The University of Texas at Austin
Texas Education Review
College of Education

Journal Homepage: Texas Education Review

Published online: May 2024

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To cite this article: van Kessel, C., Righton, K., Lester, L., Schimel, J., Hussain, Z., & Lindell, C. (2024). Tools to increase preservice teacher confidence while discussing controversial identity issues. *Texas Education Review*, *12*(2), 61-81. https://doi.org/10.26153/tsw/51994

Tools to Increase Preservice Teacher Confidence While Discussing Controversial Identity Issues

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Abstract

This collaborative, descriptive research project in urban Texas looked at the at the development, implementation, and student perception of effectiveness of a multi-stage pedagogical intervention in a classroom to help preservice teachers become more confident during discussions of controversial identity issues; specifically, ableism, classism, heterosexism, racism, and sexism. Researchers developed classroom experiences based upon worldview threat and defense as well as mindfulness, using qualitative analytic strategies to "foresee" and "assert" the effectiveness of these experiences via mid- and end-point course evaluation surveys. Participants felt more confident and capable when talking to others with differing worldviews due to the experiences and tools provided.

Keywords: curriculum; identity, mindfulness, preservice teacher education, teacher education preparation, terror management theory

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore the possibilities for combining tools and experiences with students to help them feel more confident about discussing race, class, sexual orientation, gender, and dis/ability. To that end, the teacher-researchers identified approaches to base classroom experiences upon—worldview threat/defense from terror management theory and mindfulness—and asked students at the midpoint (i.e., soon after the direct classroom experiences) and end of the course (i.e., after students have had more time to practice their skills) to evaluate the extent to which the experiences were effective in increasing their confidence about discussions that they might otherwise avoid or react overly strongly when they occur. The research question was: *To what degree can an emotionally informed approach based on terror management theory and mindfulness help students feel more confident when discussing race, class, sexual orientation, gender, and disability?*

There were six researchers on this collaborative project that took place at an urban university in Texas in 2023, a state well-known at present for its attempts to foreclose honest and open conversations particularly about race, sexual orientation, gender, and socio-emotional learning in schools and beyond. We take a cue from Journell (2017) who noted the difficulties of issues that relate to student identities that are epistemically settled but publicly open, specifically "controversial identity issues" (p. 339). Being in Texas and holding the view that educators must not claim neutrality when it comes to someone's life and dignity, we (the researchers) are acutely aware of the predicament of teachers here and want to help them find ways to continue working against injustices.

Most, but not all, of the undergraduate students participating in the study were undertaking a teacher education program, and the research site was a mandatory course that is part of that program, whose purpose is to place schools and curriculum in the context of society. Prior to team-teaching this

class, the researchers had heard anecdotally that discussions were known to become heated, and so we wanted to see what we might do about that situation.

Literature Review

Of most relevance to this article are tools for students (both preservice teachers and/or K-12 students) to build capacity for discussing controversial identity issues. Deliberation is a longstanding approach (e.g., Hess, 2009; Parker, 1997), involving discussion, informed judgments, and making choices in respectful ways, although even dedicated teachers can fall short of inclusive exchanges when disagreements are highly emotional (Bickmore & Parker, 2014). Pace (2019) observed several strategies that overlap and extend those of Hess and McAvoy (2015), and of particular interest to this research project is the call for cultivating warm, supportive environments as well as preventing and mitigating emotional conflicts.

Deliberation can invite students to engage with a perspective opposite from their own, but this is not necessarily a transformative experience. Beck (2019), for example, found that a student opposed to same-sex marriage silenced himself and was logically inconsistent during such deliberations. Deliberation is unhelpful in situations where there are not two valid opposite stances (e.g., in cases of injustice; Journell, 2017, see also Beck, 2013; Conrad, 2020). Thus, Hlavacik and Krutka (2021) offered civic litigation as an approach that avoids a deliberative, pro-con framing and instead calls into question unjust laws and the legislators who made them, while Barton and Ho (2022, 2023) have advocated for "collaborative deliberation" that emphasizes nuance and is designed to be non-adversarial and solution-focused.

It is vital to shield students from attacks on their identities and dignity. This position, however, does not necessarily mean that students uttering extreme statements are completely silenced, although by no means should that be done lightly (Lozano Parra et al., 2023). Reisman and colleagues (2020) noted how teachers can respond to troubling comments with the help of interpretive frames that can redirect, diffuse, contextualize, and otherwise unpack them. Such techniques are particularly helpful when that comment was without malicious intent. But, what about utterances that can be hateful? Again, such statements cannot be allowed to stand, but the statement itself can be labeled as promoting hate (e.g., racist) without making a student's whole identity as being racist (e.g., Kendi, 2019), and the teacher can use their professional judgment as to whether strategies from collective restorative justice are helpful, or perhaps if the situation calls for a more isolated intervention. Part of the project conveyed in this article is to exist in the messy space between condemning hate while providing opportunities for those with unacceptable views to change—but not at the expense of those positioned as targets of hate.

Centering justice feels more appropriate to the urgency of situations of life and dignity, and there are many different forms such an approach can take, including (but by no means not limited to): counterstories (e.g., Ender, 2021; Madden, 2019), critical historical inquiry (e.g., Salinas et al., 2015), critical Indigenous civics (e.g., Sabzalian, 2019), and testimonio (e.g., Rodríguez & Salinas, 2019). Teachers can, and should, engage with the voices and methods of those whom the white supremacist settler colonial heteropatriarchy silences; however, despite the ethical imperative of such approaches, some teachers nonetheless "worry that centering minoritized perspectives and histories would be biased" (Hlavacik & Krutka, 2021, p. 419) and are concerned about conflict (e.g., Reisman et al., 2020) and consequences (Lozano Parra et al., 2023). We (the authors) have heard similar

sentiments in our context of Texas and designed our research to look at processes related to contested discussions rather than the process of discussion in itself.

Addressing Controversial Identity Issues Beyond the Rational

The classroom is a highly emotional space with complex dynamics (e.g., Sheppard, 2023; Sheppard & Levy, 2019), and white supremacist settler colonial heteropatriarchal structures have had a deep effect on emotional worlds. Reisman and colleagues (2020) described vividly how teachers might address the emotional landscape after a troubling comment is made, giving examples of wording and phrasing to invite students to consider how they are feeling, and the importance of rehearsing those responses in advance. It is vital to note that these emotions are not glibly framed as a problem to resolve; rather, they are acknowledged and contextualized. Specifically in the context of those subjected to racism, they have had deep psychic and emotional effects in addition to more material forms of racial violence (Chimbganda, 2017). Even the conceptualization of emotions and communication styles can be affected, as emotions are culturally and racially coded (Jones, 2022; Kochman, 1981). Emotions of people with racial identities valued under white supremacism can be heightened while they are learning about racism (Leonardo & Zembylas, 2013). Regardless of racial identity, talking about race and racism is a highly emotional affair—albeit in different ways and with different reverberations—and so educators need to acknowledge this emotionality and explicitly teach about it, which is what this study does.

Garrett and Alvey (2021) invited educators to consider political discussions beyond the rational and cognitive in a way that provides more context for the sort of student that Beck (2019) encountered where logical consistency does not prevail. Through insights from psychoanalytic theory, it becomes apparent that emotional processes drive engagements with controversial identity issues. It is clear that "emotions are constitutive aspects of classroom discussions, always present and circulating throughout the confrontation not just with the subject matter at hand, but also with the other people who comprise the classroom" (p. 20). The presence of this emotional landscape is not inherently negative, and thus the answer is not to avoid emotions and (supposedly) return to pure logic, which in contrast with deliberative approaches (e.g., Pace, 2019). Instead, Garrett and Alvey (2021) urged educators to acknowledge this presence of the non-rational and develop their vocabulary for the emotional terrain, which this project takes keenly to heart. Given that teachers set the tone for what emotions count or not (Bekerman & Zembylas, 2011, p. 1019), as the instructors for this class we wanted to name and destigmatize defensive responses in order to address them directly.

Addressing Controversial Identity Issues Holistically

Aponte-Safe and colleagues (2022) offered a way to take a multifaceted approach that directly addresses injustice. Importantly, this ethical thrust is done with attention to *la herida abierta* (Anzaldúa, 2012), the "great open wound" in our individual and collective "knowing/being/doing in the world" (Aponte-Safe et al., 2022, p. 76). In this way, an educator isn't just implementing a strategy or conveying specific information, they are *nepantleras*—cultural workers engaging with "psychic/spiritual/material points of potential transformation" (Keating, 2006, p. 8). Significantly, *nepantleras* recognize that they may be taking personal and professional risks because of *la herida abierta*, which is no easy situation, and Aponte Safe et al., (2022) offer the concept of *aspiring nepantleras* in the spirit of *becoming* rather than *being*.

Aponte-Safe and colleagues' (2022) framing invites aspiring and current educators to see injustices in the world as not an informational problem but an ontological problem, and in that way reminds us of Blackfoot teachings from the North. The Siksika viewed White settlers as deeply unhealthy, a notion Maslow (1942) learned from them. The source of this disease (and dis-ease) is a lack of balance between the mental, spiritual, emotional, and physical (Bastien, 2004). Those without that balance are incomplete people, and thus very dangerous to themselves and others (Blood & Heavy Head, 2011). Taking a cue from Saleh (2021), the people enacting dehumanization are the ones who have lost their humanity—not those who are being dehumanized by others. Part of the humanization process is to help them find balance, thus removing the disease within which hateful actions fester. Specifically, we wondered about the possibilities for an initial exploration of emotionality and tools to engage with that emotionality before attending to the regular course content as part of what Parkhouse and Massaro (2019) articulated as the "necessary groundwork so that all students are open to ideas that challenge their own" (p. 29). Perhaps the format of the discussion (e.g., deliberation vs. civic litigation vs. direct condemnation of injustice) would not be as much of an issue if some more holistic learning and community-building occurred beforehand. In our study we took a very direct approach to teaching injustice but not before doing self and community-building work alongside the students.

Theoretical Framework

The design of our classroom experiences was framed by both mindfulness and terror management theory (TMT), both of which nudged us toward the content we asked the students to engage with and our pedagogical choices in class. Mindfulness is a state of consciousness and a discipline that involves being present in the moment and developing an attitude of curiosity, openness, and acceptance of one's experience. In the context of this study, being mindful entails an awareness and contemplation of feelings and emotional responses. We paired this thrust of mindfulness with TMT, which is an existential- social-evolutionary theory that explains how the uniquely human awareness of mortality is a root cause of interpersonal and intercultural conflict. This theory provided some conceptual and pedagogical content knowledge while mindfulness centered our classroom practice. Together, they allowed the students space to acknowledge their emotions before, during, and after discussing contentious identity issues.

Mindfulness

The origins of mindfulness come from the teachings of Buddha, and it is important to pay tribute to those origins (Bodhi, 2021). Proponents of mindfulness need to recognize and respect how mindfulness evolves from its Buddhist roots, but mindfulness can be modified into suitable forms for different contexts (Kabat-Zinn et al., 2011). It is the ability to be fully present in the moment, focusing on how we feel physically and emotionally. Mindfulness is a dynamic process occurring inside of a person that focuses on his or her awareness of things as they happen (Brown & Ryan, 2003), enabling the brain to process, think about, and reflect on the thoughts and experiences it is having at the time (Hölzel et al., 2011). Through training and meditation, one can (re)construct their state of mindfulness, which is a dynamic and changeable variable rather than a fixed one (Schonert-Reichl & Roeser, 2016). Practicing mindfulness reduces stress and anxiety, enhances focus, promotes compassion, and imparts a variety of other advantages (e.g., Jha et al., 2007), including control of emotions (Roemer et al., 2015). When in a challenging social environment, mindfulness can lessen stress as well as relieve anxiety and suffering (Hoge et al., 2013).

There are some important caveats to engaging with mindfulness. It cannot replace the need to change harmful systems. For example, if numerous high stakes standardized tests are causing stress and anxiety, it is important to change that system while helping students cope with the current situation with mindful practices. Importantly, mindfulness can be implemented thoughtfully—in ways that attend to interconnectedness and community. A case in point for such implementation is Montgomery (2022), where mindfulness is framed by Maxine Greene's call for wide-awakeness to attune to student experiences as well as their personal and community goals.

Terror Management Theory

Ernest Becker (1973, 1975) identified death anxiety as a root motivator of many aspects of human behavior. Although human motivation is complex and layered, anxieties regarding human mortality play a significant role in behavior: Were these anxieties to remain unchecked, they would interfere with many effective forms of thought and action. Consequently, humans have developed a defensive psychological system to keep thoughts of human mortality away from our consciousness.

Terror management theory was developed to test Becker's assumptions about human motivation and behavior (Greenberg et al., 1986; Pyszczynski et al., 2015), and over the last three decades there have been hundreds of experiments in countries with divergent cultural belief systems (e.g., Canada, China, Germany, India, Iran, Italy, Israel, Japan, the United States, and other countries), revealing various effects of *mortality salience* (i.e., the state of having death on our minds; Burke et al., 2010). These studies generally show that brief reminders of death cause people to become more favorable to people and ideas that support their worldview and become more antagonistic to people and ideas that oppose it. Studies have found similar effects in response to potent worldview threats because barriers against impermanence have been thwarted (Pyszczynski et al., 2015; Schimel et al., 2007)

According to TMT, cultural worldviews are shared conceptualizations of reality that provide people with a sense that human existence is meaningful, stable, and enduring. Cultural worldviews afford this comfort by answering big, important questions about the nature of human existence, questions about where we came from (e.g., divine creation, the Big Bang), what we are supposed to be doing with our lives, and what happens to us after we die. Importantly, cultural worldviews prescribe moral standards and values to live up to; and if people live up to these standards, they earn self-esteem, the feeling of being a valued and protected member of the cultural worldview. Moreover, believing in a cultural worldview and living up to its standards of value affords people a sense of death transcendence, or immortality. This hope of immortality can be literal or symbolic. In a literal sense, worldviews reassure us that our death is not an end (e.g., an afterlife, some form of reincarnation, or the recycling of our atoms). Symbolically, worldviews can function in the same way, such as researchers taking comfort that their published work will make a lasting contribution to the field (Schimel et al., 2018).

Worldviews are—to some extent—arbitrary, fictional assemblages about the nature of reality, and thus for them to serve as an effective buffer, worldviews require continual validation from others in the absence of critique or comparison (Schimel et al., 2007). We can feel anxiety or even panic when we are reminded of death or our worldviews are called into question, and we can become defensive. People defend their worldviews because of their important anxiety-buffering properties. Learning about oppressive systems and injustice can challenge the U.S. worldview myth of meritocracy as well the personal self-esteem derived from it. There is scant educational research with terror management theory. Extant articles have focused largely on theoretical explorations of how worldview threat and

defense might manifest in the classroom (Burke & van Kessel, 2021; Deschenes & van Kessel, 2023; Jacobs et al., 2021; van Kessel, 2020; van Kessel & Saleh, 2020; van Kessel et al., 2020; Varga & van Kessel, 2021; Varga et al., 2021a, 2021b), with the exception of van Kessel et al. (2022) where pre-service and early career teachers explored TMT. This article reports on a project that uniquely focused on students in an undergraduate classroom setting and revealed that such an approach increases student confidence when discussing controversial identity issues.

Terror Management Theory & Mindfulness

Engaging in mindfulness techniques can reduce anxiety and other effects associated with worldview threat. There is evidence that defensive reactions to existential threat are diminished by focused attention. In a number of studies, Niemiec and colleagues (2010) discovered that people with a tendency toward mindful attention suppressed their thoughts less after being exposed to a mortality salience induction and were less likely to defend their self-esteem in the face of existential threat. Inspired by that research, our project put such a blending of TMT and mindfulness into a real-world, non-experimental situation: an undergraduate classroom.

Mindfulness differs from other protective mechanisms against existential anxiety in that it regulates existential threat by how aware individuals perceive hazardous information rather than through reinforcing the ideals of a particular cultural worldview. Therefore, it does not seem like practicing mindfulness necessitates supporting one viewpoint at the expense of another (Hart, 2014). Consequently, mindfulness can help people persist despite discomfort during conversations across worldview differences.

Study Design & Procedure

Context and Participants

The study was embedded in the regular course procedures for this class. In other words, as teacher-researchers we developed lessons and activities from our theoretical framework and used course evaluations (standard institutional questions plus our own) at the mid and end points to evaluate the effectiveness of those experiences. Our research question was: *To what degree can an emotionally informed approach based on terror management theory and mindfulness help students feel more confident when discussing race, class, sexual orientation, gender, and disability?* Given the nature of the research context, an experimental design with a control group was not possible, and so we chose to take an approach based upon thick descriptions of experiences and student perceptions of the effectiveness of those experiences.

We conducted surveys with a sample of convenience (i.e., students enrolled in the class co-taught by Cathryn, Kelcia, and Lea). Participants were in a senior-level undergraduate class at a private university in Texas, although they were in a variety of stages of their studies (seven freshmen, two sophomores, five juniors, and two seniors). The course they were in explored the foundations of educational thought and practice through the works of influential thinkers from diverse philosophical, historical, geographical, intersectional, language, and cultural contexts. The driving questions for this iteration of the class were: *What must happen before the lesson begins? How might educators be unaware of the harm they are causing? What might an identity-conscious practice look like in my future classroom? What theories or thinkers help me wrestle with being an educator? How might we turn our plans into action in our classrooms?*

Sixteen of a possible nineteen students participated in the research, although not every participant completed all the surveys. Participants were aged 18 to 25 from a variety of home states: California, Colorado, Minnesota, New York, Texas, and Washington, DC. We asked students to self-identify themselves in relation to the content we would be focusing on in class (see Table 1).

Table 1

Participant Self-Identified Demographics

Gender identity	Female	11
	Male	5
Racial identity	Asian (Eastern), Asian American, or Pacific Islander	1
	Latine, Latina/o/x, or Hispanic	3
	White	7
	Asian (Eastern), Asian American, or Pacific Islander AND Black or African American	1
	Asian (Eastern), Asian American, or Pacific Islander AND White	1
Differently Abled or Dis/Abled?	Yes	3
	No	12
	Prefer not to say	1

Course Surveys

Mid-Semester Survey

As part of the regular administration of the class at roughly the halfway point (around lesson 13), students were invited to complete an anonymous midpoint survey designed by the Cathryn and Cassidy. They were asked five open-ended questions:

1. What is going well in the class so far?
2. What could be improved?
3. How comfortable are you with the challenging discussions we've had so far?
4. Can you think of anything that would improve the challenging discussions we've had in the class?
5. Do you have any additional comments?

Nine students participated in the survey, which was completed online.

Endpoint Course Evaluation Survey

Like the mid-semester survey, a course evaluation was administered as part of regular course procedures at the end of the semester. Students were asked standardized questions on a five-point Likert scale as well as three open-ended questions and two five-point Likert scale questions

generated by Cathryn. The standardized questions inquired about: initial interest in taking the course, student performance in the course, coursework helping learning, the instructor encouraging class involvement, the instructor treating students fairly, the instructor creating a civil/respectful atmosphere, the student feeling welcome to seek help outside of class, the preparedness of the instructor, the clarity of the instructor's explanations, and the usefulness of instructor feedback. The open-ended questions were:

- What worked well in class?
- What are your suggestions for improving class?
- Do you have any additional comments?

Using the strategy to "foresee" (Saldaña, 2014, p. 582), we anticipated a need to more directly ask participants about changes in their attitudes about discussing controversial identity issues, and whether their class experience influenced those attitudes. The two questions generated by Cathryn to these ends asked students to rate the following statements a five-point Likert scale:

- This class made me feel more confident about discussing race, class, sexual orientation, gender, and disability.
- This class provided me with helpful tools that I can use when discussing race, class, sexual orientation, gender, and disability.

Fourteen students participated in the survey, which was completed online, but class time was given for those in attendance during a particular class near the end of the semester.

Analyzing the Course Surveys

For both the midpoint and endpoint surveys were analyzed by Cathryn through the strategy "to assert" (Saldaña, 2014, p. 599). Although we were looking for evidence of the effectiveness of the class experiences, the goal of this analytic strategy is not to prove an assertion. Instead, Cathryn scanned the documents for confirming and disconfirming evidence, noting both numerical from the Likert scales and narrative data from any comments. Summative statements were developed for low-level (or micro) assertions about what the participants thought/felt happened due to their class experiences (e.g., the extent to which their identity consciousness had increased and/or been nuanced), and quotations were chosen for their helpfulness for "particularizability" to "magnify" the meaning for the unique perspectives each participant shares (Saldaña, 2014, p. 600). It should be noted, however, that absences and silences (i.e., those who did not complete the surveys or the comment section) may indicate disagreement.

Class Experiences

In this section, we are providing a thick description of what we designed with our research question in mind. The first six classes were heavily based in the theoretical framework of mindfulness and terror management theory. Subsequent classes are mentioned, but more succinctly, because those experiences would also impact the endpoint survey.

The first day was an introductory class led by Cathryn for course information and community-building. In addition to a short lecture about the particulars of the class and assignments, participants took the first survey, introduced themselves to each other, and participated in a "sticker activity". Students were given a sticker: one of three different colors of stars and two different sizes. They were told to place themselves in groups. The students first organized themselves into six small groups based on size and shape (e.g., large red stars in one group, small red stars in another), next

into one large group, then by color (regardless of size), and so on. This activity was an entryway to a terror management theory-based discussion about how humans group themselves (somewhat arbitrarily) and the benefits and harms of such groupings.

The second class focused on learning about worldview threat and defense, and students' pre-reading was van Kessel and Saleh (2020). This class focused on what worldview threat is, what forms worldview defenses can take, and what they can look like in a classroom. The content included an Attitudes Toward Difference chart based upon Riddle's (1994) scale of homophobia (repulsion, pity, tolerance, acceptance, support, admiration, appreciation, nurturance) as well as a discussion of Maslow's hierarchy and its basis in Blackfoot wisdom (Blood & Heavy Head, 2007), both of which related to the overall discussion about how even well-meaning people can succumb to worldview threat and defense. Garrett and Alvey (2021) have pointed out the urgent need for teachers to "develop further [their] emotional vocabularies" (p. 22), and this class centered around that call. The lecture concluded with strategies to anticipate and mitigate worldview defenses, including: creating a shared language for emotions and worldview defenses, priming helpful values and self-esteem (Fairlamb & Cinnirella, 2021; Tesser, 2000), compensating for decreased reading comprehension, assessing the dis/advantages of self-segregation, and how a teacher might shut down derogatory and hateful comments and steering students away from assimilatory and appropriative engagements with opposing worldviews.

The third class was a mindfulness workshop led by Zahra. The objectives included defining mindfulness, considering the benefits, and practicing mindfulness exercises. Students were introduced to the following mindfulness exercises: pomodoro exercise, the 5-4-3-2-1 grounding technique, the S.T.O.P. exercise, and guided meditation. Of particular relevance to this research is the S.T.O.P. exercise (Stop what you're doing; Take a breath; Observe what is happening; Proceed with your task).

The fourth class was an intentional dialogue workshop led by Kelcia and one of her work colleagues. Intentional Dialogue Training is offered regularly on campus, and this training was a one-session modification of a two-part training aimed at equipping college students with the knowledge, skills, and abilities to have difficult conversations across identities. In part one of the training, the focus is placed on knowledge of key terms and identity work that students need to engage with to increase awareness of themselves and their positionality related to others. In part two, students begin to engage with practical skills to have intentional conversations. This includes effective listening skills, distinguishing between intention versus impact and culminates in students working through scenarios. Aspects of this workshop were connected back to terror management theory.

Pre-reading for this fourth class was the first chapter of Talusan (2022) where she shares her experience growing up as a Brown-skinned Filipino woman in the United States, as well as the evolution of microaggression theory (Torino et al., 2019) and the dangers of identity-blind approaches (O'Brien & Gilbert, 2013). The essential questions for this chapter are: "How does identity impact my teaching and learning? How do I build identity consciousness? What impact do I have on my students when I do not notice identity?" (p. 17). The chapter closes with a discussion about how identity-conscious practice (Plaut et al, 2018) involves uncomfortable conversations, especially for those socialized to avoid conflict and take identity-blind approaches.

The fifth class focused on Talusan's (2022) second chapter, which focuses on shifting "from avoiding conflict to inviting challenge" (p. 27). After personal anecdotes from her childhood and

professional life about her avoidance tactics, Talusan explains how social-emotional learning (SEL) is racially biased (e.g., "White supremacy with a hug," p. 29) and how instead we (as instructors and students) need to embrace the full spectrum of our emotions, including discomfort. Otherwise, anti-racist dialogue can be "silenced, ignored, diluted, and/or discussed in very superficial ways for fear of offending others or creating potentially explosive situations" (Sue, 2015, p. 17). Talusan then provides a scenario of a classroom lesson on voting: how discomfort can arise when the conversation becomes heated about opposing candidates. The teacher shuts down the discussion and pivots back to the main lesson. Talusan then offers an alternative: Leaning into the conversation by noting that some are feeling uncomfortable and checking in about the processes of conflict. A suggested prompt for this scenario is: "We've been talking about who gets a voice in democracy. What are you noticing about voice and participation even in this conversation right now?" (p. 31). Talusan is also careful to note that although this example is regarding older students, younger students also need opportunities to engage in the processes of conflict (Long et al., 2016).

Building from the reading and the terror management theory approach, the class considered the format of class activities (e.g., never using debates when the topic involves someone's life or dignity) and the pros and cons of different small group discussion formats. We then turned to the philosophy of Alexis Shotwell (2017), who invited people to embrace imperfection: No matter what they or their ancestors have done, they can (and ought to) do whatever they can to create a just world. For example, someone can fight climate change and still drive a car. Purity is "domain of the racist, nativist, and eugenicist right" (para. 6). A standard of purity demobilizes individuals and movements, whereas a politics of responsibility (despite imperfections, past and present) can help everyone to hold each other accountable. She writes:

> A politics of responsibility recognizes our relative, shifting, and contingent position in social relations of harm and benefit; it enjoins us to look at how we are shaped by our place in history. We can take responsibility for creating futures that radically diverge from that history, seriously engaging that work based on where we are located, listening well to the people, beings, and ecosystems most vulnerable to devastation. (para. 8)

In this way, everyone is invited to persevere, recognizing their imperfections and bravely continuing to mobilize for justice. After a discussion of Shotwell (2017), the participants were given the second intergroup anxiety survey and invited to have their data collected for this research study. At this point, informed consent was obtained by Kelcia, Lea, and Cassidy. The instructor of record, Cathryn, left the room in an effort to reduce students' sense of obligation to participate.

The remainder of our semester together focused on putting what we had learned together to work. We spent four classes discussing how educators can be unaware of the harm they can cause. Two controlling ideas were Jones' (2020) identification of "curricular violence" and Ladson-Billings' (2006) shift from framing an "achievement gap" to an "education debt."

Next, we spent six lessons explicitly addressing racism, classism, sexism, heterosexism, and ableism predominantly via Talusan's (2022) book, and with a reminder during the start of each class about our vocabulary for defensive reactions. The lessons focused on the systemic nature of these problems, how they manifest in classrooms, and our personal responsibility as educators to subvert them. Using strategies from terror management theory and mindfulness, we paid careful attention to framing the problems as everyone versus harmful systems—instead of identity groups versus other identity groups; for example, we discussed how sexism hurts women, men, as well as gender non-

conforming people (and specific manifestations of these different harms for different identity groups). We also wanted to attend to the nuances of experience, such as a case study about how dress codes particularly impact young Black women (MTV Impact, 2019). We also sought stories of survivance, revitalization, and resistance, such as a lesson led by the Lea and another graduate student about Afrofuturism.

The subsequent section of the course focused on translating theory into practice. Theorists included: Butler, Derrida, Deleuze and Guattari, Dewey, DuBois, Foucault, Freire, Hall, hooks, Marx, Said, and Spivak. As students explored these theorists, activities invited contemplation of how these theories could help us wrestle with racism, classism, sexism, heterosexism, and ableism.
The final six lessons were designed to complete the circular design of the course, focusing on putting together the knowledge and skills thus far. Returning to Talusan (2022), we discussed abolitionist teaching and the role of failure in identity work. Also, small groups worked through scenarios regarding how they might handle educational situations and facilitate difficult conversations about racism, classism, sexism, heterosexism, and ableism. Throughout the entire course, mindfulness activities were both pre-planned and spontaneous as the need seemed to arise.

Researchers' Identities and Positionalities

All of us are striving to be good guests on the Lands of the Wichita and Affiliated Tribes. Cathryn is a White, female, cisgendered and heterosexual, able-bodied, middle-class settler Canadian Associate Professor working at a U.S. university. Kelcia is a Caribbean female, heterosexual and cisgendered, able-bodied doctoral student from Dominica studying and working in the United States. Lea is a heterosexual and cisgendered, able-bodied Black woman born and raised in the Bible Belt of the United States, a doctoral student, a former K-12 public school educator, and a licensed professional counselor (LPC). Jeff is a cisgendered and heterosexual White male, able-bodied, and middle-class U.S. citizen who is a Professor at a Canadian research university working remotely from Texas. Zahra is a cisgendered and heterosexual, able-bodied, middle-class Pakistani master's student studying counselling in the United States, and Cassidy is a White, cisgendered and heterosexual, able-bodied, middle-class settler U.S. master's student in curriculum studies.

As an example of how our identities affected the study design and execution, Cathryn struggled when creating the demographic survey. She wanted to ask about sexual orientation and gender given the context of the class (i.e., discussions of heterosexism and transphobia), but given the anti-LGBTQ+ legislative context of Texas coupled with her own cis and heterosexual identities, she had to consider that this research could put participants in danger. The other researchers were consulted about wording, and we contemplated the issue before the demographic forms were given to participants. In the end, the researchers chose to give the options of "female," "male," "gender non-conforming," "other" (with a space to fill in), and "prefer not to say."

According to Alveson and Sköldberg (2009), Binder and colleagues (2012), as well as Finlay and Gough (2003), reflexivity entails continuously assessing how the subjectivity and preconceptions of the researcher or team of researchers may affect the comprehension and interpretation of the phenomena in the research process. Having multiple combinations of identities among the researchers helped with all phases of the study—from designing the questions for the surveys (e.g., pondering how to frame questions about identity markers) to the implementation of class experiences (e.g., pedagogical choices). We drew from each other's strengths and experiences to learn and co-create understandings alongside students in the class.

Findings

Mid-Semester Survey

On the mid-semester survey, students were asked a variety of open-ended questions, including: *How comfortable are you with the challenging discussions we've had so far?* Nine responded, all stating that they felt comfortable (e.g., "pretty comfortable," "very comfortable"), and three participants commented that this comfort was in relation to our class (rather than just being comfortable more generally):

- "I feel rather comfortable because of the environment that has been established in our class. The dynamic is very welcoming, understanding, and respectful of each other, and I feel that it promotes healthy learning."
- "I feel like I have only gotten more comfortable as we have had them. They have progressively gotten less challenging to think about."
- "At first they can seem awkward, but throughout the classes i [sic] think everyone seems to be more comfortable being open in class."

Participants also made some suggestions that we implemented, including more interaction with groups sitting at other tables. The room was set up into four table groups and students could choose where they sat. There was some movement, but most students sat in the same place. We had done some group work where people had to move to other tables, but this was minimal. After this mid-point survey, we more frequently created new groups for discussions and tasks.

Final Course Evaluations

Of most interest to this present study are the two Likert-scale questions created by Cathryn that were asked alongside the standard course evaluation questions (*This class made me feel more confident about discussing race, class, sexual orientation, gender, and disability. This class provided me with helpful tools that I can use when discussing race, class, sexual orientation, gender, and disability.*). All fourteen students who completed these questions agreed with the statements. Thirteen students strongly agreed, and one student agreed for both questions. Of perhaps some interest from the standardized Likert items were the extent to which the instructor created a civil/respectful atmosphere (here, again 13 strongly agreed and one agreed), and course work helping learning (11 strongly agreed and three agreed).

Some of the written feedback was also pertinent to this study and included statements that indicated that their identity consciousness had increased and/or been nuanced: "[the instructor] has helped me understand the multiplicities of our children, of our friends, and the layers we all carry with us. Mil gracias." They also felt better prepared for some of the difficult conversations they might encounter as teachers:

> I thoroughly enjoyed this class and the real world [sic] applications that really make me feel more comfortable for addressing tough topics. I loved each teacher and their role they played in our class. I felt valued in this class and [the instructor] really encouraged students to feel comfortable and fostered a classroom were [sic] it felt okay to share.

One student wrote a comment about pivoting away from avoidant behaviors:

> I really enjoyed this class, it helped me a lot on how to make me an effective teacher and encouraged me to bring inclusiveness of different identities into my classroom. It has helped me look at some of these identities that I would sometimes avoid, because it was difficult fro [sic] me to talk about…

The only suggestions for improvement recorded on the course evaluations did not relate to this research project, and instead focused on details about the assignments (e.g., more practice with APA 7 style).

Additional Data Collection

We also gathered participant responses to the Intergroup Anxiety Scale (IAS; Stephan, 2014; Stephan & Stephan, 1985) at the beginning of the course and repeated after three weeks of instruction (six classes). With such a small number of participants, however, we did not have enough statistical power to run inferential statistics in a meaningful way, and as a result, there is a substantial chance of committing a Type II error (i.e., finding something statistically significant when it really isn't), and so overall this data cannot be used. What is interesting, however, is how participants responded to a particular affective term from the IAS: "careful." We performed t-tests using each individual item (i.e., the adjectives, including "careful"). A reliability analysis yielded a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.674; however, if we excluded the item "careful" Alpha increased to 0.703 (which would have been acceptable if our *n* was higher). We wondered if students were interpreting "careful" in a positive light (i.e., being attentive to respectful vocabulary, which was addressed during class). If so, such an interpretation of "careful" runs contrary to the original intent of the IAS. In support of this idea, the standard deviation for the "careful" item was higher than any other item ($sd = 3.04$).

At the end of the second survey, participants had an opportunity to comment on aspects of the class so far that have been helpful. Sixteen students completed this second survey. The comments included specific references to how terror management theory, mindfulness, and intentional dialogue helped them have "better conversations," "address topics without dismissing them," "improving oneself," "address things with a mature and thoughtful mindset," and "be more aware and conscious of others." Participants who did not comment on the helpfulness of specific strategies at that point in the course commented on the welcoming environment. There were no comments indicating that any aspects of class were unhelpful, but two students left the comment section blank, which could perhaps indicate that there were no experiences that they found helpful.

Limitations

Although we reminded participating students that negative feedback was just as valuable—and perhaps even more valuable—than affirming feedback, the power dynamic between instructors and students is such that they nonetheless might have felt uncomfortable providing negative feedback, even anonymously. This research project is meant to be an in-depth look in a particular context, and so generalizability was not achieved (nor was it the goal). Instead, this teacher-researcher project is intended to foster discussion about how educators might lean into controversial identities issues in ways that are helpful to communities.

Discussion

There can be a problem of logical inconsistency among students espousing tolerant views while they simultaneously uphold intolerant policies and laws (Beck, 2019), perhaps this inconsistency becomes less of an issue when non-rational aspects of discussions are considered. Of course, students can be non-rational because they are in a state of worldview threat, but perhaps mindfulness and emotional attunement provides them opportunities to be more metacognitive and less avoidant.

The hope for this study was for students to feel more confident (i.e., persist despite an urge to avoid or be combative) during discussions of race, class, sexual orientation, gender, and dis/ability. Student comments indicated that the class was helpful regarding controversial identity issues. Importantly, the "feel" of the classroom was affected by the research team. We developed a sense of community through a combination of the curricular plan we co-created and small (but significant) practices like daily emotional check-ins. As instructors, we still noticed some awkwardness at times, but importantly also perseverance through that awkwardness.

An emotionally informed approach seemed to help students navigate potentially uncomfortable conversations in the classroom and beyond. Participants felt that their class experiences gave them useful tools for navigating identity-conscious practice. Parkhouse and Massaro (2019) called for groundwork before views are challenged, and this research revealed that the pairing of mindfulness and TMT is effective to that end. Participants in the study saw value in this groundwork, and as instructors of the course we felt that the dynamic created in the class was exceptional in comparison and thus this research guides our future teaching. Navigating discussions about controversial identity issues will never be easy, but it helps to scaffold information and experiences about the roots of defensiveness and the various forms that defensiveness can take. Within and beyond the classroom, mindfulness and TMT can serve as a foundation for dialoguing across worldview differences.

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Jeff Schimel, Ph.D. is a professor of experimental, existential social psychology in the Department of Psychology at the University of Alberta in Edmonton, Canada. His research is broadly concerned with understanding the psychological function of important beliefs about the self and world. The types of beliefs he has been investigating over the years have to do with 1) self-esteem, the belief that one is an object of primary value in a world of meaning (c.f., Becker, 1971), and 2) cultural worldviews, beliefs about the nature of reality. His research suggests that these beliefs function, at least in part, to help people manage anxiety about death.

Zahra Hussain holds a Master's degree in Organizational Psychology and is currently pursuing a Master's in Clinical Mental Health Counseling at Texas Christian University. Her academic journey reflects a commitment to understanding both the organizational and clinical dimensions of psychology, equipping her with a unique blend of expertise in human behavior, mental health, and organizational dynamics.

Cassidy Lindell is an elementary school teacher with a passion for fostering a love of learning in young students. She is a graduate of Texas Christian University, where she earned her Master's degree in Curriculum Studies from the College of Education. With her strong foundation in educational theory and practice, Cassidy continuously seeks innovative methods to enhance her students' educational experiences.

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