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## Divided by Policy, United by Resilience: Using Transformative Pedagogy to Impact Prospective Teachers in All Contexts

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**Abstract:** As American teacher educators and teachers are being roiled by restrictive legislation around critical race theory and divisive concepts in some states, our investigation explored the impact of critical communities of practice (CoP) on redesigning and teaching introduction to education courses with a transformative lens. This manuscript details the collaboration of four equity-minded teacher educators, each representing unique institutional and political contexts. While two authors taught in states which promote culturally sustaining pedagogies, the other two

authors taught in states that had passed laws restricting the professional autonomy of educators and honest discussions of race and racism. Participation in this critical CoP as a support group enabled us to better understand and navigate our dichotomous policy contexts and renewed our commitment to teaching prospective teachers to be politically conscious and empowered to teach in anti-racist ways. Our CoP was instrumental in helping us recognize that transformative pedagogies and collaboration are effective tools that can provide much needed support to teacher educators across policy contexts, while we simultaneously strive to prepare teacher candidates who will teach in culturally sustaining ways.

**Keywords:** critical communities of practice; culturally sustaining teacher education; teacher education policy; divisive concepts legislation

### **Divididos por la política, unidos por la resiliencia: Uso de la pedagogía transformadora para impactar a los futuros docentes en todos los contextos**

**Resumen:** Mientras los docentes y los formadores de docentes estadounidenses se ven sacudidos por una legislación restrictiva en torno a la teoría crítica de la raza y conceptos divisivos en algunos estados, nuestra investigación exploró el impacto de las comunidades de práctica (CdP) críticas en el rediseño y la enseñanza de cursos de introducción a la educación con una perspectiva transformadora. Este manuscrito detalla la colaboración de cuatro formadores de docentes con mentalidad de equidad, cada uno de los cuales representa contextos institucionales y políticos únicos. Mientras que dos autores enseñaron en estados que promueven pedagogías culturalmente sustentables, los otros dos autores enseñaron en estados que habían aprobado leyes que restringían la autonomía profesional de los educadores y las discusiones honestas sobre la raza y el racismo. La participación en esta comunidad de práctica crítica como grupo de apoyo nos permitió comprender y navegar mejor en nuestros contextos de políticas dicotómicos y renovó nuestro compromiso de enseñar a los futuros docentes a ser políticamente conscientes y empoderados para enseñar de manera antirracista. Nuestra comunidad de práctica fue fundamental para ayudarnos a reconocer que las pedagogías transformadoras y la colaboración son herramientas efectivas que pueden brindar un apoyo muy necesario a los formadores de docentes en todos los contextos de políticas, mientras que simultáneamente nos esforzamos por preparar a los candidatos a docentes que enseñarán de maneras culturalmente sustentables.

**Palabras-clave:** comunidades críticas de práctica; educación docente culturalmente sustentable; política de educación docente; legislación sobre conceptos divisivos

### **Divididos pela política, unidos pela resiliência: Usando pedagogia transformadora para impactar futuros professores em todos os contextos**

**Resumo:** Como os educadores e professores americanos estão sendo perturbados por uma legislação restritiva em torno da teoria crítica da raça e conceitos divisivos em alguns estados, nossa investigação explorou o impacto das comunidades críticas de prática (CoP) na reformulação e no ensino de cursos de introdução à educação com uma lente transformadora. Este manuscrito detalha a colaboração de quatro educadores de professores com mentalidade de equidade, cada um representando contextos institucionais e políticos únicos. Enquanto dois autores lecionaram em estados que promovem pedagogias culturalmente sustentáveis, os outros dois autores lecionaram em estados que aprovaram leis restringindo a autonomia profissional dos educadores e discussões honestas sobre raça e racismo. A participação neste CoP crítico como um grupo de apoio nos permitiu entender e navegar melhor em nossos contextos políticos dicotômicos e renovou nosso compromisso de ensinar futuros professores

a serem politicamente conscientes e capacitados para ensinar de maneiras antirracistas. Nosso CoP foi fundamental para nos ajudar a reconhecer que pedagogias transformadoras e colaboração são ferramentas eficazes que podem fornecer suporte muito necessário aos educadores de professores em todos os contextos políticos, enquanto simultaneamente nos esforçamos para preparar candidatos a professores que ensinarão de maneiras culturalmente sustentáveis.

**Palavras-chave:** comunidades críticas de prática; educação de professores culturalmente sustentável; política de educação de professores; legislação de conceitos divisivos

## Divided by Policy, United by Resilience: Using Transformative Pedagogy to Impact Prospective Teachers in All Contexts

Since *Brown v. Board of Education* ended *de jure* school segregation, the education system in the United States has struggled to offer the equity of opportunity and experience intended by public education in a democracy. One focal area of equity-oriented education reform has been a call to diversify the teacher workforce (Rogers-Ard et al., 2019; Sleeter et al., 2014); another has been to develop more critical and culturally responsive educators (Gay, 2018). However clear these priorities may be in educational research, the current policy context of teaching and teacher education in the US could be considered as a tale of two nations. While some states seek to expand and enact equity oriented and critical pedagogies of teacher preparation, others are plagued with politicized attacks on diversity, equity, and inclusion work of any kind, threatening legal and professional repercussions for teacher educators and P-12 teachers who persist in an equity-oriented agenda (Renner & Moore, 2020; Schwartz, 2023).

This article grew out of a grant project sponsored by the 100K in 10, “Rethinking Intro to Education Through a Racial Equity and Justice Lens,” which brought us together as four teacher educators working under these dichotomous policy contexts to redesign introduction to education courses. The project posited that the starting point for an education major should be an inquiry into why the U.S. education system has not yet lived up to its potential for providing an equitable education for all learners (see Appendix A for a sample syllabus). This redesign intended to actively recruit a more diverse teacher workforce while foregrounding an expectation that all educators begin their preparation with a philosophical orientation toward transformative pedagogies and diversity, equity, and inclusion in teaching practices. In this article, we elaborate on how our critical collaboration helped to sustain and sharpen our commitment to transformative pedagogies that James Baldwin (1963) termed “dangerous times.”

In the beginning phase of our collaboration, we worked together to develop and teach the first iterations of our redesigned courses. In the second stage of this work, represented by this article, we sought to engage in the Freirean concepts of *praxis*: to reflect upon our enacted curriculum and experiences as teacher educators in order to continue to transform it. While we all felt that the collaboration had improved our teaching. We wanted to understand why: we needed to theorize what we had accomplished, and how these experiences were transformative for us at a personal as well as professional level. This article is therefore primarily a reflection on our joint and individual experiences situated within a conceptual framework for transformative pedagogies and teacher educators’ communities of practice. We began this phase of investigation by individually writing reflective narratives on our experiences. Then using these narratives, and artifacts from our teaching, including syllabi, assessments, activities and student work samples, we began to articulate key elements of the pedagogical approach we constructed. Finally, we came together through regular

dialogue, reading, and collaborative writing to synthesize our experiences within the literature on transformative pedagogy and teacher collaborations.

As such, this paper provides our critical reflections on the processes and resources we benefited from as a group. Specifically, we take up the following inquiries: 1. What transformative pedagogies did we integrate into introduction to Education courses? and 2. How did this collaboration help us as teacher educators navigate the dichotomous political contexts for our work? We share our work in the hope that other teacher educators will find it useful for conceptualization of their curriculum and building their own collaborations.

## Literature Review

Two main bodies of education research and theory fortified our collaborative project. First, we foreground research on the importance of critical and culturally sustaining teacher education and consider the challenges of this work within dichotomous national and local education policy contexts. Second, we consider our work in light of the literature on teacher collaborations generally and teacher educator collaborations specifically.

### Critical and Culturally Sustaining Teaching

In the United States, expansive demographic changes and neoliberal reform initiatives make for an urgent call for equity-minded educators. P-12 data from 2021 shows that in the United States, 42.2% of the students are white and 57.8% are students of color (Statista, 2023); however, approximately 70% of all public school teachers are white (U.S. Department of Education, 2020). In addition to work that seeks remedy through diversifying the American teacher workforce, these disparities necessitate that educational research prioritizes critical and culturally sustaining teaching.

Simultaneously, external forces promote an expansion of vouchers, charter schools, alternative teacher certification routes, and other neoliberal reforms (Stitzen & West, 2014). These forces undermine the value of traditional teacher preparation routes, and negatively impact the work of teacher educators to prepare critically conscious teachers and to recruit teacher candidates from diverse backgrounds.

In opposition to policies and practices which devalue the liberatory potential of public education, critical and culturally sustaining education is a tapestry of practices and perspectives supporting its democratic promise. Built upon the work of Freire (1970), Ladson-Billings (1995, 2014), Gay (2018), Paris and Alim (2017), and many others, it coalesces around a set of shared core beliefs such as liberation, transformation, critical conscientization, learning in community, and asset-oriented teaching. The asset component refers to teachers adopting an affirmative rather than deficit perspective around students who come from diverse racial, ethnic and cultural communities (Souto-Manning, 2019). Hammond (2021) defines culturally sustaining education as focusing on equity, “improving the learning capacity of diverse students who have been marginalized educationally” (p. 7). Culturally sustaining teachers are comprehensive: they seek to educate the whole child (Aronson & Laughter, 2016) and “prepar[e] students to understand and deal realistically with social realities (what is), along with possibilities for transformation (what can be)” (Gay, 2018, p. 63).

We aspire to be what Zeichner (2019) calls *transformers*: teacher educators who seek to reshape the system in fundamental ways, by making comprehensive changes in pedagogy, curriculum, and social relations; creating meaningful collaborations across stakeholder groups; and emphasizing the public nature of education. We strive to educate prospective teachers who would be committed to social justice by actively advocating for economic and political rights of students as well as the communities they serve (Bhatnagar & Many, 2022; Paris & Alim, 2017). As such, our curricular focus centered on the needs of communities who have been historically marginalized and

underserved by public school systems and higher education (Many et al., 2022; Souto-Manning, 2019). Thus, in our view, transformative pedagogies promote: 1. critical awareness and reflection about histories and current community contexts, and 2. conceptual and personal enlightenment in the individual with the purpose of becoming an agent of positive social change (Ukpokodu, 2009). Such pedagogies that challenge prior biases, unmask privilege, and enhance one's agency in a democratic society, are emancipatory and humanize education (Freire, 1970).

To apply these principles, potential teacher candidates must investigate historical perspectives, the current social, economic, and political forces impacting schools, and the systemic inequitable policies and practices that have consequences for student learning. One factor is addressing and challenging the “*white gaze*” (Morrison, 1993) that permeates educational research and practice with and for students of color, their teachers, and their schools” (Paris & Alim, 2017, p. 2). Paris and Alim (2017) ask questions to challenge white, middle-class norms and seek culturally sustaining pedagogies; they reimagine the purpose of education and see “schools as sites where diverse, heterogeneous practices are not only valued but sustained” (p. 3). Thus, an important goal of our work was for prospective teachers to recognize tenets of culturally sustaining teaching and learning, and understand why it has the potential for successful learning and development of agency for school students. Tensions between teacher education research and policy recommendations for teaching and learning at the university and P-12 levels are not new. For decades, policy makers have ignored what researchers deem to be the overall goals for education in a democracy: to be equitable and transformative, and confront issues of access and choice (Bhatnagar & Many, 2022; Earley et al., 2011; Moore & Stewart, 2020). This divide recently has taken an interesting turn: progressive states are actively pushing critical and culturally sustaining education, while many conservative states ban such pedagogies (Schwartz, 2023).

Conservative states have passed laws that restrict diversity, equity and inclusion related efforts, imposing their political agenda in curricula and state standards. Teachers and teacher educators in states with bans on the so-called, *divisive concepts*, can face severe consequences for discussing topics related to race, racism, gender identity, including fines, suspension, or even losing their licensure. As of May 2024, 20 states have passed bans on teaching of divisive concepts at the P-12 level and 10 states ban these concepts at the university level as well (Diliberti et al., 2024). For example, Florida SB 266 (2023) prohibits college level courses that discuss theories of systemic racism, sexism, oppression, and privilege (Lantz & Carter, 2024). The impact of such bans in education is far reaching, affecting 1.3 million teachers and 20 million students (Diliberti et al., 2024). It is no surprise that such bans can create a climate of fear, severely limit teacher autonomy, and deprive students of an opportunity to gain critical and authentic insights about U.S. history and current issues impacting our society. Since bans exist only in some states, there is a need for research and professional development on how to navigate and resist these laws without abandoning commitments to social justice in teaching and teacher education. Previous research has indicated an urgent need to marshal local support (including school administrators, parents, student groups, and lobbyists) for inclusive teaching, and preserving teacher agency (Pollock et. al., 2022). Also, it is helpful to remind educators in all states that U.S. free speech law protects students' right to discuss their views and identities in school, and therefore, even when teachers may be banned from bringing specific materials to the classroom, students still have the right to initiate and participate in honest discussions (Eidelman & Hinger, 2018).

### **Teacher Collaborations**

In addition to the centrality of critical and culturally responsive teaching, our approach to this project asserted the importance of collaboration as a means for teacher educator growth and

development. Lave and Wenger (1991) provided a seminal model for how impactful learning occurs in “communities of practice” (CoPs). Communities of practice are “groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly” (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015). Under this conception, learning becomes “identity-making life projects of participants in communities of practice” (Lave, 1996, p. 157).

However, teachers’ communities of practice remain relatively elusive. For more than 40 years there has been sustained critique of teachers’ professional norms of isolation; and research suggests that little has changed in most teaching practices during this period (Hargreaves, 2019; Little, 1990; Lortie, 1975). Research on successful teacher collaborations provides evidence of organizational change, improved teacher leadership capacity, teacher development, and improved student achievement (Grossman et al., 2001; Hargreaves, 2019; Lloyd, 2009; Louis & Marks, 1998). In synthesizing thirty years of empirical studies on teachers’ communities of practice specifically, Hargreaves (2019) argued that the goal of teacher communities should be *collaborative professionalism*: “collaborative inquiry and action, and collective responsibility, as defining the essence of professional life” (p. 617).

While many P-12 teachers and teacher educators still work in isolation, research highlights the potential of educator collaborations to impact systemic transformation. Teacher educators’ CoPs vary dependent upon the group’s context and purpose. Prior studies report positive outcomes in teacher educator CoPs including reduced feelings of isolation and improved impact of teaching whether engaging in collaborative action research (Bilican et al., 2021); implementation of a teacher inquiry stance (Wolkenhauer & Hooser, 2021); or Critical Professional Development (Lisle-Johnson & Kohli, 2020). In particular, communities of practice provide an important source of incubation and sustenance for critical and social justice-oriented teachers and teacher educators (Richie, 2012), perhaps particularly needed in these politically fraught times. Blain et al. (2022) documented the impact and growth over time for a regional group of teacher educators committed to improving their practice in anti-bias practices. Tondreau et al. (2022) analyzed the experiences of a group of eight geographically dispersed teacher educators, who met monthly on Zoom to improve their practice of critical literacy through critical self-study. In both cases, teacher educators found that they were reshaping their own ideologies as they reshaped their teaching practices in critical communities (Tondreau et al., 2022).

These shared commitments to critical, culturally responsive, and collaborative teacher education formed the backbone of our community of practice. As Blain et al. (2022) postulated in their teacher educator CoPs conceptual framework, “the characteristics of participating teacher educators (TEs) and their teacher preparation institutions (TPIs) merge to influence the nature of engagement that occurs in the CoP, and this then impacts the individual members and the field at large” (p. 5). We have adapted Blain et al.’s framework (see Table 1) to shape the examination of our collective work that follows, and elaborate the ways that individual, institutional, and policy contexts shaped the nature of our engagement, the curriculum we each wrote, as well as the impact this collaborative redesign process had on us as teacher educators.

To accomplish our joint work, our CoP met once each month to share updates about our course, experiences of using equity-centered resources, and successes or challenges that we faced in implementing these strategies in our respective contexts. The support sessions were a welcome opportunity for feedback and to brainstorm ideas, strategies, and alternatives if specific approaches were not having the desired impact on our students. At the end of the semester, we each wrote a narrative to describe the impact of our collaboration on our teaching as well as personal impact. Even though the project formally ended in December 2022, we continued to collaborate and continued meeting on a monthly basis because of the immense value we had each found in this CoP.

**Table 1***Conceptualizing Teacher Educators Communities of Practice*

Factors Impacting CoP	CoP Shaping Teacher Educators' Individual and Collective Efficacy
Contextual Factors	<p>How did context shape our work?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Institutional variables, demographics of student body, course variables, course demographics,</li> <li>• State-level policy contexts: enabling &amp; diversifying teaching corps initiatives, or restrictive policies</li> </ul>
Critical Collaboration	<p>What did we accomplish in our CoP?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Innovative practice orientation: co-construction of syllabi, sharing of resources for curricula and instruction</li> <li>• Reflection</li> <li>• Research</li> <li>• Relationships</li> </ul>
Individual and Collective Impact	<p>How did impact differ based on the policy context?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Under both contexts: increased instructional effectiveness, altered dispositions, identity development, &amp; community</li> <li>• Under restrictive policy: offer safety, refuge, site for action &amp; hope</li> </ul>

## Collaboration Outcomes

### Who We Are: Personal and Institutional Contexts

As we evaluate the nature and impact of our own community of practice, we first highlight that we each brought different experiences of race and culture to this work, and that as we work in diverse communities, institutions, and policy contexts, we were creating our redesigned courses for different audiences. These differences informed the approaches we took to redesigning introduction to education curricula. Each of us briefly introduces ourselves and our teaching contexts below, beginning with faculty in enabling policy contexts for teacher education, and concluding with faculty in restrictive policy contexts.

#### ***Rachel: Small Private Urban University in Minnesota***

I am a white, US-born woman with 10 years of university teaching experience when this project began, following 14 years as a high school English Language Arts teacher. I live and work in the Twin Cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul, an increasingly diverse community with the highest per capita resettlement of refugees in the country. The small, private university where I teach is the most diverse four-year college in the region, serving an undergraduate population of 58% students of color and 51% first generation college students. Like most of the country, Minnesota faces a significant gap in the percentage of teachers of color and Indigenous teachers in proportion to our overall teacher workforce.

Minneapolis was also the epicenter of the international protests against racial injustice that followed the murder of George Floyd in 2020. While I had previously been involved in several local

initiatives to recruit and retain a more diverse and effective teacher workforce, this tragedy reverberated across the city and my classrooms. I was challenged to ask myself, what else was I going to do? I needed to reexamine the learning experiences I was creating for aspiring teachers. While I had a long-standing commitment to critical pedagogies, I applied for this grant because I sought a sharper focus on culturally sustaining pedagogy. I believed foregrounding this from the inception of the new course might help me decolonize teacher education curricula further. I believed participation in this learning cohort would accelerate my personal goals toward improved equity in design, delivery, and outcomes in my course. I also knew I needed peers to learn from and with. In a small program, I am the only faculty member specializing in adolescent literacy. And despite my own prior research into P-12 teacher collaborations (Lloyd, 2009), this project was the first time in over ten years that I had the opportunity to teach a foundational Education course or participate in an extended faculty collaboration at the course level. My course is offered as a seminar to first-year students who want to explore the field of teaching, but who have not yet committed to an Education major.

***Jo: Mid-size Public University in Massachusetts***

As a middle-class white woman with 34 years in the field of public school education – elementary school teacher, teacher educator, dean, and endowed civics engagement professor – I said a resounding “yes” for the opportunity to work with three faculty from other regions of the US in this initiative to renew and re-envision the Introduction to Elementary Education course. At no other time since entering the field of education in 1991 have I felt such a strong need for developing pre-service teachers with a solid understanding of “why” it is essential for their future pedagogy to be equity-focused and culturally responsive to their students, families, and communities. Furthermore, university students considering entering this profession need to know that teachers have a strong voice and can feel empowered to make changes in policy when there are equity issues and concerns that need to be addressed. The notion of public school teachers as social justice advocates is essential, and when teacher education programs introduce education in this way, changes needed in education, civic-mindedness, and equity may finally be realized for future generations.

At the university where I have been since 2013, approximately 10,000 students total with 28% of the student body identify as BIPOC. We have a legacy of equity-founded principles through the founders of the institution, Horace Mann and John Quincy Adams. Horace Mann’s well-known quote is that education is the great equalizer. Even so, the teacher diversity gap exists in my state. After the pandemic, the state’s public school system has been experiencing a teacher shortage as is the concern across the country. Joining this team of four faculty members from different parts of the country to reimagine our Introduction to Elementary Education course invigorated and inspired me. It also gave me a much-needed boost of optimism for the future of public education and the next generation of teachers.

***Ruchi: Large Urban Research University in Georgia***

I identify as Asian American and as a teacher educator, I center equity, social justice, and the urgency of anti-racist orientation in my work. Each semester, I teach introduction to Education courses, which focus on equity and social justice issues in education and enroll freshmen and sophomores who are not yet committed Education majors. These courses serve as a recruitment pathway for teacher education. The curricular and pedagogical goals of my course explicitly focus on race, challenging one’s own deficit perspective, and seeing the full humanity of students, and their communities through an asset lens (Souto-Manning, 2019).



My university is a large, urban, R1 institution and is the largest producer of BIPOC teachers in the state. The College of Education and Human Development (CEHD) has a mission to prepare educators who are informed, engaged, and empowered to positively impact the lives of students and communities who have been traditionally underserved by the education system. Additionally, CEHD aims to recruit candidates from under-represented backgrounds into the teaching profession. Similar to national averages, a majority of teachers in Georgia are white, while 63% of the student population in P-12 schools is non-white. Within our teacher education programs, the percentage of non-white teacher candidates has been above 67% for the last three years, reflecting the diversity of student population in the state's P-12 schools. In light of the restrictive legislation in Georgia which seeks to suppress critical discussions on race and equity issues, my pedagogical goals seek to inspire prospective teachers to continue to resist and persist in their classrooms to teach P-12 students using an anti-racist and humanistic lens (Bhatnagar & Many, 2022).

### ***LaSonya: Large Urban Research University in Florida***

I am an African American woman, my courses include diversity, equity, and inclusion content and infuse culturally responsive teaching, social justice in education, and strategies for working with diverse student populations. My university is an urban, public, predominately white (PWI), preeminent research institution in Florida. In 2023, the university student body consisted of 9.2% African American; 29% Hispanic; 8.6% Asian; and 50.4% white students. For nearly a decade, I have taught an introduction to Education course for non-education majors, and students across various subject areas with a desire to understand the vast perspectives related to students and adults with exceptionalities. Through this course students are able to identify and relate to diverse issues surrounding our most vulnerable populations. In addition, this course empowers students to observe, reflect and advocate for organizational and community change, while modeling and encouraging productive local, state and national advocacy. This course is an opportunity to recruit undergraduate undecided majors to teacher education. Given the current policy context, Florida's teachers are in a fear frenzy: fearing to focus on facts, being fired, and/or charged with a felony.

For all four of us, the motivation to participate in the 100K in 10 grant was the desire to collaborate with other teacher educators with a similar commitment to equity and social justice. The grant provided us the opportunity for dialogue about critical issues and anti-racist and justice-oriented teaching in introduction to Education courses, while also having a support group to sustain perseverance against restrictive policies seeking to ban resources, literature, and discussions around culturally responsive and anti-racist teaching (Renner & Moore, 2020). The community of practice thus provided us the opportunity for critical inquiry into our own pedagogies, to reform our work (Moore & Stewart, 2020), and become *transformers* in our practice (Zeichner, 2019).

## **Navigating Dichotomous Policy Contexts**

In addition to the range of personal and institutional contexts we each brought to our collaboration, as our joint work evolved we found ourselves increasingly influenced by and reflecting upon the dualistic nature of our respective state-level teacher education policies. We came together to construct and enact a revised introduction to Education curriculum with a strong central commitment to critical and culturally responsive practices, but we found that we were working under escalating, dichotomous policy contexts.

### **Enabling Policy Contexts: Minnesota and Massachusetts**

Educators in Massachusetts and Minnesota have been empowered to improve culturally responsive teaching at precisely the same moment our peers in other states face politically motivated

restrictive legislation. Both states pride themselves on progressive approaches to education, and both saw November 2022 elections solidify Democratic majorities in state houses with Democratic governors. Yet after the pandemic, like most of the country, the states' public-school systems have been experiencing teacher shortages. Both states also have struggled to close the teacher diversity gap: in Massachusetts, data from 2019-2022 found 9.7% teachers of color for 44.2% students of color; similarly, in Minnesota just 5.9% of teachers identify as BIPOC, while K12 students of color and Indigenous students in the state number 36.7%. Neither have we been immune to political controversies: debates over "divisive concepts" curriculum do impact teachers and students across our states, especially in exurbs and rural communities.

Recently, both states have added rigorous new teacher standards related to diversity, equity and inclusion and state-funded programs for diversifying the teacher workforce. In February 2023, the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education developed enhanced expectations and resources for educators to more fully support culturally and linguistically sustaining practices. Additionally, they support the efforts to diversify the teacher workforce through grants and other sponsored programs.

Likewise, in April 2023, Minnesota published its newly revised Standards of Effective Practice. The revised standards strengthen the focus on culturally responsive teaching. For example, Standard 2D states; "The teacher fosters an environment that ensures student identities such as race/ethnicity, national origin, language, sex and gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, physical/ developmental/ emotional ability, socioeconomic class, and religious beliefs are historically and socially contextualized, affirmed, and incorporated into a learning environment where students are empowered to learn and contribute as their whole selves" (p. 5). Additionally, Standard 8 "Racial Consciousness and Reflection" declares "The teacher understands how ethnocentrism, eurocentrism, deficit-based teaching, and white supremacy undermine pedagogical equity" (p.11). Furthermore, the Minnesota Legislature extended grant programs such as the Collaborative Urban and Greater Minnesota Educators of Color Grant and Teacher Mentorship and Retention Grant as ways to address the racial disparity in the teacher workforce.

These combinations of financial support and explicit standards-based calls to improve culturally sustaining teaching empower teachers to better serve BIPOC students, and may be a legitimate enticement for teachers to enter and stay in the profession. We feel fortunate that our policy contexts encourage our efforts to educate future teachers with a strong culturally sustaining focus.

### **Restrictive Policy Contexts: Georgia and Florida**

While Rachel and Jo were being hastened to enact culturally sustaining pedagogies within Minnesota and Massachusetts respectively, Ruchi and LaSonya were experiencing a politicized attack on their professional autonomy, and in particular, on any curricular work deemed to be "divisive," including the investigation of culturally sustaining practices to which our project was committed.

In the wake of anti-critical race theory legislation passing in numerous states, Georgia has also attempted to ban teaching of race and racism in P-12 classrooms, with implications for teacher education under the Protecting Students First Act (Ga HB 1084, 2022). This law states that accurate discussions about historical events are divisive. Essentially, Ga HB 1084 redefines legitimate interpretations of racism and bias in the United States as *divisive concepts* and prohibits such discussions and materials in the P-12 schools, as well as in teacher education programs. In addition, the Parents' Bill of Rights (Ga HB 1178, 2022) provides external agencies and groups the power to demand alternative learning material for their children and makes curriculum decisions subject to the desires of individuals who lack expertise. This places an undesirable administrative burden on

teachers, school boards, and administrators who will have to justify their actions and decisions to parent groups if their curriculum or pedagogy is perceived to be in violation of the state law (Moore, 2021). Overall, Ga HB 1084 threatens school flexibility, professional autonomy, and the livelihood of committed teachers who strive for cultural responsiveness.

Ga HB 1084 also has implications for teacher education. Language related to diversity, equity and inclusion is being erased from the program approval standards for teacher education (Moore & Lang, 2023). Georgia is also moving away from the nationally recognized InTASC standards, and instead utilizing state developed standards that incorporate color-blind language such as “all students” instead of diverse students, “backgrounds” instead of identities and cultures, and “preconceptions” instead of implicit and explicit bias.

Similarly, Florida passed The Individual Freedom law, HB 7 (2022) which bans educators from teaching certain topics related to race and drastically restricts public school instruction on topics of race, gender identity and sexual orientation. Examples of restrictive policy impositions include book banning, limiting transgender students’ bathroom access at school, and conflict over the Advanced Placement African American history curriculum (Garrett, 2023). Fl HB 1557: Parental Rights in Education, also called the “Don’t Say Gay or Trans” law, adds external oversight to the work of teachers, just like Ga HB 1178. The language of the restrictive laws is extremely similar in both states, and other states where such laws exist. Fl HB 7 and Ga HB 1084 restrict how classrooms discuss race and gender, and prohibit teaching that: “An individual, by virtue of his or her race, color, sex, or national origin, is inherently racist, sexist, or oppressive, whether consciously or unconsciously.” Ironically, Parental Bills of Rights in education are promoted as a way for parents to get more involved in how school districts approve library books and instructional materials.; however, in reality, they intensify restrictions in public schools and undermine the professional competence of teachers to meet individual student needs (Garrett, 2023).

### **Nature of Our Engagement: Critical Collaboration**

Despite our dichotomous policy contexts, we used collaborative inquiry in our respective Introduction to Education courses to emphasize emancipatory perspectives. As each context was unique in its student audience, we never set out to create identical courses. Our collaboration was constructive and democratic in nature, providing support to our work as teacher educators in our various contexts to meet the needs of students. As a result of planning with the team at 100K in 10, our course syllabi developed around these three goals: 1) understand the purposes of education/ schooling past and present in the United States; 2) understand the infrastructure of schools: economic, legal, and political contexts/ forces impacting schools; and 3) understand culturally sustaining teaching and learning. These goals ultimately laid the foundation for examining educational equity, the socio-political and economic impacts on education, and built understanding for and application of transformative pedagogies (see Appendix A for a sample syllabus).

In particular, below we share examples of two dimensions of our work that benefited most from our collaborations: expanding (1) resources and strategies for conceptual and personal inquiry into transformative teaching practices; and (2) community engagement through advocacy and field-based learning experiences.

### **Conceptualizing Transformative Teaching Practices**

In addition to seeking peer to peer collaboration generally, we all came to this project with a commitment to developing a new course anchored in transformative practices. The grant provided us the opportunity to have ongoing discussions about critical issues in anti-racist and justice-oriented teaching in introductory Education courses. The courses we created explicitly shifted away from a singular focus pedagogy and instructional strategies and toward a shift in equity principles and

learning the broader historical and political context of education. Our work highlighted the urgency of such a curriculum in foundational teacher education courses as a strategy to recruit committed and effective teachers for high-needs contexts. Such commitment is accompanied by insistence that traditionally underserved populations in public schools need teachers and leaders who are caring, culturally aware, and advocate for their students and their communities (Acosta, 2018). Such attitudes not only promote academic achievement of students, but also help them critique hegemonic societal structures, and learn how to use their agency in a world that may be hostile to their racial or gender identities.

One hallmark of effective teacher educators, like all teachers, is that they utilize a critical race perspective and recognize how race is a determining factor in educational access, social inequities, and opportunities for upward mobility. They also are determined to harness the power of education to dismantle racism and injustice. Thus, such teacher educators prepare their students to be academically competent, culturally competent, and politically conscious (Ladson-Billings, 1995; 2014). An education that fails to prepare students from historically marginalized communities for critical consciousness, both at the P-12 and the university level is a miseducation (Woodson, 2017). The discipline of history questions whether commonly accepted accounts of the past may actually be contributing to the persistence of racism, requiring reconsideration from the perspective of the present (Moore & Lang, 2023). Thus, while we did not use identical texts, we all grounded our courses with inquiry into the impact of historical inequities on access to quality education and upward social mobility. We included investigations of key education philosophers: such as Horace Mann, John Dewey, W.E.B. DuBois, Booker T. Washington, and bell hooks, and explored with students the historical, social, economic, and political policies that have led to the educational landscape in the United States today. Our courses examined the factors over time such as systematic racism, capitalism, and political ambitions and divisions that we see today. Some of the topics and articles included for class discussions are: the school to prison pipeline (Noguera, 2003); school district gerrymandering (Richard & Stroub, 2016); school choice and inequities exacerbated by charter schools (Buras, 2015); and tracking as a tool for racial segregation (McCardle, 2020).

Our courses also included a simultaneous exploration of local resources, such as Atlanta's Civil and Human Rights Museum, a Minneapolis history museum's exhibit on school desegregation, or the Carter G. Woodson African American History Museum of Florida, as well as critical analysis of narratives, movies, and documentaries that focused on local histories. Throughout this all, our goal was to help students uncover the complex intersection of societal structure such as housing, healthcare, criminal justice, that impact education. We examined local data related to school and community zoning, segregation, disciplining disparities by race, differences in opportunity for educational enrichment and rigor by race, thereby gaining an in-depth understanding of the *achievement gap*, and from where it originates.

The focus of these aspects of curriculum were to engage in critical reflections on the systemic and historic inequities in the American education system, as well as learning from the lived experiences of classmates around these issues in their P-12 education journey. Students came away with an understanding that such inequities are unfair and unjust, effectively block opportunities for upward mobility for marginalized groups, and also are rampant. Thus, as a whole, the courses supported and modeled transformative teaching and learning practices through engaging community activities via a historical and political education lens.

### **Community Engagement: Advocacy and Field Work**

For teacher education to be transformative, future teachers should learn to work with students' families and communities, and develop a humanizing perspective on the impact of

systemic racial and economic justices on the communities (Warren & Goodman, 2018). Through our collective work, we developed resources, ideas, assignments and strategies to engage students in transformative work. We hoped that a corollary of this work would be to galvanize university students to pursue teaching as a career despite the negativity surrounding teaching as a profession in our current national conversations. We emphasized the power of teachers as change agents and advocates for the local communities, and hypothesized that this might provide an inoculation against the negative narratives being circulated about teaching as a profession. Thus, key aspects of our shared design elements were community service, advocacy, legislation analysis, and/or school-based field immersion activities.

In some courses, students worked with community-based organizations to understand the historic context of why some communities are *othered* in our society, the implications of being *othered*, and also, the role our everyday actions play in keeping systemic oppression and white supremacy intact (Acosta, 2018; Warren & Goodman, 2018). The intention was for students to learn the importance of crossing cultural boundaries, building human connections, and gaining empathy about people different from themselves, while being cognizant of the systemic factors that contribute to widespread inequities and injustices. Students also learn how commonly used terms such as volunteering, providing service, or any other activities related to helping vulnerable communities are rooted in whiteness, and that power and privilege play a big role in how we may conceptualize the seemingly well-meaning actions (Applebaum, 2010). This integration of equity-focused practices and immersion in culturally sustaining teaching and learning environments holds potential for university students entering civic life with agency. Opportunities for advocacy and legislation analysis which were built into the course helped students understand the motivation behind various state level and national bills: who these bills benefit, who is marginalized, and identify the impact on various communities around them. The intention of all readings, community immersion and advocacy activities were for students to recognize and call out the inequities in their midst.

In addition to developing critical awareness about persistent historic and current inequities in education and the society writ large, advocacy projects modeled ways for students to become effective champions for positive change. We found that the work of advocacy is sensitive to the needs of context. For example, during an election cycle, the advocacy activities in fall may be more attuned to analyzing political candidates' stance on equity and social justice issues, reaching out to people on the ballot, attending town halls, and asking critical questions, especially about educational issues that we discuss in the course, with the purpose of becoming an informed voter. In the spring, advocacy might focus on tracking the legislative agenda in the state and being aware of bills that have negative implications for equitable educational opportunities, representation, and civil rights in general. Students might also engage with education-specific advocacy projects, such as developing LGBTQ+ student resources, mental health awareness, supporting DACA students, accessibility, and Ethnic Studies or other curricular policy debates. Advocacy project topics were always student-generated, and project groups were typically led by students who identified themselves as members of the community impacted.

In Georgia, Ruchi collaborated with local organizations to have students attend a *Day on the Hill*. This is an important exercise in a collective engagement with our democracy. Students get an opportunity to prepare talking points about various bills coming up for a vote, speak with their house and senate representatives, and understand the profound significance of local and state elections in making laws that directly impact our lives. Students write emails, call their representatives' offices, sign petitions, and post on their social media to create awareness about important legislative agendas, and to encourage more people to advocate against harmful legislation.

Some examples of legislation that students have advocated against include voter suppression laws, ban on critical race theory, “Don’t Say Gay” bills, and transgender rights suppression bills.

In Minnesota and Massachusetts, both courses required field experiences in local schools. Prospective teachers were intentionally placed in culturally and linguistically diverse schools as a cohort in order to deepen the relationship between university and community schools, and provide a shared context for collective critical reflection. As described earlier, educators in both states are fortunate to have resources for determining culturally responsive teaching and learning practices. In an example of cross-context exchange, Jo shared the *Culturally Responsive Teaching Rubric* from the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary (2021). This tool was designed for use in classrooms to observe and identify what culturally responsive teaching looks like in action: both what the teachers are doing and what the students are doing. Rachel recognized the value of such a tool in providing a framework for critical reflection in fieldwork, and adopted it for her own course. We asked our students to use this rubric with their required classroom observations to analyze classrooms for indicators of culturally responsive teaching and learning.

Reflecting on the indicators from the rubric, students demonstrated the importance of considering differentiation and creating inclusive learning environments. They built relationships with the individual P-12 students and teachers with whom they worked. Overwhelmingly, students left this course more committed to teaching as a professional and academic pathway than when they began. Many emphasized how important the embedded field experience and advocacy activities were to their decision to remain in the field of education.

### **Impact on Us as Teacher Educators**

As our first semester of collaboration on teaching reimagined Introduction to Education courses came to a close, we realized, not surprisingly, that we were just beginning to form a deeper commitment to our community of practice. In line with Freirean concepts of *praxis*, we now needed to reflect upon our collective action in order to continue to transform our teaching. While the initial grant funding concluded, we continued to meet regularly to make sense of our work through discussion, research, writing, and preparation of conference presentations. In the next phase of our collaboration, we will each be teaching another cycle of these courses. We will expand our analysis to include additional artifacts of impact on students, including student work samples and course survey results. Though our contexts and challenges varied due to the divisive concepts legislation affecting some states, we are already finding similar themes that emerged from the initial analysis of our students’ reflections and assessment artifacts, including expanded conceptual awareness of and personal commitments to improving educational equity.

We were ourselves transformed in unique ways by our critical collaboration. During the initial semester, our meetings included the grant facilitators from the 100K in 10 initiative. In those meetings we discussed how contextual differences and similarities, reflected on and shared resources for course materials, assignments and activities. These meetings helped us connect with one another as critical practitioners, gain authentic insights into each other’s context and forge professional relationships. After the initial semester, the four of us continued to meet once a month to continue our dialogue and support, discuss issues, and brainstorm solutions related to teaching and student engagement. It was during this time that as a team, we determined ourselves to be a CoP and began considering how learning about our experiences may be of value to teacher educators across the US. Each of us came from a different institutional and policy context, with a range of past experiences and expertise, and areas of professional growth and connection we were seeking. We each offer a brief personal impact statement below to acknowledge these individual outcomes.

**Rachel**

Throughout much of my experience in higher education, I had been teaching almost entirely in isolation. I was usually “the only” specialist; this was an experience of exceptional learning and connection building for me. I had not taught an Education history course before, and benefited greatly from the conceptual work we accomplished. Texts and resources suggested by the group hastened my own learning in this field of knowledge. What I had not anticipated was the importance that advocacy and activism would develop in this course. Through conversations with our team, the focus on the advocacy components of the course became essential. The impact on and feedback from our university students has been overwhelmingly positive. They were excited to share what they had done, eager to learn from one another, and left class feeling empowered to continue their journey as educators and activists. This focus has strengthened my curriculum as well as my own sense of efficacy and necessity as an advocate. I have embraced new leadership roles on campus and in my broader community as a direct result of the confidence and perspectives gained through this project.

**Jo**

After experiencing my students’ passion, learning, eye-opening in-class moments, and as evident in their writing, I will be teaching this course in no other way. They clearly understood the purpose and the meaning behind all we were learning together; I am committed to approaching an introductory Education course from the equity lens. The support I felt and the experiences we shared in our CoP, helped me and therefore my students understand not only the complexity of educational policy across states, but the essential ways educators can support one another in educational equity pursuits.

**Ruchi**

As an instructor, I have always kept the course application-focused, bringing in current events and news to enable my students to see connections between issues they read about in research articles with real-time impact on their own lives or lives of marginalized communities. The 100Kin10 grant offered me an exciting opportunity to collaborate with other teacher educators who teach with a similar commitment to equity and social justice in their respective institutions and contexts. Through this CoP, I received a much-needed support group to engage in a critical inquiry into my own pedagogy, reform my work and truly embody what it means to be a transformer, and strive for comprehensive changes in pedagogy, curriculum, and social relations as a teacher educator (Zeichner, 2019). Our collaboration helped me develop a new appreciation for collective impact, over working in silos and trying to reinvent the wheel for oneself. I have found that provoking critical thought and making education empowering and liberating requires that teachers and teacher educators harness the power of allyship and collaboration.

**LaSonya**

The 100Kin10 grant has created access and opportunity for collegial and caring support group. In Florida, the purported solution is actually part of the problem (Moore & Lang, 2023). Currently, it is not easy being a Black collegial community and university/college, experiential educator in my state. Nonetheless, I pride myself in these characteristics and educating *all* populations in an authentic transformative manner. As a previous Head Start, K-12 public school teacher, behavior specialist and middle school administrator, I have observed first-hand how prevalent structural racism issues are, and how these exacerbate educational injustices that plague our nation and specifically my state. I pride myself in personal “teacher persistence,” learning from a

variety of experts in the field and beyond. This collaborative project has allowed me to communicate, collaborate, and co-construct curriculum focused on individual, group and community transformation. As a transformative teacher leader, I aim to open the gates and doors of access and opportunity for everyone, particularly those individuals with the greatest need (Moore & Lang, 2023).

## **Conclusion and Significance**

The opportunity to collaborate as teacher educators with a similar commitment to transformative pedagogies (Zeichner, 2019) but extremely different policy and local contexts helped us all appreciate the salience of critical partnerships in strengthening our teaching practices. As is often the case in higher education, we all were deeply immersed in our own practices, but operated in silos without opportunities to truly consider alternatives that could impact future teachers' practices and buttress public education as an important asset of our democracy. One limitation of this paper is that thus far we have described our practices conceptually as a model for others to learn from, and have not yet concluded empirical research into the impact of these practices on our students. Our community of practice will take up this work as the next phase of our shared inquiry. However, the importance of improving our own cultural competencies as educators was salient to our ongoing meetings where we shared experiences, opportunities, and constraints posed by policy makers and politicized attacks on public education. This collaboration helped us share ideas, brainstorm solutions, and get a deeper insight into each other's contexts, which we would not have received otherwise.

Teachers and teacher educators need opportunities to become critically aware of policies in other states and their impact on educational practice. Neoliberal policies such as vouchers, charter schools, and alternative licensure were already negatively impacting teachers in public schools (Fullan, 2016), now teachers in restrictive policy states face an additional layer of burdensome conditions. These laws directly contradict what many teachers perceive as the aspiration of our profession: achieving an equity of educational opportunities and outcomes befitting a pluralist democracy. As a result, such policies can cause teachers to experience lower morale, burnout, attrition (Carter-Andrews et al., 2019), or disillusionment with the profession. Teaching in isolation, we can fall prey to the idea that we alone are fighting these battles. For the two of us who were teaching in restrictive contexts, it was helpful to see how some states utilize the research base in teacher education to create policies that promote cultural competence and racial justice. Examples of good practice are uplifting, provide hope, and create a support network from which teacher educators may draw inspiration, strength, and resilience (Welton et al., 2023). Likewise, it is helpful for those who teach in states that have enabling policies that promote ideals of cultural competence and anti-racist practices to collaborate with faculty in restrictive states who are unable to use their voices because of a fear of reprisal. Together we can advocate as a teacher education community and elevate our collective impact.

Implications emerged from our collaborative practice which might be beneficial for other teacher educators irrespective of context. In addition to forming coalitions with other teacher educators, locally, nationally, and internationally, we recommend building broader coalitions with P-12 schools and community-based organizations to promote understanding about these laws and the urgent need to support pedagogies that are inclusive, fair, and just (Welton et al., 2023). Teacher educators, school administrators, teachers, as well as community organizers who are committed to transformative and anti-racist pedagogies, could develop toolkits to navigate various restrictive policies, and find ways to be impactful with their students despite restrictive legislation (Welton et al., 2023). For example, field trips to the local civil and human rights museums, school integration



exhibits, etc., are a great opportunity to provide critical insight for teacher candidates as well as P-12 students whose teachers may not be able to provide this instruction during school hours.

Since many divisive concepts laws are written loosely, leaving room for interpretation by local districts, school leaders and administration also need support in navigating these laws and determining opportunities to continue honest discussions and teaching of historical facts (Garrett, 2023). Creating such resources and networks is an urgent need that teacher educators all over the country could support so that teachers and administrators do not feel alone in their work contexts while resisting unfair and unjust laws (Bhatnagar & Many, 2022; Moore, 2021). The power of such grass-roots coalitions has been exemplified in Indiana where parents, community organizations, civil rights advocates, and business leaders spoke against the banning of race and racism discussions in classrooms and managed to defeat this bill in the state legislature (Rhoden, 2022; Welton et al., 2023).

On the other hand, 17 states have passed bills to promote curriculum that unpacks systemic racism, bias, and promotes antiracist ideologies (Schwartz, 2023), which is reflective of the constructive impact of teacher education research and advocacy on positive legislation. As teacher educators, we need to renew our resolve to stay involved in local and national politics and become unrelenting advocates against legislation that aims to reverse years of progress in advancing equity and social justice in education (Bhatnagar & Many, 2022; Garrett, 2023; Moore, 2021). This is a call for all teacher educators, irrespective of state context or laws, to prepare candidates who possess a critical understanding of systems of oppression, are empowered to use their agency to promote positive change, and are allies who promote democratic ideals by strengthening public education.

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