Two Sides of the (Un)comfortability Coin: Time to Fidget and Testimonial Smothering in a Diversity Course for Preservice Teachers

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Abstract: The purpose of this multiple narrative case study was to investigate how two university faculty educators of different racial and gender identities approached teaching about race and social class in a Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Justice (DEIJ) course in a predominantly White institution and to examine the perceptions of the professors and pre-service teachers. This examination revealed that when professors create "time to fidget" with course content in a "safe-ish" environment, there are two sides of (un)comfortability in relation to student identity and their willingness to grapple with racialized tensions as they develop their (critical) racial consciousness. Based on this analysis, we offer recommendations for improving DEIJ instruction in teacher education programs.

Our national public school teaching force is overwhelmingly comprised of White mono-lingual female teachers from middle-class backgrounds (Sleeter, 2016). Yet, this teaching force does not reflect the demographics of today's PK-12 students, as classrooms are more diverse. This increasing racial, ethnic, linguistic, and religious diversity of our nation compels us to ask new and complicated questions that impact the preparation and professional learning of critically conscious (Freire, 1972) pre-service and in-service public school teachers (Blevins et al., 2016). To address this need, many teacher education programs have implemented required diversity-focused courses employing a variety of diversity ideologies (Shaheed & Kiang, 2021) ranging from colorblindness to multiculturalism (Banks & Banks, 2020) to critical race theory (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). These various approaches influence how teachers make sense of our ethnic, racial, linguistic, gender, and religious diversity as it is reflected in the teaching and learning of the public school curriculum and becomes important in our understanding of how we are engaging and preparing students to be informed global citizens (Banks, 2006, 2008; Blevins et al., 2016; Blevins & Talbert, 2015;

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VanSledright, 2010).

Conducted at a large private Christian, Predominantly White Institution (PWI), this study provides an examination of the professors' approach and students' experience in an undergraduate DEIJ lab course designed for preservice teachers to better equip them as they enter field placements and classrooms of their own. The research team was comprised of three graduate students, two White females and one Black male, and two professors, one Black female and one White male, who are all affiliated with the focal university. The two professors and one graduate student were acting as participant researchers as they are all instructors of the DEIJ Social Issues in Education lab course. Additionally, we acknowledge our interest in conducting this study is to improve our department's offerings of DEIJ coursework as well as inform similar courses at other universities and affirm our collective belief that it is the responsibility of teacher education programs to enhance pre-service teachers' racial awareness and sensitivity (Milner, 2010).

Relevant Literature

As we began conceptualizing this study, we initiated our review of the literature by considering some of the general challenges for teacher educators across cultural identities as they pertain to diversity courses. In addition to their prior experiences, part of pre-service teachers' perceptions within an anti-racism diversity course can be influenced by contextual

factors of the course including pedagogical philosophy, ethnicity, and racial disposition of the instructor (Davis, 2021; Shah & Coles, 2020; Trolian & Parker, 2022). These contextual factors can play a particularly important role when set against the backdrop of a PWI where opportunities for interracial exchange may be more limited and, given the inability to experience the cultural emic of race (Rosaldo, 1986), instructors must work to provide students with an authentic exposure to diverse voices (DePalma, 2008; Dougherty, 2002) as to not run the risk of essentializing minoritized identities or constructing imaginary others (DePalma, 2008; Matusov & Smith, 2007). This is especially important for White instructors that dominate the academy. According to Williams et al., (1999), before taking a DEIJ course, student perceptions of White instructors of diversity courses can range from one of solidarity to believing them incapable of teaching "the black experience" but these presuppositions of professors' racial influence often decrease after course participation and can be mitigated through professors' pedagogical and curricular choices. Conversely, professors of color are often challenged and questioned at higher rates and can be seen as pushing their own racialized agendas (Amos, 2016; Castaneda, 2004; Chang-Bacon, 2021; Evans-Winters & Twyman Hoff, 2011; Perry et al., 2009). Further, female professors of color can be considered too emotional (Matias, 2013). Yet, representation is important for pre-service teachers of color; especially for Black pre-service females having Black

female professors to reaffirm their identities (Berry, 2005; Jackson et al., 2017; Wynter-Hoyte et al., 2020).

Just as the professor approach can have a significant impact on student's attitudes toward DEIJ course content (Hurtado et al., 1998; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Trolian & Parker, 2022), students' own racial and intersectional identities can influence their attitudes and participation in DEIJ courses. Often pre-service teachers' perceptions of race influence their comfort level in discussing race in the classroom (Demoiny, 2017) and fears of identity threat can contribute to the avoidance of interracial interactions (Shaheed & Kiang, 2021; Shelton et al., 2006). Given the predominantly White settings of many teacher education programs, minoritized teacher candidates may feel tokenized, be fearful of sharing their experience (Torres et al., 2004) or that their personal experiences are being applied monolithically to a whole identity group. Sharing of personal racialized experiences can be met with colorblindness, or worse, from their White peers (Cochran-Smith, 1995). This potential for testimonial injustice (Applebaum, 2019; Fricker, 2007) can even lead to testimonial smothering (Applebaum, 2019; Dotson, 2011) when students of color silence themselves when they perceive/receive a rejection of their position as knower by an unwilling audience (Hernández & Chew, 2002).

Another specific element of significance to our work is the idea of (un)comfortability with discussing topics, namely race, in a DEIJ class. Pedagogy of discomfort is a strategy for exposing various forms of racism (Carter, 2008) by inciting all educators in a learning space (instructor included) to challenge hegemonic practices (Boler, 1999). Ohito (2016) emphasized the affective aspect of these pedagogies focusing on noticing and listening to interactions between emotions and persons that jointly comprise the collective understanding of racial oppression in the classroom. Through this discomfort and tension, Ohito (2016) aims to cultivate an expanding racial critical consciousness by rationalizing that "when we are cocooned in the familiarity of comfort, we are often either unable or unwilling to jeopardize our sense of equilibrium by tackling emotional risks" (p. 455). Thus, many individuals, especially those of ideologies saturated (knowingly or unknowingly) in White supremacy need to feel discomfort and tension to grow (Brown, 2016). Extending this work on pedagogies of discomfort, Zembylas & Papamichael (2017) posit that these pedagogies are not enough to sustain critical consciousness, but rather must be accompanied by a pedagogy of empathy (Lindquist 2004; Zembylas, 2012) for a more beneficial ideological transformation in the learning space.

Conceptual Framework and Research Questions

In this examination of professors' identity-informed approach and student experience in an undergraduate diversity course, we considered the multiple ways teacher education programs can prepare pre-service teachers to enact critical consciousness (Freire, 1970). More

specifically, we frame our study around critical race consciousness (Carter, 2005) and racial consciousness (Haynes, 2013) or what we will later refer to as (critical) racial consciousness. Carter (2008) defines critical race consciousness as "a critical understanding of the asymmetrical power relationships that exist between Blacks and Whites in America" (p. 102). Critical race consciousness compels educators of all racial backgrounds to develop critical consciousness, in themselves and their students, to confront and combat inequities in education and society (Carter, 2008). While Carter uses critical race consciousness in the context of Black students developing this awareness for identity formation and academic persistence, we hope to extend her framework to developing a critical consciousness of race and racism for preservice teachers in diversity-specific classrooms. On the other hand, Haynes (2013) describes racial consciousness as "an in-depth understanding of the racialized nature of our world, requiring critical reflection on how assumptions, privilege, and biases about race contribute to White [individuals'] worldview" (pp. 50-51). Haynes examines how White faculty's racial consciousness translates to more equitable classroom environments and curricula. One way to grow in racial consciousness is through interrogating Whiteness and privilege (Haynes & Patton, 2019). Through (critical) racial consciousness and our participants' experiences, we hope to illuminate how identity and race impact students' (un)comfortability in discussing racialized topics in a DEIJ course. In this study we aim to investigate: 1) How do two

university faculty educators of differing identities (race and gender) approach teaching about race and class in a diversity course? 2) What similar (or dissimilar) perceptions do professors and pre-service teachers hold about the class session on race and social class?

Methodology and Methods

The purpose of this study was to investigate how two tenured university faculty of different racial and gender identities approached teaching about race and social class at a predominantly White institution of higher education and to examine the similarity and dissimilarity of the perceptions of the professors and the undergraduate teacher education students enrolled in the DEIJ courses taught by the two faculty participants. To achieve this purpose, we determined that a multiple-narrative case study (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Craig, 2009; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2018) was the most appropriate research design to capture the voices of all participants and to provide a focused examination of the particularity and complexity of the phenomenon as it unfolded in an authentic contemporary setting (Stake, 1995). To complement our choice of methodology, we were intentional in our selection of methods as a means to conduct, "naturalistic research to expand our understanding of the factors that influence the performance of real-life groups in real-world settings" (Hirokawa et al., 2000, p. 574).

An example of our intentionality in the selection of our research methods is the series of deliberative research team

meetings that allowed us to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the setting for our study and the most appropriate population from where our participant sample would be purposively chosen. Guiding our deliberative research methods selection process was our commitment to "retain a holistic and real-world perspective" (Yin, 2014, p.4) of the "factors that influence the performance of real-life groups in real-world settings" (Hirokawa et al., 2000 p. 574). Informed by these qualitative research characteristics, our participant sampling method was a criteria-based purposive bounded case protocol that included tenured university professors (n=2), Ph.D. graduate students (n=3), sophomore and junior undergraduate students (n=32) enrolled in two of the DEIJ Social Issues in Education lab courses taught by the tenured university faculty participants.

Continuing this deliberative process of research methods selection, we used a diagnostic checklist informed by Creswell (2013), Patton (2002), Yin, (2014), and Clandinin and Connelly (2000), to determine which data collection methods would be most appropriate. After reviewing the diagnostic checklist, we determined that a triangulated data collection protocol (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018) that included participant observations, semi-structured interviews, text, and visual artifacts would allow us to collect, contextualize, and critically analyze the data shared by the faculty, graduate students, and undergraduate students participating in this study.

Throughout the data collection process,

we carefully coordinated our application of the data analysis protocols to ensure we met the standards of trustworthiness and authenticity established by Lincoln and Guba (1986). A three-phased qualitative data analysis protocol was applied that included pattern matching to establish and verify data codes and categories, within-case and cross-case analysis that served as the methodological structure to establish intercoder reliability, that supported the thematic analysis process of integrating the individual participants' storied data into meaningful clusters that would form the larger narrative reported in this study. It is imperative to note, that because we chose to use a multiple-narrative case study research design, all qualitative data analysis and data interpretation procedures are grounded in a narrative analysis framework. Meaning, the form and content of the participants' stories were analyzed as textual units that facilitated our understanding and revealed deeper insights into how two university faculty educators of differing racial and gender identities approached teaching about issues of race and class in an undergraduate DEIJ course and what similar or dissimilar perceptions the faculty and the undergraduate students enrolled in the course have about the teaching and learning experiences.

Data Collection

Classroom Observation

Two of the researchers conducted classroom observations of both Dr. S and Dr. T and their students. The observation protocol included descriptive and

reflective notes. The two debriefed and shared their observations after both of the observations were finished.

Professor Interviews

Two of the researchers interviewed both Dr. S and Dr. T prior to the observation and followed up post-observation. Interview questions focused on the professors' philosophy of teaching, curricular plans, and student outcomes.

Focus Group

The researchers invited all members of both professors' classes to participate in focus groups (Roulston, 2014). Four individuals expressed interest in sharing their voices, two students from Dr. T's class and two students from Dr. S's course. Upon follow up emails and scheduling, two students engaged in the focus group interview with one student from Dr. T's section and one student from Dr. S's section. Both happened to be students of color. The student from Dr. T's class, Joel (pseudonym), was a Black male and the student from Dr. S's class, Juliet (pseudonym), was a female of color. We understand that having only one student from each course section participate in the focus group is a limiting factor of this study but believe the interviews provided valuable insights into the dynamics of these classrooms.

Findings and Discussion

Analysis of the data collected in this study revealed several common themes across the professors' pre- and post-observation interviews, classroom observations, and the student focus group. These themes included important tensions in the difference between the (un)comfortability of White students and students of color, the role the instructors' pedagogical environment played in this tension, and students' (un)willingness to lean into the tension and deeply explore the issues of race and social class.

"Time to Fidget" and a "Safe-ish" Environment

In the pre-observation interviews, both professors expressed their educational philosophies and approach to the DEIJ Social Issues in Education lab course were grounded in critical theory and a desire to help preserve teachers develop their critical consciousness (Freire, 1972). Given the structure of this course as a pairing of a traditional course and a lab component, both professors expressed excitement that teaching the lab component would allow time for students to dig in and grapple with issues and questions raised by the readings from the full course and possibly foster their (critical) racial consciousness. This format would allow for more experiential learning and personal reflection, and stemming from their critical philosophies, each professor agreed upon the importance of creating an environment where students felt comfortable dialoguing and sharing personal experiences but also challenging students to engage with often uncomfortable or even controversial topics.

Dr. T described this balance of comfort

and challenge as creating a "safe-ish" environment; one where students are encouraged to "wander curiously, question critically, and think creatively" as they consider why they believe what they believe and engage with differing perspectives. Similarly, Dr. S provided students with the opportunity to create presentations to lead class discussions not only to practice their teaching skills but to give students "time to fidget" with new and sometimes uncomfortable ideas as they decided how and what information to present on their given DEIJ topic.

Despite these similar philosophical approaches, the two professors differed in how they leveraged their identities in the classroom. Dr. T., as a White male, recognizes that his identity is the majority within academia and therefore students have a familiarity, if not comfortability, with his identity in this space. Dr. S, as a Black woman, acknowledges that she is often the first instructor of color for many of her students and views this as an opportunity to build solidarity with students of color and to leverage her personal experiences as she illustrates many of the course concepts. Both educators recognize the affordances and limitations their identity presents within the multicultural classroom.

Testimonial Smothering

Notwithstanding the instructors' best efforts to create an environment that fostered dialogue and encouraged a free exchange of thoughts and experiences, there was still evidence that the context of a PWI cannot be overcome in all instances

and social pressures can have a silencing effect on students of color. During small group discussions, Joel, who identifies as a Black male, shared his experience of the culture shock coming to the PWI when he had grown up in a predominantly Black and Latinx neighborhood in a large metropolitan area. His story was met with some surprise from his White peers and Joel appeared to withdraw from the conversation. When asked about this interaction in the post-observation focus group, he voiced, "I felt like the comfortability of everybody matters…. maybe I shouldn't have said that."

Additionally, when asked about his general comfort level sharing his personal racialized experiences, he said, "I feel like there's [Sic] certain parts where I do limit myself in what I say because I don't want to say certain things…I could have shared my story a lot more."Joel, like other pre-service teachers of color, felt that his experiences were unwelcomed, brushed aside, or may cause discomfort or even isolation from peers (Amos, 2010, 2016).

Similarly, Juliet, a pre-service teacher, and female of color, shared, "...there were times I didn't want to go deep…I thought people…wouldn't understand the experiences that I have been through…. I wasn't uncomfortable, I just thought people wouldn't understand if I talked about it so I just didn't." Both Joel and Juliet's reflections support the presence of testimonial smothering (Applebaum, 2019; Dotson, 2011) when minoritized people self-censor because they perceive that their thoughts and experiences will not be understood or valued by the dominant

group. This type of epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2007) leads to a limitation of a needed voice within the dialogical space. Moreover, when pre-service teachers of any racial background silence themselves, it limits a professor's and peers' ability to facilitate and grow critical consciousness (Mazzei, 2008; Reyes et al., 2018). In short, critically conscious instructors need to seek opportunities to ease this discomfort as they work to amplify the voices of pre-service teachers of color, particularly within predominantly White spaces.

Leveled Up Colorblindness

Comparisons across classroom observations, student focus group interviews, and professor post-observation interviews revealed a mismatch between student perception and student actions regarding the depth to which they engaged with issues of diversity and its implications for education. During the classroom observation, student groups gave presentations on race and social class. And While students voiced, "We went pretty deep and got super personal," during class discussions, they avoided using race-based labels or directly calling out instances of racism but spoke more in vague generalities. When a student group lead the conversation around social class, the group presented graphs connecting race to class, yet they shied away from confronting this relationship head-on during class discussion. Often individuals will shy away from uncomfortable words or topics of discourse in these spaces (Haviland, 2008; Pennington, 2007); however, the politeness or silence is a

missed opportunity to confront White supremacy, notions of colorblindness, and harmful ideologies (Ohito, 2016) and grow each other's (critical) racial consciousness. Moreover, professors of color often struggle with disrupting these notions of privilege for fear that it might negatively impact how they are perceived among their colleagues and pre-service teachers (Williams & Evans-Winters, 2005).

Like in many other studies (e.g., Demoiny, 2017), this lack of race-specific conversation led to a limited examination of pre-service teachers' held ideologies and positionalities. The absence of direct-racial and systematic issues discourse limited the professors' ability to navigate and the pre-service teachers ability to grapple with their critical racial consciousness. Although students felt like they "dug deep" when discussing race and class (perhaps because very few of them have previously had a space to have these conversations) they only mentioned class and nearly avoided the word race altogether. In the post-observation interview, both Dr. S and Dr. T were surprised by the lack of direct dialogue about race. Dr. T stated, "It's 2023! I expected students to be more open to having these conversations!" as he believed students would have brought more exposure to racialized problems through media if not through their own lived experiences. Dr. S. applied the term "leveled-up colorblindness" describing the pre-service teachers' willingness to engage in conversations about social class and personal injustices but avoiding race and how they stated a desire to create safe and inviting classrooms but shied away

from engaging with topics necessary to create truly inclusive spaces. This "leveled-up colorblindness" highlighted the importance of meeting students where they are and reinforced the professors' belief that DEIJ course work cannot be considered a one-and-done type of check mark on a degree plan. It takes more than just two courses and one semester to challenge this "leveled-up colorblindness" and foster critical racial consciousness.

Implications and Recommendations

Leveraging (Un)comfortability

Throughout this study, it became increasingly clear that there is a difficult balance to strike between the (un)comfortability of students to grapple with DEIJ course content. On the one hand, there is a significant need to boost the comfortability of pre-service teachers of color by creating classroom spaces where they are believed and valued as knowledge possessors and creators and feel comfortable sharing their voices and experiences. As both Juliet and Joel pointed out, this comfortability was encouraged by their professors' dialogical approach but could have been increased if there were more minoritized voices represented in the classroom and they did not feel the pressure of speaking for a whole identity group. This speaks to a need not only for individual courses and classrooms but for increased representation within PWIs and the U.S. teaching force. Sharing your story becomes easier when it is just that, your story, and not one that is applied monolithically to an entire group.

On the other hand, there is a need to leverage the "uncomfortability" of White students as they are provided the "time to fidget" with the cognitive dissonance created as they are exposed to DEIJ course content while simultaneously ensuring students are not so uncomfortable that they shut down and refuse to engage. It is important to be conscious of the affective nature of such pedagogies of discomfort (Ohito, 2016) and mindful that we are "hacking at their very roots" (Aveling, 2006) as White students are asked to confront White supremacy. By providing only the "safe-ish" environment, students are expected to confront their own beliefs and ideologies but with the understanding that beliefs about social issues are often deeply rooted, often unconscious, and take time to untangle and even more, time to transform.

We understand that leveraging (un)comfortability from these angles takes a skilled and intentional (critical) racially-conscious professor that may additionally have to navigate some discomfort of their own. This could be an area for future research.

Extending Students' Critical Racial Consciousness

While our university provides a pair of DEIJ courses (one traditional class and one lab), this study and existing literature provide the rationale that this is not sufficient to foster critical racial consciousness and combat "leveled-up colorblindness." The authors argue that race, diversity, and social justice should be incorporated into all coursework and

field experiences (Gorski, 2009; Sleeter, 2016) and be aimed at striving to identify and address inequitable systems head-on. This DEIJ course and lab component should be the springboard for this learning rather than an endpoint. One strength of the lab is that it provides numerous opportunities for grounding the students in local contexts including community walks and school site visits. When students reflected on their lab experiences, many cited the community walks as one of the most memorable and impactful learning experiences as they saw many of the course concepts in more concrete terms instead of as absent and disconnected from their own lived experience or only through textual abstractions. Increasing this type of learning opportunity could benefit students in contextualizing course concepts within the communities and schools pre-service teachers will be entering for their field placements and make it more difficult for students to ignore or gloss over the racialized inequities of their communities.

Furthermore, our program, like many other teacher preparation programs, uses benchmarks to foster dialogue around the preparedness of our teacher candidates. Our research team advocates for an infusion of diversity, equity, inclusion, and social justice standards in this benchmark structure so that growth in (critical) racial consciousness will start in this Social Issues in Education class and continue to be embodied throughout the coursework and fieldwork of our preservice teachers. Confronting and transforming White supremacy and racism does not happen overnight but is a

recursive process and teacher education programs need to treat it as such by giving it the ongoing attention and focus it deserves and requires.

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