A Theory/Practice Divide: Exploring Perceptions of Inclusion in Schools

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Abstract

This article explores the theory-practice divide with respect to actualizing how diversity and inclusion can be explicitly addressed in schools. This paper contributes important insights for teacher educators in terms of recognizing and challenging problematic assumptions teacher candidates (TCs) may hold. This research presses TCs to examine the structure of schools through a critical lens, as teachers, particularly those from the dominant group, tend to act in surface ways, avoiding conflict by using seemingly inclusive language and ideas, and either ignoring or not seeing the real challenges many historically marginalized students face. The assignment upon which this study was based was designed to make explicit and transparent the relationship between equity education and social justice action by generating targeted possibilities for classroom practice. TCs were asked to design and deliver anti-oppression lessons in a K-6 school and subsequently reflect on the experience. To gain insight into TCs' perceptions, their reflections were coded in terms of evidence of dysconsciousness and evasiveness, as well as critical consciousness.

Introduction

As sites of social interactions, elementary and secondary schools are wrought with tensions. In Ontario, Canada, the tenets of diversity and inclusion are touted as ideals to strive for (see, for example, Ontario's Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy, 2009, OME); however, many Canadian teachers are ill-prepared to ensure that all learners are affirmed in their classrooms. Social hierarchies—constructed by colonization, patriarchy, psychology and capitalism, amongst others—are often reinforced within school settings. Individual responses to our social identities, as well as the structural and systemic organization of our lives, shape who we are. As such, social constructs influence how we perceive the world and engage in the work of schools. Social identities impact who we are as teachers, as well as how we perceive our students,[1] and whether or not our students succeed or fail, both in school and in life. Although there has been some visible institutional progress (for example, accessible gender-neutral bathrooms, Gay-Straight Alliances, and social justice clubs), comparatively little change has occurred with respect to disrupting the interlocking influences of race, social class, gender, language, sexuality and citizenship. Mandatory equity and diversity coursework in teacher education programs may lack the time, depth, and insights for real change in schools to occur.

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[1] By students, I am specifically referring to those in elementary or secondary school. The term "teacher candidate" or TC will be used to distinguish those enrolled in a teacher certification program.

Despite decades of research, many educators may not be cognizant of the challenges countless students experience on a daily basis in school. This research explores the theory-practice divide with respect to actualizing how schools can explicitly address diversity and inclusion. In addition, this paper contributes important insights for teacher educators in terms of recognizing and challenging problematic assumptions that teacher candidates (TCs) may hold. Researchers have noted that many educators lack a "critical consciousness" (Freire, 1974; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Gay & Kirkland, 2003). Cross, Behizadeh, and Holihan, (2018) found TCs are more concerned with themselves, and the day-to-day "tasks" of teaching (i.e. lesson planning, classroom management, student engagement) than with critically examining the socio-cultural structures of schools and how prevailing conditions negatively impact students. As such, this research utilized a focused and purposefully designed lesson planning assignment to be implemented by TCs at a local Ontario elementary school as a way for teachers to be agentive in creating critical spaces in schools.

Understanding dysconsciousness

Freire (1970) maintained that in order to challenge dominant discourses in schools, dialogue and critical social consciousness or *conscientização* are essential components. As Darder, Baltodano and Torres (2003) explain,

> Conscientization is defined as the process by which students, as empowered subjects, achieve a deepening awareness of the social realities that shape their lives and discover their own capacities to re-create them. (p. 15)

Milner (2010), drawing from Eisner's (1994) concept of the "null curriculum," suggests that by *not* addressing or critically examining existing power structures at play in elementary and secondary schools, TCs are learning, by default, that these are not issues that should be addressed in schools. They are not engaging in critical social consciousness. As Milner (2010) argues,

> Teachers are learning something based on the absence of certain material. For example, if teachers are not taught to question or critically examine power structures, the teachers are learning something—that it may not be essential for them to critique power structures in the world in order to change them. (p. 120-121)

When TCs are not engaging in critical consciousness, they may, in fact, be in a state of what King (1991) describes as "dysconsciousness." While King was specifically referencing dysconscious racism, her definition of dysconsciousness as "an uncritical habit of mind (including perceptions, attitudes, assumptions, and beliefs) that justifies inequity and exploitation by accepting the existing order of things as given" (p. 135) can be applied to multiple inequities. King maintains that her use of dysconsciousness "denotes the limited and distorted understandings…students have about inequity and cultural diversity understandings that make it difficult for them to act in favor of truly equitable education" (p. 134). As Anderson, Narum and Wolf (2019) assert in relation to a dysconscious mindset, "[t]he term dysconscious is then not to be understood as synonymous with unconscious, but rather as implying something real, yet habitually uncontested, and indicating that this acceptance is almost certainly unrecognized" (p.5). Unfortunately, much of the work done in Canadian schools is not contested or disrupted because, as Solomon and Levine-Rasky argue, "there is a gap between the hopes for equity in education and the realization of equity in actual outcomes" (2003, p. 41). The Canadian teaching profession is dominated by educators who experienced school in ways that reflect majority group ways of knowing and interacting in the world, despite researchers', academics', and communities' calls for greater attention to disrupting the status quo. Rather than examining the structure of schools through a critical lens,

teachers—particularly those from the dominant group—tend to act in surface ways, avoiding conflict by using seemingly inclusive language and ideas and either ignoring, or not seeing, the real challenges many historically marginalized students face, which is a state of dysconsciousness. As Picower (2009) argues, "Whiteness remains masked from everyday consciousness, allowing [whites] to be blind not only to their own privileges but also to their group membership" (p. 198). There are quiet, guiding forces that encourage teachers from the dominant group to "play it safe" and choose their words, texts, and examples "carefully"—forces that work to maintain dysconsciousness.

Equity work and social justice:
Locating critical consciousness and dysconsciousness

Numerous researchers press for teachers and administrators to do the work of addressing normative assumptions in educational institutions (Ahmed, 2012; Cochran-Smith, Ell, Grudnoff, Haigh, Hill & Ludlow, 2016; Payne & Smith, 2018). As Nieto (2000) writes, in reference to her early work, "most approaches to multicultural education avoided asking difficult questions related to access, equity, and social justice. These questions strike at the heart of what education in our society should be, and they are, above all, about schools' institutional practice" (p. 180). Nieto tasks teachers, schools and teacher education programmes to make fundamental shifts in outlook, ideology and curriculum in order to challenge societal implications for all learners. And yet, as Cochran-Smith et al. (2016) argue, little has changed in almost two decades, since

> … efforts to put equity [up] front in initial teacher education are daunting. They depend on nuanced and complex understandings that equity cannot be achieved by teachers and teacher educators alone. Rather policy makers and the public must acknowledge and address the fact that multiple factors, in addition to teacher quality, influence student outcomes, including in particular, the impact of poverty, family and community resources, school organizations and supports, and policies that govern housing, health care, jobs, and early childhood services. (p. 76)

To address and explore the ways in which equity and anti-oppressive work can be done in schools, teacher educators have proposed numerous paradigms which have become more nuanced over the past 20 years; these include, but are not limited to, "multicultural education" (Sleeter, 1991); "educating teachers for cultural diversity" (Zeichner, 1993); "culturally relevant pedagogy" (Ladson-Billings, 1995); "anti-racist education" (Dei, 1995); "critical multiculturalism" (May, 1999); "anti-oppressive education" (Kumashiro, 2000); "culturally responsive education" (Villegas & Lucas, 2002); "culturally responsive teaching" (Gay, 2002); "productive pedagogy" (Gore, Griffiths & Ladwig, 2004); "culturally responsive pedagogy of relations" (Bishop, Berryman, Cavanagh & Teddy, 2007); "linguistically responsive education" (Lucas, Villegas & Freedson-Gonzalez, 2008); "teaching for social justice" (Cochran-Smith, 2010); and "critical praxis" (Arnold, Edwards, Hooley & Williams, 2012). The shifts in paradigms over time reflect a deeper understanding of equity not as "equity for equality," but as a sociohistorical perspective on inequity, which "takes on the complex system that mediates why, how, and for whom access makes a difference, and the nature of that difference" (Tan, Barton, Turner, & Gutiérrez, 2012, p. 35). It is the notion of complexity that Cochran-Smith et al. (2016) explore in their investigation of making teaching for equity a goal of teacher education programs. It must also be noted that the topics addressed in diversity and inclusion courses for TCs are politically and emotionally charged (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017). As Gallavan (2000) and Kincheloe (2008) assert, courses that address inclusion and equity thorough a critical lens challenge mainstream understandings that can trigger tensions not experienced in other courses. As Hollins and Guzman (2005) found, some initial teacher

preparation programs have limited, if any, influence on TCs' understanding and engagement with equity pedagogy, and thus there is minimal transfer into the classroom environment.

Pre-context for the research project: The lesson plan assignment

As a teacher educator, I took up the challenge to make teaching for equity a concrete aspect of a course I was teaching, *Socio-cultural Aspects of Human Development*. The course, mandatory in the teacher education program in which I was working, utilized a critical pedagogy approach (Darder et al., 2003) and raised many uncomfortable ideas and topics not typically discussed in other courses. While some initial teacher education program designs ensure that TCs have a form of practicum concurrently with their coursework (i.e. 1 day per week), this was not the design of the program in which I taught. Rather, the equity coursework (and some additional courses) was bookended by two practicum blocks. TCs did not return to campus after the second block but, if successful, went on to graduation. Thus, there was no opportunity to process their field experiences in relation to the coursework. In addition, TCs were not permitted to complete any university-related coursework while on practicum. As such, I tried to create an "in the field" moment within my course in order to link social justice coursework with the reality of schools. To achieve this, I approached a local elementary school with a request for teachers who would voluntarily welcome my 90 TCs into their classrooms to teach, in small groups, a 40-minute lesson of their own design. Five classroom teachers agreed: senior-kindergarten-grade 1; grade 2; grade 3/4; grade 4/5; and a grade 5/6 class. I developed an assignment which required the TCs to craft and teach lessons specifically focused on addressing issues of sexism, racism, ableism, gender identity, or homophobia to be taught at the elementary school during our regular class time.

Significant class time was devoted to helping the TCs develop their lesson plans in the course. Each lesson plan was presented to the whole class for peer feedback and subsequently reviewed by the instructor. Lesson plans were examined in relation to the curriculum expectations for the intended grade level and assessed using a critical framework, inspired by the work of Egbo's (2019) "Checklist for Conducting Critical Self-Reflection and Analysis." TCs had been examining their own positionality through in-class activities and key readings (i.e. McIntosh, 1990). The readings and in-class activities challenged TCs to examine the status-quo in schools, as well as to explore how change might occur. In the course, group identities and privilege were explicitly explored. To get additional input and feedback, I emailed all the completed lesson plans to the classroom teachers two weeks before they were taught. On the day the TCs were to teach their lessons, I met them at the partner school and ensured that they had sufficient time to return to the university for their next class. The teaching of the lessons was not assessed as part of their coursework. Rather, the TCs received 5% of their final grade for arriving at the elementary school and teaching their lesson.

The research project:
Examining dysconsciousness and critical consciousness

Egbo's (2019) "Checklist for Conducting Critical Self-Reflection and Analysis" was used throughout the socio-cultural course and informed the creation of the post-lesson plan reflection questions. According to Egbo, there are seven areas that should be examined in relation to diversity awareness and engaging in critical self-reflection: personal history and values; pedagogical beliefs and approaches;

knowledge of diversity issues; knowledge of students; assumptions about learning; assumptions about knowledge; and beliefs about society. Following the in-school lessons, TCs were asked to write a reflection on the teaching experience. The reflection prompts were:

1. What made you uncomfortable? In what areas did you feel comfortable? How might you explain/account for your comfort/discomfort?

2. What new knowledge arose for you out of this experience? What kinds of new connections are you making with the course reading(s)?

3. What would you do differently next time? Be specific about the kind of impact you would hope those changes would have.

4. How do you foresee taking this up in your own future work in schools?

The TCs' reflections were assessed for part of their grade in the course and constituted the data source for this research. To ensure confidentiality and anonymity, a marker-grader was hired to assess the reflections. After the assignment had been assessed and returned to the TCs, they were invited to participate in the research project by voluntarily sharing a clean copy of their reflection component. Almost half of the TCs enrolled in my course (39 of 90) opted to participate in the research project (43%). The participants included six males and 33 females. Of the 33 females, six self-identified as visible minorities and one female participant self-identified as Indigenous. All six males self-identified as white. The average age of the students enrolled full-time in the program was 26.86 with a median age of 24. The youngest student was 21 years of age and the oldest was 47 years of age. TCs who gave informed consent to participate in the project submitted their reflections to a research assistant who removed direct identifiers from the assignments and replaced them with a code and pseudonym to protect the identity of the participants.

Initially, the TCs' responses to the four reflection questions were analyzed using process coding. The codes reflected the common and various themes that were identified from the data. The data was analyzed using what Tesch (1990) describes as "de-contextualization" to "separate relevant portions of data from their context" (p. 118) in order to identify themes and coding categories and "re-contextualization" or the reassembling of the data to create "pools of meanings" (p. 122) to present a unified and coherent picture. Finally, my field notes and observations assisted with data triangulation, using the techniques described by Bogdan and Biklen (1998).

As Cross, Behizadeh, and Holihan (2018) argue, "there appears to be a crisis of praxis; in other words, a failure for critical pedagogies taught in teacher preparation (if taught at all) to transfer into actual *application* in student teaching" (p. 128, original italics). Drawing on their insights, I sought to revisit my data to gain greater insight into how TCs might be seen as acting either dysconsciously or with critical consciousness—that is, how might equity work be either thwarted or critically examined by future teachers? I thus re-analysed the data employing techniques described by Creswell (2016), using process coding and layering the constructs of critical consciousness and dysconsciousness to add additional rigour. Anderson, Narum, and Wolf (2019) argue that further research on dysconsciousness could "allow educators to assess student learning skills and readiness and intentionally attempt to move students to a deeper, more applicable, understanding" (p 4). With this in mind, I sought to determine the ways in which dysconsciousness was expressed by the TCs in relation to a specific imperative to address oppression in schools. The lesson planning assignment forced students to examine sites of oppression to intentionally push them into situations where the examination of privilege was not obscured but was the intended focus. I wanted a concrete

connection to the supposed critical consciousness raising that was the impetus of the course.

The assignment upon which this study was based was designed to make explicit and transparent the relationship between equity education and social justice action by generating targeted possibilities for classroom practice. As such, I examine the data in terms of evidence of dysconsciousness, as well as perceived evasiveness. Finally, I share examples of critical consciousness gleaned from the data.

Dysconsciousness

The TCs were asked to plan and deliver a lesson that would address sexism, racism, homophobia, classism or ableism in a 40-minute class. University class time was spent helping the TCs work through their concerns, brainstorm ideas, and obtain instructor and peer feedback. Many TCs struggled with the structure of the assignment itself: They thought they had to overtly teach the "ism" they were assigned, rather than examining the curriculum for a grade-specific topic or expectation that would allow for critical consciousness. To me, this was the first indicator that the equity and inclusion perspective of the course was not being internalized by the TCs as they were seemingly unable to transfer the theory of the course into the planning of the lessons. For some TCs, when the assignment was first handed out, they immediately responded in dysconscious ways by manipulating the assignment. For example, some TCs attempted to plan for overt teaching about their assigned "ism," but chose seemingly less contentious topics such as "positive friendships" or "anti-bullying" and not clearly identifying the reasons why exclusion and bullying might be occurring (e.g. underlying issues of socio-economics, negative racialization, gender conformity, etc.), revealing their limited understandings.

In examining the data, I was struck by the self-interest that arose from many of the reflections. As Cross, Behizadeh, and Holihan (2018) similarly found:

> TCs seem more likely to be critically conscious regarding their own positionality in schools, yet overwhelmingly dysconscious when talking about students and families…. In other words, when TCs themselves felt unfairly treated, they were able to point out inequities related to power, lack of autonomy, and limited rights throughout student teaching. (p. 139-140)

Examining the data through a critical consciousness/dysconscious lens has provided greater insight into how TCs might be seen as acting dysconsciously. First, many reflections revealed that TCs were treating the in-school lesson delivery experience purely as an assignment, rather than as an opportunity to imagine how equity work can be done on a regular basis; second, TCs were using their lack of knowledge of the students or the subject matter as a reason to excuse not having the knowledge/experiences/tools to craft inclusive/anti-oppressive lessons or, in some cases, to devalue the experience; and, third, I found a general sense of avoidance or evasiveness of certain topics. I drew from the data multiple subtle and covert ways in which dysconsciousness was evidenced.

In subtle ways, the TCs positioned themselves as "vulnerable," expressing fear of the host classroom teacher and, tangentially, parental/caregiver concerns for discussing so-called "sensitive" topics. For instance, as Nicola queried, "Will the teacher be upset if she doesn't agree with our definition and/or centers?" [Sexism, SK/1]. Yet I had shared the TCs' lesson plans with the classroom teachers two weeks before they were to be taught as a way to ensure the teachers were prepared for the content and/or raise any concerns, objections or disagreements and provide

feedback. There were none. Some of the TCs used their trepidation to produce seemingly "neutral" lessons. Glossing over potentially challenging content is another way in which change is stifled and hegemonic structures are maintained.

Dysconsciousness was also expressed through the perceived limitations of the assignment. A valid concern was expressed by Lacy, "This lesson was 40 minutes, which is quite short to cover the topic of racism" [Racism, grade 6] and this comment by Shelley, "The workshops we ran were great; they seemed to go over well, but they are probably not enough" [Ableism, grade 3/4]. Rather than viewing this experience as a *taste* of what might be possible or exploring how to work within the confines of the curriculum expectations and the structure of schools and do equity work, some saw this as a one-off opportunity to be done for the assignment and not the start of long-term pedagogical practice.

Perhaps a common positioning among neophyte teachers, some TCs had not made the shift between seeing themselves as "student" to seeing themselves as "teacher," as evidenced by this comment: "One of the things that made me uncomfortable was walking into a class I have never seen before, where I didn't know the students, and they didn't know me" [Sally Genderism, grade 2]. Rather than planning for the "unknown," crafting a lesson that would utilize aspects of the grade-appropriate curriculum to challenge or disrupt conventional thinking (focusing on deconstructing inequities through a geography or social studies lesson or examining works of art the students are most familiar with and questioning why) the TCs seemed more focused on their performance instead of the critical content. With a critical consciousness lens, they may have been able to examine the assignment from its intended perspective and to find creative avenues to infuse equity teaching and learning which might become the foundation for their professional pedagogy.

Examining the data, I found a growing awareness on the part of TCs for the "need" for anti-oppression consciousness raising, but it was often tempered with a notion that it was not something the TCs were necessarily taking responsibility for enacting, as evidenced in this quote, "I feel that by participating in this workshop, I have better prepared myself for the possible reactions and questions I may receive in the future" [Macy, Homophobia, 4/5]. This quote reveals a teacher-centered focus and awareness of potential "gaps in TC knowledge" as opposed to a recognition of the conditions within schools that silence "uncomfortable" conversations and preserve the status quo.

Evasiveness

*"I responded in a way that I tend to do in uncomfortable circumstances.
I brush off the topic" [Krizia, Anti-Bullying, grade 6].*

Krizia's comment above is probably a common response for many TCs: When in doubt, take evasive manoeuvres. In coding for dysconsciousness, similar to Cross et al. (2018), I found that I was often looking for what was *not* there. Of significance was that only one participant overtly commented on the demographics of the students she was working with, and even then, her language was coded. Sheila writes, "I was happy to see an Egyptian student and some Chinese students in the workshop" [Racism, grade 6]. It is interesting that Sheila chose to describe the students by geographic location.[2] The implication is that the students are "non-white," yet it would be incorrect or improper to describe them racially or ethnically.

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[2] As an aside, the student from Egypt had just recently immigrated to Canada and informed everyone she met of this fact. Without this self-disclosure, I am not certain how Sheila would have categorized the students.

Alternatively, the statement reveals the TC's limited understanding of how to talk with affirmation about race and ethnicity. Sheila is the only participant who makes any reference to demographics. The rest of the participants also avoided reference to race and ethnicity, revealing a sense of "colorblindness." While heavily critiqued and refuted by Gotanda (1991) colorblindness is still perceived in the teaching profession as a "progressive positionality" in our supposed post-race era, as in statements such as "I don't see race" or "I don't see color." It is a stance that some teachers assume to demonstrate that they are not racist because, to them, they do not see the "color" of their students (Milner, 2010).

A colorblind stance serves as an expression of dysconsciousness, negating the lived experience of historically racialized people. For example, I have heard students and faculty alike pride themselves on "not knowing" that a student was Indigenous because "it doesn't matter [to them]." These stances serve a key purpose: centering whiteness and diminishing the lived experience of historically marginalized people. However, the term "colorblindness" is itself a fraught term as it imposes a dis/ability binary. As Annamma, Jackson and Morrison (2017) argue,

> The racial ideology of denying the significance of race should not be equated with blindness because it is an inadequate descriptor. Color-blindness, as a racial ideology, conflates lack of eyesight with lack of knowing. Said differently, the inherent ableism in this term equates blindness with ignorance. However, the inability to see is not ignorance; in fact, blindness provides unique ways of understanding the world to which sighted people have no access. (p.154)

The authors propose the term "race-evasiveness" which draws from intersectionality and asserts that avoiding or ignoring race is a form of power. In searching for what was not there, I noted TCs did not comment on the large number of white students in the elementary school, which I view as a form of dysconsciousness expressed through evasiveness.

Sheila, however, identified that there were students from historically racialized groups, stating: "I found that the three students who were the minority were looking a little uncomfortable; perhaps they were subjected to racist comments growing up" [Sheila, Racism grade 6]. The students in the school in which the lessons were taught were primarily white. Sheila is speaking about three racialized students who are in grade six. They are not "grown up" yet and may very well be currently dealing with racist comments. What is more probable is that they have not heard white adults specifically naming racism as it might pertain to them. Social dynamics play out in subtle and covert ways in our society yet teachers often erroneously believe that schools and classrooms are neutral spaces exempt from issues related to privilege and marginalization, particularly with younger students.

Sheila, the only participant to specifically comment on the demographics of the class, interestingly, also made this comment:

> Planning the workshop was a bit of a challenge for the group as I noticed that many of the members who were from small towns were a bit more closed minded than myself, who is from the multicultural city of Toronto. [Sheila, Racism, grade 6]

Sheila is white and expressed race-awareness in several parts of her reflection; however, this sensitivity could be attributed to her assigned topic, which was racism. She also indicated she "was initially nervous about conducting this workshop in [this location], as I was not sure of the demographics of the school"

which is a form of dysconsciousness. It is not clear in what way knowing the demographics would change the lesson. Did the group "play it safe" so as not to offend the white students in the classroom? The suggestion is that the lesson might be presented differently depending on the diversity of the classroom, which warrants future exploration.

As I analyzed the data, with a lens of dysconsciousness, I noted a similar evasiveness in relation to sexual orientation. For example, this participant wrote, "We have relatives and very close friends that are gay, and we have been very open with our boys, [but] truthfully, I don't think they even notice or think any different of them" [Matilda, Homophobia, grade 3/4]. While the TC is suggesting she and her family are inclusive and not biased because they have proximity to gay friends, that does not, by default, mean she is not homophobic or disrupting homophobia for her children. A critical conscious response would be that her proximity to same-sex relationships is an opportunity to expose her children to the ways in which power serves to undermine same-sex families and to introduce an open dialogue about how societal structures reinforce differential treatment of those who are Othered. Failure to acknowledge that the social experiences of LGBTQ+ members are different from those who identify as straight or cisgender is dysconsciousness. It is also a lost opportunity to invite spaces that discuss marginalization, exclusion, and privilege. By suggesting her children "do not even notice" the friends who are gay indicates a "straightwashing" of gay issues that privileges heteronormative relationships.

Critical consciousness
"I didn't gain new knowledge, but it instilled in me a confidence
that what we were learning this year in our course work is transferrable to the
classroom" [James, Sexism, grade 2].

In the above quote, James has articulated what I had hoped this assignment would achieve: the transfer of equity coursework into the TCs' future teaching practice and the development/articulation of critical consciousness. Of course, James's comment might be similar to this participant's comment, "I am not sure if the students changed their opinions because they truly believed it or if they changed their opinions because they wanted to give us the "right" answers" [Niki, Genderism, grades 3/4]. As Cross et al. (2018) found in their study with TCs, there are some key ways in which critical consciousness could be manifested:

> TCs were questioning current structures in place in schools and the expressed beliefs and ideologies of others, and participating in critical action as they worked to engage in pedagogies and practices relevant to their students' lives. They were also working to make sense of the practices and policies in place in their teacher preparation program, and in student teaching structures in general. (p.134)

I also recognize that the TCs are on a continuum of understanding and developing their proficiency to enact an equity pedagogy. As such, I was encouraged to read comments such as this one:

> Through this experience, I have uncovered my preconceived notions about bullies and victims of bullying. This makes me question my own stereotypes of individuals who are bullied or bullies… Prior to this workshop, I was never consciously aware of my beliefs in these stereotypes. Therefore, I wonder what other stereotypes I hold that I am unaware of? [Krizia, Anti-Bullying, grade 6]

This quote reveals a shift in the TC's perspective that shows a growing awareness which might lead to critical consciousness.

An example of critical consciousness is evidenced in Nicola's statement, "I would use the centers concept to create an entire unit around this anti-oppression work and see how different the student's concepts are as generations go forth" [Sexism, SK/1]. Nicola's suggestion that she would create a kindergarten unit that actively addresses issues such as sexism *and* monitors the impact on students over time suggests a forward thinking, proactive, and conscious approach to critical pedagogy.

A similar critical conscious sentiment was expressed by Lorna who wrote, "Firstly, I realized we were not there just to present on homophobia. As educators, it is crucial that we provide opportunities for students to question the world and gain an awareness and understanding of multiple perspectives" [Homophobia, grades 4/5]. The recognition that anti-oppression work takes time and is on-going is key to providing an education for students that will expose them to the inequities in society and help them question the status quo. Xiomara also expressed similar critical consciousness:

> I see myself using these concepts and many other 'isms' and issues that people are faced with into my daily routines. Preparing my students about how to make changes in their environment, our society, and how to deal with the situation if they are faced with is one of my responsibilities as a teacher. [Sexism, SK/1]

It takes time and consistent effort to dismantle the language of inequity and work towards an action-oriented approach to social justice.

Forging new paths

For the most part, schools continue to reflect majority group ways of knowing and interacting in the world. Numerous researchers have demonstrated that while the student population is becoming increasingly diverse in Canada and the United States, faculty and teacher representation remains overwhelmingly (80%) reflective of the dominant group (Ryan, Pollock & Antonelli, 2009; Gutierrez y Muhs et al., 2012). Statistical data regarding faculty and teacher race and ethnicity is difficult to obtain in Canada (Holden & Kitchen, 2016). Data from the United States (2016) indicates that 80% of elementary and secondary teachers are white, 7% are Black and 9% Hispanic (National Centre for Educational Statistics). For 3 years (2012-2015), I collected statistical demographic data about my students using an anonymous on-line survey (see Cho, 2016). The sample revealed 87% of first year TCs identified as white. As Holden and Kitchen (2016) argue, "if Canadian teacher candidates are a largely homogenous group, Canadian teachers will be as well" (p. 46). I recently re-surveyed my students (2020). Of the 335 respondents, 80% self-identify as white, 89% straight, and 84% middle to upper-middle class. Of issue is that many teachers, despite the best of intentions, do not realize the ways in which classrooms work in oppressive ways and do not affirm all learners. A contributing factor to majority-group thinking amongst teachers is the lack of teacher diversity in our schools (Cho, 2018). While having a more diverse teaching force will not solve the problem of inequity in our schools, the lack of voice and representation diminishes opportunities to hear the counter-narratives of those who will expose the gaps and systemic structures that are preventing access and the potential for change.

Conclusion

I am cognizant that not all teacher educators will perceive the data in the same way I have and may consider my analysis as unduly harsh. However, I contend that by not critically examining TCs' reflections on and responses to equity teaching, we continue to reproduce existing approaches, or lack thereof, to anti-oppression work. In King's (1991) paper on dysconsciousness published 29 years ago, she declared "prospective teachers need an alternative context in which to think critically about and reconstruct their social knowledge and self-identities. Simply put, they need opportunities to become conscious of oppression" (p. 143). The intent of this research was to expose TCs to a situation in which they could enact the critical stance embedded in the socio-cultural course: to put theory into practice. Teachers and educators, at all levels, need to see beyond their own experiences which entails examining things from an alternative perspective and implementing a critical lens. Examining the participants' reflections revealed both the subtle and covert ways in which a lack of engagement with equity work is expressed by TCs. As teacher educators strive to improve practice, we must unpack what is and what is not being said by TCs. In the institution in which I currently work, we have one mandatory diversity and inclusion course. It is conceivable that anti-oppression approaches might appear in other courses, but a specific mandate to integrate the study of social difference, race, and anti-racism into the mainstream of teacher education scholarship is a more cohesive approach that explicitly names and draws attention to the work that needs to be done. Biases need to be identified in order to be critiqued and contextualized. If the teacher workforce continues to draw from the dominant group, it is even more vital that opportunities to engage with critical pedagogies in the field become a pillar of teacher education programs.

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