



Start Where We Are

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Abstract: This self-study describes the impact of shifting the focus of my pedagogy with first-year undergraduate teacher education students. Through increasing explicitness and describing my intent, I aimed to make students aware of the narratives that are alternatives to their earlier experiences. Placement in an inner-city elementary school provided the opportunity to experience first-hand the educational lives of their students. The impact of this opportunity on me, my undergraduates, and my pedagogy are discussed.

Keywords:

The purpose of this paper is to tell the story of my efforts to explicitly challenge students with an alternative narrative related to teaching young inner-urban children. As we continue to learn together, we are all expanding in the experiences of children of color. In this paper, I explore how I increased explicitness about the intent of the course. Through content analysis of thick descriptions and quantitative analysis of data from course evaluations and surveys, I looked at the impact of increased explicitness. Preliminary findings show subtle changes in language and attitudes in terms of equity and interactions with children.

“I believe that education is the fundamental method of social progress and reform. I believe that all reforms which rest simply upon the enactment of law, or the threatening of certain penalties, or upon changes in mechanical or outward arrangements, are transitory and futile.” (Dewey, 1897)

A long time ago Dewey described the role of change in education. As an undergraduate, I read his creed, and it described what I wanted to do. I need to be upfront and say that this is a story of trying to find my stride in an essential class. This class could (maybe) set students on a path of questioning their own biases or beliefs, have no effect, or make them more intolerant.

Ladson Billings echoes Dewey, calling for teachers and students “to thoroughly examine how they develop their sense of cultural knowing and what they deem to be social and cultural truths about themselves and others” (2000, p. 257). Though the content of this course emphasizes equity and culturally relevant practices, content is not enough. No matter how good the curriculum content is, the curriculum cannot teach itself. ...teachers will have to exemplify the aspects of culturally relevant pedagogy” (Ladson-Billings, 2021, p. 76). Students in teacher education, however, may not have experienced educational opportunities and experiences with others who do not look like them, making self-examination a challenge. As the teacher, I must do my best to model self-examination and culturally responsive pedagogy. Pushing the students’ self-evaluation may result in a range of responses from passive resistance to fervent acceptance.

Gorski (2009) contends cognitive dissonance can be an effective tool in beginning student change in understanding social justice. He suggests that cognitive dissonance may be the “moment of truth” (p. 54) at which students are grappling with added information that contradicts old understandings. This, I believe, is the sense of “grappling.” We are all brought up in settings, not within our control, and begin class with a system of beliefs about race, racism, and privilege. Our students, as young adults, have rarely had these beliefs challenged, and when their beliefs are challenged, the instructor rarely indicates that this is purposeful and part of the intent of the class. Being a student in a class in which the teacher explicitly expresses content to challenge them with an alternative narrative encourages cognitive dissonance as a means of developing new understandings.

Setting the Stage

One place in which alternative narratives can be presented is through early coursework. The introduction to exceptionalities class is a requirement of all four initial teacher licensure programs. Students in the school of education take this course in their first year. Students in communication disorders, art education, and music education take the course as juniors or seniors and are advised into different sections. In the section for the school of education students, there were 35 to 60 students each semester. In addition, the education students are provided information on topics related to the eligibility and intervention with students with disabilities, culturally sustaining pedagogy, high leverage practices, and the intersectionality of race or ethnicity and disability. Before the pandemic, students spent two 90-minute sessions a week working with second and third graders at a high needs inner-city school, in which almost all students were African American.

One constant of the students has been that, for the most part, they were white females, except for two funded efforts (one in the early '90s for career changers and the second in the early 2000s to assist paraprofessionals with bachelors’ degrees obtain special education licensure). Our candidates take this course in the year following high school. They have also, at times, been told to be “colorblind”, that everyone is equal, or race does not matter, or that laws are in place to protect students of color.

The partner school for this study serves preschool through 6th-grade students in three struggling neighborhoods. The school was named after a social activist responsible for organizing the effort to keep the school in the neighborhood. The school is a hub for community services, coordinating health, safety, and social services as well as education. Mental health services for children are provided on-site. Most of the students served by the school reside in the city’s large residential communities managed by the county

housing authority. Four hundred sixty-eight housing units are in the cluster that shares a name with the neighborhood. Fifty-three percent of the units include children, and though cohabitation is high, 7.8 percent include married adults. All students receive free breakfast and free lunch, and through a community-based program, dinner. For the weekends “care bags” include items such as peanut butter, mac and cheese, crackers, and granola bars. Rather than balanced meals, these bags are provided to stave off hunger rather than present meals. A church provides hot meals on specific Sundays of the month.



Stage 1 – Recognizing the problem with my efforts

During fall 2017, thanks to our learning community, I began to realize that I was taking an ineffective tack with my students. I presented materials, engaged them in discussion, and had them write reflections. I struggled with understanding their culture (one quite different than the one in which I grew up) and what I saw as their superficial efforts. As a program, we are committed to valuing a driven agenda related to what is, at times, a hidden curriculum. Freire (2020) would problematize my stance by asking “Whose agenda?” I realized I was telling them how I wanted them to think, providing propaganda to support my claims. I was doing what I was preaching as a teacher: take your students where they are and bring them along step by step. I needed to tell them what I was doing and what I wanted to happen. Or, as we teachers say, start by identifying the goal for the students. I changed my expectations to have them consider diverse ways of thinking. And I explicitly told them my process.

Describing my intent put words to my stance. Jaffe (2009, p. 2333) states that stance is “taking a position with respect to the form or content of the utterance of the interlocutor”. Poggi, D’Errico, and Leone (2012) describe pedagogical stance as that taken by the teacher to fulfill his/her/their goals as a teacher and the goals linked to his/her/their professional role. Labosky (1980) also describes the need of candidates to interact with providing experiences to students so that they can question their own values and assumptions.

Loughran (2007) described self-study in a way that provides the context for my efforts. He contends that self-study is embedded in the desire to better align the teacher’s intent with teaching actions. As I reviewed the evidence from my students, I recognized the need to be more explicit with my intents. If I am going to align my actions with my intent, I need to explicitly describe my intent.

Beginning Spring 2020, I emailed each student a statement of my intent prior to the first day of class:

“One of the most important aspects of my professional development is working with a group of faculty members. We are studying our teaching. My self-study research question is still emerging, but I know it will be about challenging you all with an alternative

narrative about education, teaching, equity, and recognizing the value of every single child in your classroom.

What is this alternative narrative “stuff”? Lawler (2002, p. 242) describes a narrative as an interpretative device through which people present themselves, both to themselves and to others.” Schmid (2016) says it more simply: a series of stories that come from the heart and go to the hearts. The alternative narrative for this class is that each of us must continually examine our own beliefs and confront our unintentional biases related to diversity. We are working to be not just “unracist” or “unlearning racism” – we will be working on being anti-racist. We are looking toward culturally sustaining pedagogy, as Django Paris says, that “seeks to perpetuate and foster—to sustain—linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of the democratic project of schooling” (Paris, 2012, p. 93). Nope, not multicultural. Equity. No taco nights. No Black History Month. No women’s history month. Everyone has a right to equity and to be who he/she/they are. Every day.

Wow. But we are all in this together. As Alex Schmid says, “The say-do gap must be closed, otherwise credibility and trust will evaporate.” You hold me accountable for what I say and do, and I’ll hold you accountable. Thank you for starting on this challenging work.”

Mid-semester I sent out a survey to assess the reaction to the intent. I made responding to this survey worth two points to encourage responding, and all thirty-seven students did. All thirty-seven students claimed to have read it (they received points for responding). Of these, 35% selected that the class “made me think more about culture and race”, and 27% selected “made me think about my biases and about culture and race”. I sometimes pull out my virtual soap box and deliver what I refer to as diatribes, and 90% indicate that these orations made them think – 8% indicated that they had not noticed any diatribes, which may be positive or negative.

This assessment of my explicitness provided me with impetus to extend the alternative narratives. I remained concerned that I was coercing students to agree, at least superficially, with what I was saying. This acquiescence was apparent in assessments conducted program-wide for accreditation; the students took the teacher-pleasing route of celebrating diversity while continuing to struggle with the course content. I was not sure whether they were telling me what I wanted to hear or if they had been socialized to not mention these issues.



Stage 2 – Presenting challenges

Candidates read my intent statement, and a little over a third indicated that the intent and class made them think more about culture and race. None of the students identified what I referred to as my “datribes.” I was hoping they would recognize that I was strident about the teacher’s role in social change. All indicated that these contentions made them think, but sadly there were students that didn’t notice my fervor. I needed to continue to design ways to present challenges and clarify both my stance and intent.

In Spring 2019, I required the thirty-seven students to write and analyze four “thick descriptions” of their experiences in the tutoring field experience. Denzin (1989) describes a thick description as going beyond facts and appearance. Throughout the school-based work, the university students wrote thick descriptions, beginning with their first visit to the neighborhood and weekly through the field experience. Each week, students were provided prompts, such as “describe your first view of the school as the bus pulled into the parking lot”. These descriptions resulted in detail, feelings, and the context of people interacting with each other. At the end of the semester, students were given prompts to write a response that required them to analyze their thick descriptions across the semester, four of the students responded in ways that did not address the prompts (e.g., could the class be at a different time, I don’t like riding on busses, I’m glad we didn’t have a textbook). Of the others, the major themes, example responses, and number of responses are included in Table 1.

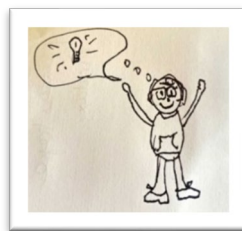
Table 1

Student Weekly Reflection Responses

Theme	Example	Frequency
Positive impact	This experience impacted me in a very positive way.	16
Learn or practice	It helped me use tools and acquire skills for the job I want in the future at a much younger age than I expected.	2
Changed outlook of Teaching in Inner City	Helping teach these students had a strong impact on my outlook of teaching in the inner city.	4
Diversity as a new experience	Growing up, I was not in an environment with any diversity. At this school, there was loads of it, and I truly enjoyed getting to meet and bond with these students.	7
Amount of Impact	I didn’t think that I was going to impact them as much as they impacted me, but, over time, it was obvious that we were all being greatly impacted by this experience.	3
Discipline	There were times where I had to be stern and strict with the students when they were being disruptive and would not get anything done. At first, I didn’t know how to approach it, but by the end I could change my tone with them, and they would respect me for it.	14
Connecting	I was able to talk about non-school topics with them, but I would also always be able to get them back on topic.	20
Depending on the day	My classroom had a lot of behavioral issues, so somedays they could be sweet and on task and other days it’s like they were a completely different person.	6

Confirm wish to be a teacher	[name of school] definitely confirmed my dream of wanting to become a teacher.	11
Teaching Skills	It taught me ways to teach students that learn better visually and hands on, like using Velcro boards or tracing worksheets. Just being able to observe ways that the teachers in that classroom interacted and taught the students showed me what to do and not to do with my future students.	21
Change major	This experience has led me to wonder if teaching really is for me. I'm really thinking about switching majors and going into [another college], but I will then be an entire year behind if I do so. I met with a specialist and found out that the major into [another college] that I want to go into only lets students transfer in the fall.	2
Fun	I think that helped us to have a very fun relationship.	2

After all the talk about race, social justice, and institutionalize racism, no one discussed that they were any different than the students they were teaching. The words race and culture appeared in no descriptions, though it is obvious if you walk the halls of the school. Though the students recognized poverty, these students didn't recognize race and culture. Throughout the class I made comments about the "Black children's funds of knowledge and cultural differences (kinship ties, for example) the students did not refer to race. My colleague (Yvette Pennington) a Black professor and I planned an activity to further assess this issue. We asked the students, "what do you see when you see Annie" and "What do you see when you see Dr. P." None of the students mentioned that one of us is white and the other is Black.



Stage 3 – A new endeavor

Though we were moving toward my goal with recognition of changes in how they felt about teaching in the inner city, I recognized that there seemed to be discomfort in talking about race and racism. With no students talking about race and culture, I had to find another way to assess what they were thinking.

Hoping for another way for students to discuss the impact of the class, at the end of the final, I asked students to describe their three takeaways. These were required responses that included points for completion. The students weren't graded on the content.

The results of the “takeaway data” were more encouraging. A summary of these data is provided in Table 2.

Table 2

Student Final Reflections

Theme	Examples	Frequency
Dispositions, traits of good teachers	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The importance of showing up• Patience• Every student learns differently• Not a friend, a teacher 2• Respect for people with disabilities• Teaching is relationships• Everyone needs PD (Professional Development)• Flexibility, keeping cool	25
Teaching strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Getting and keeping attention is hard• Making the students enjoy the learning• Speak clearly• Responded best when instruction was clear• Rules and routines are necessary• It's okay to make mistakes• UDL (Universal Design for Learning), Adaptations	31
Racial and Cultural issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Never thought about microaggressions• The developmental context matters• Trauma informed teaching• TED Talks• The significance of culturally sustaining teaching• Special Education Law and RTI and overidentification• Teaching in the inner city is different	30

Either the changes made to this course (additional TED talks, genial.ly presentations for content, increased informal conversations about the content of the course, or the pandemic, increased candidate’s attention to the cultural/racial issues of the class. Yet this class was unique. It was a full semester during the remote classes period. The tutoring was via google.meet and was not always as smooth as it could be. The summer class was also an outlier; I had several audiology students, international students, and (extraordinarily) several undergraduate engineering students. My plans for the fall semester needed to start afresh. I needed to recognize that these students are still learners, and rapid change will not occur.



Stage 4 – Becoming a techie

To keep my Ohio teaching license, I had to take six credits of classes every five years. Enter Sarah Schroeder and her Professional Certificate MS Word and Genial.ly Educator classes, which helped me incorporate these applications into the class. All our students in teacher education have some form of device, so rather than letting these devices sit there, I planned much greater interaction that I hope will increase active learning. As teacher educators, at times we preach action yet lecture. These activities were gleaned from sources committed to equity, including the Center for Antiracist Education (<https://antiracistfuture.org>), the Equity and Literacy Institute (www.equityliteracy.org), and The Knotted Line (www.Commonsense.org). “Break into groups and discuss,” in my experience, has resulted in groans. Talking over a PowerPoint often precipitated texting and social media.

Online tools support presenting material in ways that prompt student attention. Rather than a slide show about Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), a key aspect of special education, a walk through the Ohio form with interactive points associated with a worksheet encourages students to examine aspects of the IEP (Individualized Education Programs) in a way that requires active engagement. Reviewing an interactive game (Jeopardy) increases attention, and – gasp! – excitement in the classroom. Through engaging these tools, I wanted to provide students with examples of multiple ways of expression, representation, and engagement.

With the end goal nudging student toward examining their biases and belief systems rather than “unlearning racism” and employing alternative ways to present alternative narratives, I began Fall 2021 renewed and hopeful.

Intentional, explicit, and patient

This self-study will continue as long as I teach this class. As I continue this journal, I plan to continue to explore these themes:

- To paraphrase Milner (2020), I plan to increase the walk to match the talk. My emphasis will move away from “fixing” or “unlearning” my students’ biases and beliefs. I will continue to shift to “starting where they are but not staying there.” Presenting alternative narratives should be just that, presenting alternatives for their consideration.
- I plan to evaluate the impact of using various technological tools to increase students’ active engagement. Pear deck, a program requiring responses within a PowerPoint, will encourage students to respond to the content during class; interactive infographics will encourage independent learning. Digital exit slips will keep me aware of students’ thinking.
- I will be explicit about my goals for the students in the class. This is another “walk the talk,” making sure I tell the students my goals for them and how I will go about addressing them. I will again send out my stance to “warn” the students but will also require what I am calling a “prologue” to help them start with the tenor of the class.

- I plan to be “Hanging on to my hat because it’s going to be a bumpy ride.” For years Yvette Pennington has been telling me to let the students develop. I am striving to be patient, not my strong point, to encourage growth rather than sea change.
- Steve Kroeger is always ready to remind me about Paulo Freire. With his prodding I have reflected on my class and will continue to ask the question, “Is this as much propaganda as the great, white, middle-class America spreads?”

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