Designing, Facilitating, and Supporting for the Critical Engagement of Self-Reflection, Critical Diaglogue, and Justice-Oriented Teaching

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Abstract

This article provides a response to the collective body of articles in this issue of *Teacher Education Quarterly*. It offers a brief discussion of current pressing issues found in the preparation of teacher candidates as they navigate through coursework and field experiences, and the tensions found in their first years of teaching. Included is a discussion about critical critiques, counter pedagogies, and the resistance found in the range of ideas and thoughts in the five articles presented here. A number of considerations surface about dialogic pedagogy, the reconciliation of theory and practice, controversial public issues, community-based clinical placements, race-visable conversations, and maintaining and defending justice-oriented work. This response also points to the work of teacher education programs in creating brave space, normalizing the disruption of teaching as usual, and the capacity for sustainability with the intention of lifelong relationships and development.

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Introduction

Because educators have "dared to study and learn new ways of thinking and teaching, so that the work we do does not reinforce systems of domination, of imperialism, racism, sexism, or class elitism…." (hooks, 2003, p. XIV) critical critiques, counter pedagogies, and resistance have been cultivated. Freire (1970) reminds us of the importance of this work through naming, dialogue, and reflective action. "To exist, humanly, is to name the world, to change it…. Human beings are not built for silence, but in word, in work, in action-reflection" (p. 69). This justice–oriented work calls for the disruption of teaching as usual, in order to shift schools and the larger society. The articles selected for this journal provide us with examples of critical critiques, counter pedagogies, and resistance. Rooted in theories around dialogue, teacher agency, democratic education, equity, problem-posing education, critical race theory, culturally relevant pedagogy, resistance, and third space, this collective group of articles addresses some pressing issues found in the preparation of teacher candidates as they navigate through coursework and field experiences, and the tensions found in the first years of teaching.

Critical Critiques

A critical critique invites the process of naming, identifying, and interrogating belief systems, practices, policies, and systematic structures as a means of dismantling and transforming. Tannebaum's article uncovers how teacher candidates perceive controversial public issues (CPI) in all areas of K-12 curriculum, as well as the reasons for their lack of integration. Participants in this study were emphatic about CPI and articulated its importance, but also associated CPI with citizenship education rather than issues about "the equitable treatment of historically marginalized groups," democratic education, or critical theory. Tannebaum's study identifies areas that prevent teachers from integrating CPI into their pedagogical decision making. It was found that content area matters as novice teachers perceive CPI to be more relevant and approachable in specific subject areas such as social science and history, English language arts, and science while less consistent in math. Novice teachers also identified that context matters as the school and the district are significant factors when considering upset parents, offended students, and unsupportive administrators. Through a critical critique this research identifies the need for teacher preparation programs to include the explicit modeling of discussions that focus on CPI, and also explore the rights and responsibilities of teachers and students in various scenarios that involve parents and administrators.

Howard also offers a critical critique by interrogating "how things were done" in a study about classroom placements by race. Classroom placements, many times, are intentional processes where deliberations occur considering the classroom composition and the placement of individual students. Factors such as students'

abilities, workstyles, and behaviors are common considerations for student grouping and classroom placement. The school site included in this study was an elementary in the U.S. South where the lead administrator directed all classroom teachers to sort students into homerooms for the following school year and to consider race in the process. The critical critique of this placement process provides insight on how school sites are understanding and operationalizing racial equity. Findings suggest that though considering race may work towards educational equity, failing to pair the process with trainings and/or dialogue regarding race and racism reduces the process to colorblindness, monoracism, and essentialization. Because of the complexities of race, trainings and support to foster a deeper understanding about race is a necessary step.

Counter Pedagogy

Stewart, Hill, and Lindstrom, in their article "Exploring Wobble Through Collaborative Dialogue to Reconcile Theory and Practice," remind us of the capacity of dialogic pedagogy within teacher preparation programs as a process of addressing the tensions and complexities that teacher candidates navigate while applying theoretical knowledge and approaches taught in their courses. Feiman-Nemser and Buchman (1985) referred to this as the two-worlds pitfall, in which teacher candidates struggle to reconcile elements such as university professors who value a liberatory pedagogy, while at the same time their placements that model standardized instructional practices aligned with a scripted curriculum. Frustration and confusion become evident for teacher candidates attempting to navigate these competing ideologies, therefore a dialogic pedagogy can turn wobble moments (Fecho, 2011) into ample learning opportunities. Stewart, Hill, and Lindstrom's study reinforced that during times of student teaching, teacher educators can utilize collaborative dialogue, via problem posing seminars, to create a space for teacher candidates to generate practical solutions to complex challenges, and reconcile theory and practice present in teacher preparation programs and student teaching placements.

An essential aspect in teacher preparation programs is the cultivation of culturally responsive teachers that incorporate critical self-reflection and nurture a deep understanding of their students. Jacobs, Davis, and Hooser highlight the importance of community-based clinical placements that can actualize this process. Community-based clinical experiences, simply settings outside traditional schooling, can be critical sites for teacher preparation.Their study proposes that diverse community-based clinical experiences have the capacity to traverse the binary of self and student, and go into a third space (Flessner, 2008) to develop culturally responsive educators. Simply placing teacher candidates in community-based experiences does not guarantee positive outcomes, therefore a specific process was utilized within the study to create a ripe context for reflection, learning, and development. One key feature of this process and counter pedagogy included the

positioning of students as teachers for the teacher candidates to learn from. Another was the integration of specific readings allowing the teacher candidates to engage in self-reflection regarding their assumptions, while being able name what they were experiencing in their interactions with students. The last key feature was having a context to put their understandings and learnings into action; in the case of the study it was a newspaper assignment completed by teacher candidates and their students. Community-based experiences, coupled with these three pedagogical features, pushed teacher candidates to learn about their students and to adjust their planning and instruction to better match their students' needs and lived experiences. A pedagogy as such has potential for developing critically responsive teaching.

Resistance

Critical educators experience a paradox of resistance. Critical educators resist ineffective and oppressive school culture, structure, and organization, while at the same time face resistance from people, spaces, and policies due to their lived liberatory curriculum and pedagogy. The paradox of resistance is a taxing process for critical educators to navigate. Critical educators continuously reflect and act upon, "What are you teaching *for*?" and "*For* whose benefit?" Is it possible for teachers to teach social justice and maneuver through resistant school spaces, while maintaining and growing their teaching? How does survivance (survival + resistance) look for these teachers?

Critical teacher agency allows for one to successfully engage in and continue justice-oriented teaching while in less than supportive teaching environments. In the article "Word Capture, Straight Refusal, Teaching Well, and Other Forms of Resistance: The Development of Critical Teacher Agency," Gibbs follows the stories of three critical teachers in their first years of teaching as they exhibit their capacity for critical teacher agency. Based on specific skillsets, knowledge and understandings, belief systems, and dispositions, all three teachers were able to teach a justice-oriented approach even while in hostile environments. Findings indicated that all teachers held pedagogical knowledge and the capacity to teach through a justice-oriented approach. They also held a belief system in the capacity for critical pedagogy regardless of context, and held a willingness to take risks. Critical teacher agency was found to be based on individual strengths and circumstances, and it is not only being able to teach well but to also being able to defend and expand on one's justice-oriented teaching. In such, it is imperative that teacher preparation programs commit to how to teach critically and pedagogically, and equally important how to navigate the paradox of resistance, especially in the presence of unsupportive school environments.

Recommendations and Actions

We conclude this analysis with three major recommendations intended to promote the continual development of teacher candidates as they navigate course-work, field experiences, and the tensions found in the first years of teaching. First, it is necessary to offer a "brave space" for teacher candidates to deeply self-reflect, to participate in dialogue, to deconstruct their own biases, to put their beliefs into disequilibrium, to reconcile tensions, etc. As a starting point, we consider "An Invitation to Brave Space" by Micky ScottBey Jones:

> Together we will create brave space
> Because there is no such thing as a "safe space" –
> We exist in the real world
> We all carry scars and have all caused wounds.
> In this space
> We seek to turn down the volume of the outside world,
> We amplify voices that fight to be heard elsewhere,
> We call each other to more truth and love
> We have the right to start somewhere and continue to grow.
> We have the responsibility to examine what we think we know.
> We will not be perfect.
> This space will not be perfect.
> It will not always be what we wish it to be
> But
> It will be our brave space together, and
> We will work on it side by side.

Teacher education programs have the capacity to create a shared brave space that allows individuals to fully participate as human beings. This is one that cultivates an individual's capacity to be vulnerable, to question, to listen, to interrogate, to name, to learn, to heal, to support one another, to trust, to grow, and to develop.In order to do the work that is offered by the authors in this issue, teacher education programs are called to consider how to best nurture a brave space. Is it best to cultivate this focus during orientation meetings for teacher candidates? Does it become a pedagogical priority in courses, and if so, do teacher educators have the appropriate skills and dispositions to facilitate this process? Is the focus on brave space explicitly inserted in the messaging found on websites, in syllabi, in program literature? How will the ongoing development of brave space be monitored and measured?

Secondly, I point out that this issue intentionally framed the articles into sections titled critical critiques, counter pedagogies, and resistance with the intention of normalizing the disruption of teaching as usual. Terms such as critical critiques, counter pedagogies, and resistance challenge the status quo and potentially generate some level of cognitive dissonance, implicit bias, and discomfort. When we prioritize these concepts, we invite teacher educators and teacher candidates into the discursive process of dismantling, re-inventing, transformation, and to "re-imagine

our roles as teachers and find ways to create meaningful personal understandings of the world" (Ross, 2016, p. 8).

Finally, I am convinced that while embracing the implications and recommendations of each article in this issue, we must consider the challenges teacher candidates and novice teachers face, and will continue to face, engaging in this work. In such, the capacity for sustainability occurs through the development and execution of action plans. Teacher candidates and novice teachers must strategize for the sustainability of reconciling theory and practice, integrating controversial public issues in all content areas, maintaining and defending justice-oriented teaching, engaging in conversations and trainings about race and racism, questioning previously held assumptions about children, and exploring culturally responsive teaching. In such we are left to wrestle with a multidimensional responsibility of teacher education programs. We are left to explore our capacity for a lifelong relationship with those that exit our programs; a lifelong relationship that is about listening, examining, supporting, reciprocating, reconciling, and growing.

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