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Challenging epistemologies of objectivity through collaborative pedagogy: Centering identity, power, emotions, and place in teacher education

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Challenging epistemologies of objectivity through collaborative pedagogy: Centering identity, power, emotions, and place in teacher education

Abstract

In this essay, we discuss how we have attempted to counter the ongoing dominance and (re)inscription of White supremacist, ableist, and settler colonial ways of knowing and being within an elementary teacher education program (TEP) through a consideration of identity and power, emotions and place-based pedagogy. Our approaches indicate means for regenerating and expanding upon marginalized epistemologies in TEPs, challenging curricular epistemicide, while our stories also indicate that these approaches and related ways of knowing are intertwined with our own identities, histories and felt experiences as well as challenges to our enactment of this work.

Keywords

identity, emotions, teacher education, embodied epistemologies

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In the last decade, the three authors, as teacher educators, have increasingly been trying to address how we can move towards disrupting understandings around teacher learning and teacher education that we and many others have recognized as having contributed to maintain white settler colonialist, ableist, and raciolinguistic (Daniels, and Varghese, 2020; Flores & Rosa, 2015; Brown et al., 2010) hegemonic approaches to schooling as well as curricular epistemicide in teacher preparation. As posited by Green, Brennan, and Roberts (2021, p. 7),

Epistemicide results in curricular practices that are profoundly unjust, as they reduce people's capacity to remake their world (Connell 1992, p.13) in accordance with their lived experiences. In curricular terms, this implies that 'knowledges from the colonized cannot be recognised, or seen, let alone included.

The difficulties in attempting such a disruption in teacher education abound. In particular, we challenge the “practice that makes practice” (Britzman, 2003) paradigm where teacher candidates need to be prepared to work within the school system while asking them to simultaneously change the system from within. Another significant challenge is that university preparation programs are part of these same oppressive systems within academia where teacher education faculty and programs are not rewarded and supported sufficiently in doing this kind of work.

In this essay, we discuss the opportunities we found within our collaborative pedagogy, to attend to these challenges. Our overall goal has been to help future teachers literally map out ways of resisting normative ways of teaching and being, as a team composed of a faculty member, a former graduate student, and a current graduate student collaborator. The director of our teacher education program (TEP) has called this *guerilla teaching*, while we have referred to it as *subversive teaching and pedagogy* (Anderson, 2020). Moreover, when we have such discussions in our classes and the program, we have also asked teachers to not solely think of doing this work within their individual classrooms but rather conceptualizing teaching in solidarity (Hseih & Nguyen, 2020) and in terms of coalitional consciousness (Snyder Bhansari, in press), which are integral to our own theoretical grounding in this essay. All of these efforts are meant to counter the ongoing dominance and (re)inscription of White supremacist, ableist, and settler colonial ways of knowing and being that we view as prioritizing objectivity and individuality as well as a non-engagement with emotions.

In this brief essay, our purpose is to highlight our collaborative and reflexive identity-conscious pedagogies that epistemologically challenge curricular epistemicide in normative, often oppressive, approaches to teaching and learning in teacher education programs, while also providing examples of how we model this for future teachers. Furthermore, through dialogue, we demonstrate our mutual and 'horizontal learning' as collaborators deeply embedded in the messy process of changing the system as we work within it (Souto-Manning and Martell, 2019). First, we delineate the ideas that we started with and developed through this collaborative pedagogy and end with a dialogue between us, which aligns with the same instructional and relational approaches we use to engage with teacher candidates; such as, discussions, dialogue journals, reflections, and critical questions.

Methodologically, our process for creating this essay mirrored our process for collaborating and co-teaching across multiple years in the same TEP. The TEP in which we have worked has been increasingly diversifying, and in the past few years has been composed of a majority of multilingual students of Color. This context has also shaped our pedagogies and their

impacts. In writing this essay, we each composed our individual vignettes describing our particular approaches and the connections to our identities. We begin with Maia, a faculty member and advisor of the two other authors, then Ruby, a faculty member and former doctoral student and finally, Cora, a current doctoral student. After reading each other's vignettes, we proposed and developed critical questions for dialogue, and wrote in conversation with one another to mirror our ongoing processes of 'horizontal learning'. We conclude with a short section highlighting the implications of our work.

Maia: Identity and Power

As a faculty lead in multilingual education in our elementary teacher education program, I was initially focused on helping aspiring elementary teachers to teach multilingual students to learn English, especially academic English, while maintaining their home language, and honestly, viewed this as a neutral perspective on teaching and learning. At the same time, the recognition, over time, that not only was this not neutral, but that to ask multilingual students, many of them who are racialized, to learn standardized English, was extremely damaging. This was even more so when this kind of pedagogy was practiced by mainly white monolingual teachers. The methods class for aspiring teachers of multilingual students has since become a class where teacher candidates are asked to reflect on their own racial, linguistic, and intersectional identities in terms of power in the classroom and with their students, as a key dimension of their practice. Over the course of the ten weeks together, we learn about language, race, ability, heteronormativity, immigration, and their intersections, and the teacher candidates are asked to put together three to five questions related to their own identity and power, such as “How do I as a white able bodied woman bring in an awareness around different abilities in the classroom?” For their final paper, the candidates are asked to respond to the questions they choose in relation to a recording of them teaching a particular lesson. The focus on identity has expanded beyond this class and now has become a significant part of the program - along with the methods class where candidates are asked to reflect on their identities as related to their practice (Daniels and Varghese, 2020), the candidates start the program with a class on identity; and finally, all the teacher candidates are asked to be part of race-based caucuses (Daniels and Varghese, 2020). All of this demonstrates a deliberate shift in the program from seeing teaching purely as a set of practices or pedagogical moves that teachers need to learn to one where teachers' identities, especially their racial and linguistic ones, are deeply implicated in the choices they make and the consequences of these choices.

Working with graduate students as collaborators, such as Ruby and Cora, with years of teaching experience with multilingual students and who also understand and are deeply invested in changing the unjust ways these students are taught, categorized, and placed in schools and society, has provided for deeper and continued evolution of our curriculum and pedagogy. This evolution has led, if not yet to full integration, to consideration of concepts and dimensions in teacher education curriculum and teacher learning, such as emotions and place-based pedagogy.

Ruby: Inviting Emotions Through Poetry

I became a teacher through an alternative certification program (Teach for America) that prepared us prior to our first year in the classroom with six weeks of rapid-fire training on lesson-planning and 'high leverage' behavior management strategies. Although we had ongoing classes throughout the first year of teaching, they were focused on teaching methods and content

strategies with little space for processing our experiences and emotions. I came to Teach for America as a white woman from a rural, predominately white town, and as a survivor with PTSD who was experiencing relationship violence. My first year in the classroom was full of frustration, sadness, joy, anger, fear and love, all of which I attempted to repress in order to 'do the work' of teaching. Yet, I later came to understand that the intense emotions I experienced as I began teaching were related to my efforts to understand my identity in the classroom, my growing sense of felt inequities my students and their families lived through, and my emergent critical consciousness linked to my own experiences with trauma. My teacher education program failed to help me draw on and learn from this knowledge and also to fully humanize me or to move beyond my technical skills to my whole being and felt awareness as a teacher.

Because of this experience, and my ongoing relationship with new teachers in our program, I have endeavored to make space for emotion within my own work as a teacher educator. Furthermore, I have worked to connect emotion to embodied knowledge of power which I believe is essential in learning to teach for social justice. One means through which I have done this work is through expansion of encouraged forms of expression in class including poetry and assignments meant to go beyond the 'typical academic essay'. In engaging with poetry, I draw on the work of Audre Lorde (1984) and other Women of Color feminists (Anzaldúa, 1987; Sandoval, 2000). Lorde (1984) argues that poetry is a mode through which writers, particularly Women of Color, can express what they know through embodied experience and emotion. In other words, poetry opens space for teachers to communicate beyond words and consider aspects of teaching, and their own identities as teachers, that are frequently ignored and devalued.

Furthermore, I think it is necessary to process emotion in connection with critical understandings of identity (particularly raciolinguistic subjectivity) (Daniels and Varghese, 2020). This link is significant to supporting teachers to learn about how their identities relate to the distribution of power in the classroom and how their emotions link to the ways in which they uphold and/or disrupt whiteness (Daniels and Varghese, 2020; Matias, 2016). Thus, when I engage teachers in poetry writing, I draw on 'radical vulnerability' to highlight my own identities in poems that I have written (Nagar, 2014). I also explicitly ask students to respond to identity-centered prompts that acknowledge their own selves and personal histories. Cora has supported me to more deeply consider the connection of self and personal history to settler-colonialism, adding an important dimension to our reflections and identity related activities.

Cora: Inviting Personal Histories of Education through Identity Mapping Activities

I locate my first experiences as a teacher candidate, not in the U.S., but abroad. I co-taught high school English at a university city in Indonesia. I worked with students and families who had very similar cultural, political, and linguistic experiences as me and my Filipino immigrant family. I found joy and affirmation in this teaching experience but I also needed more support in my identity development as a teacher. While abroad, I began to notice differences between the legacies of colonial interventions in Indonesian education compared to Philippine education. I was reckoning with the realization that colonization's impact also spreads to many educational systems. This systemic restructuring created inequities in education, both nationally and globally.

I also realized my identity and access to schooling and language is linked to these inequities. I was in a teaching abroad program that originally brought White and Black American teachers to the Philippines as a project of U.S. colonialism. Aware of the intersections between colonialism's implication in education and my personal and professional histories, I returned to

the U.S. to work in public education. I didn't see this kind of teacher identity work in my U.S.-based teacher education program; however, I did see the continued perpetuation of curriculum and pedagogies with underlying colonial motives being taught.

Now as a graduate student and a teacher educator, I am thinking about how teachers' experience professional identity development in conversation with their own personal identities and histories. I wanted to explore the intersections between teachers' own educational experiences, their current teaching environments, and their relationships to land and place. I think of this as the teachers' personal histories. In relation to their personal histories, I also wanted to consider the professional histories of teachers and how teachers make sense of these identities. We live in a settler-colonial society where teacher candidates arrive to the teaching profession already with settler-colonial experiences in education (Domínguez, 2019; Chávez-Moreno, 2020; Patel, 2021). These pre-teacher education experiences are not only reminiscent of teacher education's historical participation in formal U.S. imperial expansion projects but are also still unquestioned and accredited as relevant teaching experiences by the field. How do both personal and professional identities interact or manifest within a teacher's understanding of their own identity development?

Within our strand of teacher education coursework, I have been able to collaborate on developing a two-part mapping reflection activity that first focuses broadly on teacher candidates' identity awareness. Teacher candidates reflect on the role and importance of their given, chosen, outgrown, and developing identities. They then create a visual map that communicates the relationships between these identities and the lands where the teacher candidates work and live as well as in their own physical and virtual communities, their learning experiences, and their career(s) (Annamma, 2018; Fujikane, 2021; Bowman & Gottesman, 2017). As a class, we discuss how mapping our identities enables us to see our journeys in relation to past educational experiences, to family and community histories, and to the specificities of place and time. We connect our identity awareness to Bettina Love's work on "mattering" and teaching: "Mattering cannot happen if identities are isolated and students cannot be their full selves" (Love, 2019, p. 7). I utilize mapping within teacher education as a form of resistance in exposing oppressive political interests, an act of solidarity in redrawing assumed boundaries, and a method for reflecting on one's education and teaching journeys inclusive of narratives and relationships. I hope these approaches provide spaces for teacher candidates to see the ways in which their identity journeys are ongoing and in relationship with their work as teachers.

Dialogue

In what follows, we use dialogue to reflect on our shared experiences with these pedagogies and with each other. We also choose dialogue as a methodology for disrupting the traditional structure of "academic" texts, shifting towards a narrative and process of horizontal learning that is collective, ongoing, and unresolved (Souto Manning & Martell, 2019). This enactment challenges teacher education curricular epistemicide rooted in White Supremacist, ableist, and settler-colonial notions of relationality as well as the linearity of time and bordered nature of space. We respond collectively to three questions meant to spark reflection and connection.

How do we notice that our approaches are taken up and experienced by teacher candidates (of different positionalities)?

Maia: As you know, I have been working with other graduate students, in the past, on transitioning our methods class to one that centers identity and subjectivity in relation to methods, especially in terms of teacher candidates' racial and linguistic (and other intersectional identities) since before you started in the program. It is clear that the program as a whole, has taken this up as one of its signatures, expanding it to other areas, such as racial caucuses and the identity class the teacher candidates start the program with. Although teacher candidates seem to appreciate that about the program as a whole and apply to the program because of its justice and identity focus, they have had mixed reactions to the class itself. They are understandably concerned with the instrumental dimensions of their role and the class not being "methodsy" enough.

Cora: Yes, Maia, I've appreciated how we immediately communicate to the teacher candidates that our own instructional methods can also be taken up as examples of possible teaching strategies for their own classrooms. For teacher candidate's experiences with mapping, I noticed that engaging with identities in the perspective of a journey connected to place, rather than a disconnected fixed state of being, can be liberating. Particularly, teacher candidates with intersecting identities that are often minoritized in schools (i.e. race, language, ability, gender, sexuality, document status) have been able to locate and see how their identities have formed or continue to develop (or not) without partitioning themselves. The teacher candidates honored their relationships to multilingualism within their maps. They depicted nonlinear forms of time in their journeys and they blended state-sanctioned borders with virtual spaces of home and community. I remember we invited teacher candidates to try this with their own students. I've seen the teacher candidates share their experiences with this approach as a way to learn and celebrate the identity journeys their own students might be navigating.

Ruby: Cora, I really appreciate what you are saying about mapping offering a way for candidates to honor and express their wholeness within the intersections of their identities. I think that emotions expressed through poetry or other "non-traditional" forms of writing can offer similar opportunities for candidates to exist in contradictions, and highlight their multiplicity of being. I have noticed varying levels of engagement or willingness/readiness to share emotion in candidates, and I wonder if you see this in your engagement with mapping activities? For me, particularly candidates who hold one or more dominant identities (white, male, able, wealthy, neurotypical etc.) have struggled and/or purposefully disengaged from these pedagogies at times. In assignments for the course I taught *Identity and Equity*, this resistance was manifested through surface level emotional engagement with reflection prompts, particularly for white teacher candidates reflecting on their racial identities. I have responded by naming this in feedback, and encouraging students to go beyond the 'analytical' to the felt experience. I wonder if you have seen this, and how you consider it to be a part of the process?

Cora: Ruby, yes - I agree with the varying levels of engagement for mapping. I've seen hesitancy from teacher candidates with one or more dominant identities. I've seen them initially avoid fully engaging with the activity because of assumed neutrality between their identities and relationships to place or even process. I think it's been so helpful working with you because of the ways in which you share your own map and model to teacher candidates how you've been able to reflect and confront these identities' relationships to place and history. I think part of this mapping process includes questions that teacher candidates developed as a result of doing the mapping. They've posed questions such as, "How has my family always lived in this

neighborhood?”, “Why has my monolingual identity never been questioned in schools or abroad?”. Teacher candidates also recognized the ways in which their identities are in community with others rather than in silos. I think this reflective work has provided them with space to see their identities and emotions at the intersections of education, history, and place.

How have we learned from and with each other? How has collaboration and solidarity mattered in this work?

Ruby: I do not believe that I could have nor can I do this work as effectively on my own. During my time working with you both, I benefited so much from our collective planning and enactments and the ways in which we could bring our different identities to the work of co-teaching. I also feel that our collaborative work has given me a space in which to grow my own capacity to engage emotionally and express myself emotionally after traumatic relational experiences in the past. Our work together has also taught me so much about the ways in which identity matters as we work with students, and the importance of being in solidarity with folks of a variety of identities in our collective support of our students. I believe these understandings are embodied, learned through the felt experience of our co-teaching.

Maia: I couldn't agree more, Ruby. I would not have been able to conceptualize the methods class in the way I had, without a former doctoral student who helped teach me more deeply about the harm caused by White teachers in the practices they carry out. With you, Ruby, we were able to create more of an identity strand to the whole program integrated with emotions (Grant, 2019) and the fact that you were teaching in all spaces of that strand with your thoughtfulness around Whiteness, contributed significantly to a shift in the program and how we view what a teacher preparation curriculum should look like. The relational aspect with both of you and other graduate student-collaborators, including the emotional connections we forged when we would feel things were going wrong, or our candidates were struggling, provided much needed sustenance, which translated into what we wanted to build for teacher candidates. I remember numerous instances where we would talk about that relationship with teacher candidates and the complexity of me being your advisor, Ruby, so being hierarchically in a role of power related to you, but at the same time, feeling deeply being read and treated differently from you (as a white woman), being a woman of color, when we co-taught.

Cora: Ruby and Maia, our collaboration has taught me so much about care for one another in teacher education and as teacher educators. The approaches we use with teacher candidates are the same approaches we have done together as an instructional team. I remember writing my own poetry after a class planning session with Ruby. This written dialogue between each other comes from the same method of dialogues written between us and teacher candidates. I'm learning that our commitments to anti-oppressive teacher education also need to be embodied within our own commitments to collaborating and being in solidarity with one another.

What opportunities and tensions exist between these methods and our role as instructors in higher education? How does that matter for us given our positionalities (I'm thinking of race, language and institutional position here)?

Cora: I feel very new to the “instructor” role within our teacher education program. Now, I have the autonomy to build upon the approaches we've been using in our class. As I've begun to join

the faculty meetings this year, I'm thinking about how we as instructors can move coursework away from learning about methods in silos of topical areas and likewise for foundations courses. I'm entering general exams soon and I hope for a space to not only envision using reflective dialogues and questions, creating poetry, and mapping identities but also to enact these approaches within both foundations and methods courses. As we invite teacher candidates to participate in these opportunities, I am also wondering now how teacher candidates feel about creating these contexts and opportunities for their own students? For example, I encourage teacher candidates to utilize all of the languages they are in relationship with - not just named languages or languages they have been deemed "proficient" in. I give this explicit option during the summer when teacher candidates are completing course assignments and not yet in their student teaching placement. As a cohort, we discuss what is gained and lost with this intentional move away from "standard" English as a dominant language for assessment. My hope is that teacher candidates' reflections at the intersections of lands, communities, and power will continue onwards from their teacher education program to beyond their time in teacher education.

Ruby: I think what you are saying is really interesting Cora, because independence is so heavily encouraged in the academy and within institutions of higher education. As I transition into my new role as an assistant professor, collaboration and/or integration is not part of how my teaching is evaluated, and in many cases my classes are treated as silos by students and colleagues. This can be very hard to resist, especially as I learn a new institutional context and contend with my own comfortability with this mode of being as a white person. I also really appreciate, Cora, how you are bringing teacher candidates into this process as well as their future students. I believe that as a teacher educator, this is ultimately a very relevant part of "evaluating" my impact, but how can we continue to push to make it so?

Maia: When I started in my role as faculty, and teaching within our elementary teacher education program, it started in a very individualistic manner, where I taught my courses and discussed the course in relation to other courses only during faculty meetings. But as I started realizing, in an iterative way, the White supremacist, settler colonialist, ableist, and patriarchal values underlying such ways of being, also working with and learning from graduate-student collaborators, such as both of you, I have moved and sought more collaborative arrangement in our teacher education space as well as other spaces within academia. Like you both mention, it is crucial that we model this as instructors and faculty for teacher candidates, which I feel we have been attempting to do.

Moving Forward

As we move forward, we continue to grapple with the integration of our various approaches and pedagogies in order to work towards intersectional justice. While one of us has moved on to a new institutional context, we continue to see our collective work and dialogue as an ongoing process that supports our growth as teacher educators. In particular, we all continue to struggle with the separation between the types of courses we teach, and "methods" courses that tend to take a more white-washed, emotion-neutral and identity-neutral approach to teacher learning. We continue to ask: how can we promote integrative collaboration across methods AND foundations courses, moving away from learning about methods in silos of topical areas? How can we make space across teacher ed programs for teacher candidates to engage with and generate their own epistemologies?

Taken together, our approaches indicate valuable means for regenerating and expanding upon marginalized epistemologies in teacher education programs. Our stories also indicate that these approaches and related ways of knowing are intertwined with our own identities, histories and felt experiences. At the same time, our identities and positionalities in the system lead to varying constraints and challenges to our enactment of this work. This collective essay highlights the ways in which our pedagogies and approaches, developed in collaboration with one another and with students, can challenge curricular epistemicide rooted in oppressive systems and bring embodied epistemologies for teacher candidates and teacher educators to the center of teacher education.

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