August 2024

Course Correction: Examining 2020's Middle Level Teacher Education through a Critical, Antiracist Lens-A Collaborative Self-Study of Teacher Education Practices

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Abstract

The work of teacher education in a 2020's context is challenging and filled with opportunity. With a diversifying P-12 student body (Love, 2020; Pitts, 2019) and the confluence of social, political, and educational factors (Nieto & Bode, 2018), the complexities of teacher education are vast and fluid. In a historical moment that has included teaching in a time of pandemic, national reckonings over race and injustice, and explicit legislation to guide teaching about social history (Kelly et al., 2023), effective middle level teacher education is multifaceted. It calls for the development of teacher candidates skilled in creating school environments that are "welcoming, inclusive, and affirming for all" (Bishop & Harrison, 2021, p. 12). It also necessitates middle level educators to grapple with the impact of systemic bias and to hold explicit commitments toward equitable and justice-oriented pedagogies (Bishop & Harrison, 2021; Ranschaert, 2021). In "Course Correction" we tell the story of our collaborative self-study of teacher education practices, situated in middle level education. Within this inquiry, we sought to identify points of bias that influence and inhabit our work by assessing our instructional frames, curricular resources, and practices.We also sought to examine our teaching through a critical, antiracist lens, a necessary framing for the 2020's teacher education context.

> **Keywords:** *middle level, teacher education, teacher preparation, anti-bias, antiracism, curriculum and instruction*

The work of teacher education in a 2020's context is challenging and filled with opportunity. With a diversifying P-12 student body (Love, 2020; Pitts, 2019) and the confluence of social, political, and educational factors (Nieto & Bode, 2018), the complexities of teacher education are vast and fluid. In a historical moment that included teaching in a time of pandemic, national reckonings over race and injustice, and explicit legislation to guide teaching about social history (Kelly et al., 2023), effective middle level teacher education is multifaceted. It calls for the development of teacher candidates skilled in creating school environments that are "welcoming, inclusive, and affirming for all" (Bishop & Harrison, 2021, p. 12). It also necessitates middle level educators to grapple with the impact of systemic biases and to hold explicit commitments toward equitable and justice-oriented pedagogies (Bishop & Harrison, 2021; Ranschaert, 2021).

Teacher preparation in the 2020's, like in previous eras, serves the practical purpose of apprenticeship to the profession. Also, given that schooling and education teach us norms, values, and beliefs that are important to our culture and society (and) what knowledge is valued

by our culture and society" (Goyette, 2017, p. 6), teacher preparation takes on a critical role. Competencies such as collaboration, creativity, and critical thinking are often characterized as "21st century skills—" the skills students need to engage in the pursuits of the modern era (Trilling & Fadel, 2009). However, in a consideration of the "social importance of teaching," Darling-Hammond and Bransford (2007, p. 13) underscored teachers' development of social knowledge as an important aspect of the teacher education practice. Further, in the 2020's context, teachers need both curated socio-cultural tools and cultivated mindsets toward equity to teach with courage and effectiveness in the "larger social chaos" (Delpit, 2021, p. xxi).

2020's teacher preparation also includes an amplified focus on equity-oriented practice and racial literacies (Price-Dennis & Sealey-Ruiz, 2021), which include a knowledge "about the role racism continues to play in structuring…opportunity" (Guinier, 2004). In their application of Critical Race Theory to the educational context, Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) challenged notions of neutrality often applied to curriculum, instruction, and institutional policies, and in the 2020's, these ideas inform the teacher educator's role in fostering new educator mindsets toward the disruption of existing educational inequities (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Price-Dennis & Sealey-Ruiz, 2021; Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017). About this work, Love (2019) noted, "abolitionist teaching is as much about teaching down old structures and ways of thinking as it is about forming new ideas, new forms of social interactions, new ways to be inclusive, new ways to discuss inequality" (pp. 88-89).

These principles serve to frame the work of teaching in the field with implications for the role and practice of 2020's teacher educators. In *Course Correction* we partnered as co-researchers to engage in a collaborative self-study of teacher education practices, situated in the middle level teacher education context. Through this inquiry, we sought to identify points of bias that influence and inhabit our work by assessing our instructional frames, curricular resources, and practices. We also sought to examine our teaching through a critical, antiracist lens, a necessary framing for the 2020's teacher education context. Born out of our orientations to our middle level teacher education practice, our shared middle level teacher preparation experiences, and our previous collaborative research, *Course Correction* was a labor of scholarly inquiry that both answered and asked. In our previous project, *Middle Grades IRL*, we worked in critical friendship and self-study to illuminate connections and disconnections between our pedagogies and classroom structures with attention to a 2020's context. Through *Middle Grades IRL* we discovered a need to critically interrogate our instructional practices, targeting areas for needed redesign, while holding attention on anti-bias and antiracism as relevant 21st century skills for teacher preparation (Bishop & Harrison, 2021). These findings led us to pose the following questions that guided our study: *In what ways are our course content, resources, assessment, and outcomes aligned/misaligned with principles of 21st century instruction? What are the embedded points of bias? What antiracist ideals are underlying or absent?*

A Review of Relevant Literature

Middle level teacher education is the specific field of teacher preparation and development that focuses on future and present teachers of young adolescents. Bishop and Harrison (2021) noted that middle level educators are "specifically prepared to teach young adolescents and possess a depth of understanding in the content areas they teach" (p. 25), and the Association for Middle Level Education (2022) has identified teacher preparation standards for

the middle grades. Whether the middle level focus is on grades 4-8, 6-8, 5-9, or any other configuration of grade levels, middle level advocates have long argued that young adolescence is a unique time of development that warrants a specific and focused preparation honoring this distinctive period. Field defining works in the middle level field such as *Turning Points* (Carnegie, 1989; Jackson & Davis, 2000) and *This We Believe* (NMSA, 1995; NMSA, 2003; NMSA 2010) called for specialized instruction for middle level teacher preparation. The *Turning Points* authors noted that "prospective middle grades teachers need to understand adolescent development (and that) this understanding should come from coursework and direct experience in middle grade schools" (Carnegie, 1989, p. 19). In early versions of their position paper, the Association of Middle Level Education, formerly the National Middle School Association, called for "educators who value working with this age group and (who) are prepared to do so" (NMSA 2003; NMSA, 2010). As teacher education programs started to take up this call and to create curriculum to prepare middle level teachers, developmentalism became the dominant theory driving curriculum decisions (Harrison et al., 2019). While this focus on developmentalism centered the young adolescent age range, as Harrison et al. (2019) discussed, critics recognized that this focus did not do enough to center theories of equity or to speak to the unique experiences of minoritized youth.

In an updated 2020's call to action, the Association of Middle Level Education, with authors Bishop and Harrison (2021), asserted that middle level learners deserve educators who "value young adolescents, acknowledge these multiple and intersecting identities, and seek to cultivate relationships, design curriculum, and establish learning environments that support, affirm, and honor youth holistically" (p. 11). This call, while recognizing the need for specially prepared middle level teachers, took steps to push teacher education away from an exclusively developmentalism-centered approach, and into a more intersectional view of young adolescents and the needs of these learners (Brinegar et al., 2019; Harrison, 2017). This shift requires a reexamination of the current curriculum in middle level teacher preparation with greater attention to critical perspectives in the field.

Also, within the literature around middle level education, there is research to support the idea that at the middle level, young adolescents are uniquely and developmentally ready to engage in justice-oriented learning. Brinegar and Caskey (2022) reminded us that "during early adolescence, young adolescents typically develop an increased awareness of social identities including race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, religion, or immigrant status" (p. 5). At the same time, adolescents are increasing their capacity for abstract thought and their abilities to empathize and notice injustices around them (Bishop and Harrison, 2021; Brinegar & Caskey, 2022). About effective middle schools, Bishop & Harrison (2021) pointed out that these schools give the opportunity for students to "become actively aware of the larger world and how their identities influence their position in it" (p. 4).

In a review of the literature around middle level teacher education, it is apparent that many scholars in the field acknowledge and advocate for equity-oriented approaches to teacher preparation (Andrews et al., 2018; Bishop & Harrison, 2020; Brinegar et al., 2019; DeMink-Carthew & Bishop, 2017; Harrison et al., 2021). While middle level scholars have articulated the need for equity-oriented pedagogies and a focus on socially just curriculum and instruction as a step in the work toward dismantling harmful educational systems, action is still needed to deepen

this body of research and to explore the critical practices for teacher education in this area. A recent research summary around middle grades teacher education and equity (Smith & Falbe, 2021) emphasized the continued need to further examine equity- and social justice oriented practices, skills, and dispositions in middle level teacher education (Andrews et al., 2018; Bishop & Harrison, 2020; Brinegar et al, 2019; Harrison et al., 2021), as well as a need for expanded empirical research on these topics. Similarly, the Middle Level Education Research Special Interest Group emphasized a needed commitment to "thinking through and acting on changes that empower and liberate middle level scholars, educators, and young adolescents and their families" (*Dismantling Racism – Middle Level Education Research*, 2020), holding a focus on expanding the volume and breadth of this research.

Given the 2020's context of teaching and teacher education, a variety of skills become important. Darling-Hammond and Bransford (2005) described a multi-faceted and complicated modern-day reality, noting "on a daily basis teachers confront complex decisions that rely on many different kinds of knowledge and judgment and that can involve high-stakes outcomes for students' futures" (p. 1). Articulating specific skills for the modern era, Trilling and Fadel (2009) named "learning and innovation skills" such as "critical thinking and problem solving [and] career/life skills [such as] ...social and cross-cultural interaction..." (p. 48) as crucial competencies. Further, Muhammad (2020) argued for the explicit teaching of criticality, which "enables us to question both the world and texts within it to better understand the truth in history, power, and equity" (p.117). Connecting various skills of a 21st century context and teacher preparation, Darling-Hammond and Branford et al. (2005) underscored the need to support the development of adaptive expert identities, wherein pre-service teachers (PSTs) are prepared with a "command of critical ideas and skills and, equally important, the capacity to reflect on, evaluate, and learn from their teaching" (p. 3). Educational scholars have also called for 21st century teacher preparation that aligns with the current educational reality that "students of color make up a majority of public-school enrollment" (Love, 2019, p. 29), while doing more to "address the structural inequities that pervade our society" (Hess & Noguera, 2021, p. 110). Around the work of contemporary middle level teacher preparation, specifically, Bishop and Harrison (2021) described the need for programs that "integrate equity-oriented and anti-racist pedagogies through(out)... to prepare (PSTs) to address issues of equity, diversity, and social justice in their future classrooms" (p. 26).

Theoretical Framing

In framing our project, relevant theory is connected to the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL), principles of critical and culturally responsive pedagogies, and tenets of critical friendship and co-mentorship. In the SoTL literature, Felten (2013) identified educator practices around "critically reflective inquiry (that is) focused on student learning" (p. 122). Within our project, our targeted focus on coursework for needed redesign with attention to anti-bias and antiracism, was connected, primarily, to our intended outcomes for short and long-term learning for pre- and in-service teachers as students. Additionally, across the project, through our cycles of inquiry, we used critical reflection as a tool for debrief; for co-constructing understandings; as an educator action (Freire, 1970); and for pushing the inquiry forward. Felten (2013) also described SoTL inquiries as being "grounded in context…accounting for both the scholarly and

the local context where the work is being done" (p. 123). In *Course Correction*, our inquiries, both independently and in collaboration, were shaped and created with attention to our local teacher educator settings, to our field-specific (middle level teacher education) context, and to the scholarly context of our research. Additionally, we were attentive to findings from our previous collaborative self-study, *Middle Grades IRL*, that led to the design of *Course Correction*.

Informed by principles of critical pedagogy, our project included a consideration of the transformative power of teaching and learning alongside the idea of *praxis* as the meeting of theory with practice (Freire, 1970; Wink, 2011). Through our work as self-study researchers, it has been our ongoing pursuit to leverage our collaborative inquiries about our teaching toward the improvement and long-term transformation of our middle level teacher educator practice. Further, as Freire (1970) noted, "knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other" (p. 53). This iteration of our journey in co-inquiry involved the work of naming, critical reflection, and plans toward needed coursework revision. These principles informed both our lines of inquiry and the thematic threads that created the project. Finally, our study was informed by tenets of culturally relevant pedagogy that explicitly link schooling and culture and call for students to "develop a critical consciousness through which they challenge the status quo of the current social order" (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 160). Toward this, and in keeping with the nature of self-study, we sought to interrogate our work as teacher educators to support similar competencies, assessing ourselves both independently and collaboratively.

As is often the case in academic self-study partnerships, critical friendship was foundational to our research collaboration (Ramirez et. al, 2020; Samaras & Freese, 2006). Defined by Costa and Kallick (1993) as "a trusted person who asks questions, provides data to be examined through another lens, and offers critique of a person's work as a friend" (p. 50), a critical friend lends more than a listening ear, truly serving as a "sounding board" (Schuck & Russel, 2005, p. 107), truth teller, and critical analyzer. Our critical friendship spans a decade, and we find that this gives us the freedom and shared trust to say the hard things to one another with honesty and respect. While critical friendship continues to be the foundation of the work we do together, as our professional roles and goals evolve, we find ourselves taking on the additional role of co-mentors. Using a feminist framing, Morretini et al. (2019) noted, "feminist co-mentoring supplants the hierarchical model in traditional mentoring with one that focuses on mutual empowerment and learning" (p. 7). As women serving in pre-tenured academic positions, we found ourselves using each other and our self-study research to navigate and better understand the professoriate. In this research study, this co-mentoring relationship played a part in how we thought about and negotiated tensions, particularly tensions around the needs for broader systemic change beyond just our local classrooms.

Taken together, all of these ideas helped to shape our lines of inquiry and to explain the connections we made between social and educational contexts, while providing an overarching rationale for our focus on coursework re-designs.

Methods and Research Design

The purpose of this study was to engage in a critical examination of our teaching practices as middle level educators given the complex context of a 2020's setting. Through a collaborative self-study of teacher education practices (S-STEP), we sought to achieve a more conscious mode of professional activity, which includes striving to notice aspects of our work that may be based solely on habit or tradition, toward a deeper examination of our instructional approaches. Our work together centered on understanding the alignment or misalignment of our content, resources, and assessments, holding a focus on principles for 21st century instruction and teaching through antiracist frameworks.

Study Context

Our S-STEP work was cross-institutional, bringing together our individual teaching contexts within the midwestern and southeastern regions of the United States. For the scope of this project, we considered our teaching roles across undergraduate and graduate levels of middle level teacher education coursework and sought out points of work that overlapped, considering our teaching across a total of five courses. At the time of the study, Kristie was teaching as pre-tenured faculty at a state institution in the southeast with a teaching load that included both generalist and content-specific undergraduate and graduate middle level coursework, such as instructional methods for middle grades education and a trends and issues course. Kristina, at the time of this study, was teaching as pre-tenured faculty in the role of a middle level generalist, with a teaching load that included all middle level majors; an introduction to middle level education course; and a middle level clinical course. Additionally, particularly in our orientation to critical friendship, we engaged in this project with attention to our social and racialized identities, which include our professional identities as a Black woman and professor and a White woman and professor working within institutions that are demographically diverse at varying levels.

Guiding Questions

The following research questions guided our study:

- In what ways are our course content, resources, assessment, and outcomes aligned/ misaligned with principles of 21st century instruction?
- What are the embedded points of bias?
- What antiracist ideals are underlying or absent?

With our first question, we sought to consider our work as middle level teacher educators with attention to a 2020's context. Drawn from our findings in *Middle Grades IRL*, this posed question was significant because we learned that skills such as adaptability, collaboration, and critical thinking, among others, have specific value and utility for navigation of the current educational context. So, in this research project, we wanted to pick up those threads and interrogate our instructional practices with these and other ideas in mind. Similarly, with our additional research questions, we sought to hone in on aspects of our findings in *Middle Grades IRL*, the realities of the current educational context, and work in the field of middle level education, wherein we noted that while justice-oriented education is particularly significant (Bishop & Harrison, 2021; Brinegar et al., 2019), there is room for continued scholarship to help

explore and articulate pedagogical practices in the field (Ranschaert, 2021; Smith & Falbe, 2021).

Self-Study Design

While self-study researchers argue that there is no single definition of self-study (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2004; Loughran, 2007; Samaras & Freese, 2009), we aligned our self-study design with Samaras' (2002) definition of self-study as a "critical examination of one's actions and the context of those actions in order to achieve a more conscious mode of professional activity, in contrast to action based on habit, tradition, or impulse" (p. xiii). As is evident in our research questions, we designed this study as a way to move toward action and away from some of the influences of tradition in our teacher education practices. We called on self-study methods as an approach to this work, because as Nolan (2010) discussed, within the academy, we have noticed a scarcity in spaces for teacher educators to learn openly and to be transparent about their own learning. About this, Nolan (2010) stated, "teacher educators are expected to 'have it all figured out.' Such a facade does not create spaces for embracing the learning of teacher educators as a necessary ingredient for the growth and reconceptualization of teacher education programs" (p. 165). As pre-tenured faculty, we sometimes felt that we had to be careful about being open about our own learning or mistakes, as to avoid receiving negative student evaluations or feedback that would impact the tenure process. Interrogating our teaching through our scholarship gave us the necessary space to question systems and practices as they have always existed, while providing scholarly import to the work of teaching (Loughran, 2007). Connecting this reflection to scholarship (something that holds great value in academia, and in the tenure process) legitimized our inquiries. One of the key aspects that distinguishes self-study as a research approach is that it is a situated inquiry emerging from problems in a teacher/teacher educator's context, and it is intended to both create new knowledge and to uncover areas for improved practice. Self-study is also conducted in collegial collaboration or partnerships (Samaras, 2011). By adopting a critical friendship orientation, we engaged in a rigorous and transparent exploration of our teaching contexts. This self-reflective approach allowed us to confront potential biases and ingrained assumptions, toward identifying areas in need of future pedagogical revision.

We envision this self-study as a multi-phase project with qualitative approaches that we position within Samaras' Five Foci Framework (Samaras, 2011). Figure 1 visually summarizes how our research has followed the components of the framework. The model intentionally includes bi-directional arrows to suggest that we are constantly going through the steps of the framework, and that we may cycle back and forth between each step. About this, Samaras (2011) noted, "quality research involves a continuous looking back and revisiting of your understandings. It requires that you acknowledge and embrace the fluidity of qualitative research" (p. 6). Samaras (2011) also described self-study as "a change journey in a hermeneutic spiral of questioning, discovery, challenge, framing, reframing, and revisiting" (p. 15), and as such, this study draws from insights and tensions surfaced in earlier iterations of our self-study collaboration. In a prior self-study inquiry, (Falbe & Smith, 2022), we uncovered three significant themes that illuminated problems of practice, which were the following: (a) A need for an intentional instructional focus on 21st century skills and mindsets such as adaptability, collaboration and critical thinking; (b) A need for an intentional instructional focus on antiracist

mindsets and cultural competencies; and (c) A need to illuminate and work toward the abolishment of systemic biases that impact and are perpetuated through our practices. In keeping with S-STEP methods as cyclical and generative (Samaras, 2011), we sought to leverage these findings toward the design of *Course Correction*.

Figure 1

Cyclical Nature of our S-Step Methods as situated in Samaras' (2011) Five Foci Framework
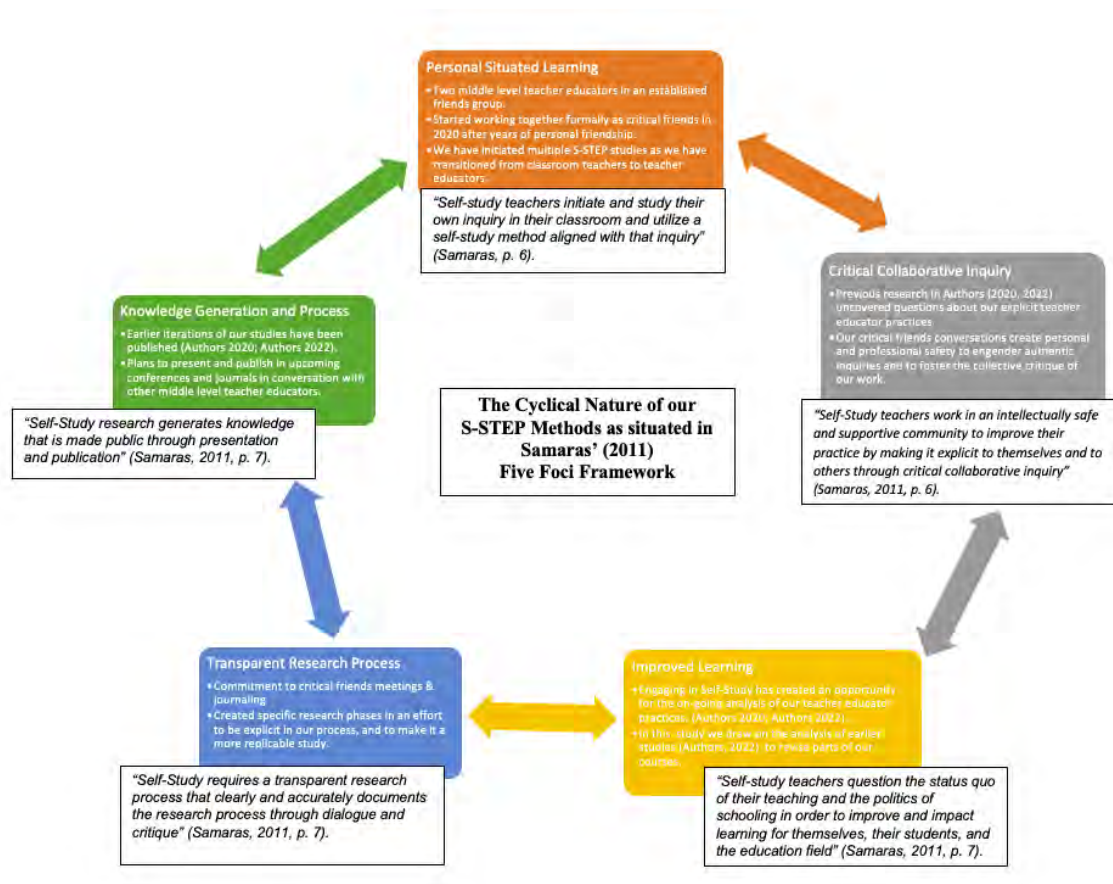
Data Sources

Our S-STEP design used a variety of qualitative data sources, with our collection methods having been informed by our research purposes (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Our data sources included a combination of narrative journal entries (Lyons & LaBoskey, 2002; Samaras & Freese, 2011); teaching artifacts that included our syllabi and select course assignments (Creswell & Creswell, 2018); and our professional conversations (Bojeson, 2018), during which

we engaged in analytic reflection, discussed emergent ideas, and shared our ongoing teacher educator experiences. Consistent with the iterative qualities of self-study (Samaras, 2011), and with the tendency of qualitative research toward "simultaneous procedures," (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 192), we conducted our data analysis in multiple rounds across the span of a semester and in conjunction with ongoing data collection.

To launch our study, prior to the start of the semester, we worked, independently, then in partnership, to conduct initial analyses (Bazeley, 2021) across our selected course syllabi, memoing with attention to our lines of inquiry. We considered five course syllabi to coincide with our selected courses. We brought these memos into our bi-monthly critical friends conversations, in which we sought to exchange thinking, to pose generative questions, and to use our initial ideas as a "springboard…(to guide) further analysis" (Bazeley, 2021, p. 140). As we moved into the semester and began our teaching, we worked independently to reflect on our teacher educator experiences, memoing about the implementation of our written assignments and capturing, through reflective journaling, other emergent ideas, as guided by our research questions, and/or sparked by our instruction. Our journaling coincided with our teaching work and consisted heavily of open reflection. During critical friends conversations, we discussed our journals and assignment memos using digital tools to "create a digital audit trail," (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 188). As we neared the end of the semester, we returned to our posed research questions to journal final semester reflections before engaging in end-of-the-semester rounds of professional conversations that we used digital tools to transcribe. Our transcriptions became data artifacts that we coded with attention to our lines of inquiry. As researchers engaging in self-study and qualitative methods, we opted for these layered, iterative, and hybrid approaches to data collection and analysis to deepen the scope of our findings and to ensure trustworthiness about our conclusions (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Findings

Creswell and Creswell (2018) discussed findings-posing in qualitative research as being part of an overarching discussion of lessons learned through the research project. Additionally, Creswell and Creswell (2018) discussed findings in qualitative research as being connected to the illumination of new questions. Taking up these perspectives, we considered our findings, not only with a consideration of dominant themes in our analyses, but also through the lens of lessons learned for and about our practices as middle level teacher educators and emergent questions for future study. In the sections to follow, we will present our major themes and findings around our lines of inquiry, with connections to key ideas that we will take away from the project toward our work in the field. Additionally, we will articulate some of the subsequent questions that emerged through our consideration of major findings.

Coursework and 21st Century Instruction

Through our first research question, we wondered how aspects of our coursework aligned with practices of 21st century instruction. Within our data, in terms of strong alignment, we noticed a trend in our instructional designs toward the centering of student voice and choice about demonstrations of learning. In our analysis we discovered that these were integral parts of our course design even before our formal critical friends conversations. For example, within course artifacts and through threads of our professional conversations, we called out tasks and

projects such as student-curated portfolios, multimedia journaling, and podcasting clubs that we designed with intentionality toward non-traditional student engagement with course outcomes. We discussed that by providing multiple avenues for expression and creativity, these activities supported the principles of 21st-century learning, emphasizing adaptability, collaboration, and critical thinking as essential skills for navigating the current educational landscape.

Further, within our professional conversations, we discussed the importance of "holding space (in our coursework) to personalize learning for our students and to carry the learning in the direction students need." This thread had a significant connection to the principles of 21st century learning that value qualities of instructional responsiveness and learner personalization (Keefe, 2007). In these discussions, we acknowledged that underlying our instructional design choices was the belief that a traditional, one-size-fits-all, hierarchical approach to teacher education was outdated, uninclusive, and insufficient for preparing our middle level teachers for the social complexities of teaching and learning in the 21st century.

Another important idea that we found to be situated within the reality of a 2020's context, was looking for places to refine our teaching with attention to our students' social identities, while supporting them in learning designs that amplify an awareness about culturally sustaining practices (Ladson-Billings, 2014; Paris, 2012) to frame learning for middle grades students. Within our professional conversations, we discussed our teacher educator strivings in this area. For example, in the following excerpt from one of our conversational transcripts, we noted, "I reflected on places in my teaching where I can give more explicit attention to my students' social and learning diversities earlier in my course planning…both for their needs as learners and in the hopes of modeling for the middle level classroom…" This thread was connected to teaching for the 21st century context, wherein attention to student identities is a relevant and necessary skill (Simmons, 2021).

We also traced a thread in our data about disrupting traditional definitions of curricular resources as part of an approach to 21st century learning for middle level education and as an area for continued improvement. For example, in a critical friends conversation about expanding definitions of "text" we noted the following:

> We're listening to podcasts or reading memoirs. We're using social media to look at issues around middle level education and social justice or disability advocacy...We use TED Talks, and we use blogs …For the 21st century…I think about how it's not just access to (traditional) textbooks (that is important) ...A typical textbook, where you need to have all this background and understanding about how school … (may not be the best resource).

This thread continued in our considerations about disrupting points of bias and expanding representation within our coursework, teaching, and curricular resources, which is discussed in later sections.

Finally, as we considered our data toward our first research question, we identified tensions and misalignment, particularly connected to our orientations to systemic non-negotiables that qualify our contexts for practice in varying ways. For example, we discussed course learning outcomes and objectives that existed prior to the design of our coursework and prior to us meeting our students as social and academic citizens of our courses. In some cases, we wondered about how the imposition of course outcomes within a top-down structure might

run counter to practices such as classroom level democratic learning. Ideally, in democratic classroom models, we hope to co-construct course outcomes with our students and to negotiate learning objectives as a timely response to students' needs (Hurd et al., 2018). About this, in one of our professional conversations, we reflected, "...Sometimes I have a hard time navigating the non-negotiables…If the course I teach is part of a larger sequence of (programmatic) building blocks…I begin to feel tension with authentic and responsive learning designs…" Similarly, we discussed grading conventions that we came into tension with, juxtaposing traditional grading and assessment approaches and flexible, equity-oriented grading approaches. Our takeaway from this thread was a need to sharpen our teacher educator skills for both mediation and advocacy around the curricular principles that exist as systemically non-negotiable and what we know to be promising critical practices in the field for 2020's middle level education (DeMink-Carthew & Bishop, 2017).

Points of Bias

Within our lines of inquiry, we also sought to interrogate our middle level teacher education work for embedded points of bias toward needed course redesigns. In this area, we identified an important theme around coursework accessibility and instructional designs for learning diversities. Connected to this, we reflected on gaps in our knowledge, resources, and practices. We discussed not only the need to to consistently support learning accessibility in our coursework, but also to model equitable practices in this area for pre-service teachers of middle level learners. About this, we noted the following in an excerpt from one of our professional conversations:

> So one of the points of bias that I was thinking about is…around accessibility and universal design. And…my question to myself, for future iterations, is how have I addressed this? How have I modeled it for pre-service teachers and acknowledged that I'm addressing this? I could do better, especially about…accessibility... Even in how I present my courses, whether it be in my (Learning Management System)...which has accessibility models within it… I do try to call that out at the beginning of the semester, but I don't feel like I'm being very intentional anywhere else in my coursework, so I would like to work on that…

Within this conversation and in other sections of our data, we considered what we were already doing toward accessibility, noting work through our own professional development, amplifying the research of colleagues in this area, and planning explicit instruction about universal designs as equity-anchored pedagogies (Novak & Mirko Chardin, 2021). While these approaches represent positive strides towards fostering an inclusive learning environment, we also acknowledged that there is still much room for improvement in our teaching in this area. Within our reflections, we shared takeaways about working to improve our teaching with greater accessibility support and to do so more consistently. About this, we noted, "...this is an area that I continue to want to improve because it's so important, often overlooked, and not hard. They're (accessibility planning) not hard things to do…" We recognized the need to be more intentional in incorporating both accessibility considerations and teaching about this throughout the entirety of our coursework (ex. disrupting ableist language; paying closer attention to print accessibility; consistently taking up pedagogical principles of UDL), from the initial planning stages to the design of instructional materials and assessment. We connected this thread to both our

considerations of embedded biases in our teaching, as well as to our takeaways around coursework redesign with attention to a 2020's teaching context.

Another significant thread that emerged around points of bias was connected to race, supremacy, and antiracism. We will explore this thread in the next section.

Race, Supremacy, and Antiracism

With our third research question, connected to both our wonderings about 21st century skills and points of bias within our coursework, we sought to engage in collaborative critical reflection about our teaching and practices with a lens toward race and antiracism. This was a thread that we traced from the beginning of our data collection, given our initial rounds of instructional artifact analysis and professional conversations, through to our final reflections at the end of the semester. Multiple themes emerged, to include a consideration of representation, white supremacy culture, and working toward antiracism.

Representation Matters. A theme that emerged as important to our wonderings about race and antiracism in our classrooms and practices was connected to awareness about the need for diversity in representations of thought, social identities, and perspectives. In particular, we discussed the curation of curricular resources, what defined curricula across our coursework, and amplifying BIPOC scholarship in the field (*Dismantling Racism – Middle Level Education Research*, 2020). For example, in this excerpt from one of our critical friends' conversations, we noted, " …I want to be intentional about diversifying the voices and perspectives that I position as 'expert' in my classroom…" This conversational thread echoed ideas that emerged in our syllabus annotations and discussions, wherein we critically considered texts, images, instructional approaches, and course content. We also grappled with emergent questions that expanded across our data analyses and through our ongoing conversations. Among the critical questions that our data sparked for were the following:

- Where have we been most attentive to centering the voices and work of BIPOC scholars in our curricular resources and what we qualify as curricula?
- Where might we be more intentional towards centering the voices and work of BIPOC scholars in our coursework?
- How do we critically consider canonical middle level scholarship and curricula with attention to racially marginalized or underrepresented voices?

White Supremacy Culture. As we delved into our data analyses around race and antiracism, we grappled with both the volume of our data and the multiple ways that we might approach this part of our analyses. One of the threads that we noticed emerging was connected to what Okun (2021) articulated as aspects of white supremacy culture. As the volume of our data swelled, we sought to streamline the analysis process, landing on the idea of drawing upon aspects of Okun's (2021) articulation of prominent qualities and characteristics of white supremacy culture to guide a small part of our analysis. This approach helped to provide a structured lens and shared language for critical friends' discussion and to summarize the threads that emerged. Our findings in this area were concentrated, in particular, around the qualities of *one right way*, to include a consideration of *perfectionism*, and *worship of the written word*. In Table 1, we provided quote excerpts and notes about how these qualities showed up within our data.

Table 1

Okun's (2021) Qualities of White Supremacy and Example Quotes and Data Notes

Quality of White Supremacy	Example Quotes/Data Notes
One Right Way (Including Perfectionism) [a]	Tensions around grading and feedback; the idea that grading can ideally be process-oriented and about revisions, rather than product or achievement oriented and solely about quantitative data collection "I refuse to give rubrics or exemplars…I don't support that practice anymore, because there's not one right way right to do something and there's a lot of tension with that…Who said this is the way to do it?" "I wonder if by having these types of tools and framing them as assessments, they help to contribute to students' ideas and tendencies toward perfectionism, because we do have this (assessment)...I know that it's a systemic non-negotiable to do these (assessments)...but how can I neutralize any negative impacts... It reinforces the narrative of one right way…"
Worship of the Written Word [b]	"...by not centering print literacy….and I feel like I could be more explicit about naming that I'm doing this. I don't tell (students) that. That's just how the course is designed (and it is part of what) I suggest for students' demonstrations of learning…" "...Also, I countered this with my tendency to teach off the page of my own written syllabus… We talked about this earlier in the semester. I don't think my syllabus is the most important document or source of

information in my coursework. It is probably the least important because…I don't know the students yet…given the non-negotiable that the syllabus is prepared before the semester starts…"

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[a] "The belief that there is one right way to do things. Connected to the belief in an objective 'perfect' that is both attainable and desirable for everyone. Connected to the belief that I am qualified to know what the perfect right way is for myself and others" (Okun, 2021).

[b] "Honoring only what is written and even then only what is written to a narrow standard, even when what is written is full of misinformation and lies. An erasure of the wide range of ways we communicate with each other and all living things" (Okun, 2021).

While we noted other threads around white supremacy culture throughout our data, these two threads, *one right way* and *worship of the written word* emerged as the most prominent.

   Toward Antiracism. Finally, an important idea in our data that aligned with our third research question was connected to the pursuit of antiracism in our teaching practices and coursework designs. In considering this, we used Kendi's (2019) definitions of racist and antiracist. About this, he suggested the following focused definitions:

- **Racist**: "One who is supporting a racist policy through their actions or inaction or expressing a racist idea" (Kendi, 2019, p. 14).
- **Antiracist**: "One who is supporting an antiracist policy through their actions or expressing an antiracist idea" (Kendi, 2019, p. 14).

In our critical friends' conversations, we discussed how these principles might show up in our teaching, and we identified important threads connected to our approaches toward disrupting racism, particularly as they aligned with our social identities. For example, within our transcripts, we followed a thread about how we approach explicit conversations about racism and antiracism in our middle level coursework, considering how this might look different given our different teacher educator contexts and racialized social identities. Within excerpts from our reflections and professional conversations we noted the following:

- "I often…talk about whiteness…given my positionality…"
- "I (sometimes) run the risk of appearing to push a personal agenda based upon my social identity…So, one thing I do as I come into an existing institutional space, is I look for allies---whether they be people, or in the existing curriculum…I look for places where these ideas are already alluded to, even if indirectly, and I use those as anchors for my work that is explicitly antiracist or that challenges white supremacy…the issue is, I know that (institutional traditions) don't favor me in that way, so I look for connected support and leverage it to justify my practices…"

We also exchanged thinking and coursework goals about how to care for our students' social identities, noting, "...it challenged me to think about the approaches that I'm going to use in my own classroom when centering issues of equity and antiracism…(so that) students who (are part of historically) marginalized groups… aren't being asked to be the experts, but that they also have a chance to grow and to…have authentic (discovery) conversations." We also noted, "...this has amplified an awareness...that I don't want to replicate the same marginalization (that exists in larger society) ..." In terms of future course redesigns connected to these findings, we questioned ways to revise our instructional planning to be more explicit about our work toward antiracism and our social and professional responsibilities around modeling these practices for pre- and in-service teachers.

Implications

Through our inquiries in *Course Correction*, we sought not only to engage in critical reflection about our middle level teacher education contexts and practices, but also to glean important understandings about future opportunities for reenvisioning our coursework and critical shifts in our practice. Within our inquiries around course content, points of bias, and antiracism, our most prominent takeaways leave us with questions to consider in future iterations of our research and teaching (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) and to explore through new cycles of self-study (Samaras, 2011). In particular, we hope to continuously refine our curricular resource curations and pedagogies that support and center anti-bias and antiracism as 21st century competencies for middle level teacher preparation. We also hope to sharpen our approaches to modeling and co-constructing activist mind- and skill sets with our pre-service teachers (DeMink-Carthew & Bishop, 2017).

Our hope in sharing this study is to come into conversation with, not to prescribe, a critical set of practices or pedagogies for the work of middle level teacher educators. Toward the goal of advancing knowledge in the field of middle level teacher education research, particularly around dismantling racism through our curricula, pedagogies, and the creation of new knowledge, we seek to add the ideas of *Course Correction* to the body of growing and existing literature. With the completion of this project, we sought to move our shared inquiries and findings into the realm of public field knowledge, both as an act of scholarship and as a call to action for other middle level education researchers. As Samaras and Freese (2006) noted, "the public nature of self-study often involves an activist stance where the private moves to the public for morally, ethically, or politically based reasons" (p. 52). We have found this approach, particularly with a critical friends framing, provides a safe forum for complex and critical inquiries that lead to actionable outcomes for improved practice. Thus, for teacher educators seeking to interrogate their practices with a lens toward anti-bias and antiracism as essential skills for the 2020's educational context, we recommend the methodological approaches of collaborative S-STEP as powerful processes for similar inquiries.

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