



Book Reviews & Resources

Within and Beyond Breakout Rooms: Preparing Teacher Candidates to be Social Justice Advocates During and After the COVID-19 Pandemic

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CCOVID-19-related school closures have posed challenges for school districts and families across the United States (Bazon, 2020; Strauss, 2020). Although the scale of pandemic-related school closures is novel, the inequities in our school systems are frustratingly old (Delpit, 2012; Emdin, 2016; Tatum, 2017). Many existing educational disparities experienced by minoritized individuals in the United States have been amplified and, in many instances, worsened by COVID-19 (Winter, 2020). Students in lower-resourced schools are more likely, for example, to lack access to the technology required to participate in online learning, and they are also more likely to experience food insecurity, leading public schools to prioritize providing students with nutritious meals prior to technological access (LaFave, 2020). As a result of these barriers to educational access, school administrators and educators have been met with significant challenges and impossible choices in attempting to offer equitable remote schooling experiences to all students while continuing to meet students' basic needs.

In consideration of the devastating tragedies that have resulted from the pandemic, coupled with systemic racism perpetrated against minoritized groups, we believe that adult educators have a responsibility and an opportunity to examine how our teaching maintains or dismantles inequities and access to quality education. To that end, this resource piece shares insights that we, as teacher educators, have gained through working with our undergraduate students (whom we refer to as "teacher candidates") on a curriculum that foregrounded issues of social justice in education. Additionally, this resource piece offers strategies that teacher educators can adopt and adapt in promoting educational equity and antiracist teaching practices.

First, we describe the program’s goals more broadly, identifying ways we have made social justice a central part of our curriculum. Next, we share our reflections and experiences from working with undergraduate students during remote, day-long sessions that focused on COVID-19 and the educational inequities underscored by the pandemic. Finally, we brainstorm strategies and tools that teacher educators can adopt in both remote and face-to-face settings that go “beyond breakout rooms” to involve students in meaningful social justice and civic engagement work.

POSITIONALITY AND THEORETICAL COMMITMENTS

We come to our work as three teacher educators with a commitment to anti-bias and antiracist pedagogy (DiAngelo, 2018; hooks, 1994; Kendi, 2019; Saad, 2020). We rely on the term *anti-bias and antiracist* to convey our activist stance to teacher education, one that attempts to foreground, acknowledge, and interrogate prejudices such as ableism, gender discrimination, and racism (an impartial list). We identify as women, and we each hold a terminal degree and work within institutions of higher education. This positionality affords unearned privileges that must be acknowledged, such as a degree of economic security and professional regard, to name only two advantages. However, we also differ in important ways. Two of us identify as white and from middle class backgrounds, and one of us identifies as white and from an international and multi-ethnic background. In the realm of educational research, there has historically been a tradition of color- and culture-blind research in PK-12 educational settings, color- and culture-blind policies and document analyses, and color- and culture-blind teacher education research (Howard, 2019; Milner, 2007; Sleeter, 2017).

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Seeking to avoid falling into common traps of teacher education research, we have taken pains to acknowledge, interrogate, and interrupt blindness in our work on social justice issues in education with teacher candidates. We do this by being intentional about discussing and owning our own privileges openly and transparently with one another and with our students to model reflective and reflexive practice. We enact intentional ownership of privilege through honest discussions with our students in which we point out aspects of our own identities that require little or no extra action in order to be protected and avoid discrimination or harassment. In doing so, we use ourselves as examples that our students can call to mind when reflecting on privilege and bias in educational (and other) spaces.

This work is an attempt to use our positionalities and our voices to enable students to notice and question moments of prejudice or implicit bias rather than remain silent and maintain status quo understandings (Gay, 2009; Ladson-Billings, 1996). In this way, we aim to engage students in difficult conversations with the goal of students using them as learning opportunities for growth rather than shutting down, which serves to reinforce the institution of white supremacy (Brookfield, 2014; DiAngelo, 2018; Gaskew & Thompson, 2020). By modeling the kind of discomfort in our pedagogy we wish to see in our students, we also aim to lessen the power

differences between us and the students such that dialogue can be used as a means of creating critical communities of inquiry (Freire, 1972; Zembylas, 2018).

One of the pressing concerns of our teaching practice is how we, as educators, both account for our positionality *and* hold ourselves accountable to our goals of teaching for and towards social justice. We recognize the need to attend to how our multiple positions and identities are embedded in our practice. Teacher training is intimately connected to social justice work in that our job is to prepare teacher candidates to go out into the world and be advocates for all of their students, not just when it is convenient or comfortable, but also, and especially, when it requires making difficult choices that require a willingness to lean into discomfort rather than move away from it.

PEDAGOGY OF DISCOMFORT

A pedagogy of discomfort can be defined as a teaching practice that encourages students to move outside of their comfort zones and question beliefs and assumptions that sustain social inequities (Boler, 1999). This approach is grounded in the assumption that discomforting feelings students might experience could allow them to re-examine their identities and worldviews (Zembylas, 2015). Boler (1999) further claims that working within and around this discomfort creates a space for students to become aware of how they see the world and also how they might change it without slipping into defensiveness, anger, blame, or guilt.

Within teacher education discussion regarding the Pedagogy of Discomfort help them develop encourage social justice Mar Pereira, 2012; Ohito, 2002). In our own work as found it useful to think of (PoD) as our theoretical

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challenging discussions with our students regarding social justice issues both in and outside of the classroom, and in and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic. We have utilized PoD to help our students develop an awareness of their place within the educational system, their relative privilege, the composite components of their identity, and how those factors influence the ways in which teachers are present in the classroom.

literature, there is active value of enacting a with teacher candidates to antiracist practices and pedagogy (Boler, 1999; de 2016; Zembylas & Boler, teacher educators, we have Pedagogy of Discomfort basis to navigate

We have turned to PoD literature for advice about how to address typical responses of teacher candidates to occurrences within the classroom that serve to maintain the status quo (Boler, 1999; de Mar Pereira, 2012; Ohito, 2016; Zembylas & Boler, 2002). We have also utilized PoD literature for guidance about how we can act as “disruptors” to those common responses, both in ourselves and in the teacher candidates with whom we work. We have used PoD as a framework for engaging in honest conversations about who is served by the system of PK-12 education in the United States. We also draw upon this framework as a way to challenge teacher candidates both to see themselves within that system *and* to see that they have agency to make an impact on the system’s continuation or disruption.

LEARNING OUTCOMES AFFECTED BY COVID-19

For future and practicing PK-12 teachers to develop understandings of larger systemic issues related to privilege and opportunity, adult teacher educators must provide opportunities for collective inquiry so that individuals can learn from one another's experiences and reflect on their own lives and livelihoods in relation to others. These reflections create space for participants to work together to co-construct new understandings of the world (Adams & Bell, 2016). The COVID-19 pandemic makes addressing this need for deeper understanding even more urgent. For example, according to preliminary estimates, the impact of school disruptions related to the COVID-19 pandemic on United States students' learning outcomes in reading and mathematics was observed as early as Fall 2020 (Kuhled & Tarasawa, 2020). Researchers suspected that students returned to school in Fall 2020 with as much as a 30 percent decrease in formerly held reading gains, and expectations for retaining gains in math were expected to take an even steeper decline with researchers predicting as much as a 50 percent drop in math gains from the previous year relative to a typical school year (Kuhled & Tarasawa, 2020).

How these losses in learning will impact the learning outcomes of students from minoritized groups is still unknown; however, we know that COVID-19 has upended our typical systems of schooling. As we renegotiate these systems—whether in-person, remote, or hybrid—PK-12 teachers need to consider not only the physical, emotional, and mental health and safety of their students but also how to distribute resources fairly and equitably in a system that was not built on those principles (Alvarez, 2020).

BUILDING A FOUNDATION FOR EXAMINING ISSUES OF SOCIAL JUSTICE IN EDUCATION

The pedagogical experiences described here were situated within a year-long clinical practice program that emphasizes social justice in education. In the context of this program, 14 undergraduate students participated in field placements (either elementary or secondary schools) for one academic year. As teacher educators in this year-long clinical program, we observed, instructed, and supported our students in their clinical placements. Our role was both to deliver course content and bridge the gap between theory and practice. Five times throughout the year, all of our students came together with us for a day-long seminar. These seminar days were focused on specific topics related to social justice and self-awareness in the context of education as an institution. To support our pedagogical goal of anti-bias and antiracist teaching, we dedicated our seminar days to topics such as implicit bias, inclusive language, dis/ability and/or neurodiverse learners, emergent bilingual or multilingual learners, educational inequities, and racial justice.

Addressing Educational Inequities During the COVID-19 Pandemic

As the landscape of higher education quickly and unexpectedly shifted to a remote format in Spring 2020, we, like many other adult educators, were forced to adapt our teaching methods while still retaining our goal of critical inquiry into social justice in education. Further, we saw a unique opportunity to pivot our seminar days in two ways: first, we chose to deliver the content of our seminar day instruction in a remote, synchronous format; and second, we used the time set aside during our final two seminar days to explore educational inequities that were specifically related to the COVID-19 pandemic *or* that were being brought to light more poignantly because of the COVID-19 pandemic. This section presents findings and reflections on the resources we

used to conduct our final seminar days in a remote format and to focus the group's collective attention and reflection on educational inequities in the COVID-19 era.

Using remote breakout rooms, small-group discussions, written reflections, web-based discussion boards, and student-driven presentations, we used our final two seminar days to examine a variety of resources and topics related to educational inequity amidst the pandemic. These resources included our PowerPoints, selected readings, social media posts (such as a

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Twitter post from Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (NY-14) that called attention to inequality as a comorbidity and, more specifically, the disproportionate COVID deaths in Black and Brown communities), and data-based graphics available from the City of New York that illustrated the disparate rates of COVID-19 infection based on ZIP code and borough. We conducted our final two seminar days using Zoom, a remote meeting platform, and we made use of our university's learning management system (LMS) to facilitate written reflection and document exchange. Further, we used web-based resources such as Padlet to facilitate real-time comments and exchanges among teacher candidates during our seminar days.

One of the key questions we had when transitioning to an online environment was: *How can we continue to build a learning environment that is rigorous, engaging, and conducive to having challenging conversations when we cannot meet face to face?* Online learning platforms have distinct advantages; however, it can be challenging for adult educators to mimic real-life learning experiences in these settings. Further, it can be difficult to discuss sensitive topics such as race and remain attuned to the way our

students receive these topics through subtle cues such as body language, which can be more difficult to read in a video conference setting. As we were committed to continuing our work with social justice issues in education while navigating a global pandemic, we had to be intentional about finding ways for our students to contribute to the conversation meaningfully, confront normative conceptions, and build new knowledge with their peers in an online setting.

In light of our pedagogical commitment to social justice pedagogy and antiracist teaching practices, and our shared belief that we should address inequities brought to light as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, we leveraged the following four tools to discuss and destabilize assumptions about schooling.

1. **Written Reflection Pre-work:** During the COVID-19 pandemic, our communication with our undergraduate students was more important than ever. We wanted to provide clear expectations about what our students needed to complete or review prior to our remote seminar days in order to augment participation and engagement. A key issue that emerged from switching from in-person to online teaching was how to incorporate critical and reflective thinking around Social Justice Pedagogy (SJP) and anti-racist teaching practices that would promote transformative learning processes prior to our remote, whole-group meetings. In advance of each of the two remote seminar days, we asked our students to complete a 1-2-page written reflection that called for connections

between their lived experiences, the academic content, and the “real life” examples with which we were engaging. For example, we asked students to provide a written reflection on questions such as:

- a. *How has COVID-19 highlighted educational inequities and (in)access to resources in PK-12 public education?*
- b. *What is our role, as teachers, to “level the playing field” for students in times of crisis, and what are the roadblocks that may prevent this from happening?*
- c. *What are some potential solutions to the roadblocks that you can think of?*

These written reflections supported our theoretical commitment to a pedagogy of discomfort and antiracist teaching practices by asking students to foreground their thinking on particular topics that were discussed during the seminar days. Additionally, the reflections invited our students to reflect on inequities in public education such as reliable access to technology, educational resources/materials, and nutritious meals as well as inequities in local communities with regards to health outcomes for Black Indigenous People of Color (BIPOC) communities, access to affordable healthcare, and access to reliable transportation (to name only a few).

2. **Breakout Rooms in Web-based Meeting Platforms:** It can be tempting for adult educators to provide online teaching and learning experiences without providing any time and space for group activities. However, online teaching and learning experiences should be at least as engaging as the classroom experience, if not more. Effective remote/distance learning has a long history (Black, 2018), and implementations of Community of Inquiry (CoI) frameworks in this setting are not new (Cleveland-Innes et al., 2018); however, the move to implement online learning under such short notice, in the context a worldwide pandemic, is. Utilizing breakout rooms during synchronous class meetings allowed us to maintain some semblance of familiarity with the format we were using before in an in-person setting and provide students opportunities for rich peer-to-peer discussions and engage in synchronous inquiry over class materials. In our remote seminar days, we created three breakout groups, each of which was supported by one of us. We used these small-group settings to prompt students to discuss the issues in more detail, with more airtime for each individual student to share and contribute so that everyone would feel motivated to engage (Hartnett, 2018). In this way, students were able to visit the selected topics in more depth, navigate more challenging discussions (as opposed to hiding or remaining silent in a larger online room with multiple students), and take chances by engaging with rich and meaningful content to challenge previously held assumptions in a smaller environment (Heiser & Ralston-Berg, 2018).
3. **Online Bulletin Boards:** In keeping with our commitment to engage our students in collective inquiry regarding educational inequities in the face of the pandemic, we used free online bulletin boards (see online tools such as Jamboard or Padlet) to allow our students to post ideas and share thoughts without the weight and stilted quality of a more traditional discussion board. We found these online bulletin boards helpful and supportive for several reasons. First, they are free and easy to use in remote learning settings, allowing our students to stay engaged with one another even if they were not in front of a computer. Second, they can provide a place for gathering ideas, sharing them, and modifying them later. This allowed the students to revise their thinking and

reflections as they participated in remote discussions. Third, they provide a space for students to learn from one another's experiences and reflect on the words of their peers without the pressure of speaking in an online setting. Instructors can design their "Padlets" and "Jamboards" in efficient ways in order to support students' growth and thinking. For example, to help organize the Jamboard, we used a KWL chart format (Know-Wonder-Learned) to guide our students' thinking about the topics we discuss. Students posted what they know, what they wonder, and what they think they learned by adding their responses under each section. Students could also post links, video clips, and images, adding an expressive and interactive element to an otherwise traditional method of sharing information. Lastly, in the context of our work with the students, we believe that these tools allowed us to see students' thinking about the social justice issues we were discussing in real-time, providing a glimpse into their unfiltered understandings which helped us understand the gaps we needed to fill to promote accurate and holistic understandings.

4. **Small Group Work and Student Presentations:** In our remote seminar days, we assigned students to small groups in which they researched different aspects of the inequities associated with COVID-19. Specifically, we asked students to conduct independent research to explore how different racial and ethnic groups were impacted by the pandemic with regard to access to technology, remote learning opportunities, and adequate health care (a partial list of systemic issues). The students engaged in brainstorming activities, collaborative research, debate, data analysis, and, finally, consensus-building with a goal of expanding their understanding of the education and health implications of COVID-19. At the end of this independent work activity, each group presented their findings to the entire group during our remote seminar day.

Challenges and Possibilities: Fostering Social Justice and Anti-Racist Orientations in the Online Classroom

In the process of making these changes and adaptations to create our remote seminar days, we noticed that some of these approaches—while new to us, though not new in general—enhanced the kind of student participation and willingness to take risks that may not have occurred in an in-person setting where the perceived stakes may be higher. For example, by integrating opportunities for the students to work independently, research the issues we were discussing, and share their thoughts with one another on the online bulletin board or in breakout rooms, we were able to build in time for students who may be more introverted or need additional time to process content and contribute to the class discussion in meaningful ways and/or in smaller settings. Additionally, specific forms of mobile applications, such as social media platforms and web resources, have the potential to bring learners to deeper levels of cognition and engagement with the content as students gain control of their learning through "virtual hands-on" experiences (Cheng & Tsai, 2013).

Anneliese A. Singh in the *Racial Healing Handbook* (2019) suggests that antiracist work is always in progress, never perfect, and differs depending on the person and where they are in their development of racial consciousness. In the context of teacher education, antiracist teaching means examining the institution of public education through an equity lens and providing teacher candidates with the means to be critically conscious practitioners who are familiar with

discomfort and equipped to talk with their future students about topics like race and racism (Picower, 2021).

Although we noted that some of our students were able to gain deeper analysis and awareness from the remote seminar days, we also observed some surface-level engagement with the material as evidenced by students' difficulty grappling with the language of inequities beyond a superficial level. For example, our students talked about the importance of creating "welcoming communities" in classrooms, to give PK-12 students "equal opportunity and access to learning," and to be "advocates for our students." These phrases pointed to our students' familiarity with the language of equity and inclusion while not necessarily demonstrating a deeper understanding of the kinds of individual, systemic, and policy changes that are needed to result in more equitable outcomes for students. For example, deeper musings might have included some of the following: (a) a consideration of the role of school stakeholders' unexamined implicit bias in perpetuating stereotypes and divergent outcomes for minoritized student groups; (b) addressing the role of policies that posit BIPOC, linguistically diverse, and/or gender non-conforming students as being at a deficit rather than addressing their strengths; and (c) an acknowledgement of the disproportionate impact of standardized tests on lower-income and lower-resourced schools. These understandings would have demonstrated a more rigorous evaluation and perhaps internalization of the topics we had explored over the course of the year.

In order to address these surface-level takeaways and promote deeper engagement with the issues discussed, a learning outcome for us has been the necessity to create additional opportunities for sustained and challenging engagement with social justice resources throughout the year. To this end, a suggestion—for those interested in building on this work—is to integrate continual self-reflection among students regarding privilege, access to education and educational resources, and positionality. bell hooks (1994) calls for educators' self-reflection in her book *Teaching to Transgress*, and many other critical educators and thought leaders have since taken up that call (Kendi, 2019 Oluo, 2018; Saad, 2020). With this in mind, we offer the following two action items as potential next steps for adult educators who are interested in developing their awareness of social justice issues in an online setting.

First, we recommend creating and sustaining Social Justice Book Clubs. In these clubs, students choose a book to read from a list provided by the adult educator (see Appendix A for a list of suggested resources). Each week, a student is responsible for collating a set of discussion questions and facilitating the discussion over the portion of the book that was read for that week. Professors will want to explore norms for creating respectful classroom dialogue, prepare guidelines that promote openness and change, and develop frameworks for participation that focus on critiquing ideas, not individuals. At the end of the semester, students can work collaboratively to prepare a presentation that shares their learnings and findings. We drew inspiration for the titles we chose, as a starting point, from those that have been meaningful in our own journeys of unlearning. The intention of Social Justice Book Clubs is to engage with challenging content in order to reflect on difficult questions and envision possibilities for systemic change, rather than simply consume the material.

To this end, a suggestion—for those interested in building on this work—is to integrate continual self-reflection among students regarding privilege, access to education and educational resources, and positionality.

Second, we recommend engaging with students in Critical Academic Service Learning (C-ASL) as part of the regularly scheduled coursework. Critical Academic Service Learning encourages students to see themselves as capable of transforming society to be more equitable and to “use the experience of service to address and respond to injustice in communities” (Mitchell, 2008, p. 51). Our goal in incorporating C-ASL is two-fold: students in a class come together around a collaborative service opportunity in the context of their communities, and they reflect on their work in the context of class presentations. This merges reflection and action in a way that Freire (1972) deems *praxis*. As students engage in their service work in small (remote or in-person) groups, they simultaneously create presentations that teach the rest of the class community about their service. An important feature of the ongoing course content is for students to learn about community assets, so that students’ takeaways are not centered on assistance that they might “provide” to communities, but rather what communities already have and are doing and how the students can contribute meaningfully to that network.

Despite these unsettling times, as teacher educators, we see great possibility in maintaining our commitment to social justice while transitioning to an online format. We believe there are rich opportunities to engage students in social justice antiracism work that promotes educational and societal equity.

Suggested community engagements include working with organizations such as a mutual aid group, a local food bank, or an activist group. Distinct from traditional service learning, which has circular goals of “learning to serve and serving to learn,” key components of C-ASL are: embodying a social change orientation, working to redistribute power, and developing authentic relationships (Mitchell, 2008).

Teachers and teacher educators are among the many affected by the fallout of COVID-19 as we were asked to transition from mostly face-to-face instruction to remote modes of teaching and learning. These changes could continue for months and even years to come. Despite these unsettling times, as teacher educators, we see great possibility in maintaining our commitment to social justice while transitioning to an online format. We believe there are rich opportunities to engage students in social justice antiracism work that promotes educational and societal equity. The door to this world of this work is just opening up to us, and we welcome the possibilities it introduces.

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