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Bridging Teacher Candidates, School Communities, and the World During a Pandemic

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Bridging Teacher Candidates, School Communities, and the World During a Pandemic

Introduction

As the nation responded to a global pandemic, teacher educators were among those responding to the necessary call to change instructional practices, expectations, and response to student needs (Ellis, et al., 2020; Zhao & Watterston, 2021). The pandemic amplified inequities in terms of technology (Starkey et al., 2021), economics (Waller et al., 2020), social support (Zhai & Du, 2022), and resources (Czerniewicz et al., 2020). These inequities and multiple contexts and situations created even more distance and greater learning disparities (Grewenig et al., 2021): distance between students and professors, students and peers, students and classrooms, and students and the content. Teacher educators were expected to bridge this gap within a distant learning community.

Additionally, the nation found itself protesting racial injustices within a global health pandemic. This pandemic within a pandemic amplified the failures and biased structures and practices of our profession creating an urgency for change (McCoy-Wilson, 2022). Teacher educators are at the core of this call for change. In the profession that supports and creates all others, educators are responsible for being complicit in the fight to combat racism (Picower, 2009). Confronting inequities in schools is challenging in the best of times, but schooling during a pandemic was testing even the best educators. Addressing issues of equity is nearly ALWAYS going to be met with resistance. However, the time has come, and it is imperative to make real change. Education continues to evolve with society, but the direction of that evolution remains undefined. Serdyukov (2017) provides this description:

Education, being a social institution serving the needs of society, is indispensable for society to survive and thrive. It should be not only comprehensive, sustainable, and superb, but must continuously evolve to meet the challenges of the fast-changing and unpredictable globalized world (p. 4).

The pandemic has highlighted the need for educators to rethink, unlearn, and approach education differently (McCoy-Wilson, 2022). The purpose of these narratives is to provide discussion regarding lessons learned from the impact of the pandemic on education and consider the commitments required for building community and improving educational experiences.

Context

We are four teacher educators at a Midwest public university that is situated in one of the whitest cities in the United States. The university has a Public Affairs mission that encompasses three pillars: ethical leadership, cultural literacy, and community engagement. This mission is infused through all

programs across campus. The College of Education is the top teacher producer in the state. Students in teacher preparation programs continue to be predominately white and female (Carter Andrews et al., 2019; Irwin et al., 2022).

The authors come to this work from various backgrounds, experiences, and research foci: however, we all have found ourselves as scholars and teachers for social justice. All contributing authors identify as white, work at a primarily white institution, and have prior experiences in K-12 teaching, instructional coaching, and administration in urban, suburban, rural, and private schools, including Title 1 schools.

Narratives

The following three narratives present tensions and opportunities faced by many individuals involved in teacher preparation. Teacher preparation programs by a multitude of factors including the faculty, the communities they support, and the teacher candidates they prepare, but they are also guided by larger institutional frameworks. Drawing inspiration from the three pillars of our institution (Cultural Literacy, Ethical Leadership, and Community Engagement), we use narratives to highlight how we intend to confront the challenges of equity minded activism in a post-Covid educational context.

Cultural Literacy: Accounting for “Distance” Un/Learning

I teach future teachers, many of whom are from what I sometimes call “diversity deserts” (Author, 2016). It is my responsibility, not only to teach methods for social studies instruction, but to disrupt future teachers’ dangerous narratives, build cultural and equity literacies, and prepare them to do the same with their students and colleagues. Teaching social studies presents a challenge to future teachers who attended public schools during an era in which the subject was marginalized and discouraged in elementary schools because of standardized testing policies (Fitchett, Heafner, & Lambert, 2014). A large part of my course includes critically understanding and teaching multicultural U.S. history. Although we make some connections with current, global events, I still see a vast distance between my students and the rest of the world.

Like many of my teacher candidates, I became a teacher in a diversity desert. Mine was a rural, overwhelmingly white, Title 1 school in the Midwest. Within this place, a school board member and principal banned an art project featuring Arabic calligraphy because it was “un-American”. A teacher taught his 5th grade class that “all Muslims hate all Christians.” With impunity, a student regularly wore a t-shirt featuring puppeteer Jeff Dunham’s Achmed the Dead Terrorist and his catch line, “Silence! I keel you!” Most disturbingly, I heard community members, young and old, declare some variation of “We ought to just bomb them all...” when discussing events involving the Middle East and North Africa. Illustrating the relationship between racism and terrorism, some declared the same sentiment when discussing demonstrations in Ferguson, Missouri.

Teachers in the same community uncritically embraced the school's musical performance of Disney's *Aladdin Jr.* and decorated their reading corners with mass produced "Moroccan" motif rugs while knowing nothing about people living in Morocco. I taught in the toxic shadows of 9/11, an endless and extractive "Global War on Terrorism", racism, and orientalism. Many of my current students and future teachers grew up in it.

When teacher candidates went into lock down in the Spring of 2020, my friends and colleagues in Egypt and Morocco had already been teaching in lockdown for weeks. They filled my social media feed with videos of their English lessons posted to YouTube, advice for teachers using WhatsApp, and webinars created by and for educators. Inspired by their work, I scrapped my pre-pandemic syllabus, created one with options to participate in weekly World Ed Chats on Zoom, and invited every international teacher I knew to join us and to share the invitation with their colleagues.

The diversity desert of my past connected me with my students as I poured over their reflections. They described transformative experiences of learning with and from teachers in the Middle East and North Africa- their first conversations with people who are Muslim, conversations about the similarities between Islam and Christianity, learning about the niqab (face covering) Marwa wore, congratulating Mohamed on the birth of his first child "Mabrouk!", Azza's wise advice for nervous new teachers, dancing with a Moroccan student in a breakout room, being shown Ramadan lights in Cairo, hearing Arabic, Moroccan Darija, Hassani, and Tamazight and subsequently learning about ethnic and linguistic diversity in the Muslim world.

We all benefitted from the experience. An undergraduate student and I coauthored a chapter, "I Never Thought Quarantine Would Take Me All Over the World" (Author, 2020) and I began working with Moroccan teacher trainers to create a virtual exchange project between teacher candidates in Missouri and Morocco. Within its first two years more than 600 new and future teachers from our university and Moroccan training centers have participated, and the project continues to grow.

It is fair to say that the ongoing global pandemic has been a transformative time for teacher preparation. However, when thinking about possibilities for distance learning, my mind races to a different kind of distance. Learning and teaching in "diversity deserts" requires us to testify and take account of how we are not yet doing enough to disrupt our most dangerous narratives and the dangerous distance we create between ourselves and members of local and global communities.

I am now turning my attention to what we accomplished and did not accomplish through our World Ed Chats. Although disrupting learned distance is a step in the right direction, alone, it falls short of building equity literacies and

just practices. As I sit here, still “socially distancing” and taking account of what we did together, activists risk their health and lives to remind us that *#BlackLivesMatter*. That we must say their names- *George Floyd. Ahmaud Arbery. Breonna Taylor*. My mind races back to the diversity desert of my teaching career, the one without a teacher of color, the classrooms that, like mine at the university, held very few students of color, to our K-12 district’s graduates who went on to declare that “We ought to just bomb them all” as the denizens of Ferguson struggled for justice.

Ethical Leadership: Preparing and Supporting Ethical Teacher Leaders

Educators focused and prepared with an orientation towards justice, equity, and inclusion have an ethical obligation to ensure student academic success and broad social wellness (Gorski, 2016). That ethical understanding positions educators to be social justice leaders of change in schooling that leads to increasingly equitable outcomes, both societally and academically. The first step in leading for justice and equity is being able to recognize how inequity is perpetuated in schools. Many future and current teachers are not aware of the social and professional costs they are likely to incur when confronting systemic racism in schools (Pizarro & Kohli, 2020). TPPs must acknowledge, prepare, and vehemently defend students advocating for equity (Gorski & Parekh, 2020).

The following narrative is an imagined scenario informed by years of hearing the stories of student teachers attempting to lead on issues of equity and justice in school settings. Karla was uncomfortable, her face was breaking out from wearing the same school provided mask Deandre, a student in her student teaching experience, was wearing. She was wearing the school provided mask because she had forgotten the one, she had sewn herself, back at her apartment. DeAndre was wearing the school provided mask because the mask his mother had sent him with wasn’t considered appropriate to wear at school because it had “*Black Lives Matter*” printed on it.

Ms. Johnson, the cooperating teacher addressed DeAndre, saying “you know the rules, if you don’t wear a mask you’ll have to go to the office, it is a school rule for the safety of everybody in the school.” DeAndre again complained about putting on the mask, and so Mrs. Johnson asked Karla to walk DeAndre down to the principal’s office “just to make sure he gets there.”

Karla had learned many valuable things working with Mrs. Johnson; she knew she was going to be a better teacher because of the experience, but she also knew that certain students had a unique ability to get under Ms. Johnson’s skin; DeAndre was one such student. Karla and DeAndre had done the walk to the office more times than Karla could count. Each time she would drop him off, and return to class, but she had begun to experience a nagging feeling that she should say something. Through her coursework, she knew boys, and more specifically, Black boys, like DeAndre were likely to be sent to the office for perceived

behavior problems (Cook et al, 2018). She decided to say something when they got to the office.

When they arrived at the office, DeAndre, already familiar with the routine, plopped down in the chair facing the principal. Standing there, Karla told the principal that Mrs. Johnson had sent DeAndre to the office for not wearing his mask and being disrespectful, but that DeAndre hadn't been disrespectful, he had merely told Mrs. Johnson he didn't want to wear the mask because it was hot. The principal thanked her but informed Karla it sounded like DeAndre was being disrespectful by *talking back* when Mrs. Johnson had asked him to follow school rules. Karla pointed out that she had seen plenty of kindergarteners who were not wearing a mask ever. The principal, now visibly annoyed with Karla, asked Karla to leave so he could talk with DeAndre and figure out the appropriate consequence for being disrespectful. "He wasn't disrespectful, these masks are hot" burst out Karla. She immediately knew she had crossed a line by the look on the principal's face, and it was confirmed when she got back to class. Mrs. Johnson stopped her in the hall and told her she should never question her decisions in front of a student or another colleague ever again, it was unprofessional behavior. Mrs. Johnson left the conversation by indicating that she would be speaking with Karla's university supervisor about her behavior. Karla left school that day crushed:

Crushed because she might not pass student teaching.

Crushed because she was embarrassed.

Crushed because she felt like she had done something wrong.

Crushed because based on all her training she had done the right thing.

Crushed for DeAndre.

He was sent home, missing instruction, and interaction with peers.

Teacher educators, like Karla, willing to support the dignity and rights of students should be celebrated and encouraged. However far too often teacher preparation programs gloss over or worse, actively resist supporting students who are engaging in efforts to make schools more equitable and just. Teacher preparation continues to struggle producing teacher advocates particularly when confronted with school partnerships that have differing philosophies as it pertains to equity and justice for all students.

Community Engagement: Parents and Caregivers as Education Activists

I am a White middle-class mother and teacher educator, my oldest child just finished his first year at the neighborhood middle school, and my other children are still attending the neighborhood elementary school. School improvement efforts are challenging for school leaders and teachers alike. Part of the challenge is due to the fact that school leaders and teachers dedicated to reforming and improving schools also depend on earning a livelihood from the system they are working to change. Therefore, parents and caregivers often

become better positioned to be agents of change, advocates for equity practices, and activists in the school system.

During the first quarter of the academic year my oldest child's sixth-grade math teacher was not present for over five weeks of the quarter. There were substitutes rotating in and out of the sixth-grade mathematics classroom throughout the quarter in the teacher's absence. The school leadership never informed the families by sending an official school communication home. Instead, families were left ignorant of the fact that student(s) were spending most of the mathematics instructional time with non-certified substitutes simply trying to keep students occupied during class time with busy work.

When my husband and I learned about the situation, we requested and had a meeting with the school principal to discuss concerns about the lack of consistent instruction by a qualified teacher during the first quarter. We were assured changes were being made and all would be well. Shortly after our meeting, first quarter grades were reported to families. Many of the had earned a low grade in mathematics for the first quarter, including our son. This incident became an opportunity to advocate for all children, so another meeting was requested. The school leadership team (principal and assistant principal), along with the mathematics teacher will be present at the meeting. Naively, we believed the concerns regarding inconsistent math instruction would be heard by the educators in the space and wrongs from the first quarter would be righted.

The discussion during the meeting centered around inequity. We were advocating for all students in the local neighborhood school, as the middle school is one of the two most diverse middle schools in the local school district. The school leadership and even teacher struggled to understand this perspective, let alone apologize for the mistakes they had made in not providing a high-quality mathematics education to the sixth-grade students. The sixth graders had missed close to an entire quarter of math instruction, while peers at other middle schools in the largest district in the state were experiencing and learning from qualified mathematics teachers. We were being an advocate for all children at the middle school because the quality of instruction impacted every sixth grader at the middle school.

No one knew how drastically the learning in the final quarter of the school year would be impact; a worldwide pandemic began resulting in students across the nation missing the last quarter or more of their school year. The pandemic only added more missed math instruction for this diverse group of sixth graders. And most families did not know about the rotating substitutes for math instruction that occurred during the first quarter due to the lack of communication from the school leaders.

This story is not isolated; Ishimaru (2020) recognized that the pandemic did more than highlight racial injustices, it deepened the divide. This pandemic

has highlighted the opportunity for all stakeholders, families, and organizations (i.e., PTA) to advocate for all children. School communities need to create new ways- meaningful ways for caregivers and parents to engage with students' educational needs. The pandemic has given us the opportunity to rethink how school is done with students and their families.

Synthesis and Commitments

Nearly thirty years ago, Giroux (1983) called for schooling to address inequities mirrored in society. That seminal work has continued to be the foundation for repeated calls for schools to combat societal inequalities (Oakes et al, 2018; Ryoo et al, 2020). TPPs have responded by shifting, to varying degrees, toward social justice informed teacher preparation. The quote by Maya Angelou's "when you know better you do better" is often bandied about as the rationale for the continued existence of systematic oppression of marginalized communities, as if White people are just not aware of the discrepancies that exist.

These three separate and unique narratives point to the injustices within teacher preparation and schools. Using comparative analysis (Glasser & Strauss, 1967), we opened coded then grouped codes to form themes. These themes inspired commitments for change. TPPs can no longer assume that as long as we highlight the systematic inequities present in schooling, our students (both teacher candidates and practicing teachers) will respond differently than previous generations of teachers, thereby eventually eliminating racial and economic disparities. TPP's don't merely prepare and support teachers by preparing them to effectively teach mathematics or social studies, the same approach must be used for equity advocacy.

The time for bold action in teacher education has come. If educators are going to disrupt biased practices in schools, then all stakeholders need to be aware educator preparation opportunities as we work to build inclusive communities in which we live and work. Educators throughout the preparation pipeline should commit to academic excellence, but a commitment to social equality is equally important, to that end educators should consider the commitments laid out below:

Commit to acknowledge and combat the challenges of diversity deserts. We are committed to teaching for global understanding and supporting the development of cultural literacies. Research has shown that teacher preparation has provided teacher candidates with the language and perspectives necessary to discuss and identify the impacts of instruction on a diverse student population (Halbert & Chigeza, 2015; Liu & Ball, 2019).

Commit to empower and supporting equity-focused teacher leaders. We are committed to a shared vision for preparing anti-racist teachers. This preparation includes having a shared understanding and commitments with and from all stakeholders (faculty, per course, university supervisors, mentor teachers, and other community stakeholders). "For in this field, it is our measured

movement forward that nourishes resistance to—and possibilities of freedom from—racial oppression within and among us” (Ohito, 2016, p. 464).

Commit to supporting families and helping them leverage their, and our, power (perceived or not) to advocate for children, equity, and access to quality learning experiences. Because schools and communities remained highly segregated (Fuller et al., 2019; Monarrez et al., 2019), we are dedicated to bridging the distance through our preparation and support of teachers.

Commit to advocating and supporting access and equity to meaningful instruction, especially mathematics and social studies. Mathematics is often the vehicle for perpetuating the status quo (Stinson, 2004), because Black, Indigenous, and People (children) of Color (BIPOC) and children living in poverty experience dehumanizing practices and are marginalized in mathematics classrooms (Battey & Leyva, 2016). Impoverished mathematics instruction tends to be focused on rules, basic facts, compliance, procedural thinking with the goal for state assessments and not instruction focused on problem solving, inquiry, and exploration to succeed outside of school (Delpit, 2012), and is often led by teachers with inadequate preparation in teaching mathematics (Lewis, 2005). Some teachers are emergency certified, long-term substitutes, or teachers teaching outside of their certification (Darling-Hammond & Sykes, 2003). So, it is imperative that we advocate against problematic practices. Additionally, effective STEM learning is embedded within real-world contexts which is social studies. So, we advocate for social studies instruction that teaches students how to both understand and change the world in which they live.

TPPs often pay little attention to supporting future teachers engaged in social justice and equity-minded activism (Carter Andrews et al, 2021). Teacher candidates are beginning to be educated on educational systematic racism, so they often “know better”, but teacher candidates have not been confronted with the challenges of school activism, so when they “do better”, they are for the first time confronted with disappointment and cost associated with advocating for equitable schools. The distance between socially aware and equity activism is wide but has been occupied by a small but dedicated group of social justice educators. The next generation of teachers is already proving to be more aware and more focused on action and stepping into that gap between social awareness and activism in far greater numbers and far sooner than previous generations of teachers. It is teacher educators’ responsibility to prepare teacher candidates for bridging challenges they will likely encounter.

The Covid-19 pandemic response continues to have seismic consequences for the short and long-term educational outcomes of students (Hanushek & Woessmann, 2020). The challenge of identifying and disrupting distances remains in order to build and sustain creative, imaginative, and inclusive communities. If we can turn education upside down almost overnight to disrupt patterns of disease

transmission, we can do big things to disrupt patterns of racism, classism, sexism, and other social evils. The next generation of teachers have been prepared to recognize the social and educational challenges that exist within communities. The preparation of teachers must not only prepare educators who can practically apply knowledge (**knowing better**) but also activism (**doing better**) in a school setting. All educators must all commit to this work.

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