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Unlearn: Preparing Preservice Teachers as Antiracist Educators

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Unlearn: Preparing Preservice Teachers as Antiracist Educators

Abstract

This paper explores a Teacher Education faculty member's approach in providing preservice teachers a holistic, antiracist preparation that includes prioritizing the hiring of Black and Brown faculty, teaching critical pedagogies, and providing diverse experiences to enhance their theoretical and classroom learning. Although research that explores the impact of race and education exists, more is needed if we are to deconstruct the impact of antiblackness in Teacher Education programs.

Keywords

Anti-racism, antiracist, antiblackness, preservice teachers, Teacher Education, BlackCrit, Black Critical Theory

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Unlearn: Preparing Preservice Teachers as Antiracist Educators

Although our society has rid itself of an administration that weaponized its devaluation of social sciences that seek to support equity, inclusivity, and antiracism, remnants of these ideologies yet linger in Teacher Education programs. According to Ladson-Billings (2009), attitudes surrounding the profession of teaching have caused it to become de-professionalized and have resulted in watered-down pedagogical training with less than favorable outcomes for students in urban school districts. Many Teacher Education programs fail to provide preservice teachers with holistic, antiracist preparation that includes prioritizing the hiring of Black and Brown faculty, teaching critical pedagogies, and providing urban practicum experiences to enhance their theoretical and classroom learning. According to Matias and Mackey (2016), the majority of K-12 teachers and faculty in Teacher Education within higher education are White females, which creates a situation in which the dominance of whiteness in the field of education is recycled and preserved. Although research that explores the impact of race and education exists, more is needed if we are to deconstruct the impact of antiblackness in Teacher Education programs.

The endless cycle of education reforms to increase diversity and dismantle racial inequities in education have had and continue to have minimal results. According to Vasquez Heilig et al. (2019), the U.S. faces ongoing challenges with diversity and representation among higher education faculty members, and overall faculty representation continues to fall short along both gender and ethnoracial lines. We propose that, in order to support Black-mattering in education, Teacher Education programs must be intentional about dismantling the aforementioned hegemony of whiteness and having diversity in their faculty be more reflective of their desired student population. We in academia must dedicate more resources to prepare our preservice teachers for careers in support of an antiracist society. Gehrke and Cocchiarella (2013) concluded that curriculum improvements are critical for special and general education preservice teacher preparedness. This preparation should include more antiracist training in critical pedagogies like antiblackness and Black Critical Theory (BlackCrit). According to Dumas (2016), BlackCrit provides a more definitive way to theorize and respond to anti-Black racism in education. Through transformative curricula, experiential learning, and improved faculty representation, we can better prepare educators to engage in antiracist teaching in all educational settings by preparing preservice teachers to decolonize existing education and educational practices that promote antiblackness and harm minority, as well as majority, students.

CURRICULUM

I had less than one week to prepare my Racism and Sexism in Educational Institutions course prior to the beginning of the semester as a novice faculty member. I was also informed that there was not a book for this course. It was a *deja vu* of my first day as a middle school teacher of students with Emotional Behavior Disabilities and being informed that the district would not provide my students with books. Fortunately, I was given a complete course syllabus that had been used and access to a Learning Management System (LMS) course shell, which consisted of peer reviewed journal articles and excerpts from books. The material found in the LMS informed me of the course outcomes without reading the syllabus. While some of the course material was a pleasant surprise, much of it was admittedly centered around what I like to call “safe” pedagogies and studies like multiculturalism. Cherng and Davis (2017) subscribe to the multiculturalist assumptions that education reform benefits from hyperawareness of multicultural approaches and that this method is associated with better teaching. Existing content within the Racism and Sexism in Educational Institutions course material I had been given championed approaches like James Banks’ and his five dimensions of multicultural education. Banks (1994) constructed elements that reference content, knowledge construction, prejudice reduction, and equitable pedagogy to empower school and social structures to assist educators in executing and evaluating programs that respond to student diversity. Banks (1994) asserted that all of our students will be ready to play their roles in the nation and celebrate diversity when content, concepts, and events are studied from many points of view. Sleeter (2017) noted the popularity of this approach: “Teacher education programs attempt to prepare their predominantly White cohorts to teach racially and ethnically diverse students through a course or two on multicultural education, culturally responsive pedagogy” (p. 156).

I was happy to see the preexisting content transition beyond Banks to a module referencing Ladson-Billings’s (1996) *Culturally Relevant Pedagogy*. According to Ladson-Billings (1996), *Culturally Relevant Pedagogy* is centered in the “academic success of African American and other children who have not been well served by our nation’s public schools” (p. 159). The pedagogy asserts that the issues lie in the discontinuity within a student’s home and school life, including language and cultural norms and values, and that academic success, cultural competency, and critical consciousness are the criteria for cultural relevancy in pedagogy. I also had a glimmer of hope when I reviewed a module labeled “Intersectionality,” which featured a TED Talk by Kimberle’ Crenshaw (2016). However the material needed to flesh out of the theory in these sections was absent from the course content. Muhammad et al. (2020) recommend the use of multiple theories in teacher preparation and while working with teachers. Yet, while overall

the preexisting content for the course addressed diversity, multiculturalism, and cultural competency, it was devoid of important discussions about racism *in education*—how it is created, perpetuated, and recycled in and by our educational system. The content caused me to remember Ladson-Billings' (1999) assertion that,

Although scholars such as James Banks, Carl Grant, and Geneva Gay began on a scholarly path designed to change schools as institutions so that students might be prepared to reconstruct the society, in its current practice iteration, multicultural education is but a shadow of its conceptual self. Rather than engage students in provocative thinking about the contradictions of U.S. ideals and lived realities, teachers often find themselves encouraging students to sing “ethnic” songs, eat ethnic foods, and do ethnic dances. (p. 22)

As noted above, Matias and Mackey (2016) asserted that the perpetuation and recycling of the hegemony of whiteness in the educational system is directly tied to a failure to acknowledge the fact that the majority of the U.S. teaching force, from K-12 schools to Teacher Education programs in higher education, are White middle-class females. Both sections of my courses were populated with predominately White female students with admittedly little to no experience with diversity, and I taught the only mandatory course that would prepare them to teach diverse student populations. Although I knew it was imperative for me to interrupt the security of the course content, I was uncertain of what that would mean for my own existence and survival as a faculty member.

Being the only Black female faculty within my School of Education (SOE) and being on a fellowship with a temporary contract renewal that was predicated on teaching effectiveness, I wondered if I could decolonize my curriculum and, as with Smith and Hawkins (2011), maintain the good teaching reviews that were expected so that it would not negatively affect my career. I was reminded of what I thought I had escaped in my K-12 teaching tenure and the need for teaching to a standardized test, and I began to ask myself if I should keep the curricula “safe” and “sell out” or interrupt the comfortability of the program, faculty, and students and be true to myself and my theoretical foundations. Smith and Hawkins (2011) noted that, within the requirements of teaching, research, and service, teaching evaluations were the most problematic issue for Black faculty to navigate. Although Smith and Hawkins's (2011) research did not directly address the impact of course content and the inclusion of less-safe curricular topics, like racism, several items within the data referenced course material within student evaluations, as I had seen in my own student evaluations. So, I decided to incorporate Critical Race Theory (CRT) the following semester, Spring 2020.

The integration of CRT into the course curriculum went more smoothly than

I expected. A few students grappled with the material, as they were not yet, as Sleeter (2017) asserted, ready to interrogate and accept how racism is institutionalized and maintained in educational institutions and our society. However, many were receptive to CRT, its tenets, and how it serves to expose the racism intrinsic to our educational system. I decided to push the envelope and build upon these students' willingness to examine the impact of whiteness within Teacher Education and conceptualize how it might be addressed (Sleeter, 2017) by incorporating Critical Whiteness Studies (CWS). More specifically, I utilized research from Matias and Mackey (2016) and framed in Critical Whiteness Studies in reference to Teacher Education in order to better prepare my preservice educators to engage in antiracist teaching in urban education, as well as all educational settings. Although I had established good reviews amongst my students so far with just the inclusion of CRT, I surmised there would be more resistance to this CWS literature, especially considering that I had also incorporated assignments that asked my predominately White preservice teachers to deconstruct their own whiteness. The situation was complicated by my identity as a Black woman and the first Black educator (as they admitted within an assignment) most of my predominately White students, who as Matias and Mackey (2016) asserted likely have limited relationships in general with people of color, had ever encountered. Many of the students were not complimentary about the new, antiracist pedagogical applications, and some students admitted in reflection assignments to feeling "attacked" by them. Yet, there were others who earnestly engaged in transparency, self-reflection, and transformation.

Preparations for curricula were inspired by many things, but they were largely impacted by what some have deemed this country's "racial reckoning" pandemic. My university service commitments informed me of the depths of our Black students' anguish. Students were hurt and angry by the senseless murder of Breonna Taylor, a 26-year-old Black female EMT in Louisville, Kentucky, who was shot eight times in her home by plainclothes officers executing a nighttime noknock warrant (Oppel & Taylor, 2020). The grand jury failed to indict officers involved with her murder in late September of 2020, just as our semester was beginning. Gibson et al. (2020) claimed that the deaths of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd elicited new levels of fury from people, many of whom appeared to be acknowledging racism, Black Lives Matter, and police brutality for the first time. Unfortunately, this could not be said for the majority of the student population for our university. My volunteer service, where I was able to hear the narratives of Black students, enlightened me to the antiblackness that permeated our institution. According to Dumas (2016), antiblackness is "a cultural disregard for and disgust with blackness" (p. 11), which constructs Black persons as the "problem" for White people, White supremacy, and capitalism (Mayorga & Picower, 2018, p. 217). The Black students' experiences enlightened me regarding

how imperative it was for me to restructure my curricula to educate students on the dangers and violence of anti-Black racism in educational institutions. I am by no means dismissing multiculturalism, CRT, or Culturally Relevant Pedagogies. However, the blatant acts of anti-Black violence that had been described to me encouraged me to agree with Dumas and Ross's (2016) assertion that simply teaching CRT to White students was not enough. They wrote, "it is not that LadsonBillings and Tate (1995) understood the applicability of CRT as limited to Black people; rather, it is that their explication of CRT centers most decidedly on antiBlack racism" (Dumas & Ross, 2016, p. 416). The racial reckoning informed my instructional practices and pedagogies to add "Black" instead of "race" at the forefront of my course content curricula.

I also chose to include Mayorga and Picower's, (2018) article, "Active Solidarity: Centering the Demands and Vision of the Black Lives Matter Movement in Teacher Education," in the curriculum. Students' narratives within our university coupled with our low enrollment of Black students inside of our SOE clearly reflected Mayorga and Picower's (2018) claim that "even with the progressive trajectory that teacher education has traveled, from being ethnocentric, to additive of multiculturalism, to 'social justice' oriented, teacher education still works institutionally in ways that answer to and uphold White supremacy" (p. 213). I was aware that my choice of Mayorga and Picower's, (2018) article would not be as welcomed as some other antiracist teachings, considering that it is framed in Black Critical Theory (BlackCrit). However, BlackCrit was essential if our teacher candidates were going to come to understand how "antiblackness constructs Black subjects, and positions them in and against law, policy, and everyday (civic) life" (Dumas & Ross, 2016, p. 417).

In addition to the assignment to read of Mayorga and Picower (2018), I created a reflection assignment that consisted of probing and open ended questions designed to evoke authentic responses from students informed by the literature. For example, the following prompt was provided:

According to the article,

Countless studies highlight the problematic ways in which White teachers [and teachers of Color who possess whiteness or White ideologies] resist and reproduce patterns of racist ideology and call into question their ability to teach from the perspective demanded by #BLM. (Picower & Kohli, 2017).

Share your thoughts.

This module also included a reading and a Flipgrid reflection from Daniel-Tatum's (1997) "'Why are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?'" and Other Conversations About Race," which unpacks how people of color experience racism

and inequities through their multiple identities. Flipgrid is an audiovisual discussion platform that provides students, as well as educators, a social learning experience. It replaces traditional written discussion prompts with video prompts and responses. I also saw Flipgrid as a tool to enhance understanding and accountability. More specifically, I understood that words are often lost in translation and that people hide behind words. I thought it was imperative for students to see their identities and hear their voice inflections while reflecting on antiracism—and more specifically, antiblackness—in educational institutions and society.

As with Mayorga and Picower (2018), some in this group of preservice teachers were not ready to come to grips with the fact that we, as teachers, are fundamentally entangled in these oppressive circumstances. A few responses reflected teacher candidates' need to defend their whiteness or share their experiences with oppression with answers completely devoid of reference to the literature. Although my integration of antiracist teaching and BlackCrit, along with increased Black student population in one section of my Racism and Sexism in Educational Institutions course, provided me encouragement, I discovered that three out of my 35 students enrolled in one section had dropped the course. Two of them had recorded Flipgrid videos with similar themes of the content making them feel like White supremacists. These reflections, coupled with additional information gathered from my new position within the SOE leadership team about the adding and dropping of students within a course, put a damper on my shortlived milestones of achievements. But, a colleague's reminder of historical and current subscribing to antiblackness that is prevalent in higher education encouraged me to continue to do my part in actively addressing "institutional racism along every step of the teacher preparation pipeline, from recruitment, admissions, coursework, placements, and professional development, and how they aim to reproduce or resist anti-Black violence in theory and practice" (Mayorga & Picower, 2018, p. 222).

Some themes emerged around the "safe" topic of preservice teachers allowing students to "respectfully" voice their concerns with race within their future classrooms, but there were other themes that developed that helped me feel more like the curriculum was reaching them. Some of the students' reflections acknowledged their racial identities and how they may inform their future classrooms and impact students of color, yet many of them were afraid to say "Black." Although I provided previous theoretical foundations and instructional guidance on why "of color" and "Black" were not the same, students continued to struggle with this until I incorporated the article, "Be Real Black for Me: Imagining BlackCrit in Education," by Dumas and Ross (2016). Using this text, students were able to unpack how "Black people become situated as (just) 'race,' whereas other groups, through these more specifically named crits, offer and benefit from more detailed, nuanced, historicized, and embodied theorizations of their lived racial

conditions under specific formations of racial oppression” (Dumas & Ross, 2016, p. 417). Students were also able to state discipline trends as it related to the disciplining of Black children and children of color using CRT and BlackCrit. These teacher candidates also were able to better conceptualize and make connections with police brutality, how Black children’s bodies represent the ultimate threat to authority, and how their discipline serves as reinforcement of security and order (Dumas & Ross, 2016).

EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

Mayorga and Picower (2018) asked, “In what ways is teacher education implicated in the maintenance of White supremacy and what would teacher education look like if it were to be actively in solidarity with #BLM? In theorizing how teacher education can achieve this solidarity?” (p. 221). To answer the first part of their question, my Teacher Education program includes, among other issues: 1) minimal diversity within our school population; 2) the lack of field experiences/practicums with our local, predominately Black school systems; and 3) students who desire to teach in urban/predominately Black schools with little to no interaction with Black and Brown people. In an effort to employ various pedagogical approaches to increase students’ awareness of diversity and push back against the maintenance of White supremacy, I decided to keep the *Plunge Experience*—an experiential learning assignment from the original course syllabus that focused on students engaging in service experiences with a cultural or gender-based group different from their own. The goal of this experience is twofold: a) to build awareness of the group’s cultural or gender norms, and b) to experience life as an other. According to Dolby and Rahatzad (2018),

In an era in which undergraduates spend more of their time online, selfsegregated and fractured by political beliefs and social identities and experiences, assignments such as the “Immersion Experience” help to create the physical, human encounters with difference that are vital for community and democracy. (p. 7)

The preexisting criteria for the *Plunge Experience* were similar to that of Dolby and Rahatzad’s (2018), with the service participation being in off campus sites such as women’s and homeless shelters, churches, or YWCAs along with a reflection tied to their privilege and awareness of diversity. The original assignment also reflected Sleeter’s (2017) definition of course content within SOEs that are reflective of White sensibilities. I may have had zero power to change the field experience/student teaching policies to include placing our preservice educators into predominately Black/urban educational settings, but I could provide them an

opportunity to engage with diverse cultures within our university community by changing the requirements so that the group to be engaged must be a university student cultural or gender-based group. Ladson-Billings (1999) claimed that this community building can extend beyond the classroom into the community, allowing teachers to create bonds and connections with their students.

While I felt that changing the assignment to focus on our university community would be impactful and that it is important for teachers to learn the importance of engaging in the community they serve, I knew that service alone would not rid them of anti-Black bias. So, my *Plunge Experience* revisions incorporated student reflections on how their cultural or White privilege may or may not have been interrogated in those community spaces where they were the minority. I also asked students to reflect on how their experiences corroborated or debunked the theoretical foundations of the Racism and Sexism in Educational Institutions course and on how to teach in solidarity with students from diverse cultures.

Most students were successful with this assignment and were able to interrogate their whiteness in regard to the experience. Although most of the students expressed their desires to teach in predominately Black/urban school districts, several had difficulty with this assignment. Some withdrew from the course prior to the due date, and others simply chose not to complete the assignment and admitted to their fear of being the minority in Black or Brown spaces-even amongst their peers. These students never seem to have answers when I ask how they will teach Black and LatinX students when they are afraid of their peers of the same cultures within their current learning institution. These moments remind me of Dumas' (2016) assertion of the fundamental and specific concern with Black bodies and the significance of their blackness as a threat to educational well-being of other students.

According to Mayorga and Picower (2018), Teacher Education programs can

be in active solidarity with #BLM by serving as gatekeepers of who is provided the tremendous right and responsibility to teach America's children. Therefore, it is critical to look at who pre- and in-service teachers are and what that means for their ability to teach in solidarity. (p. 222–223)

I was unable to make the *Plunge Experience* assignment exclusive to Black student organizations or all assignments in the course about antiblackness because the course is intended to be about racism writ large. However, I subscribe to Dumas's (2016) notion that teacher educators cannot identify nor respond to racism in education, nor can those future teachers implement societally beneficial education policy, without an understanding of the theorization of antiblackness.

FACULTY

As with most of my academic appointments in Teacher Education, I was one of few Black faculty. Although Matias and Mackey (2016) asserted that faculty within Teacher Education programs are often not reflective of the population of students being taught, our numbers are somewhat commensurate with our student population, given that only a few Black students were admitted into our college that academic year. Like Vasquez Heilig et al. (2019), impetus for establishing my position and hiring me was an understanding of how critical it was for colleges and universities to address obstacles that prevent a sustainable ethnoracial and gender diversity within the professoriate, which is why my appointment was strategically positioned to maximize opportunities that would best serve myself and the university. I collaborated on projects relating to my experience and scholarship, which included partnerships with a local urban public school system. This initiative also correlated with university goals to increase representation of Black, Indigenous, and Other People of Color (BIPOC) from urban educational settings. Our Teacher Education program initiatives included field experience placements and student teaching opportunities for students in our goals, designed to provide our students more robust, diverse learning opportunities in urban educational settings. As one of few Black female faculty, I was also asked to serve in many capacities within our department and university. These opportunities expanded beyond my original “teaching” responsibilities and created pathways of maximized opportunities with university and community stakeholders.

As with the new curriculum and experiential learning assignments, this effort to increase diversity faculty visibility also had its challenges. Time and tide altered the vision of this particular teacher education program and my responsibilities. As with most diversity track positions, I found myself adhering to White Liberalist goals. Many of the obligations I was given were outside the scope of my contractual obligations and felt counterintuitive to my understanding of equity and inclusion. As with Coles (2020), “my racial awareness positioned me to know that as a Black person—particularly, with dark skin—that I would inevitably face varying degrees of anti-Blackness” (p. 5), especially in a space where I am the sole representation of female blackness. Due to the aforementioned reasons, I admittedly at times go out of my way to provide my counterparts a sense of comfort—ignore microaggressions—in an effort to not appear as the “angry Black woman.”

Dumas (2016) asserted that “one can theorize that the Black is still socially positioned as the slave, as difficult as it may be to use this frame to understand contemporary ‘race relations’” (p. 14). My experiences navigating whiteness as a faculty member within racial minority is not unique to me or to any particular institution. Black faculty across the globe experience macro and microaggressions

due to our counterparts' inability to recognize us human (Dumas, 2016). Several colleagues at various institutions have shared similar experiences of overwhelming requests to volunteer for committees, of being, as we say "voluntold," which was opposite of our White colleagues' narratives. According to Dumas (2016), "Black is socially and culturally positioned as slave, dispossessed of human agency, desire, and freedom. This is not meant to suggest that Black people are currently enslaved, but that slavery marks the ontological position of Black people" (p. 13).

CONCLUSION

According to Warren and Coles (2020), "Antiblackness, or the socially constructed rendering of black bodies as inhuman, disposable, and inherently problematic, endures in the organizational arrangement and cultural ethos of American social institutions, including her K-12 schools, colleges, and universities" (p. 383). As previously mentioned, Teacher Education programs are responsible for recycling and retaining the hegemony of whiteness through faculty (Matias & Mackey, 2016) and curricula. Minimal research has been dedicated to the intentional presence of antiblackness in Teacher Education and how it is reprocessed. Warren and Coles (2020) asserted that these anti-Black assaults are residuals of slavery and that they occur in three forms: curricular assaults, environmental assaults, and interpersonal assaults.

Although integrating antiblackness into my curricula was a risk, considering that positive student course evaluations were important to the renewal of my teaching contract, the purest educator in me had to provide my students, the majority of whom are predominately White with at least the minimum exposure to blackness, the necessary theoretical foundations that reflect our society. While we can't overstate the importance of Ladson-Billings's (1995), *Culturally Relevant Pedagogy*, which promotes the importance of cultural competency, or Bell's (1992) tenets of CRT that expose the very racism used by our previous federal administration to characterize this global pandemic as the "China Virus," we must be specific about the violence and disdain that initiated the Racial Reckoning of this country that took the form of nationwide protests on June 1, 2020, to bring attention to anti-Black violence. It is imperative that future educators—whether White, LatinX, Black, etc.—have the theoretical underpinnings necessary to unpack ways institutionalized and individual antiblackness are recycled and redistributed in education, curricula, and society.

Though a curriculum that supports antiblackness should never dismiss, decenter, or "distort the experiences of those whose lives are daily affected by racism" (Bell, 1992, p. 6), a holistic teacher preparedness program should also apply theories like BlackCrit to help preservice teachers analyze how social and education policies are informed by antiblackness and serve as forms of anti-Black

violence. Experiential learning where White students are thrust into settings as the minority may not be the most desirable or preferred choice for giving students the opportunity to engage with cultural groups different from their own, nor should it be seen as it an attempt “to implement policies intended to bring racial balance” (Dumas & Ross, 2016, p. 434). However, limited diverse, urban field experience and student teaching placements available to students in my school and likely to those in many other similar settings, minimize our teacher candidates’ opportunities to engage and learn with cultures different from their own.

While the education platform within the Movement for Black Lives Matter (BLM) does not specifically address teacher education, it demands teacher education programs work in solidarity with its demands of racial and economic equality (Mayorga & Picower, 2018). Although Black Lives Matter was created as a response to police brutality, Mayorga and Picower, (2018) claimed that it is evident “that anti-Black violence is a multidimensional set of discourses and practices that permeate all sectors of the society that produce Black suffering, including education” (p. 216). These practices are currently addressed within education through the promotion of unity and diversity. Mayora and Picower (2018) asserted that practices that call for unity, such as including more racially and culturally diverse students at an institution, promote shared visions and demographic changes but ignore institutional views of the school that are situated in whiteness. BLM suggests solidarity—or the “active practice of recognizing and working through difference to achieve liberation for ourselves and for others” (Mayora & Picower, 2018, p. 220) and to dismantle White supremacy in Teacher Education. To be in solidarity with the vision of BLM and progress towards antiBlack learning institutions, Teacher Education needs to actively address anti-Black violence in Teacher Education programs by supporting and defending faculty and preservice teachers committed to BLM, gatekeeping who becomes teachers, and preparing educators to teach aligned with BLM within the curriculum and in service learning/urban experiences (Mayora & Picower, 2018).

Notes On The Contributor

Dr. Eddie has over twenty years of experience combined from both Preschool through twelve and Higher Education sectors in Special Education, Educational Leadership, Teacher Education, and Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion. Her research seeks to better prepare pre-service teachers and educational leaders as antiracist educators and leaders. More specifically, Dr. Eddie seeks to interrupt, expose, and dismantle the violence racism and anti-Blackness permeates within our educational systems and society, using critical frameworks like Black Critical Theory (BlackCrit), Critical Race Theory, and Disability Critical Studies (DisCrit), within her curricula and scholarly research.

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