding of the profession of teaching beyond personal experience as a student and can offer a well thought-out, reflective explanation and rationale for his/her desire to become a teacher. This explanation should extend beyond naming or listing personal experiences; instead, it should link the work of being a teacher to broader principles and sociopolitical contexts:
- Personal Attributes in relation to Collaboration and Professionalism 0 1 2 3 4.
The candidate displays an understanding of the value of collaboration with peers and colleagues, desires to engage with a variety of ideas about approaches to teaching and learning secondary English, and demonstrates professional behavior, including appropriate dress, presentation and writing mechanics:
- Commitment to the Discipline of English and the Language Arts 0 1 2 3 4.
The candidate displays an understanding of the scope of English Studies, including imaginative literatures and the cultures they represent; rhetorical practices of writing and speaking for public engagement; and the multiplicity of textual genres and language forms in the twenty-first century. The candidate displays thoughtful and reflexive awareness as receiver, analyzer and producer of texts. S/he articulates a professional commitment to the use of at least some aspects of English Studies for engagement with cultural issues and agency for social improvement:
- Commitment to working with Diverse Youth 0 1 2 3 4.
The candidate makes visible an understanding of youth beyond personal experiences and can articulate a thoughtful, reflective set of commitments and reasons for wanting to work with diverse secondary-aged people – ones that extend beyond talking about teaching and the discipline of English.

Appendix 2

Mid-program interview questions:

- Academic Preparation and Potential for Success within the Program.
In what ways have you grown as a scholar in the program? Specific texts/writers that especially resonate?
- Personal Attributes in relation to Collaboration and Professionalism.
You have had multiple opportunities to engage robust collaboration throughout the program. What have you learned about yourself, professionalism and effective collaboration?
- Commitment to the profession of teaching.
In what ways has your “why” for teaching enlarged and deepened?
- Commitment to the Discipline of English and the Language Arts.
What is the important work of teaching English? When considering your future course impacts, what essential competencies do you want your students to take away?
- Commitment to working with Diverse Youth.
The program has afforded nearly one year of immersive field experience working with diverse youth so far. What have you learned about yourself? About effective teaching within these contexts? What growth areas do you identify for yourself?