

## **Essential and insightful narratives from teacher candidates: Challenges with an equity initiative in teacher education**

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This article aims to share the too often silenced or missing voices of teacher candidates' accounts in a university-school based equity initiative. The Diverse Schools (DS) Initiative<sup>1</sup> is a one year long university-school based equity initiative that took place in a Canadian university which offers a Bachelor of Education program. The partnership occurred between the local school board and the university in the hopes that this initiative would benefit associate teachers, teacher candidates, and ultimately the students in the public school.

The DS initiative is founded upon the simultaneous teaching that took place in a one year-long required course in the Bachelor of Education entitled *School and Society*, and in eight professional development seminars for associate teachers. What is unique about this initiative is that the course instructors for *School and Society* also designed and led the professional seminars for associate teachers. The associate teachers were given release time from their school board to attend these professional development seminars that facilitated dialogue around similar themes and topics that were explored in the course.

The *School and Society* course had approximately 70 teacher candidates and the professional seminars had approximately 20 associate teachers in attendance. It is important to note that the DS Initiative only involved 10 teacher candidates and their respective 10 associate teachers. All the participants volunteered to participate in this DS Initiative, which extended outside the regular practicum experience. The particular cohort that took up the DS Initiative was the Equity Option which was designed to address inner city schools' diverse students' needs. The associate teachers at the professional development seminars taught at inner city schools and self-identified as urban educators, some of whom had been paired with teacher candidates in the second academic term. Originally, ten associate teachers signed up to do the research interviews; however, during the research process two of them withdrew their participation for personal reasons. As a result, this study is based upon the experiences of ten teacher candidates and eight of their respective associate teachers.

The theoretical underpinning of the DS Initiative is based upon the blended theories of culturally responsive teaching and culturally relevant pedagogy. The amalgamation of these two theories has been renamed 'culturally responsive and relevant pedagogy' (CRRP) by Ryan and Lina<sup>2</sup>, who are the developers and instructors of the DS Initiative. According to Ryan and Lina, the purpose of CRRP was to create a common language in order to promote an equity dialogue between

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<sup>1</sup> Diverse Schools (DS) Initiative is a pseudonym used to protect the identity of the program.

<sup>2</sup> All the names for participants involved in this research have been given pseudonyms to protect their identities. In addition, the Equity Option is also a pseudo-label to protect the name of the cohort.

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teacher candidates and associate teachers. Thus teaching about CRRP to teacher candidates in their *School and Society* class and teaching associate teachers in their professional development seminars was essential to the DS Initiative.

The two main research questions explored in this article are: (1) What (if any) are the challenges of the 10 teacher candidates with respect to their experience with the DS Initiative? (2) How, if at all, do these challenges impact equity initiatives in teacher education?

### **Theoretical Framework**

This paper's theoretical framework draws upon two teacher education scholars' work, Gloria Ladson-Billings (1994, 1995a, 1995b) and Geneva Gay (2002). These scholars provide insights from their research which aim to address the question, how teachers can reach, connect and teach students of racialized and marginalized backgrounds? The importance of this research is evidenced by the widespread phenomenon of deficit thinking towards racially marginalized students that is held by teachers, as reported by several scholars (Portelli, 2010; Sharma, 2009; Shields, Bishop & Mazawi, 2005; Valencia, 1999; Valenzuela, 2010). Such studies demonstrate that there is a widening gap between how teachers are connecting, engaging, and perceiving racially marginalized students. Thus, understanding the critical approach Ladson-Billings and the practical approach Gay provides teachers, allows for more inclusive education for all. What follows is a brief overview of Ladson-Billings' and Gay's work.

It is important to note that Ladson-Billings and Gay were the first scholars to coin the terms "culturally responsive pedagogy" (Gay 2002)<sup>3</sup> and "culturally relevant pedagogy" (Ladson-Billings 1994, 1995a, 1995b). Ladson-Billings' (1995a) work explains culturally relevant pedagogy as one that addresses the following three main tenets: (1) holding high expectations for all students, (2) developing cultural competence in students, and (3) creating a political consciousness around the existing social order. With the same interest in improving schooling experiences for marginalized students, Gay (2002) provides teachers with in-classroom practices that utilize culturally responsive teaching. Gay (2002) states there are five practices that must be upheld in light of culturally responsive teaching, namely:

1. Developing a knowledge base about cultural diversity;
2. Including ethnic and cultural diversity content in the curriculum;
3. Demonstrating caring and building learning communities;
4. Communicating effectively with ethnically diverse students; and
5. Responding to ethnic diversity in the delivery of instruction (p. 106)

Thus Ladson-Billings' work takes a critical approach that requires teachers to grapple with critical issues of power and privilege with respect to the schooling experiences that racially marginalized students go through, whereas Gay's work provides practical ways in which teachers can modify their practices to help improve racially marginalized students' experiences in schools.

Several secondary literature pieces on culturally relevant pedagogy and culturally responsive teaching have influenced the understanding of "culturally responsive" and "culturally relevant pedagogy" (e.g. Bazron, Osher, & Fleischman, 2005; Bergeron, 2008; Bondy, Ross, Galligane, & Hambacher, 2007; Brown, 2007; Brown-Jeffy and Cooper, 2011; Chamberlain, 2005; Hefflin, 2002; Howard, 2003; Kress, 2005; Montgomery, 2001; Morrison, Robbins & Rose, 2008; Osborne, 1996; Villegas & Lucas, 2002; and Young, 2007). The majority of the secondary literature draws upon

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<sup>3</sup> Throughout their interviews, this understanding of Ladson-Billings and Gay as being the key scholars who originated the concepts of culturally relevant pedagogy and culturally responsive teaching was agreed upon by both Ryan and Lina.

Gay's work on culturally responsive teaching and Ladson-Billings' work on culturally relevant pedagogy.

For many scholars it seemed that both culturally responsive teaching and culturally relevant pedagogy could be used interchangeably because they have the same prospective goals and audiences; which is how the developers of the DS Initiative came up with the term Culturally Responsive and Relevant Pedagogy (CRRP) – a theory that fused culturally responsive teaching and culturally relevant pedagogy together.

### **Methodology, Methods and Positionality**

This article is based on a larger critical practitioner research study (Sharma, 2013). The data is based on field notes from *School and Society* classes, professional development seminars, and interviews with teacher candidates and associate teachers after their practicum. The methodology used in this paper is critical practitioner research methodology and it primarily uses the qualitative interviewing from the larger study as its main source of data. Practitioner research methodology as described by Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009, p. 20) has two core tenets:

1. Teaching is a deliberative (not a technical) profession, practitioners generate knowledge for practice.
2. Contextualized questions and uncertainties are brought forward by practitioners which are based on issues of teaching and learning at all levels.

The teacher candidates and the associate teachers' willingness and involvement as participants of the DS Initiative demonstrate their desire to generate knowledge for their classrooms. In this article, we will focus on the voices of teacher candidates as often their experiences with such initiatives are not well-documented. Moreover, one of the key questions that the teacher candidates and I wanted to learn about is: How (if at all) does the DS Initiative which uses CRRP impact the teaching and learning experiences of teacher candidates during practicum? Through the use of semi-structured interviews "contextualized questions and uncertainties were brought forward" by teacher candidates (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p. 20).

LeCompte, Schensul and Schensul contend that "semi-structured interviews combine the flexibility of unstructured, open-ended interview with the directionality and agenda of a survey to produce focused qualitative textual data" (1999 vol. 2:149). The questions that emerge from the content and analysis of the ten semi-structured 45 minute to 1-hour interviews I conducted with teacher candidates reveal challenges, insights, as well as several gaps in the DS Initiative. Furthermore, as Cochran-Smith and Lytle contend, these questions and uncertainties might arise from practitioners "...examining their own assumptions, deepening their local knowledge by gathering data, asking questions, and working towards social justice" (2009:74).

In light of the nature of practitioner research, which emphasizes positionality, I share my positionality at the time of this research, as it will better help contextualize the overall study. While studying the DS Initiative, I had to balance and stretch the multiple identities I inhabited at the time: those of graduate student, researcher, former teacher candidate from the Equity Option, and a current teacher with the Toronto District School Board. These intersecting and sometimes contradictory roles provide me with an *insider-outsider* identity (Cochran-Smith and Lytle 1993). Herr and Anderson (2005) explain this insider-outsider positionality by claiming:

Each of us as researchers occupies multiple positions that intersect and may bring us into conflicting allegiances or alliances within our research sites. We may occupy positions where

we are included as insiders while simultaneously, in some dimensions, we identify as outsiders (p. 44).

Throughout this process, I found myself holding multiple identities that in some contexts positioned me to be an insider while in other contexts, positioned me as an outsider. Each of my identities allowed me to be part of the group (an insider) and as a result enabled me to have conversations and develop trustful relationships with the participants in my study. However, my outsider identity as researcher separated me from all the participants in my study. As a researcher, I was looking in on an initiative, into a community that I was invested in as teaching assistant and as a former student. This sense of “investment” in this community and the work it was doing made it difficult for me to analyze and observe the DS Initiative and the community as a complete outsider. Lytle (2000) articulates this tension as follows:

[t]aking the dual stance of teacher and researcher has indeterminate and sometimes problematic implications for the role of teacher researcher as teacher, raising issues about what it really means to attempt to embed research in practice (p. 697).

As a result of this “dual stance” which can entail occupying multiple identity roles simultaneously, it becomes difficult to predict when these multiple roles will be conflicting or when they will be compatible. In this sense, Lytle (2000) would consider me to be a practitioner researcher who has interrupted the “...easy distinctions often made between “insider” and “outsider” and [has] destabilized the boundaries of research and practice—creating a space where a radical realignment and redefinition may be possible” (p. 699). Given my positionality, I did member checks twice with Ryan and Lina (the developers of the DS Initiative) who were the key informants of this research. In the next section I describe the DS Initiative in greater detail, after which the findings will be shared.

### **The Diverse Schools Initiative**

As this was the first time the Diverse Schools (DS) Initiative was piloted, there were many learning opportunities for everyone involved. The DS Initiative was led by Ryan and Lina who encouraged growth in their students and were open to further developing their equity-based work. The DS Initiative was positioned within a full year required course within the Bachelor of Education program for all teacher candidates entitled, *School and Society*. The *School and Society* classes were 3 hours in length and there were 24 classes for 70 teacher candidates. The second major component of the DS Initiative took place in the form of eight 2.5 hours long professional development seminars for associate teachers. In general for the 70 students, associate teachers were selected through their school’s administration and were invited to become or asked to become associate teachers for that academic year.

What made the DS Initiative different was that it offered paid release time for 20 associate teachers who were randomly paired with 20 teacher candidates for different practicum periods. It is important to note that only a group of 10 self-volunteering teacher candidates and 10 self-volunteering associate teachers decided to participate in the research for the duration of the DS Initiative.

The associate teachers were invited to eight professional development workshops in the afternoons (12:30-3:00pm) on the university campus to learn about culturally responsive and relevant pedagogy (CRRP). The focus of these professional development seminars was on CRRP and related activities for teachers in the field. With respect to the teacher candidates beyond their *School and Society* course, they were involved in two seminar opportunities with their associate

teachers to connect and dialogue about CRRP, at the university site, outside of the practicum experience.

With this context of the DS Initiative in mind, the following section examines some of the challenges teacher candidates had with the DS Initiative. Again, the focus on teacher candidates' narratives and voices is intentional because their narratives are often missed when examining teacher education initiatives. The data used to inform and articulate these findings are based on the qualitative semi-structured interviews conducted with teacher candidates upon the completion of the first term, which included their practicum time.

### **Teacher Candidates' Challenges with the DS Initiative**

The process of coding and analyzing the collected data for the larger study (Sharma, 2013) was through triangulation and colour coding themes across the data, and then critically analyzing them through an anti-neoliberal and critical pedagogy theoretical framework. I categorized data by re-coding it into items, patterns, and structures using my pedagogical theoretical framework of CRRP (LeCompte and Schensul, 1999, vol. 1:150). I identified patterns using both generalized statements about a group of items and cultural statements that were missing or that stood out. After these grouping processes were conducted, I coded the patterns. While coding the patterns, I looked for any relationships among the patterns (e.g. who was saying them, what was being said and how often, how much importance and relevance was given to them) which then initiated the process of identifying structural patterns (e.g. understanding teacher identity, teacher knowledge about culture, and the complexity involved in university-school based equity initiatives) in my study. Given this background on the coding and analyzing process of the data, in the following paragraphs I share two salient findings from the larger study.

The two main challenges identified by teacher candidates are: (1) Difficulty understanding the theory of CRRP, and (2) Missing Areas in the DS Initiative. Both these challenges emerged from descriptions of how teacher candidates described and understood the DS Initiative and its impact on them during the interviews with them. After sharing each of the challenges from the perspective of a researcher and now a teacher educator, I present a reflection on each of the challenges respectively.

#### *1. Difficulty Understanding the Theory of CRRP*

In the interviews, the responses to how each of the teacher candidates understood CRRP varied; however, they can be grouped under three sub-sections: (1) they were emerging from a personal life experience, and thus they were able to make a connection to equity-based work, (2) an academic theory they learned about during their post-secondary education, and (3) how they see it "in action" in a classroom setting<sup>4</sup>. In what follows, excerpts from different teacher candidates' interviews are shared to provide an insight on their thoughts.

**Neha:** Neha, (2010) a young teacher candidate, explains how her childhood schooling experience left a lasting impression on her:

M: Where does your definition of CRRP come from?

N: I gained that through my life experiences. I grew up in inner city, I am an ethnic female minority with a learning disability. (Laughter). Just growing up in that public system, and being on the inside of it...how much of a difference it makes when teachers address these issues. When I was diagnosed as dyslexic and dis-graphic in grade three, I was moved from

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<sup>4</sup> Again, the distinction between academic theory and how to use it in action in the classroom echoes the theory and practice dichotomy described earlier.

the slow kids table to the regular class table. The teacher told the class that kids learn differently and that is how I was reintegrated into the group. So, kids didn't say, don't ask her or she is stupid anymore, they understood that I had a different learning style and that is at a grade three level. So if they know, they can understand.

M: So the understanding of CRRP comes from your own life experiences?

N: Yes and a fire for it! (Interview notes, p. 5).

Thus, Neha (2010) used her experiences of elementary school student to gain an understanding of how people understood her learning disability and accommodated her. This relational narrative is where Neha's understanding of CRRP comes from and how it makes sense to her.

**Danny:** According to Danny (2010), he was able to understand and define CRRP but did not incorporate it into his practicum placement. Danny understood CRRP as doing "things related to student's identity, culture, subjects that are related to that. Things that [students] can relate to more [easily]" (Interview notes, 2010, p. 4). He claimed that the closest thing he had done with this definition in mind was "when [he] taught them about perimeter in math for measuring their house (how big a rug was in their house) other than that I taught the origins of native people in Canada...I couldn't see anything connect" (Interview notes, 2010, p. 4). As a result, Danny was able to define CRRP, but in terms of explaining how he gained his understanding of CRRP, he remained unclear.

**Drew:** Drew's interpretation of CRRP had a focused approach on literacy texts and students. Drew said, "I think [CRRP] is to make teacher candidates engage with an objective to make the teaching material relevant to the students, in particular with inner city communities. The textbook is the example of classic troubles" (Interview notes, p. 8). Nevertheless, Drew stated that CRRP allows for a way to create material and teaching strategies that are relevant to students' lives which helps address student disengagement. Interestingly, Drew's interpretation of CRRP (making teaching material relevant) is different from what he understands to be the DS Initiative's understanding of CRRP (making teaching material reflective of students).

**Kathleen:** Another teacher candidate, Kathleen (2010), understood CRRP as the pedagogy and content utilized in the classroom, which is

Informed by a consciousness of what is going to be relevant and meaningful to those students. Really investigating the kinds of content and pedagogy they are experiencing at home and in their neighbourhood, and be conscious of that when setting up the dynamics of your classroom (Interview notes, p. 8).

She stated that there were connections between the knowledge students bring to class and what they are presented with in classroom with respect to the content taught. When Kathleen was asked about the foundations of CRRP she responded:

A large part of it comes from our classes in the [Equity Option] - in particular, in our School and Society class, also from readings we have done from our class. We talk a lot about it in class, but I think it is one of those terms that if you ask different people in our class, you would get different answers. Because I am not sure it is super well-defined. I think for me, my understanding of it comes from the classes and the workshop my associate teacher and I

attended. Also, my own reflections about how I see that fits with what I see in the classroom (Interview notes, 2010, p. 8).

Later, Kathleen stated that CRRP required teachers to acknowledge their students' experience of "music, books, and speaking about their culture, language, neighbourhood [was included]...but then also give them experience about things outside of what they know..." (Interview notes, 2010, p.7). This definition went beyond connecting with the cultures of students in the class to including other cultures and ways of being beyond the racial and ethnic composition of the class, which provides a greater sense of inclusion.

In retrospect, almost all the interviewees quoted above refer to culturally relevant pedagogy often in contrast to culturally responsive teaching or CRRP. Such an observation may mean that the participants were acquainted with culturally relevant pedagogy (although they did not use the definition as explained by Ladson-Billings) or it could be that teacher candidates were more attuned to what they were doing instead of acknowledging these as different theories (culturally relevant pedagogy or culturally responsive teaching) or one infused theory (CRRP).

Several relevant questions arise: Who determines how culturally responsive and relevant pedagogy is defined, and from what context are they determining the definitions and understandings of these key concepts? Furthermore, if context (i.e. one's lived experiences) creates the lens through which teachers understand these concepts, what happens if their context is based on deficit thinking about other cultures? Moreover, what happens if that lived context is not brought into the classroom to be challenged? This becomes dangerous and detrimental to public school students' experiences in school and of course in the lives of the teacher candidates who become teachers.

In retrospect, examining all the field notes I had on the *School and Society* classes and CRRP seminars over the course of a year, CRRP was never quite defined or explained.<sup>5</sup> I argue that not defining CRRP could be intentional if CRRP is understood to be on a continuum and in response to a particular context. For example, if a beginning teacher is confronting their biases towards East Indian students and they are learning about Indian heroes and holidays, perhaps their sharing of Indian heroes and holidays might be how they are implementing and understanding CRRP at that given time. It is understood though that this form of CRRP is still at an initial stage and as the beginning teacher develops a richer knowledge base about Indian culture then the form of CRRP would change respectively.

As teacher educators it is a challenge to make teacher candidates acknowledge their own biases and privileges, especially when given only one course over a short period of time together. This is an area that teacher educators need to reconsider when desiring to make meaningful and impactful change on teacher candidates who are still developing their teacher identity. One question that lingers is how can teacher educators facilitate and develop the role of the equity-minded teacher candidate whose practices use CRRP when the mere understanding of CRRP requires a self-examination that not all teacher candidates are willing to do? Thus, equity initiatives in a course-based model have many challenges on a philosophical, epistemological, and practical level. Perhaps, future areas of research could explore ways that teacher education programs could develop the infrastructure to support equity initiatives throughout the entire program.

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<sup>5</sup> In the member check with Ryan and Lina they stated that CRRP was simply the fusion of two theories with the same intention of reaching marginalized students. No direct definition was shared.

## *2. Missing Areas in the DS Initiative*

**Alexandra:** One of the teacher candidates, Alexandra (2011), was concerned about how the DS Initiative theory of CRRP did not directly address children with special education needs. She stated, “I felt like my lessons were not being understood by [the English Language Learners (ELL) or the Home School Program Students (HSP)]. The way I was doing it and when I was doing it; I didn’t see a way to accommodate these learners.” (Interview notes, 2011, p.4). Alexandra’s frustration was with how to modify the CRRP-driven lessons to a level in which ELL could participate and excel. She had attempted to “...implement differentiated instruction in class, but because I didn’t learn about it she was lost. It was a constant struggle to keep up with the kids who were bored because they caught on quickly and the kids who didn’t understand.” (Interview notes, 2011, p. 4).

**Kathleen:** Another theme that was not addressed by the DS Initiative was how CRRP was used in response to classroom management issues and in response to violence in the classroom. A challenge that Kathleen (2011) had been trying to cope with was “implementing” the “CRRP values” while trying to address physically aggressive behaviour in the practicum. Kathleen wondered if and how these CRRP-based lessons impacted her students. She shared:

[One of the challenges I had was] trying to put into play the values we talk about in [Equity Option] about equity and not having a deficit attitude towards students, and at the same time, deal with the real and physical moments. How do those big ideas impact the student who was running out of the classroom or hitting me? He was strangling another kid...then do we respond and how does that happen in the moment? (Interview notes, 2011, p. 4)

This excerpt stands out from all the data, as it brings forth the concrete difficulties with which teacher candidates struggle while developing their own teaching pedagogy alongside what they have learned at the university. In addition to this example, which explores the immediacy of Kathleen’s safety concerns, Kathleen (2011) also pondered how race impacted her lesson delivery. As a White<sup>6</sup> woman who was teaching predominantly Caribbean children, she questioned whether the physical aggression was related to race and power:

M: Could you please expand on the situation in which, your Caribbean students were asking you about being white, or questioning your authority and other students that were privileging you. Can you tell me more about this?

K: Yeah, it was interesting. I think sometimes the way they responded to my race depended on the situation and the student. Often it was raised as a point of interest or just odd. I am not really sure I understood of what that boy thought when he was questioning me and it was hard to get him to explain this to me as he was a four year old (Interview notes, 2011, p. 6).

Kathleen later expressed that she was worried about how impactful CRRP could be if race was such a huge obstacle.

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<sup>6</sup> “White” was used here because the participant, Kathleen, self-identified in this way during the interview.



**Lilly:** Another teacher candidate, Lilly (2010), reported feeling uncomfortable with being who she was in the Equity Option (in the teacher education seminars and sometimes in *School and Society* classes):

One other issue...challenge I had was trying to place myself, we have been having this conversation in the teacher education classes. I mean being a young white woman, and their teacher is an older white woman, and both of us are white women. I wanted to have conversations about race and racism but it has been hard for me not only in the practicum, but also in teacher education seminars. It has been hard to say that I have a perspective that is different and it can be valuable because there are so many people from marginalized backgrounds that have such dominant voices that I don't feel that I have the right to speak. They have more of a platform to talk about it, and so they do (Interview notes, p. 5).

This narrative provides another challenge for equity initiatives in teacher education. It articulates the recognition that one's racial and ethnic identity can be read by people through deficit assumptions or stereotypes that may be used to essentialize a group. In this particular case, the concern raised by the teacher candidate draws on her race. She feels uncomfortable being White in a group of racially marginalized peers.

Although I acknowledge that teacher education programmes have tight time limits, there is space to question what gets prioritized in the teaching and why, because in the end some information is taught over other content. Alexandra's narrative brings forth an interesting gap in the DS Initiative about how CRRP practices look for English Language Learners and Home School Programme students. As a teacher educator I recognize ELL perhaps requires bilingual translation, but I reckon that they are capable of understanding and doing culturally relevant and responsive activities in the classroom. On the other hand, students with special needs may need more assistance and scaffolding of tasks, but this would be considered a matter of differentiation and not a challenge with using CRRP practices in the classroom. Thus, it is important to identify what consists of differentiation and how that aids in the process of making lessons accessible to all students, but simultaneously I regard using CRRP activities as something separate from differentiation. The question that is left, then, is how can teacher educators encourage equity based practices when teacher candidates are still struggling with the multi-dimensions of classroom teaching for each student?

Kathleen's narratives also draw attention to the complexity of classroom teaching in her case, given issues of violence and discrimination. Her narratives again draw attention to larger questions: How do violent outbursts, such as the one in the kindergarten classroom, relate or come into conversation with CRRP? How can issues of race not be discussed as a part of CRRP, as race is a part of identity and being culturally responsive and relevant is partially in response to the race and cultural identities of diverse students? These questions provide an opportunity to reflect on how CRRP—which is a pedagogy used to engage and address the needs of marginalized students—can redirect violence in the classroom and be used as a way to begin and enter into critical conversations about discrimination. This is an area that can be further explored within culturally responsive and relevant pedagogy theories.

In Lilly's narrative the issue of discrimination resurfaces, however in this context it has to do with the teacher candidate's own identity. It draws attention to the importance of unpacking the power dynamics implicit in being White and offers the opportunity to enter into a discussion about *white privilege* (McIntosh 1988). As a teacher educator, I recognize that these conversations create discomfort, which is disturbing for some students. Nevertheless, I encourage these conversations as they can be used as a springboard to trouble the complexities laden with power and privilege. Thus,

creating a possibility for teacher candidates to recognize and work through their privileges while working with diverse student populations.

### **Possibilities and New Directions for Teacher Education**

Current scholarship shares the voice and/or experiences of teacher candidates in teacher education programs (e.g. Morrison, 2009; Austin, 2009; Blair & Valdez Noel, 2014; McQuillan, Welch, & Barnatt, 2012; Kauchak & Burbank, 2003). Although this scholarship is helpful in providing insights on teacher candidates' perspectives, often these perspectives are not seriously taken up nor used to co-facilitate change in teacher education initiatives/programs. Following analyzing teacher candidates' narratives above and the findings that emerged from them, I argue that teacher candidates' narratives can be an important catalyst for informing and co-designing improved teacher education programs and equity initiatives. Austin (2009) states:

On a symbolic level, *voice* represents a perspective from an active agent [teacher candidate] who not only gets attention but offers a viewpoint that is fashioned from a particular experience for an audience who otherwise may be indifferent, ignorant, or unaware of its existence" (p. 43).

In other words, Austin emphasizes the importance of multiple viewpoints (including and going beyond teacher candidates' voices) that may push us to consider different perspectives for the sake of discussion. Thus, using a multitude of teacher candidate narratives as done in the analysis section of this paper provides an opportunity to hear viewpoints that may not be heard otherwise.

Taking another perspective on teacher candidate voice, McQuillan, Welch, & Barnatt (2012) conducted research on a capstone inquiry course in teacher education concluded:

[g]iven that teacher candidates have found their [associate] teachers and clinical faculty often have ambivalent attitudes toward the inquiry project and can offer limited assistance in helping them complete this undertaking – in part a reflection of their lack of understanding about the project and limited input into shaping how such projects unfold – [the school] feels a need to integrate our cooperating teachers and clinical faculty more closely into this process (p. 548).

These scholars identify the benefits of hearing what teacher candidates say and sharing it with a larger audience, but it does not include teacher candidates in the redesign or development of the capstone course or equity initiative; rather it invites teacher educators and cooperating teachers to gain more agency and ownership of the course. Thus, I argue that the voice of teacher candidates be used to co-create and re-design equity initiatives and courses.

In the same vein, Kauchak & Burbank's (2003) study shows how teacher candidates' voices are being used in a peripheral way, which gives the power to teacher educators to direct the experiences of teacher candidates: "Teacher educators must design preservice experiences that provide minority teacher candidates with the skills necessary for translating their cultural resources into active pedagogy and culturally responsive teaching" (Huling-Austin & Cuellar, 1991; Phuntsog, 1998 as cited by Kauchak & Burbank, p. 73). Kauchak & Burbank's (2003) research demonstrates how teacher candidates' voices and experiences are heard by providing interview excerpts, but what is lacking is an analysis of the role teacher candidates can play in recreating and co-designing teacher education programs.

In other words, teacher candidates' narratives as presented in current scholarship have the potential to have significant implications for the future direction of teacher education programs and

equity initiatives, but yet this scholarship limits the role the narratives play to a descriptive one. To clarify, when the use of teacher candidates' voice is presented but not processed, understood or co-implemented into teacher education program initiatives, the contribution to improving teacher education programs remains limited or at least not fully realized. Hence, it is important to state that the potential for using teacher candidates' narratives and perspectives can only be realized when they are taken seriously and contribute to improving teacher education programs.

### **Significance and Ideas for Further Research**

One of the limitations of this work is that there was no opportunity to follow up on the teacher candidates and how their teaching practices evolved after they completed the teacher education program. There is an opportunity to explore whether former teacher candidates are able to take the time to reflect and draw upon their experiences from their teacher education programs and use them in their classrooms. Furthermore, to have this study replicated in other universities that carry out equity initiatives that co-created with teacher candidate participation would allow for insight on how effective those initiatives are for teacher candidates.

Nevertheless, the narratives shared by teacher candidates provide promising insights that could help build more influential and transformative equity initiatives in teacher education. Teacher education programs have a great responsibility to the future of all our children because they are responsible for the preparation of teachers – an undertaking which must be meaningful, critical, and inspiring for all teacher candidates. In light of above I hope that teacher candidates' narratives will have an impact on how teacher educators reflect upon possibilities of co-design, co-planning and experiencing equity-based initiatives together with teacher candidates in teacher education programs.

### **Conclusions**

Teacher candidates are the key participants in teacher education programs and they bring their lived experiences into the teacher education program waiting to be heard. They eventually enter the public classroom where their personal narratives become the (un)conscious foundation of their teaching. Thus, it is important to guide and provide a space in teacher education for teacher candidates to co-reflect, co-design and have some ownership in teacher education programs. By claiming that teacher candidates should have some ownership and agency in teacher education programs/initiatives, I do not mean that they should construct the program themselves. Rather, teacher educators' vision and goals in teacher education initiatives should be flexible and allow for input and encourage multiple and diverse perspectives that come from teacher candidates and go beyond them as well. It is not until teacher candidates are part of the process in equity initiatives within teacher education programs that their experience in the program will be more engaging and meaningful to them and their future public school students.

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