

Teaching On Days After: A Case Clinic Approach to Understanding More Humanizing Pedagogies in Early Childhood-Elementary Teacher Education

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Context of the Case Clinic Process

Our community of practice (CoP) formed as we began reading and meeting to discuss Alyssa Hadley Dunn’s book *Teaching on Days After: Educating for Equity in the Wake of Injustice* (2021). Although we were committed to Teaching on Days After pedagogies (TAD) and related justice-oriented practices, we also acknowledged tensions and trepidation about broaching certain topics in the Early Childhood-Elementary Education (ECEE) teacher education courses we taught out of concern for making mistakes, opening ourselves to criticism, and potentially causing unintentional trauma to our students. In order to continue to explore collaboratively how to engage in TAD “on all days” and to confront and overcome these hesitations when necessary to connect to and support our teacher candidates in authentic and meaningful ways, we engaged in a *case clinic* conversation (Wenger-Trayner et al, 2023, p. 146). Drawing on Wenger-Trayner and colleagues’ (2023) work, we used the following structure to guide our conversation:

- **Context of the Challenge:** The Presenter gives context to frame the challenge, then poses a specific question to the group. (5-10 minutes)

- **Understanding:** Group Members ask clarification questions to get a better understanding of the context and the nature of the challenge. Group members should not offer advice during this time. (15 minutes)
- **Sharing Related Experiences:** Group members share related experiences and stories. (10-15 minutes)
- **Advice:** Group members give advice (in the form of stories) and discuss each other's advice from the perspective of their own experiences. (15 minutes)
- **Summary:** The Presenter summarizes insights and advice they are taking away. (5 minutes)

Kara¹, the presenter, began by describing her diversity and awareness course for ECEE teacher candidates in their second year of the PreK-5 teacher preparation program. As she prepared to facilitate a discussion about gender diversity and gender identity with them, she had been reflecting on her own upbringing and internalized beliefs about limiting disclosure about her personal feelings and perspectives when teaching, a practice that conflicted with her thoughts and feelings and what she was learning from the *Teaching On Days* book. The question she posed to the CoP centered on how to further her capacity to embed TAD pedagogy into a class for early childhood-elementary teacher candidates who may be questioning their own thoughts and beliefs, and may even harbor regressive beliefs about children and families.

¹ All of the authors are faculty in the Ohio University Patton College of Education, and all are at the assistant and associate levels in either instructional or tenure track roles. We are all in the Early Childhood-Elementary Education program, but work on various campuses of the university. We have decided to use pseudonyms in an effort to protect the presenter's ("Kara's") identity. Opal, Jamie, Finley, and Nicole all actively participated as CoP members, with Finley serving as the timekeeper.

Developing Understanding

A rich question and answer session followed to clarify the context. Opal started by asking Kara to say more about why she is nervous, hesitant, and afraid to disclose her beliefs and values and to elaborate about what might happen if she were to share more. Kara talked about her past teaching experiences where two students who held homophobic views expressed sentiments that seemingly pushed another student out of the program for a year. And while Kara knows her students well, she is still worried about what may happen. Prompted by questions from Jamie about Kara's personal and professional experiences that led her to believe that she couldn't or shouldn't share her personal beliefs with her students, Kara spoke about growing up in a military family and the oppressive "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" mandate (where military officials could not ask or require a serviceperson to reveal their sexual orientation or else he/she/they would be discharged) that she remembers.

Finley asked how Kara typically supports teacher candidates in thinking about gender diversity and identity. Kara discussed the current texts and resources she uses and shared personal stories about her family and the positionality she brings in to ground her teaching for teacher candidates. Kara said she feels fairly comfortable with the content and telling stories about herself and her family, even though she's not quite sure how her students will respond.

Opal asked Kara how she approaches planning and teaching these topics (gender diversity/identity) differently based on her experiences. Kara talked about how she sets the stage for this kind of justice-oriented work and is much more intentional about acknowledging *discomfort* for herself and for the teacher candidates. For example, if students need a break and need to walk out of the room during certain discussions, she lets them know that it is fine to do so.

Jamie asked if Kara had shared her own upbringing with her students. Kara explained that while she is fairly transparent with them, she has not explicitly discussed "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" or the chauvinistic and racist family members that she lived with growing up.

Nicole asked about the times Kara remembers making missteps in her teaching and how she might have responded. Kara described beginning courses by discussing how she may/will make mistakes over the semester because she is human. She provided an example of when she made a mistake and was intentional about privately connecting with the student to acknowledge and apologize.

Sharing Related Experiences

Finley discussed how their own upbringing and positionality have shaped their perspectives and pedagogies related to diversity, equity, and justice and how these have changed over the course of their career (e.g., related to different identity markers including socioeconomic status and parental status) and both Finley and Jamie discussed how they have supported teacher candidates to learn about and reflect on identities as intersectional, relational, and evolving. Jamie added the importance of facilitating conversations between and among teacher candidates (rather than teacher educators always leading) given the implication of faculty often reflecting dominant, non-target identities and the power of students learning from other students.

Nicole shared how she has sometimes intertwined both personal stories with current events to support her students' understandings and developing conceptions of what it means to be an inclusive teacher. She included an example of feeling frustrated when teacher candidates were resistant to having representative children's literature (e.g., having picture books featuring lesbian families) and her continued attempts to confront, challenge, and support the teacher candidates in thinking about their practice from a more child-centered, equitable, just, and inclusive stance.

Opal recounted a story from her own undergraduate experiences where a faculty member did not appropriately facilitate a class meeting that included content about LGBTQ+ oppression and brutality. She used this example to illustrate how faculty can cause harm to students when they don't carefully and intentionally set up learning experiences.

Opal also discussed feeling confident and hopeful about engaging teacher candidates in conversations about diversity. But at the same time, she worried about how to react when a student wrote blatantly racist things in course assignments. She felt that in today's political climate, it can be a lot riskier to challenge and confront students.

Advice from Participants

Opal talked about teacher educators' roles as "gatekeepers to a profession that is of immense value and importance to the lives of children and to families and to society" and how we have a responsibility to take seriously this role to support teacher candidates in becoming equitable and inclusive teachers. She asserted that we also have a duty to confront issues in formal ways when needed (e.g., refer a teacher candidate to the Dean's Office when they have racist views about children and families).

Finley mentioned that this diversity work must be done in community with others, in part because of how vulnerable it can be to challenge and confront students as Opal discussed. Relatedly, Finley acknowledged that it's sometimes difficult to know exactly what to say to students to challenge and disrupt them while not wanting to shut them down. Again, Opal alluded to how engaging in this work seems to be riskier now, given the current climate.

Jamie advised that when having difficult conversations with others, she often has a visual reminder, like a photograph of children, to keep the focus on what is most important, which is the children that the student is going to be responsible for as a future teacher.

Because Kara had earlier discussed several students' conservative Christian views possibly leading to their regressive perspectives, Jamie suggested another tactic: connecting with students on a common identity marker (in her case, her Christian identity). In other words, she suggested using her Christian faith to show how she uses it to highlight and value the humanity of all people, including LGBTQ+ people.

Finley appreciated that Kara mentioned she explicitly acknowledged discomfort at the outset and that she allowed students to step out when they felt like they needed to. However, Finley also pushed back a bit, suggesting that students needed to also be responsible to be part of difficult conversations. They said, “it’s kind of a both/and... people need to take care of themselves when they're feeling trauma...[but also we don’t] want people to opt out of important conversations” that need to take place. Jamie articulated this idea as “embracing discomfort” and accepting conflict as a catalyst for change.

Finley also talked about how when teacher educators are worried about pushback from students when discussing “diversity content”, they can remind themselves to think about how to support, protect, value, and validate the most marginalized in the class and in society (and relatedly, the people who are voicing pushback are likely those with privilege). Opal also acknowledged that when it comes to pushback her fears are typically greater than what actually transpires.

Summary and Next Steps

One of the major insights that Kara (and the others) are taking away is that we must trust that teacher candidates can and need to have potentially challenging conversations about diversity issues. Teacher educators can’t ever know how they will feel or what they are going to say, and there may be some discomfort involved, but we need to be sure to provide space and facilitate these important conversations since they are likely happening in other spaces regardless.

In addition, while it is important to allow students to take time to step out if needed, they have a responsibility to take part in these difficult conversations. A big part of engaging in diversity, equity, and justice-oriented work is being open and vulnerable with them and learning alongside them. As Nicole said, “by making these spaces in our classrooms and cultivating the norms to be able to have these conversations, we're allowing them to grow even more.”

Additionally, the reason we are invested in this work is because our world is fundamentally inequitable and unjust, and there are certain groups of people who have been and are currently marginalized. It is part of our jobs as teacher educators to teach prospective teachers to understand, value, welcome, and support others.

At the beginning of the conversation, Kara was wrestling with the notion of whether or not she should be bringing in her own values and perspectives when discussing and teaching about issues of diversity, including specific topics like gender identity and gender diversity. Leaving this case clinic conversation, she is committed to not shy away from issues, activities, or conversations that might have potentially silenced herself or her students, but instead she will bring her full self which is necessary when unpacking individual or systemic oppression. She is committed to facilitating these conversations and bringing in her values, thoughts, and opinions while still respecting and meeting where students are coming from and without overstepping all the ethical boundaries that she has been taught for all these years.

The case clinic enabled our community of practice to speak to each other candidly, share experiences, and discuss ways to address Kara's concerns. The group engaged in rich dialogue that allowed the safe exchange of diverse perspectives and experiences related to teaching about sensitive topics. CoP members demonstrated empathy and understanding in response to Kara's apprehension about sharing her personal beliefs and experiences which fostered a supportive environment for each member. The formal structure of the case clinic shifted the CoP dialogue to make listening and speaking more intentional, allowing space for participants to hear and for a range of voices to be heard. It focused attention on the problem posed and constrained the discussion to that topic.

Additionally, the members offered practical advice and strategies to address ongoing challenges in their teaching. The emphasis on storytelling allowed for co-construction of meaning. Reflective practice, a necessary strategy for all educators, was evident as the group analyzed their teaching approaches and prior classroom experiences. The power of reflection

was highlighted as Kara moved from hesitation to committing to bring her full self into her teaching. Overall, the case clinic structure provided a supportive social learning space in which CoP members could learn and grow together toward stronger equitable and inclusive teaching practices.

References

Dunn, A. H. (2021). *Teaching on days after: Educating for equity in the wake of injustice*. Teachers College Press.

Wenger-Trayner, E., Wenger-Trayner, B., Reid, P., & Brüderlein, C. (2023). *Communities of practice within and across organizations: A guidebook*. 2nd Edition. Sesimbra, Portugal: Social Learning Lab.