Teaching while Black: Best Practices for Engaging white[2] Pre-service Teachers in Discourse Focused on Individual & Cultural Diversity in Urban Schools

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Abstract

In this article, I reflect on ways to improve my practice as a Black woman teaching in a white-dominated teacher education program through self-study in teacher preparation (S-STEP). I describe strategies that Black professors can use to engage white preservice teachers in discourse about individual and cultural diversity in urban schools. The general underlying principle in this focus is that one must create a safe space for white students, regardless of comfort, to communicate about individual and cultural diversity in urban schools. This is imperative, as research demonstrates many professors of color, specifically Black professors, experience hostile classroom environments. These experiences occur mostly within white-dominated institutions when students experience a shift of power from a white professor to a professor of color. This shift is intensified when the topics of the course focus on equity and social justice in urban schools. Practitioners of color are encouraged to explore ways in which these and others can be incorporated in courses that prepare white teachers to teach diverse populations in urban schools.

Keywords: *Black professors, teacher education, white pre-service teachers*

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[2] Note: The author of this article deliberately does not capitalize the word "white" in order to minimize the dominance of whiteness as the standard.

"Kisha, I must warn you that most African Americans who have taught this course get bad evaluations because it is an African American teaching white students about the issues of diversity. As a white woman, it has gone two ways [for me]: students can connect to my experiences, or they think that I hate white people." The comment was said casually to me, a Black woman and newly hired professor at a white-dominated institution, by a white associate dean and immediately prompted feelings of excitement, fear, and anxiety. The dean and I were discussing a course she'd previously taught and one I had just been assigned: *Individual and Cultural Diversity in Classrooms.*

The dean's comment reminded me I would expect challenges, and the lens of critical race theory (Allison, 2008; Delgado & Stefanic, 2001) helped me situate the conversation. Although the course focused on the challenges of individual and cultural diversity in the classroom, the context and structure meant the associate dean's white privilege provided the opportunity for her to operate in a social space where whiteness is credited, privileged, and taken for granted. I would not have the same luxury.

Based on the literature and the experiences of fellow Black professors, I knew there were going to be students who question our competency, credentials, and ability to teach and assess their work. I was likely going to have white students who expected me to represent an entire race, leaving me feeling emotionally drained as I re-wrote, revised, and perfected lectures to avoid being seen as less than totally prepared. Managing the frustrations resulting from a racial double standard in order to be effective in the classroom meant I had to be cognizant of existing macro-level racial barriers while diminishing the importance of those barriers on the micro-level (Harlow, 2003). I made the choice to honor my emotions *and* move into action.

Literature Review

Emotional Impact for Faculty of Color

The discrimination Black faculty face falls into two categories: institutional and personal racism. Institutional racism is a system of inherent institutional structures, processes, and policies that lead to the disparities between Black faculty and their colleagues. Personal racism is direct experiences with racism and discrimination at the individual level (Griffin et al., 2011). In addition, the first years of any faculty appointment involve high levels of stress due to the many demands (Cole et al., 2017) of a new position. It was reassuring to know that the anxiety I felt during that conversation with the dean was

common, but it didn't limit the emotional toll and the subsequent pressure (Harlow, 2003) of managing racial stigma and my positionality in the classroom as a Black woman professor. This awareness and pressure suppressed my excitement and was compounded by reading accounts of Black women harassed and verbally abused by students (Pope & Joseph, 1997). I knew I was going to have white male students, and so I read work by authors like Allison (2008) who theorized they are the most common harassers of Black female faculty because our mere presence may challenge some of their beliefs about the abilities of minorities and women.

Armed with this information but shaken by the conversation with the associate dean, I began to question my knowledge and presence as a professor, especially knowing I was the youngest member of our faculty. I realized I'd internalized a fear my white students would not take me seriously or respect me. Harlow (2003) attests to this, indicating that younger Black professors could struggle to win a sense of control over their ability to be effective.

Researchers (Cole et al., 2017; Jayakumar, et al., 2009; Stanley, 2006; Trower & Chait, 2003) argue that additional support is needed for faculty of color due to issues of racism, tokenism, and hostile campus environments. Unfortunately, that support was not available to me. I knew I had to quickly learn to manage my emotions in ways my white colleagues wouldn't have to (Harlow, 2003). Affect control theory (Heise, 1989) helped me understand that if our environment fails to confirm our conception of self, we adjust our definition of a situation or change our behavior to relieve the resulting emotional tension. This meant I would likely try to change my behavior to correct students' perceptions of me.

Professors of Color Experiences with white Students

All professors in the modern era face challenges, and professors of color face compounded challenges due to racism. Professors of color experience role conflict, isolation, and a lack of respect (Aguirre, 2000; Harlow, 2003), unwelcoming and hostile classroom environments in white-dominated institutions (Tuitt et al., 2009), and problematic white student attitudes and behaviors (Harlow, 2003; McGowan, 2000; Stanley, 2006). This includes students questioning the authority and credibility of professors of color in the classroom and reporting their concerns to department chairs. The hostility is at times so overt, it has made the news. Black professors have found hangman's nooses hung on their office doors (Smallwood, 2007) and been mistaken for a thief (Goodnough, 2009). Delano-Oriaran and Parks (2015) argue that the issues professors of color experience are

due to white students experiencing a shift in power from a white person to a person of color, and their belief Black professors might try to force a racial agenda upon them.

Best Practices for Professors of Color Teaching Primarily white Students

Unfortunately, there is limited guidance for professors of color who have these experiences or for Black professors teaching primarily white students who are preparing to teach students of color in urban schools. While there are some resources for professors who teach in predominantly white teacher preparation programs (*e.g.,* Hickey & Lanahan, 2012), they typically presume the professor is also white or are authored by white professors. Gloria Ladson-Billings, a Black woman, (1996) shared her approach to engaging her white students in conversations about issues of race, equity, and social justice. Her strategies include:

- structuring seminars in such a way that students would engage in dialogue with people they don't speak to on a daily basis,

- distributing index cards to solicit questions and comments about the readings,

- engaging students in small group discussions and activities as a way to share ideas,

- reminding students that all comments and opinions are open to criticism and debate,

- mid-semester evaluation (plusses and wishes), and

- journaling.

The ratings within her course after employing these practices were positive. She noticed that her students were most vocal and honest when journaling about issues of race, equity, and social justice.

Delano-Oriaran and Parks (2015) conducted a study where they illustrated effective discussion strategies used by a Black professor and a white professor while engaging white students in conversations about white privilege. The goal of their course was to create a classroom where the climate was conducive to student growth so students could move toward understanding the enemy in their classroom is dominance, not white people (Howard, 2006). The Black professor indicated that she used online discussions, relocating the classroom from a lecture hall to an informal seating area on campus near a fireplace

(fireside chats), and selecting culturally diverse texts, to increase students' comfort with speaking about white privilege. The white professor realized that there was no need to create a safe space because she was already "safe" as a white woman. She exposed her students to the language they needed to engage with in-person conversations and online discussions about white privilege. Both professors indicated that the students were most comfortable speaking about white privilege in online forums.

While the methods that the researchers (Delano-Oriaran & Parks, 2015; Ladson-Billings, 1996) administered are considered best practices for engaging white students, it's compelling that the students are more comfortable expressing themselves via writing and not discourse. I wanted to use some of those strategies but I wanted my white students to engage in discourse about challenging issues of individual and cultural diversity in urban schools. Swartz (2003) argues that white preservice teachers often have little to no awareness of the history of racism or colonialism in America. They often enter urban schools with a lack of knowledge of the past and present strengths, accomplishments, and resources of the neo-colonized cultural communities they're entering. My conversation with the dean inspired me to address this lack of awareness and challenges head-on. But first, I had to make sure my classroom was a safe space.

Safe spaces are classroom environments where students, and their professor or professors, feel secure and empowered to engage in civil, honest, critical, and challenging discourse about sensitive issues (Delano-Oriaran & Parks, 2015) without judgment (Holley & Steiner, 2005). Safe spaces do not signify potential discomfort, rather they are an essential tool for ensuring Black professors are supported. Researchers (Aguirre, 2000; Delano-Oriaran & Parks, 2015; Harlow, 2003; Tuitt et al., 2003) documented that the hostility toward professors of color is intensified when the topics of the course focus on equity and social justice in urban schools, which meant it was essential I was fully equipped with solutions when I stepped into my classroom.

Methodology

I utilized self-study in teacher preparation (S-STEP) a practitioner inquiry undertaken by teacher educators with the dual purpose of improving my practice while teaching as a Black woman in a white-dominated teacher education program. S-STEP also acknowledges my role in teacher learning in the larger project of preparing high-quality teachers to teach in urban schools (Sharkey, 2018). S-STEP uses a critical social justice

perspective to organize a teacher educator's reflective practice (Vanassche & Kelchtermans, 2015). My action-research and reflective practice was the course I'd discussed with the associate dean, *Individual and Cultural Diversity in Classrooms.* The S-STEP structure provided me a way to reflect on events in my class and students' responses to my pedagogical moves in a way that was healthy and safe for me. It meant I would have some emotional distance as I analyzed the impact of my strategies throughout the course. Engaging in a self-study of my pedagogical strategies would not only provide the opportunity to for me to assess my effectiveness in teaching in a white-dominated teacher preparation program, it could also be a model for other Black professors teaching in these spaces.

Effective Discourse Strategies for Professors of Color

I wanted to create a safe space for me and my students, and I thought carefully about the exercises, activities, and approaches that would make that happen. Conversations on race, racism, equity, and social justice can be uncomfortable. Race, a socially-mediated construction (Omi & Winant, 1986) is so central to how we live, yet it is one of the most arduous and essential to discuss (Sealey-Ruiz, 2013). In the end, I was able to create a safe space for my students and for myself as a Black professor by co-creating norms and expectations, establishing a safe word, requiring affective journaling, and holding co-generative dialogues.

Co-created Norms & Expectations

Although the course had engagement goals and expectations, it was important to me that my students created the norms for the course with me. Palmer (1993) states, "We cannot learn deeply and well until a community of learning is created in the classroom" (p. xvi). I used Venables's (2011) norm-setting protocol to facilitate the process, which asks each student to write their suggested group norm on a Post-it note. As we reviewed each norm, we categorized them based on similar concepts and expectations. I asked the students for their permission to synthesize the ideas for the next class. The norms that we agreed upon were summarized by the phrase, "learn, make mistakes, and grow."

The granular norms that we agreed upon were:

- Mutual Respect: Care for one another

- Confidentiality: What we talk about in the room, stays in the room

- Freedom of Speech: Disagreement does not mean attack

- Be Present & Attentive: Listen to hear not to respond

Each class period, we reviewed the norms with space for students to propose changes. For many of the students, the norms were a great start; however, this was the first time that they would engage in difficult conversations about race, and norms alone wouldn't be enough.

Safe Words

As we moved forward with our norms, I felt comfortable bringing up topics I knew would challenge my students and began the course by focusing on intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1995). However, I knew that when we got to the topics of race and white privilege, it would start to feel personal to my students. I also knew my positionality as a Black woman could impact the ways in which my white students discussed their own race, privilege, and positionality. I introduced the option to utilize a safe word when the discussions and/or activities began to feel too intense or emotional.

After discussing a number of options proposed by the class, they voted to use "Stop the Traffic." If someone said the phrase, it was a signal to me to stop the conversation. I told them there was no need to rationalize why the phrase was used, and it would immediately mean a break for the entire class. After a break was called, I would provide the opportunity for the students to develop a written reflection about their emotions. Despite some very challenging and complicated conversations, the students never used the safe word.

Affective Journaling

I've been coaching white teachers for five years and have noticed that when discussing issues of diversity, many find a way to separate themselves or become defensive when discussing the history of racism and oppression. I wanted to ensure that students kept themselves centered in the topics we discussed, even when their feelings were strong and uncomfortable. I asked students to bring a journal to class and introduced them to "affective journaling." Their journal was a place for them to reflect on and discuss their feelings, enabling them to remain present in the situation. I designed a series of prompts aligned to the different topics and concepts we were exploring.

Table 1
Affective Journal Entry Prompts

	Journal Writing Prompts
Prompt 1	What did you learn about yourself through this exercise? What power and privilege do you have? How does this make you feel?
Prompt 2	How are the readings and classroom activities challenging your view of your identity?
Prompt 3	Identify the pivotal moment in your life when you realized your race. Describe the feelings that you had when you experienced this "pivotal" moment. How did this moment change your perspective of your position in the world? How did this moment help you understand the way(s) in which your race is viewed in the world? Explain as many details as you can.
Prompt 4	When did you know your gender? How did you know? When did you decide your sexuality? What was the deciding factor? How did the people around you/society respond?
Prompt 5	Do you have friends that are of a different race? If so, how often do you spend time with them? How did you become friends with them? Is your neighborhood diverse? Does your family spend time with others that are of a different race?
Prompt 6	Do you believe that your work in the course thus far is the best representation of you? Explain. Are you fully present in the course? Completing all blogs, reading the texts, fully participating in class? Explain in detail. In what ways can you ensure that you are fully present in the course for the remainder of the semester? What do you need to best show up for yourself in this course?
Prompt 7	Write a poem that illustrates both your native/familial tongue. Demonstrate the art of code-switching.
Prompt 8	In what ways have you experienced and/or contributed to the school-to-prison pipeline? In what ways can you inform the people around you about the school-to-prison pipeline? What will you do differently as a teacher to dismantle the school-to-prison pipeline? How do you create a counternarrative?
Prompt 9	Social Media Response: The oppressor has no business going around measuring our GRIT...You're measuring things like the achievement gap? When you have a 400-year head start? Underprivileged. How did they get under? Finish the sentence.
Prompt 10	Reflect upon what you have learned in the class. How have you changed? (your thinking, your actions, etc.) What do you need more of? What is still challenging for you? What will you share with others?

The students were given the opportunity to read their entire entry or just a few sentences, but only if they were so inclined. I modeled listening to a student's sharing without passing judgement and encouraged students to use their journal to stay present in

the conversation. The journaling prompts were always connected to a discussion and activity. For example, before students engaged in affective journaling for Prompt 1, they participated in an activity focused on intersectionality. The directions for the task were as follows:

> Step 1: Identify each yourself within each "system/social construct"

> Step 2: Rank them in importance based on your "Lived Experiences" (Turn & Talk)

> Step 3: Rank them based power/privilege in your "Social Reality" (Turn & Talk)

> Step 4: Reflect on the difference between the two rankings

One student's response is illustrated below.
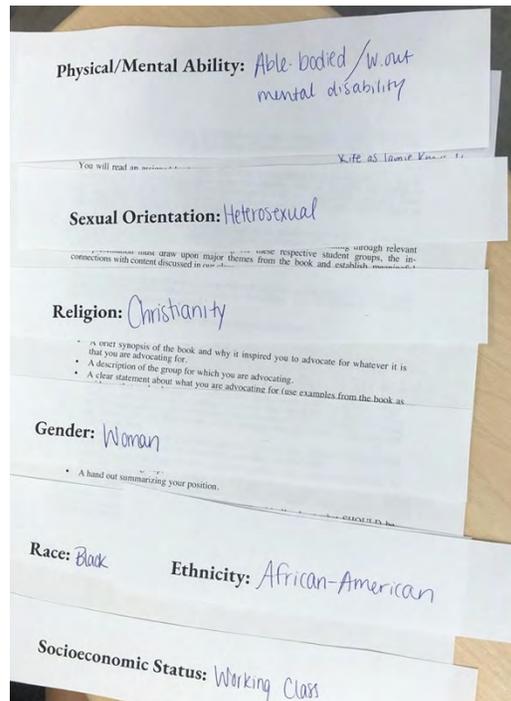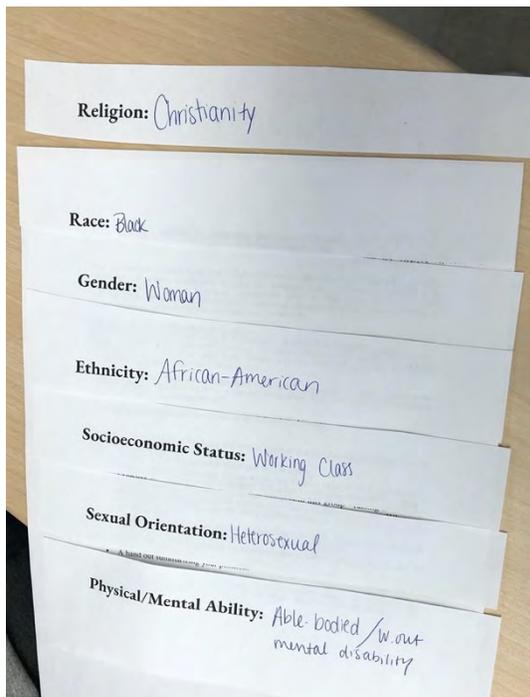
Image 1: Lived Experiences Ranking

Image 2. Social Reality

Note: This example, used with permission, comes from a Black student, Latoya (pseudonym).

It wasn't until the student shared the inability to hide her Blackness in social reality that the white students understood the power and privilege of whiteness. One white student stated, "Initially, I struggled to put my race first during the social reality round. But when Latoya (pseudonym) shared, I recognized that I had the privilege to avoid my whiteness in the lived experience round." The other white students in the course agreed. Latoya added, "I love being Black, but I recognize that it causes oppression." This exchange highlights how journaling supported students' ability to discuss race in a safe and productive way. Along with expressing their emotions about the topics via affective journaling and discussions, I also wanted to provide a way for students to give me ongoing and consistent feedback about the course. This was done through co-generative dialogues.

Co-generative Dialogues

Co-generative dialogues (or cogens) are structured exchanges in which students and their teacher co-develop strategies for instruction that focus on the students' socioemotional and academic needs (Emdin, 2016). The dialogue provides the opportunity for both students and instructor to discuss their perspectives on schooling. Ideally, cogens take place outside of the traditional classroom lesson and includes four students who are not connected to one another. This space and variety allow for different perspectives concerning the content of the class and students' experience with the teacher. This approach strengthens positive relationships among students and between students and the teacher. The goal of consistent cogens is to support students to find pleasure in the content and the person teaching it. Teachers also learn to make adjustments to curriculum and instruction based on the needs of the students. I used Emdin's (2016) modification to cogens that includes all students in the course as a way to increase transparency between myself and the students.

After each formal class meeting, I invited the students into a conversation about the effectiveness of the session and course (see Table 2). During these reflection sessions, I took notes on the feedback provided and only respond when invited by students. Below (Image 3) is an example of the "glows and grows" identified by students. The glows highlight the difference between race and ethnicity, prejudice and stereotypes, racism in different countries. The grows demonstrate that the students need more time for breaks in a three-hour class and guidance in using the readings from the course in the context of the discussions. The reflection opportunity allowed students to critique and co-develop strategies for instruction based on their needs.

Table 2

Co-generative Dialogue Prompts

| Occurrence of Cogen	Cogen Discussion Prompts
Daily	Identify three things that went well (glows) in our class today. Identify three areas of growth to improve our class today.
Mid-Semester	What has been working well this semester? What should I do differently to improve the course? What still confuses you? (Think of the content we have covered thus far.) How can I make the information a bit more clear for each of you? In what ways can I include information about your culture and experiences within our classes? In what ways might I get each of you involved in the creation of the course lessons? Any other details you would like to share
End of the Semester	Reflect upon what you have learned in the class. How have you changed? (your thinking, your actions, etc.) What do you need more of? What is still challenging for you? What will you share with others?
Final Reflection	Identify things that went well (glows) in our course this semester. Identify areas of growth to improve the course overall and my practice as a professor.

Image 3

Instructor notes from course reflection
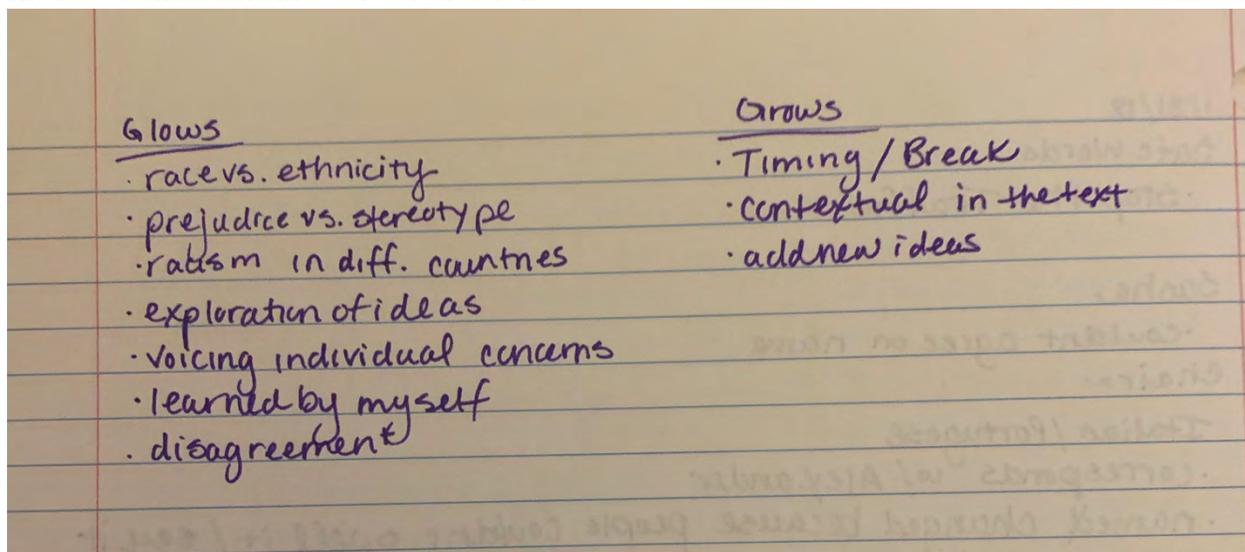
One of the ways I used these cogens was to model that the role of the teacher and student can be interchangeable. I shared that I recognized there was room for growth in my learning in the area of gender and sexuality and invited students who identified as gay, bisexual, or transgender to co-teach a class, as experts in their lived experiences. I formulated and shared notes (Image 4) and questions based on the panel they organized with the goal of modeling how we all enter the class with funds of knowledge and places where we can learn more. I asked them to make connections between that moment and how they view students when they step into an urban classroom.

Image 4
Instructor notes from student-led session on gender and sexuality
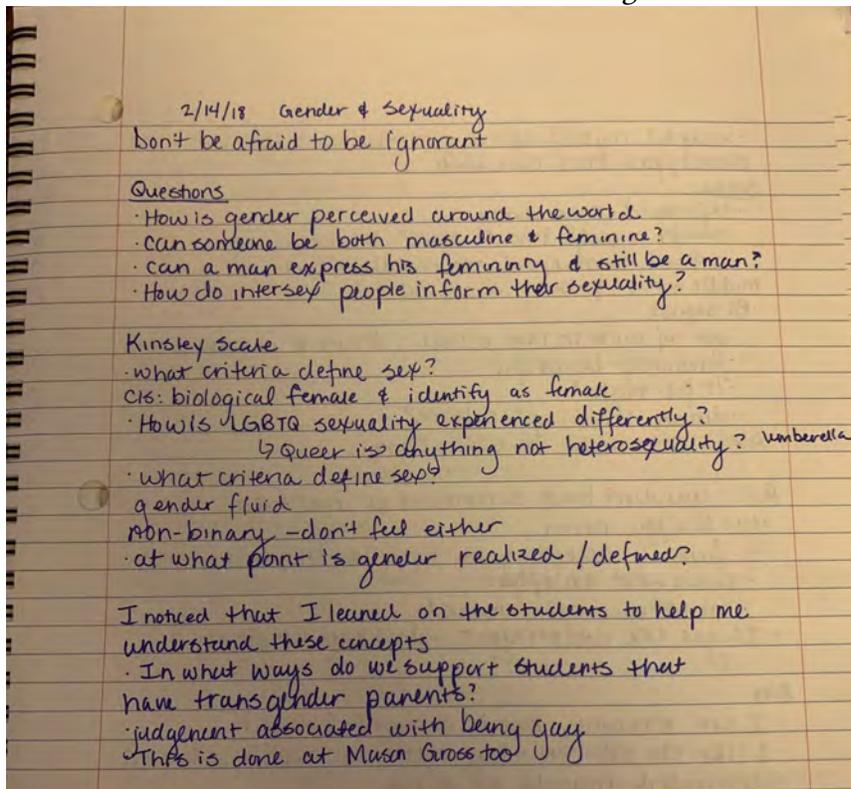
I also engaged students in a mid-semester and end-of-semester co-generative dialogue. Finally, the students were given a reflection to critique the structure of the course as an opportunity for reflection for me to improve the course for the next group of students, and to present to the teacher education committee. The strategies, co-created norms and expectations, safe word, affective journaling, and co-generative dialogues assisted in creating a community of learners and increased their ability to have discussions about race, equity

and social justice with a Black professor. Incorporating these strategies also ensured that both the students and I were safe, transparent, and open to engaging in challenging discourse in our community of learners.

Student Overall Responses to Strategies

Overall, the students responded positively to the strategies implemented in the course and reported I had successfully created a safe space for them. Some of their end of program reflections included:

- Very diverse and the resources are amazing. Great professor who knows how to discuss every topic with resources and positive attitude.

- Very engaging and intimate.

- The sharing of experience and the way I am able to grow as a person as these experiences are shared and I unpack my own biases.

- Very good to discuss these topics in a comfortable atmosphere set by teacher.

- I was really impressed with my instructor. The course material would have been miserable, but it is something that she is really passionate about and was able to pass that intense interest onto us. The instructor was the best part.

- I think that the topics covered were all extremely valuable and being in class was extremely beneficial to classroom discussions.

The students also provided feedback on how I could improve the course:

- More inclusive videos and less dense readings

- Make syllabus a bit easier to follow

- I would have done nothing differently than she did. She was very tolerant. I would maybe try to reduce the workload.

- If possible, I would change the course to a twice a week course vs a once a week course. Having class once a week made the course lack the personable touch that it very well could have had.

Although not every student completed the course evaluation, and this is not an exhaustive list of strategies, it provides a starting point for Black professors to engage white students in discussions focused on individual and cultural diversity in urban schools while ensuring the classroom is a safe space for them as a Black professor.

Conclusion

Being one of the few Black professors in a white-dominated program compounds the stress of being a new professor. With the current uprisings in support of Black Lives, the killing of Black women (Breonna Taylor, Oluwatoyin Salu, Riah Milton and the list continues) and men (Ahmaud Arbery, George Floyd, Rayshard Brooks, Elijah McClain and the list continues), there is an assault upon Blackness and our lives in all spaces, including and especially in white-dominated teacher education programs.

Rather than connecting me with other Black faculty for interpersonal connections or helping me create ethnic spaces within a white-dominated space (Cole et al., 2017), the associate dean started off my professional experience by telling me to anticipate negative feedback because I am a Black woman. McGowan (2000) argues that scholarship is needed that focuses specifically on pedagogical practices to assist professors of color in coping with the challenges of teaching all white students, and my class is an ideal place to study such practices. It's disheartening that I had to create and toil over best practices for students to engage in discussion rather than feel supported to see my expertise and my classroom as a positive research space.

Knowing my pedagogical and personal goals enabled me to be clear in what I expected for my students and to hold myself to my high standards. I developed a series of recommendations for my fellow Black professors who step into mostly white teacher-preparation programs. These recommendations, based on my experiences, can support Black professors to help their students unpack their identities and understand the system of white supremacy around them. Finally, it can help the future teachers better understand social constructs that shape them and school before they step into urban classrooms filled with Black children.

Recommendations

Recommendations for Practice and Research

- *Authenticity and Celebration of your Blackness.* As much as there is the dark cloud of barriers that can impact your career trajectory in academia, it is important to be your authentic self. As my student said, We don't get to take off our Blackness, so let's celebrate it.

- *Safety for you and the students.* Our pedagogical responsibility is to engage students our students in discussion about individual and cultural diversity in schools, but we have the right to to create boundaries for our own emotional safety. We can give students free reign to discuss the topics without judgement, but we can use the strategies when the discussion has the potential to cause trauma.

- *Document, study, and reflect upon your work.* The research shows that Black faculty have negative experiences in white-dominated institutions. I have notebooks full of observations about discussions and encounters to not only use as an opportunity to improve my practice but to also present to my department chair about the climate for Black professors. In these conversations, I hold the department chair and others accountable for addressing the culture and climate of the program.

We can no longer be silent. We are physically dying in the streets and mentally dying in white-dominated spaces. Using specific strategies to support ongoing discourse focused on race, racism, and equity with preservice white teachers can help develop the next generation of social justice advocates for students of color when they enter urban school as well as offer us ways to protect our hearts and spirits.

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Dr. Kisha Porcher is an assistant professor, scholar-practitioner, and agent of change for all students in urban areas. She is passionate and deliberate about ensuring that all students have an equitable opportunity to learn regardless of race, class, gender, socioeconomic status, sexuality, and/or religion. Dr. Porcher is an assistant professor of English Education at the University of Delaware. She is the co-founder and co-creator of the Black Gaze Podcast. The podcast highlights, "Two women in academia, raising questions and breaking down perceptions, from a Black point of view." She is also the co-founder of the Equity Consulting Group. She served as a former high school English Language Arts teacher, International Baccalaureate Coordinator, Senior Educational Consultant, and Assistant Professor of Professional Practice. She holds a B.A. in English and Secondary Education from Spelman College; M.A. in Curriculum and Instruction from Teachers College Columbia University; and Ph.D. in Teaching and Teacher Education from George Mason University. Dr. Porcher's research focuses on three distinct interrelated areas: 1) archeology of the self (Sealey-Ruiz, 2019) as foundational to teaching and learning; 2) exploration of assets and conditions of Black & Brown students and communities; 3) centering Blackness in community-engaged learning and teaching. ORCID ID: 0000-0002-8058-7336