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To Teach as We are Known:

The 'Heart and Soul' Labor of Teacher Educators of Color Working in PWIs

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter, the authors outline the ongoing dialogues, thought processes, and pedagogical moves we make as two seasoned colleagues of color attempting to enhance the cultural competence of students through a critical multicultural education course offered at a public university-based teacher education program. We document how we address many enduring moral, ethical, and epistemological questions through our practice that are unique to educators of color working at predominantly white institutions (PWIs). We frame our work within the literature on diversity and social justice pedagogy and link our own work to the broader well-documented challenges faced by many educators of color at PWIs. We tackle the thorny concept of cultural competence, offering our professional understanding of an admittedly contested topic. We draw on spirituality to ground the "heart and soul work" (Palmer, 1983) we undertake that enhances our own critical consciousness as it is continually nurtured in dialogic relation to our students.

[1] This chapter came about as a result of our ongoing conversations as office suite neighbors in the same department over several years. That conversation led to several presentations to various conferences on equity, diversity, and inclusion. We see ourselves as co-equal "first authors" and reject the implied ranking that is customary in academic writing.

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INTRODUCTION

We borrow our title from Parker Palmer's (1983) now classic text, *To Know as We Are Known: Education as a Spiritual Journey,* in which Palmer called for the lifelong cultivation of each educator's deep inner wisdom as essential leaven for transformative teaching and learning practice. Holding firm to a spiritual understanding of our vocation helps to ground our commitment to providing effective multicultural programming, despite the challenges imposed by the current political climate (hooks, 1999). That teachers today live and must operate in highly politically charged contexts is beyond debate. As a result of heightened polarization and the ongoing culture wars that escalated beginning in the 1980s (Shor, 1992), educational equity leaders and social justice-oriented educators, especially those of color, have come under increasing levels of scrutiny (Ruparelia, 2014). Particularly at taxpayer-funded public institutions in the "red states," progressive-minded higher education faculty frequently encounter criticism from conservative college students and legislators for pushing a "liberal" agenda. In response, educators like ourselves necessarily hone our skills at reading and responding to the shifting social and political landscape in which we teach and struggle. In the end, we believe that this makes us better teachers, as we are forced to thoughtfully re-examine our pedagogy in relation to present-day exigencies in dialogic relation, whether with participants in our classrooms or professional development sessions.

While educators like to tell themselves that they can create the conditions for learning that are "safe spaces" for frank and open discussions related to issues of social justice in education, we have become aware that students from different backgrounds sometimes express dismay and resentment, especially when dialogue in the classroom becomes heated or charged with conflicting social and political views (Bonilla-Silva, 2015; Matias, 2016; Ohito, 2016; Singleton, 2015). Nevertheless, as of 2020, white students have become the minority in public schools (now making up less than 49% of the approximately 50 million students enrolled K-12) (Krogstad, & Fry, 2014). According to the US Department of Education, as of 2016, the teaching force was 80% white and 77% female (USDE National Center for Educational Statistics, 2017). The rapid demographic shifts in schools, in our view, create an escalating sense of urgency to

directly address educational disparities and the particular role of *whiteness* in schools with burgeoning minoritized student populations.

Given the sense of urgency to transform the teaching force, it is vital to consider pre-service and in-service teachers' situated identities in teacher education (Morales, Espinoza, & Duke, 2020). How we attempt to orchestrate transformative learning experiences by drawing on our own situated identities as our multicultural "superpower" provides the focus of this chapter. We focus on the interwoven links between the intellectual, emotional, and psychological labor--what we refer to as spiritually-grounded "heart and soul work" that simultaneously motivates and sustains us as we address challenges in our daily struggles as faculty of color frequently working against the current in predominantly white institutions (PWIs).

This chapter offers our commentary on the ongoing dialogues, thought processes, and pedagogical moves we make as two seasoned, progressive-minded colleagues of color attempting to enhance the cultural competence of students through critical multicultural education. We both teach in the same state funded university-based teacher education program. In what follows, we hope to weave a jointly constructed narrative that documents the many enduring ethical and epistemological questions that arise within our practice, and link those to who we are, and the ways in which we want to be known by our students. We situate our professional experience within the considerable literature on diversity and social justice pedagogy. We link our own work to the broader well-documented challenges faced by many educators of color at PWIs who find themselves facilitating the diversity, social justice, and/or equity literacy development among mainstream students who frequently have not yet had much experience with minoritized or racialized populations (Ruparelia, 2014).

This chapter follows a deliberately meandering path, for two reasons: (1) because circularity pushes back against linear Eurocentric norms that are endemic in academic writing, which is culturally appropriate given our identities and loyalties as rooted in communities that academic discourse tends to devalue and marginalize, and (2) because it underscores discursively our shared commitments to de-colonization and anti-racism. Both space on the page and time are required to describe fully the sociopolitical context in which we operate. We take care, in order to set the stage for understanding the ways in which critical, race-based, and decolonizing epistemologies, philosophical commitments, and pedagogical stances both reflect and inform our own unique positionalities as racialized *Others* in the PWI teaching context.

Next, we tackle the thorny concept of cultural competence itself, offering our professional understanding of an admittedly contested topic. We challenge the superficiality of diversity discourses that have become popular throughout teacher education, and the ways in which they tend to focus primarily on *cultural appreciation*, with little interrogation of the social inequities that reproduce educational disparities within schools and communities (Ladson-Billings, 2014; Morales, 2018). In contrast, we prefer to draw upon critical scholarship that pushes to redress the historic and ongoing practices of deculturalization in schools (Spring, 2016), and that ideally advances anti-colonial, anti-racist policies. We also draw upon the more recent work of critical multicultural scholars such as Django Paris (2017), who calls educators to move from espoused culturally *relevant* pedagogies towards intentional culturally *sustaining* approaches that can better promote liberatory and empowering education for the nation's increasingly diverse P-12 students.

And finally, we highlight some of the specific pedagogical and conceptual moves we make with students to enact critical multicultural practice, or, to borrow from Paulo Freire (1970), to model a recursive *praxis* as a way to effectively respond to both the predictable and the unexpected instructional challenges that we confront. We argue that a recursive praxis of *critical reflection-action-further reflection* is key to understanding how we navigate problems of practice presented through multiple challenges extant at a PWI. In other words, we hope our discussion shows implicitly how our own critical consciousness emerges and is continually nurtured in dialogic relation to our students.

FRAMING OUR WORK

Both of us teach different sections of a required course for teacher education majors called Multicultural Education. The course is part of the department's Social & Cultural Foundations of Education program. It covers, in an explicitly political manner, the history of race relations and public schooling in the United States, and how that history continues to impact various ethnic groups socially, economically, educationally, and politically. Students often report that they learn more about the ugly history of US society from the curriculum materials we

unpack together (videos, memes, films, poetry, and texts such as the book by Joel Spring[2]) than they ever learned from their high school history classes.

After beginning the course with a historical survey of the uses of schooling for deculturalization, we delve into examinations of systemic oppression. For example, we learn about the boarding school movement for Native Americans and related child removal policies that paved the way for the founding of the white settler nation-state, and we explore of the role of privilege in the maintenance of white supremacy (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012; Lensmire, Mcmanimon, Tierney, Lee-Nichols, Casey, Lensmire, & Davis, 2013; McIntosh, 2003). We encourage students to investigate their own unwitting collusion with interlocking systems of oppression, using stories of our own participation and collusion at different stages of our careers. We tackle associated topics such as red lining in housing, white flight to the suburbs, and ways in which poverty impacts racialized lives.

The second half of the course surveys the fields of multicultural education and social justice education, which provides the critical perspectives needed to interrogate how issues such as gender, sexual orientation, language, and religion play out in present-day educational contexts. These learning experiences push future teachers to develop a more critical understanding of the inequalities inherent in society, and to equip them with the cognitive and pedagogical tools they can use in their future schools.

At this point, let us state without reservation that our approach to equity and diversity work with teachers is informed profoundly by the work of Sonia Nieto (2018), one of the leading architects of the field of multicultural teacher education (and who, incidentally, like us, was deeply influenced by Paulo Freire's life and work). In her landmark book, *Affirming Diversity: The Sociopolitical Context of Multicultural Education* (upon which we draw heavily in class), Nieto articulates seven dynamic goals or characteristics of the field. Under Nieto's approach, multicultural education entails a comprehensive process of school reform. This contrasts with more superficial approaches that proffer curriculum add-ons (e.g., focusing on multicultural "heroes and holidays" or additive ethnic content that merely supplements the standard Eurocentric curriculum). In order to be implemented successfully, Nieto argues that multicultural

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[2] Joel Spring (2016). *Deculturalization and the Struggle for Equality: A Brief History of the Education of Dominated Cultures in the United States.*

education is inherently political, because it attempts to reform institutions and curricula originally established based on hegemonic Eurocentric norms and worldviews. Furthermore, multicultural education is important education for *all* students, and involves practices and policies that pervade local school environments far beyond the curriculum. Adding further to its inherently critical emphasis, multicultural education must be firmly anchored in critical pedagogy, according to Nieto. (2018).

Subsequent research echoes Nieto's foundational work that calls for criticality in teacher education. For us, this means that in order to frame meaningful instruction to enhance the *equity literacy* (Gorski, 2016) of future teachers, teacher educators must be prepared and willing to identify and confront students' potential tendencies to evade explicit attention to and discussion of race, which has come to be known as race-evasion (Bonilla-Silva, 2017; Sleeter, 1992). The challenge becomes how to address the initial resistance, particularly among mainstream students, to engaging in thoughtful and intentional conversation about overtly political topics that sit at the ideological intersections of students' identities (Jupp, 2017).

As faculty of color working within a PWI, we find that our direct approach to critical, anti-bias, and social justice-oriented education typically upends many of our students' ideological and epistemological understandings of and assumptions about the role of education, both historically and contemporarily. In addition, a critical multicultural approach challenges internalized notions of the supremacy of whiteness in U.S. society in which students from all backgrounds have been socialized (Bonilla Silva, 2015; Lensmire, et al., 2013). As we think about best practices for designing culturally competent teacher education programming, the task of organizing curricula and enacting pedagogies that push reluctant or resistant learners in and through these turbulent waters becomes paramount. For instance, we invite them to think beyond the box of cultural competence and into a place of increasing fluency in their understanding of equity literacy (Gorski, 2017) and a more nuanced approach to social justice in education (Adams, Bell, & Griffin, 2007).

We hold that a significant goal of our practice is supporting novice teachers on their individual journeys through increased critical self-reflection and consciousness-raising (Jupp, Berry, Morales, & Mogush Mason, 2018). In so doing, we find ourselves continually revisiting our own problems of practice, including notions of (dis)comfort and emotional safety in the classroom. As colleagues who teach similar groups of students, we ask ourselves to what degree

we should be concerned with creating an environment that is *safe enough* for our students to engage meaningfully with controversial topics? How much can we rely on the generative potential of felt tension and even discomfort as necessary and integral to the process of what Paulo Freire (1970) referred to as *conscientization* or critical consciousness? We understand and embrace the risks inherent in our roles at a PWI teaching multicultural education and diversity to students from the over-represented mainstream of U.S. society. That is, our students continually remind us of the ways in which our presence in the classroom embodies for many of them the very issues they are studying. It is not uncommon to hear students admit that we are the first teachers of color they have ever had, or the first person of color with whom they've discussed race in a serious way.

SOCIOPOLITICAL CONTEXT OF MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION IN THE HEARTLAND

We bring our combined decades of teaching experience in multiple states and across varying levels of P-20 education to the work of teacher education. As newcomers to the state, we have had to learn about the local power of place and the history of its settlement at the expense of its displaced Indigenous inhabitants. Our institution resides in what is now called Nebraska, the traditional homelands of a number of different tribal Nations. We spend time exploring with students the institution’s inheritance as a "land-grab" (Lee & Ahtone, 2020) or land-grant campus. We discuss in class the role of not only the Morrill Act which established the land-grant system of public universities, but also the importance of contemporary land acknowledgments as a way to refuse the elision of the legacy of genocide and displacement of Indigenous peoples.

The development of multicultural awareness begins with an understanding of how each of us is implicated, one way or another in this ugly history. Incidentally, "Nebraska" comes from an Oto word, *Nebrathka,* meaning "flat water," and refers to the Platte River that transverses these lands. The quiet beauty and enduring strength of the Great Plains is echoed in the earnest nature of our students and neighbors, whether they are Indigenous, recent immigrants from abroad, or long-term settlers whose families have lived on and farmed the land for several generations.

Despite the state's increasing demographic diversification due to immigration and migration patterns associated with regional industry as well as to refugee resettlement, Nebraska's population remains overwhelmingly white. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, high concentrations of German and Czech immigrants settled in so-called frontier regions, including Nebraska (Sudbeck, 2015), and have established roots by farming the land for years. In the present day, the descendants of European settlers comprise much of our enrollment, coming from all corners of the state. Each year, we have students from a range of social, political, and educational backgrounds, hailing from remote one-room schoolhouse hamlets to suburban and smaller-scale urban communities.

It is not uncommon, as we stated earlier, for students to disclose that we are the first "minorities" they have ever talked to or had as an instructor. For many of our students from rural environments, attending the university provides their first authentic encounters with diversity; it is likely their first opportunity to sit beside classmates who are African American, Asian American, Indigenous, or Latina/o/x.[3] Of course, we also teach students from large metropolitan areas, particularly from out of state. Helping our students to appreciate the vast differences in educational backgrounds among their peers offers early opportunities to learn about diversity and to practice intercultural communication in a personally meaningful way. We take advantage of the diversity in class to model respectful curiosity about people's backgrounds, and use activities such as sharing Identity Bags and other community-building activities in order for students to get acquainted, and importantly, learn how to run similar exercises in their future classrooms.

In terms of religious affiliation, a large percentage of our students identify as Catholic; many others identify as simply Christian, whether evangelical, denominational, or non-denominational. Rarely do we encounter education majors who identify as Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, or Hindus. We spend time learning about religious diversity, to prepare these future teachers for the diverse faith traditions they will inevitably encounter in classrooms of their own. In class discussions, many students report that they come from conservative homes and communities. They often express disbelief (incredulity rather than hostility) about the topics we

[3] As a contested term in academic writing and an emergent one in non-academic spaces, *Latinx* has been challenged on several fronts. We recognize the unfinished struggle over representation and markers of identification. We choose, at this historical moment, to err on the side of feminist and trans-friendly solidarity and inclusiveness, by writing the identifier as Latina/o/x, which, to our way of thinking, includes individuals of various gender identities, while at the same time respecting traditional categories of difference in the Spanish-speaking world.

address in class; they simply cannot imagine that urban students of color, for example, or refugee students and Indigenous students attending reservation schools, have such vastly different life experiences and perspectives on the meaning of schooling.

A handful of students fall into the category of what we refer to affectionately as active resistors. That is, some students express blatantly racist and homophobic ideological views, from time to time, and sometimes engage in dismissive or even hostile behaviors that challenge, undermine, and reject what they perceive to be "liberal" biases and unfamiliar progressive classroom practices. However, because of their reliably strong work ethic and deep-seated respect for authority, we find that most students are willing to engage in the multicultural learning activities provided week to week.

Positionality in the Classroom- To Teach as We are Known

As we have shown, we strive to promote critical, race-based, and decolonial epistemologies that are inflected through our own unique positionalities as racialized *Others* (Delgado-Bernal, 2002; Kubota, 2019; Tuck & Yang, 2012). We model for students how to make learning about differences and intergroup dynamics interesting and even fun. While most students report that they indeed enjoy our classes, the hidden labor of winning them over, maintaining a welcoming, nonjudgmental posture, yet at the same time exposing them to the wounded, sometimes angry perspectives within oppressed communities that they have never encountered before, can feel daunting. Our next aim is to narrate the delicate line that some faculty of color walk as we strive to engage all learners in consideration of difficult subject matter that purposefully disrupts, de-centers, and deconstructs dominant ideologies and traditional approaches to education.

We consider ourselves fortunate to have each other as departmental colleagues and office suite neighbors. Many faculty members of color at PWIs work in isolation as the token colleague who does diversity work. As office next door neighbors, we find ourselves frequently engaged in ongoing conversations about how our *own identities* help or hinder our effectiveness, particularly with reluctant or even resistant students. As described by Ruparelia (2014), faculty who take a critical stance when teaching about social justice in education frequently receive criticism and even blame as students struggle with their unsettling sense of discomfort. Ruparelia explains the psychological taxation on faculty of color, saying that students' discomfort often leads to

microaggressions that can "compromise the psychological well-being and deplete the emotional and physical resources of racialized professors" (2014, p. 815). As such, we strongly recommend to current and future faculty of color engaged in this work to find a colleague to vent with regularly, and to strategize with, particularly if they are on a PWI campus.

We have found that solidarity with other colleagues of color goes a long way towards mitigating the potentially harmful emotional and psychological toll that accrues when engaging in high intensity "heart and soul" work. For example, faculty of color report that they often endure initial suspicion (and at times interrogation) from mainstream pre-service and in-service teachers who assume they are not smart enough, qualified enough, competent enough, or even loyal enough (e.g., to the settler nation-state, the dominant race, or the campus community) to hold positions as respected university professors. While the majority of our students do make significant progress in their equity literacy development over the course of a semester, some of the comments we receive on anonymous course evaluations at the end of the semester reflect students' ambivalence (and outright hostility, in some cases) to a class that made them feel uncomfortable because of its explicit focus on anti-racism and decolonization (Ruparelia, 2014). For example, we have been chastised for being "too loud", "too passionate", "too gay", "too ethnic", and for "pushing a racial agenda". To be certain, instructors can never assume that all students will extend their trust or respect, or even come to like us. We are aware that for some students, our perceived differences present, at this stage in their development, an almost insurmountable barrier to their learning.

However, we view this crisis in the classroom as an opportunity, with an eye to what Martin Luther King, Jr. (1964/2000) referred to as *creative tension*, without which, injustice cannot be confronted and transformed. Although King was discussing the creative tension generated by principled acts of nonviolent resistance in the struggle for desegregation, his analysis applies to our current situation. This is precisely because of what Raible (2005) describes as the unfinished project of racial integration, which our heart and soul work arguably attempts to address. Indeed, negotiating these historical tensions and competing loyalties is central to our ongoing deliberations, particularly if we remain committed to helping students from sheltered monocultural backgrounds to seek common ground with – and ultimately understand and affirm – their future students. We remain optimistic that using our own brown

bodies and multifaceted identities in the service of learning allows students to get comfortable with confronting diversity issues head on.

Furthermore, we are mindful of the messiness of our positionalities as professors, what Nyachae (2016) aptly describes as the *complicated contradictions* we negotiate daily as teachers of color working within systems that we often experience as oppressive. We come to grips with the profound duality of our roles, both as the colonized and the colonizer, and the tensions this presents in our work: How do we remain loyal to our home communities while participating in the academy that was never built for people like us? How do we draw from our communities of resistance (e.g., Indigenous, queer, & feminist community epistemologies) to support decolonization in real time? What is our responsibility to the pre- and in-service teachers from marginalized backgrounds who often turn to us when they feel misunderstood, dismissed, or even targeted by their mainstream peers within these educational contexts? How do we reconcile the fact that the conscientization of white students often comes at the expense of students of color, undocumented students, and LGBTQA+ students who must sit through insensitive comments, not to mention overtly biased and condescending pronouncements made during heated class discussions?

These tensions cause us to further question, what is our responsibility to coach and perhaps coddle white students from conservative backgrounds? How do we respond with courage, critical care, and resolve when students voice naively racist, anti-immigrant, or homophobic statements that we fear will affect their ability to interact effectively and justly with their highly diverse P-12 future students? What is our responsibility as gatekeepers into the education profession, when we fear the harm they can do to impressionable young children? What affirming and liberatory pedagogies (Freire, 1997) do we enact and model ourselves, given that in our mid-western U.S. context, many who enter our courses or professional development sessions bring with them understandably limited experiences with various aspects of diversity (Irizarry, 2014; Herrera & Morales, 2018)?

Embracing the "Superpowers" of POC Faculty in PWIs

In our efforts to embody critical reflexivity, we ponder these questions and many others, seeking to know our ourselves fully (Palmer, 1983), in relation to our students and the communities in which, and with which, we work (Adams et al., 2007). Within the “safety” of our

office suite, we talk through these tensions with each other (and with other faculty and graduate students charged with teaching this course (many of whom also come from minoritized backgrounds)). We unpack how our positionalities are shaping the power dynamics in our classrooms each semester. We talk about the similarities and differences we see in how the identities and personalities of our students are shaping the climate and discourse within the learning environments and we support each other with ideas and suggestions for how to navigate issues. By serving as affirming and critical sounding boards for one another, we can co-interpret, understand, reframe, and heal in community with each other.

Given that we (the authors) both embody hybrid ethno-racial profiles, we both have negotiated the uncertain terrains of multi-racial spaces our entire lives (McClain, 2004). At the same time, we recognize that, unlike most of our students, we enter these conversations and white-dominated spaces with a great deal of experience and a well-developed thick skin. To clarify, Amanda was born to a Mexican American migrant worker father and a white mother who grew up in profound rural poverty. As a member of the only non-white family in her hometown, Amanda was hyper-aware of her family's contrasting cultural and linguistic diversity early in life. She grew up in a very conservative home, with non-denominational Christian (not Catholic) religious teachings as her orienting frame for morality and spirituality. This also created tensions within her Latino extended family (who was predominantly Mexican Catholic) as well as within her hometown which was predominately German Catholic. Therefore, for many reasons, she spent years struggling to fit in or find a place within her local community as well as within either side of her biological family. John was born to a working class European American mother and African American father, but later adopted by graduate school-educated, middle class white parents who struggled to understand their adopted son's difficult experiences with racism as the only minoritized child in the family, and who downplayed his struggle to "come out" as gay.

In both our cases, our family biographies, as well as our personal and professional identities, are riddled with the complexities of whiteness, race, gender, sexual orientation, and class, and the hybridized identities that often emerge within the crucible of intersectionality. It is precisely from this crossroads, in this *borderland,* as Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) noted, that we make our stand. The crossroads of intersectionality is where we claim our "superpowers," and do some of our finest work as multicultural educators.

Yet despite being cloaked in our strengths, the daily realities of life in these liminal racialized spaces has left us, at times, feeling uncertain, isolated, unsettled, depleted, and misunderstood. While significant, these are not uncommon emotional responses to marginalization for POC in academia (Nadal, Sriken, Davidoff, Wong, & McLean, 2013). And though often adding complexity and difficulty to our individual identity development, we continue to nurture these perspective lenses to understand and the skills to navigate the social structures and spaces that we inhabit. We share these aspects with you the readers in hopes to draw your attention to colleagues of color in your institutions; to give you perspective (and perhaps to foster gratitude) for the challenging work they do within PWIs, often without thanks or recognition from their mainstream peers.

Now, as context for deepening an understanding of our approaches to critical multicultural education, this next section articulates how past and current research in the related fields of diversity and multiculturalism in education has shifted and continues to shape our philosophical and theoretical orientations.

CULTURAL COMPETENCE CRITIQUES AND NEW DIRECTIONS

In our view, and put simplistically, cultural competence invites pre-service and in-service teachers from the mainstream to learn to think and relate to parents and teachers from minoritized communities in more authentic, affirming, and inclusive ways. We believe that we must always hold ourselves accountable to various communities in resistance, whose children our teacher education students will soon encounter in public school classrooms. As legal scholar and law school professor Rakhi Ruparelia (2014) points out, if our pre-service students are not willing to engage in the work of anti-racism directly, they have no business working with students and families from racialized communities – what we refer to as *communities in resistance* to mainstream domination.

Our task, then, is to model for our pre-service and in-service teachers how to stand in solidarity alongside their future students (Freire, 1970; 2000), rather than above them, and how to understand their future classrooms as sites of resistance to mainstream Euro-American cultural hegemony. In order to "convert" students to this perspective we must gain some measure of our

students' trust, while establishing our credentials as knowledgeable, culturally competent educators ourselves.

As Ruparelia (2014) describes the thankless role for faculty of color teaching race-based courses at a PWI, we must always strive to stay mindful of the larger social systems at work. We agree with her that "understanding negative student reactions in the context of structural racism and embracing students' sense of disequilibrium [are] a necessary part of social transformation [that can] enable professors to reconceptualize personal attacks as something more constructive" (p. 815). In other words, we accept as part of our labor withstanding attacks and complaints from students who might resent explicit and unapologetic social justice-oriented pedagogy.

Of course, we don't just charge ahead intentionally trying to make students squirm. On the contrary, leading class discussions about systemic oppression and privilege requires not only having passion and "thick skin", but also tact, thoughtful deliberation, and professional skill. It requires ongoing professional development, deep learning, and strategic planning on our part. We recognize that designing teacher education programming to increase cultural competence takes us beyond small scale classroom-level reforms into deeper analyses of the institutional and structural barriers to equity and social justice.

Gorski (2016), for example, examines the ways in which equity frameworks are often superficially and inaccurately taught in multicultural education contexts. He describes the ways in which many instructors teach these frameworks and their associated approaches with a "considerably less justice-oriented lens" (p. 221) than the scholars who established them intended. For example, despite the great potential of culturally relevant pedagogy as articulated by Ladson-Billings (1995), many teacher preparation programs tend to emphasize superficially appreciating the cultural differences of the imagined *Other*.

Gorski (2016) provides examples of the ways in which such a focus on celebrating differences is problematic, by tending to downplay the actualization of equity. He has found that teacher education approaches that essentialize cultures as monolithic, static constructs do so precisely in order to *deemphasize* direct confrontations with inequity. Teacher education typically asks future teachers simply to become more "culturally aware" (for example, by adding ethnic content to their literature selections, holiday concerts, or story problems in math class). In contrast, our critical multicultural approach favors the professional development of committed advocates for racial or social justice in their sites of practice.

To this end, in our own work we draw on Gorski's (2016) approach to equity literacy to describe how teachers (current and future) can support each other in cultivating the knowledge and skills necessary to “become a threat to the existence of inequity in their spheres of influence” (p. 225). Gorski clarifies that by intentionally linking knowledge and skills to equity and cultural competence, educators can more easily maintain a focus on systemic issues (e.g., racism, classism, linguicism, and heterosexism) that lie at the heart of P-12 practice; doing so makes it “more difficult for the institutions with which we work to tiptoe away from that conversation and back to cultural diversity” (p. 225), which no doubt feels less risky.

As mentioned, a major part of our pedagogy challenges teacher education students through reflective conversation, both in the classroom and online (discussion boards and social media platforms), around topics that understandably make many of them uncomfortable. That is, we push for a suspension of pre-existing paradigms and ideologies as they grapple with new and dissonant ideas that disrupt Eurocentric paradigms and *cherished knowledges* (Jupp, 2019) of school and schooling. This concept, which we expand on further in a forthcoming publication, is evidence of our modest but purposeful commitment towards decolonization.

As a framework that we share and interrogate with our students, Glen Singleton (2015) outlines and questions teachers’ tendencies for racial "tip-toeing" and race-evasion. Singleton's approach, like that of Gorski, aims to increase teachers' effectiveness as anti-racist, equity literate advocates who do not shy away from necessary conversations around inequity. According to Singleton, becoming comfortable with being *uncomfortable* is a key ingredient in effective interracial dialogues, which is why we overtly discuss *emotions* with our students on the first days of class (Ohito, 2016; Quinlan, 2016). We name the tensions associated with the course and the curriculum to be explored, pointing out the fact that they (and we) will likely experience frustration, discomfort, disillusionment, anger, uncertainty, and disequilibrium at numerous and various points in the semester; and that these emotions have meaning. They matter. Yet, we assure them that these felt tensions are common and an important part of our growth and learning together in the course.

We also bring our students’ attention to the fact that, given the complicated histories and experiences of minoritized communities in the United States (as both Singleton and Gorski argue) the racial climate in our society equips us with well-developed skills for *dis*engaging from racial issues. In other words, we point out that most people have been socialized to avoid topics

and conversations that confront injustice directly. Yet, in order to develop into effective culturally competent and conscientized educators they must resist tendencies to evade ethno-racial topics or disengage from difficult interactions and be willing to face their own racial identities and positionalities in relation to the various students and families they will serve. In fact, it is in these uncomfortable (and at times painful) spaces and processes that an equity consciousness and racial literacy skills can develop. In our teacher education classrooms, then, pedagogies must be ongoingly supportive yet intentionally stretching. Using humor, play, and creativity as *balm* to ease their pain and discomfort, we guide them along the meandering pathways of critical self-reflection and through the uncertain waters of racial literacy development.

As one specific cognitive tool to help our students "dive in" to the course, at the start of each semester we often introduce the interpersonal communications construct of *dialog versus debate* (Senge, 2006; Yankelovich, 1999). Drawing students' attention to the differences in the intent and impact of both, we focus in on the value of *dialog* as a key tool for working across differences and for arriving at new and powerful learning collectively. Similarly, according to Singleton's metacognitive trajectory of awareness, once students have committed their will to raising their racial consciousness, they are better positioned to hold what he calls *courageous conversations about race* and other uncomfortable topics. In his model Singleton asks learners to come to four agreements: (1) to stay engaged in dialogue (morally, emotionally, intellectually, and relationally); (2) to accept and expect to experience some level of discomfort; (3) to be willing to speak truth (not just what we think others want to hear); and (4) to expect and accept non-closure (that is, resist the urge to solve or resolve complex racial dilemmas with some sort of quick fix) (ibid). By engaging in committed and ongoing conversations on race, critical knowledge increases, and educators are better equipped to see and address structural inequalities in the policies and practices of their institutions.

Though we see Singleton's model as beneficial in moving predominantly white educational practitioners and equity leaders out of superficial and essentializing diversity discourses and into real conversations about institutional oppression, there are valid critiques of Singleton's stage approach that warrant mentioning. For one, his framework can be interpreted to imply that by an individual's act of sheer *will* and simple exposure to cultural differences, they will move through stages, arriving at some identifiable level of readiness or racial consciousness.

It is argued that the linearity of the model placates whiteness in some ways, aligning more toward Eurocentric, reductive approaches to "problem-solving" (Asberry, 2007), as if there is a step-by-step solution to issues of racism.

A concern within such a model is that it is difficult to account fully for much needed dialectical and recursive construction of transformational knowledge, or the common and messy forward and backward momentum one experiences or groups experience when engaged in race work. As such, instances of conflict and regression and the ways in which a community of learners work through these junctures individually and collectively are important and powerful moments in a critical multicultural education classroom. Therefore, we believe teacher educators must name them within the learning space. We must be vulnerable enough to share our own mistakes and regressions, our own messy experiences with biases, and how we are working through them as learners committed to racial justice and healing. Overlooking, dismissing, or not attending to the cultural and historical and political complexities of these exchanges within our "courageous conversations on race" can lead to simplified interpretations of racial identity development, or to a discounting and dismissal of the dynamic nature of power and race relations in the microcosms of our classrooms and the macrocosms of society.

As a second issue, Singleton's sole focus on *race,* to the exclusion of an intersectional analysis, leaves limited opportunities for teacher education students to fully explore race as it is experienced and interpreted in complex and nuanced ways, particularly when race intersects with other marginalized identities. For these reasons, critical multicultural education, although unabashedly anti-racist in orientation, necessarily incorporates a deeper analysis of interlocking systems of oppression, as detailed in the social justice education approach of scholars such as Maurianne Adams and colleagues (2007).

Their approaches to social justice education work to expose the structural interconnections between sexism, heterosexism, classism, ableism, anti-Semitism, along with other systemic "isms." It is therefore this more inclusive and comprehensive approach that we take in our courses, which demands that we work to know ourselves and our students on multiple levels. We must introduce activities and assignments that unearth the multiplicities of students' identities for them and others to see, hear, unpack, ponder, and interpret within the context of the content we are learning. Assignments such as *Identity Bags*, *Cultural Quilt*, *Who Am I & What's My Why*, *Mirrors & Windows*, and *Looking Glass Self Narrative*[4], work well for both critical

self-discovery as well as community building. With any of these assignments, one key component of their effectiveness is our own vulnerability and willingness as instructors to do the assignment and share aspects of ourselves as well (Berry, 2010; hooks, 1994).

We must be willing to dig deep every semester with every group and commit to really investing in their processes of critical awakening. While white guilt and shame are often used as leverage points in traditional multicultural education classrooms (intentionally and unintentionally), as a new direction, we believe that educators working to model cultural responsivity and high expectations for all learners, we must position students proleptically. We strive to intentionally convey to students our firm belief in their emerging abilities to promote equity, inclusion, and social justice in their current and future professional lives, even if their competence is still emergent. This admittedly is a tall order, but one that we view as essential to developing their equity literacy and sustaining their belief that they *can* and *must* become the agents of change in schools that students need.

By engaging with our students as *emerging* advocates and professionals who are committed to equity and social justice, we hope to reposition them ideologically from a stance of "I want to teach because I love children (or my content area") to "I champion democracy and social justice, therefore I want to teach." We strive to model socially justice, culturally sustaining pedagogies that invite them to enter an ongoing struggle that admittedly feels daunting, but one to which they can contribute as conscious allies and dedicated, informed professionals. These equity-oriented models continue to provide rich insight and guidance for our praxis as critical multicultural educators. In the next section, we go deeper into the “heart and soul work” involved in our teaching.

RELATIONAL AND BRIDGING PEDAGOGIES AT THE INTERSECTIONS

In depicting his experiences as an educator, Palmer (1997) aptly captures how personal the act of teaching can be: “As I teach, I project the condition of my soul onto my students, my subject, and our way of being together” (p. 1). In spiritual terms, the entanglements that Palmer experiences in the classroom are “often no more or less than the convolutions of inner life. Viewed from this angle, teaching holds a mirror to the soul” (ibid.). This quote likely resonates with many educators who take the act of teaching seriously, and who recognize its spiritual

dimensions. However, as those charged with preparing the next generation of teachers or further developing the professionalism of those currently teaching, how often do educators take time to fully consider their own identities as racialized beings as instructors or facilitators? We argue that despite one's ethno-racial identity, rarely are we encouraged to explore how our particular identities shape our pedagogies and our learners' experiences. Yet, from our experience, we believe that in order to be truly impactful, it is vital to remain acutely aware of these dynamics and to make a conscious decision daily to bring the complexity of our full authentic selves to the teaching and learning process.

As noted by McClain (2004), many who have bi-/multi-racial backgrounds develop dexterous racial identifications. Given the potential range of insider/outsider experiences had by multi-racial individuals, some develop adaptive identifications that can function jointly or separately within various contexts. Through our conversations over time, we have come to see this adaptability in our identities. We have come to understand the profound value of our unique cultural and experiential biographies as strategic tools in facilitating powerful learning in our classrooms. Gee (1999/2011) and Carbaugh (1996) noted the importance of situated identity based in social and institutional contexts – how our identities and customary discourses can create miscommunication and barriers for bridging differences, but they can also serve as "content" that leads to the co-construction of new identities and discourses that can respond to social injustices.

For example, a given situation or instructional moment might call for us to lean in to our white, educated, Christian, heterosexual, or middle-class roots in order to relate to a common majoritarian experience or to accurately interpret something a majority student shares in class. Our ability to demonstrate an authentic majoritarian, "white insider" perspective, in that moment, lessens our *Otherness*... Ironically, this type of "code-switching" as an intentional pedagogical move to help them see the complexities of a topic of issue, can create just enough cognitive dissonance in our more resistant students to break down walls and build trust over time. Put another way (though highly problematic), in situations where our value, capabilities, or intelligence might be questioned as people of color, "flexing" our majoritarian social capital in some way can boost to our credibility as instructors amongst the predominance of whiteness in our classrooms.

In contrast, in other instances, we might lean into to our minoritized identities more intentionally. We see the value that (re)telling of lived and contested knowledges and the creation of new knowledges have to heal, galvanize, and embolden activism and agency (Kohli, Picower, Martinez, & Ortiz, 2015; Morales, 2018; Pour-Khorshid, 2018). Therefore, we utilize our own identities as tools for unearthing understanding. Often, in modeling resistance through the sharing of our own lived experiences, the experiences of loved ones, or accounts of experiences from communities of color we are connected to, students more readily can *see* and *feel* the humanity of the racialized *Other*. Depending on the topic or the issue being discussed, there are key moments that the ever-present weight of our *Otherness* can be leveraged in our favor. In such moments, personal narratives as counter-stories are profoundly powerful.

Whether they are stories of strength or struggle, they have the potential to break down essentialized notions of people from marginalized identities within the white imagination. The use of story to illustrate both the impacts of structural racism and systemic oppression, *and* the beauty, complexity, and hybridity within and among minoritized groups can be a transformative pedagogical tool in teacher education. Portrayed through narratives, poetry, testimonio, music, theater, or art, as educators of color the documenting, telling, and (re)telling of stories can be a decolonizing act; breathing life into the more formal content of multicultural education courses (the social, institutional, historical, economic, and political forces that shape education).

We believe the approaches described above have the potential to create learning experiences that are far more meaningful and impactful, as they build bridges to understanding worlds that otherwise might seem too different, too unfamiliar, or too far removed. As such, we see our ability to enact such relational and performative pedagogies at the intersections of our identities as critical skills in the strategic and situated work that we are doing in our region of the country.

Ultimately, in our work as teacher educators, we attempt to bridge the various communities in which we have at least one foot, for instance, public schools *and* academia; mainstream society *and* racialized communities in resistance. We offer our very bodies in service of teaching and learning, for instance, when we invite students to walk across invisible lines of difference that divide society. Through our presence as teachers and thought leaders, we encourage our students and colleagues to trust us, and to hold strong like a metaphorical sturdy *bridge*. As our settler-mainstream (i.e., white) associates figuratively cross over our backs

(Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1983), our bodies and our cultural insights facilitate the bridging of experiences that can potentially heal the divide between historically embattled communities.

With this said, we acknowledge that this type of teaching is personal. It requires courage and fortitude, as well as a level of vulnerability (Berry, 2010; Reyes, Radina, & Aronson, 2018). Yet, we believe that it is essentially vulnerability in these learning spaces that gives us power—power to transform, to change, and to be changed as learners and teachers (Mershon, 2018).

Sharing our own narrative journeys invites students to reflect on their own identities and experiences. As caring cultural brokers and intellectual coaches, we provide ongoing words of encouragement; instead of telling them not to look down from these dizzying heights, we suggest that they keep going steadily forward, despite the cognitive dissonance our students experience, particularly at the beginning stages of their journeys. We push them to hang in there when they voice their confusion and unease. We invite them to press into the discomfort, to entertain the uncertainty, and to dig deep into the humanity that connects us-- all with hopeful intentionality to grow and to become better versions of ourselves as educators, advocates, and agentive beings. Bridging is exhausting work, to be sure; yet it is this kind of emotional, intellectual, and psychological labor that faculty of color are obligated to do, if we remain committed to the mission of higher education within PWI spaces.

CONCLUSION

We hope that this chapter, although written perhaps in an unconventional, non-academic and decolonizing manner, has offered significant insights into the thought processes and professional praxis of two experienced multi-racial instructors. We are grateful for the opportunity to share our experiences and expertise, focusing on how our unique pedagogical innovations increase the relevance and impact of teaching. Our intent has been to provide insights for others who seek to enact critical care pedagogies with the expressed purpose of enabling teachers and administrators to become racially literate, culturally sustaining (Paris, 2012), and socially just educators, decision-makers, and advocates.

We acknowledge that our approaches as multi-racial educators may not work for or be accessible to everyone. We also acknowledge the pervasiveness of colorism and the privilege that comes with our various affiliations with white and majoritarian identities. However, we trust

that by illustrating some of the ways in which we, as educators of color negotiate and leverage our hybrid and intersectional identities within contested spaces, add richness, complexity, and depth to the teacher education programming within PWIs.

By sharing our own narrative journeys here, as we so often find ourselves doing with our students, we hope that we have inspired readers to reflect on their own experiences and struggles in doing anti-racist, social justice-oriented work. As the renowned Black feminist scholar and educator bell hooks (1999) has taught us, our spirituality can serve as a rationale for persevering in our work, as well as providing a resource for transcending oppressive conditions. We hold firm to the potentialities to draw on our identities, our very bodies, to serve as bridges between communities, and as tools in service of struggle, empowerment, and transformation.

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[4] If readers are interested in learning more about these assignments and/or activities, please contact the authors. We are willing to share details and/or associated instructions for facilitation upon request from the reader.

ADDITIONAL READING

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KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Epistemologies: Theories and conceptions of human knowledge.

Praxis: The practical application of theory or theory-informed practice.

Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs): Those institutions whose histories, policies, practices, and ideologies center whiteness or the white majority. PWIs, by design, tend to marginalize the identities, perspectives, and practices of people of color.

Prolepsis: In an education context, prolepsis is a teacher's critical, hopeful orientation towards students based on high expectations for what they can be or do. A commitment to speak and respond to students as though they are already exhibiting or performing at the level you know they are capable.

Race Evasion: An individual's tendency to avoid engaging in conversations involving issues of race and/or to avoid interracial/intercultural interactions with others who they perceive as different.

Social Justice: The focused efforts and commitments of social actors to dismantle of all forms of oppression – economic, racial, religious, gender, sexuality, nativity, etc.

Teacher Education: The preparation of post-secondary students for the profession of teaching. Coursework and field-based professional experiences that focus on the theoretical knowledge and practical skills needed to become a teacher.

White privilege: The benefits and privileges associated with being White or being socialized and/or interpreted as White. Founded on ideologies of ethnocentrism, White supremacy, racism and oppression of people of color.