

ENACTING CRITICAL PEDAGOGY IN AN ELEMENTARY METHODS COURSE:

A MOVE TOWARD RE-IMAGINING TEACHER
EDUCATION

JEANNETTE D. ALARCÓN
THE UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA, GREENSBORO

Abstract:

This paper explores enactments of critical pedagogy within an elementary social studies methods course. Critical scholars urge teacher educators to commit to practices that promote equity and social justice for an ever-diversifying student population (see Cochran-Smith, 2004; Nieto, 2000). In a move to disrupt entrenched deficit attitudes, I propose we look beyond what we ask teacher candidates to do and instead engage in critical reflection and dialogues together with our students that push toward nuanced understanding of their future students. This project details the ways that changing the course procedures, structured activities, and policies provided the opportunity for the students to experience the vibe and feel of an elementary pedagogy that strives for community building focused on learning and societal improvement. I enlist action research to explore a shift in my practices to more explicitly align with the critical pedagogical practices I encourage teacher candidates to enact in their future classrooms.

INTRODUCTION

As a Latina teacher educator working with predominately white teacher candidates, I openly disclose to my students that I do have an agenda when I teach them about working in elementary classrooms with diverse populations. One group of students I encountered during the fall 2014 semester proved to be particularly resistant to the notion that undeserved privilege and deeply engrained racialized perceptions are often at play as we navigate our daily lives. The course evaluations that semester included comments like, “she pushes a minority agenda” and “all we talk about is social justice.” My first reaction was annoyance; I am consistently open about my “agenda” and my stance regarding the use of the social studies to further the cause of social justice. After allowing myself to dismiss their comments momentarily, I entered into reflective writing about why the comments, though true, felt so negative. I began to question whether my practices actually aligned with my message. Was I becoming a heavy-handed oppressive educator? At that moment I decided to radically change my practices in an effort to model the critical pedagogy I expected my students to employ in their future classrooms.

In response to a call to action, this paper explores enactments of critical pedagogy within an elementary social studies methods course. Critical scholars urge commitment to teacher education that promotes equity and social justice for an ever-diversifying student population (Cochran-Smith, 2004; Nieto, 2000). Further, teacher educators are presented with the opportunity to model pedagogies that create space for mutual accountability in working toward student growth. Over the course of the spring 2015 semester, my students and I have worked to use community building as way to explore what it means to create a space where multiple perspectives are shared and valued. This action research project recounts my processes of preparation for the course (including revised instructional practices and procedures) as well as reflections following our class meetings. The course materials and student exit slips that typically asked for students’ reactions about the day are included in my analysis. Data analysis focused on locating moments of community building that enabled us to grow in our practice of tackling a variety of controversial issues over the course of the se-

mester (ex. racism in socio-historical contexts, gender representations and traditional vs. counter narratives), and frame teaching itself as a political act. The aim of the project is to pinpoint moments in my own practice that led to increased participation in discussion and expression of the ways that thinking about teaching such issues may have changed over the course of the semester.

SITUATING THE ISSUE

How can we encourage elementary teacher candidates to reject deficit thinking? In a move to disrupt entrenched deficit attitudes, I propose we look beyond what we ask teacher candidates to do and instead engage in critical reflection and dialogues together with our students that push toward nuanced understanding of their future students who are different from themselves. This action research project will be used to inform the final stages of design for a qualitative study centered on the guiding question: What happens in a social studies teacher education classroom when a teacher educator models and enacts community building as a form of critical pedagogy? The goal is to learn how the teachers use this type of learning experience to guide pedagogical decision-making that leads to good and just teaching. This article focuses on the preparation process by identifying how reflexive practice helped me to make pedagogical decisions that could guide enacting a course centered on community building with a goal of moving toward critical community building (Bettez, 2011). Further, this component of the larger study illuminates the ways in which I, as a teacher educator, engaged with students in difficult conversations centered not only on course content but also on problems of teaching. My goal is to discover practices that moved pre-service teachers toward deeper professional dialogue and reflection. Further, I aim to identify the moments of contention and note the teachable moments produced in the midst of discomfort so that I can articulate this nuance during future instruction.

This action is warranted because, as has been reported, public school student demographics have shifted radically over the last decade while the elementary teaching force has remained largely static (Cross, 2003; U.S. Department of Education, 2010, Villegas & Lucas, 2002). This pre-existing issue is compounded by the fact that elemen-

tary pre-service teachers appear to remain resistant to openly addressing controversial issues with children. Since today's students carry a much wider array of socio-cultural understanding than their teachers might, schooling brings them into a space where home community cultures are often questioned (Yosso, 2005; Nieto, 2000; Kurmashiro, 2004/2009). Adopting critical pedagogical practices and purposefully selecting relevant materials could lead to meaningful classroom experiences that center social issues and problems. For this reason, modeling for elementary pre-service teachers the value of teaching children how to engage civilly with one another about controversial issues is a key step toward advancing the use of critical pedagogies toward community building and honoring difference in classrooms. This paper draws upon critical pedagogy theories in an effort to foster courageous conversations with elementary pre-service teachers (Freire, 1998; Nieto, 2000; hooks, 1994). Engaging in critical pedagogy can help move pre-service teachers away from what Hess (2004) terms a stance of avoidance when controversial issues arise in the elementary classroom and help them become more comfortable locating, creating, and using curriculum materials that situate controversial issues within the elementary context.

THEORETICAL ORIENTATIONS

This work is grounded in theories that challenge teacher educators to re-imagine the possibilities for their practice. In particular, it builds from Nieto's (2000) ideas for rethinking teacher preparation programs to develop a deeper and more meaningful understanding of diversity and a more complex enactment of teaching for social justice. This involves a disruption of our own practice and a re-imagining of the structures of teacher education. This work makes use of a rethinking of pedagogy that emphasizes teacher educators modeling rather than demonstrating "good and just teaching" (Cochran-Smith et al., 2004). This project details the ways that changing the course procedures, structured activities, and policies provided the opportunity for students to experience the vibe and feel of an elementary pedagogy that strives for community building focused on learning and societal improvement. In doing so, I provided spaces for teacher candidates to engage in questioning the curriculum and pedagogy they witness in

field placements. This is key to promoting teaching that is centered on social change as opposed to re-enforcing the status quo.

Freire articulates critical pedagogy as a tool for facilitating use of educative spaces to teach and learn about root causes of persistent societal issues and to work collectively toward justice for all people (Freire 1970/2000; 1994; 1998). Enacting critical pedagogy is particularly important for students who are subjected to compulsory schooling that often promotes re-entrenchment of structural inequities. For this reason, teacher educators should also be concerned with enacting critical pedagogical practices when working with teacher candidates. In order to identify the moments of critical practice within my own teaching, I planned embedded activities that could serve to promote mutual accountability among the students and myself. A second avenue for enacting critical pedagogy happened via purposeful community building activities that became part of our regular class time together.

Recently, scholars have argued that community building is an integral yet neglected aspect of education for social justice (Bettez & Hytten, 2013). Although an implicit valuing of community is evident in education for social justice literature (Carlisle, Jackson, & George, 2006; Murell Jr, 2006; Sleeter et. al 2005), only a few writings exist (see Preskill & Brookfield, 2009; Renner, 2009) that explicitly define what community means or how to create it. Furthermore, results of an extensive review of the literature on education for social justice reveal that no related empirical studies exist regarding community building in teacher education classrooms in particular. This paper seeks to work toward filling that gap by positioning community building as a mode of critical pedagogy in ways that foster mutual accountability for knowledge building and sharing; taking ownership in a learning community via dialogue surrounding difficult/new topics related to equity and access in schools. Ultimately, the hope is to move beyond community building to a space of what Bettez (2011) terms critical community building to foster forging critical “friendships” where teacher candidates can push each other via questioning and discourse to move beyond complacency with the status quo in the elementary classrooms where they will work with diverse student populations.

METHODS

ACTION RESEARCH

Whitehead's (1989) classic question "how can I improve the learning experiences of my students?" situates action research as a relevant method for exploring one's teaching practices with the goal of improvement. More recently, however, education researchers and teacher educators have enlisted action research to explore ways that teacher education practices can more explicitly address issues of equity, inclusiveness and working toward social change (Jimenez-Castellanos, 2010; Patthey & Thomas-Siegel, 2013; Postholm & Skrøvset, 2013). Further, Kemmis (2010) calls for rethinking action research as praxis; that is as "action that comes together and coheres in the context of a way of life...and all of the uncertain situations we encounter in life" (p. 418). His work situates professional teaching as a way of life fraught with uncertain moments within the classroom. Action research methods potentially provide a way to move beyond static consideration of student feedback and academic performance on assignments that serve to "protect old practices from changing times" (p. 420). My goal is to use action research to inform a shift in my practices that are more explicitly aligned with the critical pedagogical practices I encourage teacher candidates to enact in their future classrooms.

COURSE CONTEXT AND PEDAGOGICAL PRACTICES

The School of Education's mission statement explicitly calls for attention to "equity and inclusiveness—dedicated to...the role of education in addressing social justice" (Institution's Mission Statement, retrieved from website 3/30/2015). While many could consider explicit attention to issues of equity in the mission statement an indicator of progress, our elementary education program remains focused on modeling traditional—rather than transformative—pedagogical practice. During the 2014-15 academic year the elementary education program committee members have been engaged in a book study focused on the topic of developing cultural competence when working with students. Within this space, several faculty discussed the idea that moving toward this goal would require us to re-imagine our own practices as teacher educators. Participation in this group proved a contrib-

uting factor to my decision to make significant changes to procedures and pedagogical structures that shape my teaching.

During the spring 2015 semester, the elementary social studies methods class met once a week for two hours, fifty minutes during a traditional fifteen-week semester. The focal group for this phase of the study consisted of twenty four (twenty-two female and two male) second semester juniors who spent one and a half days in elementary field placement classrooms, who were also taking an additional methods course and participated in weekly cohort seminars that included a variety of professional development topics such as lesson planning, assessment, and classroom management. Unlike the typical lecture/activity based model enacted in most of the elementary methods courses (including social studies during the fall 2014 semester), our class time was divided into four segments: Class Meeting, Jigsaw Reading, Content Knowledge Building, and Teacher Workshop. Each of these segments is described in detail in the following subsections. Further, each instructional segment will be revisited in the findings section of this paper to highlight moments of community building as critical pedagogy.

Class Meeting. During this segment we shared a variety of information. Our meetings could be very brief, mainly focused on “house-keeping” type information, such as due dates and announcements. Other times the meetings were longer and more substantive, involving issues calling for group consensus or providing clarification of content. We also shared what we termed social studies sightings. Sharing social studies sightings provided students with practice describing the instruction and curriculum content they saw during field placements, with a particular focus on looking for social studies content. The data collected during this time included preparation notes and decision making process reflections which were used to determine the best format for facilitation of the meetings, as well as relevant documented information that related to the content of the meeting. During the meeting, I oftentimes took note of the types of questions and comments the students offered and how they interacted with each other. Additionally, when students reported seeing no social studies instruction, I took note of what they did report seeing. Drawing upon this information helped

me to engage in more relevant and realistic dialogue with them about how to purposefully incorporate social studies content knowledge.

Jigsaw Reading. The group engaged in a jigsaw reading strategy each week. This practice was enacted in response to previous semesters' evidence indicating that the students were not reading in preparation for class, or were overwhelmed by the amount of reading required. Since each of the selected readings was relevant to the course topics, I made the decision to divide readings among the students, concurrently attaching greater importance to the act of reading and thinking about the content. Each week, students signed up for the course reading of their choice and were asked to prepare for teaching the content to their small group. This method provided the opportunity for me to draw upon the small group dialogues to inform the instructor-led "Content Knowledge Building" segment and interject as needed to clarify misconceptions. The data collected during this section informed my understanding of how students selected relevant material to share with their classmates and provided a way to frame the idea of mutual accountability for acquiring and sharing new knowledge. As the instructor, I provided prompts to guide the small group dialogue as a form of scaffolding for those with less experience facilitating discussion

Content Knowledge Building. This instructor-led segment generally lasted forty to fifty minutes and included materials and teaching strategies related to the day's topic. Depending upon the nature of the topic, this segment happened either immediately before or after Jigsaw Reading. During this time, students investigated the state teaching standards and made connections to the assigned reading. Typically, we included a web 2.0 technology appropriate for use in an elementary classroom, such as Storybird or Voicethread. An additional goal for this class segment centered learning how to engage and remain present during the difficult discussions that often arise when teaching and modeling social awareness for young students. We often viewed teaching samples in order to practice making determinations about whether the teachers depicted were addressing important, relevant social issues and/or presenting "flattened" historical narratives and/or irrelevant content.

Teacher Workshop. My decision to incorporate a time for working on projects together was directly linked to my desire to model pedagogy that inspired community building and engaging in meaningful dialogue. Our course assignments consisted of two major projects and several smaller instructional technology integration activities. Typically, the assignments resulted in successful student work products. However, given that the content, technologies, and/or ways of thinking were new to most, assignments were also frequently source of anxiety for students. For this reason, we incorporated Teacher Workshop as a space to foster a sense of professional relationship building via collaboration on assignments. This was a time to work on assignments with guidance from the instructor as needed. More importantly, it was a time to engage in peer-to-peer interactions in order to talk through understandings of the day's learning and projects in progress. The amount of time dedicated to this segment depended upon its use for the given class sessions. Toward the beginning of the semester when assignments were less time consuming and complex, Teacher Workshop time could be as short as fifteen minutes while later in the semester as projects intensified in complexity we could dedicate up to fifty minutes. Not only did this time provide students with necessary scaffolds toward more complex understandings of historical thinking and deepening professional dialogue, it also communicated to the students that the instructor valued the projects and was willing to dedicate class time to ensuring clarity in expectations and commitment to students learning.

DATA COLLECTION

The data set consisted of multiple documents and course materials that informed the planning and enactment of the course. They included course evaluations from the previous semester, responses to prompts in the form of exit slips at the end of class, mid-term evaluations and other instructor created documents related to the class segments. I also took notes during class meetings and small and large group discussions that I used to facilitate the conversations and/or plan for subsequent class sessions. Finally, I kept reflective notes during the semester. The data set was used to identify the practices that garnered the most student engagement and helped me to record the moments of dissonance

that I experienced during the semester. Both uses shaped an articulation of how facilitating a community of learners in the classroom can encourage more purposeful planning for teaching. Each class session was divided into four segments (detailed above); within each, community building was fostered via group activity and meaning making.

DATA ANALYSIS

The reflective stories and thoughts about each meeting along with planning documents, student exit slips, and work from collective projects were treated as textual data that could be read and re-read in order to identify initial themes present in the texts (Creswell & Miller, 2000). After this stage, analysis moved to initial coding, creating categories and then revising themes and writing reflective memos to help in interpreting the happenings recorded as data (Saldana, 2004). The analysis presented in this paper aims to discern “patterns of cultural experience” through collective storytelling “to produce an aesthetic and evocative thick description of personal and interpersonal experiences” (Ellis, et. al., p. 277).

FINDINGS

In response to student evaluations gathered at the end of the fall 2014 semester, course policies and procedures were revised in an attempt to more explicitly model community building as a mechanism for engaging in difficult dialogues centered not only on social studies content but the problems often encountered by teachers. Problems are defined here as teaching dilemmas such as, but not limited to, selecting course materials that address social injustice and their historical root causes. In the subsequent sections, I describe several moments of community building. I frame this purposeful community building as critical pedagogy because it resulted in a change in the ways the students and I communicated with each other. Additionally, we made time to discuss social issues related to teaching such as the growing influence of private industry in the creation of tests and teaching materials. These conversations often included countering taken-for-granted understandings of schooling, particularly in the elementary context. Another, yet equally important, shift was in students’ willingness to talk about stereotypical representations of race, class and gender that

they encountered during field placement. Many of the teacher candidates expressed a genuine interest in figuring out how to address these types of issues with their own students. The following sections provide an explanation of the ways in which changes to practices and policies resulted in mutual accountability between the instructor and teacher candidates while using our community space to address and navigate uncomfortable leaning moments and difficult conversations related to course content and the field of elementary teaching.

ATTENDANCE AS A PROFESSIONAL CHOICE

Like many teacher preparation courses, the syllabi in our elementary methods courses included “attendance” and “participation” grading systems. Often these consisted of allowing one absence during the course of the semester with subsequent absences resulting in grade deduction. Instructors often award participation points when students answer questions in the whole group setting and/or demonstrate that they have read the assigned material. Both of these practices emphasize power hierarchies and, in my experience, rarely result in students engaging deeply with course material via assigned reading or during class discussions. The class structures and systems presented next provide a description of the changes I made to these policies for my course and the impacts that these changes had on my teaching over the course of the semester.

I communicate a mandatory attendance policy for my course. When I first began teaching at the university level, my rationale centered the notion that, given the limited time in a semester, missing a session would result in content knowledge gaps. In reflection, I notice that this policy mirrors the rationale provided by school personnel to encourage parents and older students to buy into the compulsory educational system in the United States. My enactment of this familiar structure did result in few absences, but simultaneously reproduced the lopsided distribution of power between the teacher candidates and myself. I began to ask myself why I felt the need to follow mandatory attendance policies that have become entrenched in professional programs over time. Reflective action resulted in my realizing that the essence of asking the students to attend regularly had less to do with knowledge acquisition and more to do with getting to know the stu-

dents. This seemed to be an obvious realization, however it had taken me several years to figure out a way to communicate the importance of attendance while also emphasizing that coming to class can be seen as a professional decision.

I revised my attendance policy to reflect these newly unearthed motives. All language connecting attendance with the final grade was removed from the syllabus. Instead, I asked that in the event of an absence the candidate meet with me prior to returning to class in order to clarify any content. In preparation for the meeting, I asked students to review the session PowerPoint (posted in our institution's learning system), read all articles covered during Reading Jigsaw time, and consult with two colleagues to gain their understanding of our work during the missed session. These practices resulted in meaningful conversation during our meeting. Often, students who had been absent asked focused questions, but also used the meeting time to share moments from their other courses or field placements with me. I see evidence that this practice facilitated my getting to know students in multi-dimensional ways and vice versa.

A second result of the amended attendance policy surfaced in email communication with students regarding their absence. I noticed a more professional tone that centered the dialogue on making a decision about being absent, as opposed to the previous pattern of permission seeking. This is a significant shift to note because it shows that if we model treating students with dignity they will respond in ways that demonstrate transition from passive learning to active participation in their own professional development. This shift is key to achieving spaces of critical pedagogy that promote disruption of power dynamics between instructor and students. The nuance of communicating shared decision-making power around the course attendance policy resulted in the ability to engage in dialogue with students as they learned about making professional decisions. Not only were there fewer absences this semester, with no one absent more than once, the conversation never degenerated to crafting convincing arguments about the validity of the absence nor the impact it would have on the student's grade. Instead we were able to engage in professional learning.

MUTUAL ACCOUNTABILITY AS COMMUNITY BUILDING

“Do they read in your class?” seems a persistent question in the teacher education programs I have worked with over the last decade. Based upon the steady decline in deep reading I often witness over the course of any given semester, I believe that teacher candidates begin each new semester with every intention of reading and engaging with the required texts. Often our syllabi carry a policy that threatens punitive consequences for disengaging from learning: the reading quiz. I, too, have been guilty of attempting to lead my students to police each other. I remember threatening during the fall 2014, “And if you all do not fully participate and it becomes apparent that you are not reading, we will have to go to reading quizzes.” The problem with this age-old tactic is that it does not motivate students to read and it punishes the instructor with a new set of tasks to complete in a timely manner (e.g. grading the reading quiz). Once our students get into the thick of projects, field placements and deadlines, reading falls by the wayside, just as it often does for us as teacher educators and educational researchers. As I watched this pattern unfold again during the fall 2014 semester, I started to think deeply of a way I could model shared accountability for learning. The jigsaw reading strategy could serve this purpose in two ways. First, this method requires each student to take ownership of a portion of course content, this in turn created interdependence within the learning community. Secondly, students experienced a viable literacy strategy they could use in their own classrooms.

During our first class session together in the spring 2015, I explained to the group that while there were three or four readings assigned for each session, each person would only be reading one of them a week. I explained jigsaw reading as a literacy method that is often used in content areas for dividing large sections of text in order to cover more content within a set timeframe. I shared with them that this was a practice I often used in my fifth grade classroom, and that we would use this method to structure small group discussions of the reading each week. As we discussed the procedure, several students commented that they were relieved that they would be responsible for less reading even though they were expected to present the important information to their peers.

A few weeks into the semester as I was walking to class, I met up with one of the teacher candidates. As we walked to class together, she shared with me that she appreciated the shared workload with regard to the reading because it made her able to read the assignments more thoroughly. Both of these experiences informed my decision to more explicitly frame jigsaw reading as a pedagogy that encourages community building in our classroom because it required a commitment to sharing newly acquired knowledge and perspectives about learning via the reading. I communicated this intention by crafting questions aimed at facilitating dialogue that not only asked them to synthesize the reading material but also required them to think and talk together about implications for classroom practice.

During one of our final class sessions while addressing teaching about government and citizenship in elementary classrooms, several students pointed out that our jigsaw reading segment could be a way to teach young learners about citizenship. When I asked them to elaborate, they talked about the way that they all had to pitch in to help each other learn about the reading material. Further, they pointed out that this helped them all because it lessened the individual workload. In reflecting upon the discussion, I can see nuances in how they approach teaching and taking responsibility. There were moments of discomfort as they acclimated to taking on more teaching responsibility than they had in previous methods courses. During the same session they noted that the pedagogy enacted in our class was much different than what they had experienced before. When I visited the small groups, it seemed they enjoyed teaching each other and supported each other in clarifying ideas from the reading.

Using reading jigsaw time as a recurring structure in our elementary methods course resulted in an environment where student accountability with the reading material ceased being a power struggle between instructor and student. Instead, on the occasions when a person did not complete the reading, they could talk to each other about it. These moments revealed how the shared accountability promoted by critical pedagogy is experienced rather than simply described by the teacher educator. As we debriefed this process during our final content session of the semester, several students mentioned this process as key

to providing spaces for multiple voices and perspectives to be shared. Data collected via the mid-term evaluation supported this conversation by revealing several students who typically did not share during whole group did engage in the reading jigsaw. Upon further reflection on this practice, I realize that the most relevant learning for me occurred as a result of the students becoming less concerned with what I thought and how I would grade them, and more about their learning to engage in discussion and share knowledge with each other. This is an important step toward the goal of modeling a classroom where students have the space to take ownership of learning.

I have shared successful experiences via reflective moments from the spring 2015 semester. My focus has been on what was happening “at hand” both during the moment in class and while reading exit slips immediately following class (Bissex, 1986). Engaging in this activity helped me to examine moments that might have been left unnoticed. While the structures discussed above resulted in positive movement toward modeling critical pedagogy in practice, there were also moments of uncomfortable learning and compromise. In the next section, I discuss my own moments of dissonance as I practiced remaining mindful of sharing decision-making duties and facilitating a space for open dialogue.

DEALING WITH DISCOMFORT IN LEARNING AND HASHING IT OUT

Learning happens when what and how we know is challenged by the institutions we encounter (Kurmashiro, 2004/2009) teacher preparation programs are complicated educative sites where, too often, teacher educators enact surface level demonstration of teaching strategies and activities. I argue for rethinking our practices with the goal of truly modeling critical pedagogy as a method for creating equitable learning spaces for all students. Further, I posit community building as an integral part of this process. I engaged action research in order to systematically identify moments of tension that needed resolve in order to all forward movement. This learning happened in what Newman (1987, 1991) terms critical incidents. These are “moments which allow you to stand back...[to consider] important opportunities for learning about professional practice” (p. 11). I used this principle to make

sense of my own practice as I grappled with relinquishing control of large portions of our class time while also responding in the moment to what the students were communicating to me. Additionally, I worked through uncomfortable moments when I facilitated class meetings dealing with difficult topics.

Our course content was aligned with the state teaching standards and organized by topic. I prepared for class by identifying key content information that I wanted the students to learn. At the same time, I tried to remain mindful by listening to the conversations students had about the reading so that I could make authentic connections to the content I had planned. In examining my preparation for this practice, I realized the importance of knowing my content deeply so that I was able to make in-the-moment connections, dispel misconceptions, and question assumptions. Often when teaching about integrated lesson planning, I emphasize the importance of teachers' deep understanding of curricular content. Modeling this skill required me to move into a risk-taking space where I had not pre-planned for responses nor pre-determined outcomes. It was a difficult space to occupy at times because there was always the possibility of appearing to be unprepared.

In analyzing the mid-term evaluations, I discovered this was in fact the case. Seven students commented, "the class could be better organized." I believed engaging in co-construction of content knowledge with the teacher candidates allowed a pathway to conversations about addressing student questions in the moment and recognizing teachable moments. However, I also knew that if I did not address the comments I would miss a teachable moment focused on revealing my reflective practice. Further, I could model a space engaging in a difficult dialogue, which to my mind, is at the heart of critical pedagogy. It was challenging to broach the topic of organization without appearing defensive, so I framed the conversation as an act of meaning-making on my part. I shared my own planning practices as a way of revealing behind the scenes processes and asked in return that they share with me examples of times when they felt the course was not organized. This exercise was not easy for any of us because I had to willingly listen to critique and they had to trust that there would be no negative consequences for their honesty. Ultimately, we engaged in a dialogue

that revealed differing ideas about what “organized” looked like in a classroom. The teaching candidates pointed to instances when I veered away from the agenda listed on the power point and changing due dates as moments of dis-organization. I explained to them that I viewed these moments as responsive teaching moments when I had the opportunity to make adjustments based upon the needs of the group. This meeting was a valuable learning experience for us as we grappled with trust building as a goal for our community because we left class that day with a greater understanding of class as unique group of people working toward the common goal of learning to teach in good and just way. During the moments of this class meeting, we were all cast as teachers who desired to do the best for our students.

A second shift in my practice was use of time. Typically, the projects assigned in teacher education courses are completed outside of the designated class time. I noticed that this often resulted in individual students asking the same or similar questions of me while working in isolation from each other. As the course instructor, I centered a paradigm aligned with professional development for critical pedagogy. One strategy enacted was creating space within our shared time during class for students to talk with each other about projects. In addition to creating the space for professional dialogue, the Teacher Workshop evidenced my valuing of the work addressed in assignments, as well as the students’ success. Again, this modeling of class time use allows teacher candidates to experience working together to support community learning. This form of group work centers an individual project while the learners share their assets to help each other to identify relevant content as well as the logistics of navigating the rubrics and/or working with technology. While this form of group interaction was embraced by the students, it also resulted in my learning how to make determinations about how much time to allot for the workshop and also the best ways to make myself available for student questions about content. One unanticipated outcome was that two students interpreted the teacher workshop time as the only time they should spend working on major projects. Given this misinterpretation, I will need to be more mindful of communicating the fact that often the projects require time outside of class for completion.

Class meeting, as originally envisioned, was planned as a space where we could practice skills (such as civil deliberation and reaching consensus) while simultaneously sharing information. Our first attempts at this procedure resulted in awkward moments of silence and the instructor talking more than the students. Often after class, I would grapple with whether this was a worthwhile use of our time. Ultimately, I decided it was an important component that needed to be infused with more purposeful focus. A breakthrough came around the mid-term when I decided to use class meeting time as a vehicle for discussing some of the comments provided in the midterm course evaluation. This meeting was pivotal because I opened myself to their critique and addressed their concerns in an open and honest way. Though the meeting ended on a positive note, it did not begin that way. As I began the meeting, it became clear fairly early that I sounded defensive about what they had written on the evaluations, despite the fact that I actually did not feel I needed to defend any of my decisions to this point. The more I tried to explain myself, the more laptops opened. I decided to stop, sit down and ask, “please close your laptops and tell me what you all are thinking.” At this point, a student offered that she felt the evaluations were impacted by the direct written feedback I had provided for a recent assignment. I said, “OK, tell me more about that.” At this point, they talked about how they read my feedback and shared that, at this moment, they felt like they were “in trouble.” At that moment, I wanted to defend myself further, but instead, asked them to describe what made them feel that way. After listening to two or three people share their thoughts, I explained to them that I viewed all of us as teachers who were trying to learn how to best work with our students. What followed was surprising to me. The students then returned to the topic of my feedback on assignments. Instead of blaming me for what they perceived as negative feedback, they began to talk to each other about taking responsibility for ensuring that they had attended to all stated assignment criteria. This moment reinforced my thinking that class meeting could serve as a space for establishing for critical friendships; a space where both students and teachers can hash out misunderstandings and tackle difficult topics together with the intention of reaching resolve, if not solutions. From my perspective, I had the chance to model a reflexive practice by revealing the ways in which I

think though my plans and reflective moments after class to inform my decisions. Further, they experienced my making adjustments according to feedback and observation, which could result in teacher candidates re-thinking the uses of class meeting time.

In the preceding sections I have provided reflective data illustrating my journey toward enacting and modeling critical pedagogical practices. The structural changes resulted in discomfort for all members of the community including myself. At one point during the semester when we discussed the bumpy nature of getting started with our procedures, I posed the possibility that this discomfort may be a reason why classroom teachers and university instructors don't change pedagogical practices as often as they could/should. Further, we talked about the mutual risk-taking involved in our leaning community. Sharing moments of uncomfortable learning illuminated the idea that we had the agency to facilitate learning communities where teachers and students engage in risk taking behaviors together.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

This action research project contributes to the field of teacher education by exposing my experiences with implementing a radical shift to my pedagogy in action. Active participation in the work of the elementary education program committee at my institution pushed me to rethink the practices we model in our methods courses. I had to honestly evaluate my own enactments of what Hess (2004) terms avoidance of controversial topics in the teacher education classroom. We came to realize that controversial topics can arise in planned activities and in authentic ways when classmates disagree. Despite the discomfort and messy nature of this approach, I found it to be a more authentic representation of life in elementary school classrooms.

In striving to create space of mutual accountability, it became necessary to find ways for students to push beyond simply getting along. By drawing upon Bettez's (2011) notion of critical community building, class meetings and teacher workshop became collaborative learning spaces. Not only were they engaged in learning activities I had planned, they also grappled with issues of race, class and gender that often surfaced as we learned new and different social studies content.

We moved beyond solely thinking about completing the task at hand to engaging in important conversations about how to facilitate critical classroom communities.

As mentioned previously, this is the initial step in a larger project. In the next phase of the project, I will collect student interview data in order to gain insights about the moments I have shared in this paper. I will add to my data set via continued reflexivity around how decisions impact student learning and dispositions, and I will analyze student feedback from subsequent semesters. Cochran-Smith (2004) demands teacher education that is committed to equity and social justice. Further she urges us to make this work public. I view helping teacher candidates to critically examine their choices, pedagogy, and practice as integral to their willingness to take risks in their own learning and to share power and agency with their young students during internships and beyond.

REFERENCES:

- Bettez, S. (2011). Critical Community Building: Beyond Belonging. *Educational Foundations*, 25(3), 3-19.
- Bissex, G. (1986). "On Becoming Teacher Experts: What's a Teacher-Researcher?" *Language Arts in Multicultural Education*. 63(5). p.482-484.
- Brookfield, S., & Preskill, S. (2009). *Learning as a way of leading: Lessons from the struggle for social justice*. Jossey-Bass.
- Carlisle, L., Jackson, B., & George, A. (2006). Principles of Social Justice Education: The Social Justice Education in Schools Project. *Equity & Excellence in Education*, 39(1), 55-64.
- Cochran-Smith. (2004). *Walking the Road: Race, Diversity and Social Justice in Teacher Education*. Teacher College Press.
- Creswell, J., & Miller, D. L. (2000). Determining Validity in Qualitative Inquiry. *Theory into Practice*, 39(3), 124-130.
- Cross, B. E. (2003). Learning or unlearning racism: Transferring teacher education curriculum to classroom practices. *Theory into practice*, 42(3), 203-209.
- Ellis, C., Adams, T., & Bochner, A. (2011). Autoethnography: An Overview. *Historical Social Research*, 36(4), 273-290.
- Freire, P. (1970/2000). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Bloomburg Publishing, Inc. .
- Freire, P. (1994). *Pedagogy of Hope: Reliving Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. A&C Black .
- Freire, P. (1998). *Pedagogy of Freedom: Ethics, Democracy and Civic Courage*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
- Hess, D. (2004). Controversies about Controversial Issues in Democratic Education. *Political Science and Politics*, 37(1), 257-276.
- hooks, b. (1994). *Teaching to transgress: Education as the practice of freedom*. New York: Routledge.
- Jimenez-Castellanos. (2010). Relationship Between Educational Resources and School Achievement: A Mixed Method Intra-District Analysis. *The Urban Review* , 351-371.

- Kemmis, S. (2010). What is to be done? The place of action research. *Educational Action Research*, 18(4), 417-427.
- Kumashiro, K. (2010). Uncertain Beginnings: Learning to Teach Paradoxically. *Theory Into Practice*, 43(2), 111-115.
- Murrell Jr. , P. (2006). Toward Social Justice in Urban Education: A Model of Collaborative Cultural Inquiry in Urban Schools. *Equity & Excellence in Education*, 39(1), 81-90.
- Nieto, S. (2000). Placing Equity Front and Center: Some Thoughts on Transforming Teacher Education for a New Century. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 51(3), 180-187.
- Newman, Judith M. (1987). Learning to teach by uncovering our assumptions. *Language Arts*, 64(7), 727-737, <http://www.behs.cchs.usyd.edu.au/arow/reader/newman.htm>.
- Postholm, M., & Skrøvset, S. (2013). The researcher reflecting on her own role during action research. *Educational Action Research*, 506-518.
- Renner, A. (2009). Teaching community, praxis, and courage: A foundations pedagogy of hope and humanization. *Educational Studies*, 45(1), 59-79.
- Saldaña, J. (2009). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- Sleeter, C., & Stillman, J. (2005). Standardizing Knowledge in a Multicultural Society. *Curriculum Inquiry*, 35(1), 27-46.
- Villegas, A., & Lucas, T. (2002). Preparing Culturally Responsive Teachers - Rethinking the Curriculum. *Journal of Teacher Education* , 20-32.
- Whitehead, J. (1989). Creating a Living Educational Theory from Questions of the Kind, ‘ How do I Improve my Practice?’. *Cambridge Journal of Education* , 41-52.
- Yosso, T. (2005). Whose culture has capital? A critical race theory discussion of community cultural wealth. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 69-91.