



2022


“Teaching in a War Zone”: A Collective Reflection on Learning from a Diversity Course in Contentious Times

Elena Aydarova
Auburn University, eza0029@auburn.edu

Jacob Kelley
Auburn University, jkk0019@auburn.edu

Kristen Daugherty
Auburn University, kld0042@auburn.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://cedar.wvu.edu/jec>

 Part of the [Elementary Education and Teaching Commons](#), [Junior High, Intermediate, Middle School Education and Teaching Commons](#), [Pre-Elementary, Early Childhood, Kindergarten Teacher Education Commons](#), and the [Secondary Education and Teaching Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Aydarova, Elena; Kelley, Jacob; and Daugherty, Kristen (2022) “Teaching in a War Zone”: A Collective Reflection on Learning from a Diversity Course in Contentious Times,” *Journal of Educational Controversy*. Vol. 15: No. 1, Article 3.

Available at: <https://cedar.wvu.edu/jec/vol15/iss1/3>

This Article in Response to Controversy is brought to you for free and open access by the Peer-reviewed Journals at Western CEDAR. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Educational Controversy by an authorized editor of Western CEDAR. For more information, please contact westerncedar@wvu.edu.

"Teaching in a War Zone": A Collective Reflection on Learning from a Diversity Course in Contentious Times

These Contentious Times

The murder of George Floyd and the ensuing protests brought to the national fore the racial injustices endemic to the United States. In the summer of 2020, Black Lives Matter protests spread across Europe, Canada, Australia, and Nigeria. It seemed that the time had come for racial reckoning. In October 2020, the tide began to change when the 45th president issued an executive order banning diversity training in any organization with a federal contract. President Biden rescinded that executive order, but individual states proceeded to adopt similar bans. In spring of 2021, Christopher Rufo—a senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute—began a public campaign decrying equity, diversity, and anti-racism initiatives under the banner of *critical race theory* (CRT; López, et al., 2021). Attacking these initiatives as forms of *indoctrination*, he called on state officials to ban CRT in schools. Governors, legislators, and policymakers responded with uniform proposals banning the discussion of *divisive concepts*, including race/racism, gender/sexism, meritocracy, oppression, and others. In the summer of 2021, half of the states either passed bills or resolutions banning CRT or were considering such legislative moves.

Legislation targeting divisive concepts reached our home state of Alabama in June when the state board of education first began discussing an anti-CRT resolution. The draft of the resolution was prepared by a conservative think-tank—Alabama Policy Institute—connected to the national networks of the American Legislative Executive Council and State Policy Network, organizations that previously mobilized efforts promoting charter schools, vouchers, and school

choice. During the discussion of the resolution in August, board members of color shared their concerns. Their objections, however, were ignored and the resolution passed. Subsequently, the resolution was turned into an official ban on discussions of race and racism in Alabama schools.

At the same time, two bills were proposed for discussion at the legislature. House Bill 11 banned divisive concepts and proposed termination of any educator—whether at K-12 or higher education level—if they taught any of these concepts. House Bill 8 (2022) banned discussions of divisive concepts but allowed educational institutions to promote “racial, cultural, or ethnic diversity or inclusiveness” (p. 4). The language of the bills was vague but consistent with the bills introduced elsewhere. On the one hand, some educators could look at the clause that no one is allowed to teach that “one race or sex is inherently superior to another race or sex” (H.B. 8, 20220, p. 2) and assume that the bill would not affect their work because they did not teach that. On the other hand, the vagueness allowed for anything to pass as a violation. When a district in Huntsville conducted professional development and photos of posters with the words *discrimination*, *equity*, and *racism* were published online, state officials opened an investigation into the district’s professional development activities (Crain, 2021).

In the context of the growing political polarization and intensifying attacks on anti-racist education in the fall of 2021, we found ourselves navigating conflicts and tensions surrounding these ideas in a required diversity course for preservice teachers. We came together to work on a multivocal text that documents our experiences around the divisive concepts as the bans on their teaching were rolled out around the country. The purpose of our essay is to offer a collective reflection (Healey et al., 2020) on how teaching about race and racism unfolded at the time when broader sociopolitical forces stoked fears, anger, and racial animosity. Our reflection sheds light on the limitations of pedagogic interventions when civility in the public discourse has declined.

It also points to future teachers' diminished learning when fears of political repercussions limit what courses can address.

Literature Review

Challenges of Teacher Education

There is no denying the fact that teacher education in the United States is shaped by the culture of Whiteness and the monolingual heteronormative assumptions accompanying it (Picower & Kohli, 2017; The Teacher of Color Collective & Souto-Manning, 2022). The majority of preservice teachers and teacher educators are White women (Sleeter, 2017). In contrast, a growing majority of K-12 students are students from minoritized backgrounds. Calls to prepare White teachers for working with racially, culturally, and linguistically diverse students have a long history in teacher education (Cochran-Smith, 2004; Gay, 2018; Milner, 2010; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). To address these calls, many programs around the country use diversity courses. Gorski's (2008) overview of such courses has shown a wide range of approaches to multicultural education: from problematic approaches of *teaching the Other* to more critical approaches that center the interrogation of dominant structures, cultures, and ideologies.

Building on these observations, Milner (2020) identified several common misconceptions that preservice teachers must interrogate when learning about diversity: colorblindness, cultural conflicts, myth of meritocracy, deficit mindsets, and context neutrality. Addressing these misconceptions supports the development of preservice teachers' critical consciousness and ability to interrogate systems of oppression that result in inequitable outcomes for students from historically underserved communities (Gorski & Pothini, 2014). In turn, critical consciousness plays an important but frequently overlooked role in culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 2017).

Welcoming the Discomfort

Engagement with critical concepts, however, often creates discomfort for preservice teachers, particularly if they belong to dominant social groups. Conversations that name oppressive structures often create cognitive dissonance (Gorski, 2009), which in turn results in preservice teachers' resistance, denial, or withdrawal (Cabrera, 2014; Haviland, 2008). In some instances, learning about inequities and injustices is accompanied by participants' "willful ignorance," a conscious refusal to learn anything different from the preexisting beliefs (Zembylas, 2017, p. 501). In other cases, preservice teachers turn to questioning the content by treating it as theory unrelated to practice. Refusal to engage in learning manifests itself in demands to see practical solutions to the endemic problems of racism and other forms of oppression (Pollock et al., 2010).

Multiple pedagogical strategies have been suggested to mitigate preservice teachers' reactions. McFalls and Cobb-Roberts (2001) proposed addressing cognitive dissonance as an instructional technique "to increase students' awareness of internal discomfort due to discrepant information" (p. 171). Boler and Zembylas (2003) suggested that pedagogy of discomfort should be utilized to trouble students' comfort zones when learning about diversity, power, and injustice. Acknowledging that discomfort can also diminish learning, Zembylas and Papamichael (2017) argued that pedagogies of empathy help learners move past their discomfort toward a productive engagement with difference. Along similar lines, Terror Management Theory (TMT) illuminates how participants view information that contradicts their beliefs as existential threats (Van Kessel et al., 2020). Empathy from the instructor or facilitator, in this case, can address students' emotions and diminish their apprehensions about the content. Carter Andrews et al. (2019) contended that diversity courses should model for preservice teachers what equitable and

humanizing education entails. To deepen students' insights into sociopolitical processes and socialization experiences, they encouraged teacher educators to enact "ontological and epistemological plurality" (p. 21) by engaging critical texts, multimedia resources, and object-based learning opportunities. These pedagogical tools and approaches are meant to deepen students' learning by helping them overcome their discomfort and refusal to engage.

The Bigger Picture

It is common to respond to the challenges of teaching social justice and diversity concepts by suggesting new classroom tools, pedagogical interventions, or innovative materials. These are reasonable responses if we locate the source of resistance, denial, or withdrawal *within* individuals. Yet, this approach goes counter to the foundational principles of social justice education that seeks to understand how oppression operates on multiple levels, including social, structural, cultural, and institutional dimensions (Kelley et al., 2021). While much has been written about how university professors *should* approach the teaching of diversity content, much less attention has been paid to constraints imposed by sociopolitical struggles beyond classrooms and campuses.

An added dimension that further complicates this gap is the question of how a highly politicized environment shapes what happens in courses where divisive concepts constitute the core of the course. Heeding Daniels and Varghese's (2020) analysis of Whiteness of teacher education, we "consider the ways that ... trends in teacher education are produced by and producers of—and therefore embedded within—broader discourses and organizations of power" (p. 58). For this reason, we explore our experiences of engaging with diversity concepts in the fall of 2021 amidst the anti-CRT bans. We show that sociopolitical contexts influenced not only preservice teachers' willingness to engage in examining their beliefs, values, and socialization

experiences but also diminished learning opportunities even for those preservice teachers who were open to learning about race, racism, and racial justice.

The Course

This collective reflection is situated within a required undergraduate course for preservice teachers titled *Diversity of Learners and Contexts*. Elena taught this course as a professor, Jacob joined it as a teaching apprentice, and Kristen was enrolled in it as a student. During prior years, Sensoy and DiAngelo's (2017) *Is Everyone Really Equal?* and Michael Vavrus's (2015) *Diversity and Education: A Critical Multicultural Approach* were used as required texts. However, in 2021, as anti-CRT bans were rolled out around the country, DiAngelo's work came under attack. There was a concern that students could refuse to engage with these texts and parents would complain of *indoctrination* into leftist propaganda that DiAngelo's work became associated with. In an effort to mitigate potential harm from anti-CRT bans, Jacob and Elena settled on one of the more commonly used textbooks—*Multicultural Education: Issues and Perspectives* (Banks & Banks, 2019)—but decided to maintain the rest of the content intact. The struggle over the textbook and over course content in teacher preparation was one of the first indicators of the effects of fearmongering and politicization of diversity issues that the anti-CRT campaign created.

Through readings, reflections, class discussions, and case studies, students were supposed to develop a consciousness of how systems of oppression, such as linguistic, religious oppression, sexism, heterosexism, ableism, classism, and racism, position members of dominant groups at an advantage and members of target groups at a disadvantage (Adams et al., 2007). *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (UN General Assembly, 1948) served as the conceptual foundation of the course. As a text that exists outside of the U.S. political binary of

liberal/conservative, Left/Right, Democrat/Republican, it was meant to disrupt the assumptions that inequality is a norm and serve as a reminder that individuals have inalienable rights regardless of their social group membership.

The course addressed three dimensions of learning outcomes: (a) "viewing knowledge and knowing with greater complexity and taking into account multiple cultural perspectives;" (b) "increasing awareness of one's own values and self-identity and integrating these into one's sense of personhood;" (c) fostering "one's willingness to interact with persons with different social norms and cultural backgrounds, acceptance of others, and comfortability in relating to others" (Braskamp & Engberg, 2011, p. 35). Students received a variety of assignments aligned with these outcomes. To gain an understanding into the complexity of knowledge and to distinguish between myths and empirical facts, students engaged in a research project on whether the United States is a meritocracy (Blumenfeld, n.d.). A series of reflection tasks allowed preservice teachers to examine their values and beliefs regarding difference. A case study analysis (Gorski & Pothini, 2014) carried out by groups offered an opportunity for students to apply course concepts to classroom settings or school events. The course culminated in an autobiographical essay where preservice teachers had to examine personal values and beliefs by analyzing their own socialization.

Who We Are

Kristen

As an undergraduate student, I am cognizant of my inexperience in conversations about racism. My own understanding has developed through conversations with both my professors and peers. As a White woman who has lived my entire life in Alabama, it has taken most of my adult life to even begin the process of dismantling my own assumptions when it comes to race.

Jacob

My commitment to equity and justice is heavily influenced by my upbringing as part of the working class in Appalachia. I regularly witnessed the trials and tribulations of folks simply working to make ends meet. No stability. No security. I knew that a different reality was possible. It seemed like education, particularly postsecondary education, was a path toward shaping a better future for all. Unfortunately, I never felt a sense of belonging within the walls and halls of the university. Even though I am a White man, it still seemed like I was standing on the outside because of my social class. This only reinforced my commitment to justice and equity, though. I quickly learned that I could leverage the advantaged positions that I do hold to contribute to social, political, and educational change. Now, as a PhD student, I strive to align my practice and research to values such as respect, care, truth, and openness.

Elena

Fall 2021 marked 10 years since I started teaching diversity courses. My personal experiences with marginalization shape the urgency with which I address the issues of oppression in my courses. As a first-generation immigrant, bilingual but not fully bicultural, I occupy multiple contradictory positions. I am ethnically Russian and present as White. However, the moment I start speaking, assumptions about my Whiteness begin to be challenged, especially by White undergraduate students. One classroom interaction highlighted my marginal position when a White woman explained to me, “When *we* grade, we say three things that are good and only one thing that needs to be improved.” Being schooled as a professor on how *we* do grading sent a clear signal that I did not belong. As Sara Ahmed writes (2000), “The stranger is not anybody that we have failed to recognize, but some-body that we have already recognized as a stranger, as ‘a body out of place’” (p. 112).

Collective Reflection

In what follows, we present a mosaic of our observations on how learning about race and racism unfolded throughout the semester. First, we share how we entered and navigated the space of the course. Next, we bring our voices together to reflect on three critical incidents where a class event disrupted or inhibited learning. Afterwards, we explore dimensions of the course that we struggled with individually because of our different roles, positionings, and identities.

Entering and Navigating the Course

Kristen

Entering Elena's classroom, I hoped for the chance to have discussions with my peers that challenged my own assumptions about race. I looked forward to learning ways to identify problems and achieve equity in my future classroom. Due to personal circumstances, I had the opportunity to take this course twice. Both times, I took the course with Elena as the professor.

My first time taking this class was in the Fall of 2020. This class section contained people who had kept up with the news coverage throughout that year. We were able to hold many discussions detailing the impact of racial justice protests, trials, and how the overall media coverage affected the way these events were viewed. As a whole, my peers were open-minded and willing to critically think about the course content. Most of the conversations held in this class were respectful, and people were willing to listen to dissenting points of view. This allowed everyone to think critically about their own beliefs and gave us the chance to discuss them in a constructive way.

The class I took part in during the fall of 2021 gave me a different experience. Despite having the same professor, the discussions in this section of the class did not feel nearly as productive. There was a wider range of ideas held in this class, and some people were not willing

to challenge their beliefs. This led many discussions to turn into disagreements, which derailed the point of the session. Some contention is to be expected in classes like this, but it can be incredibly frustrating to argue fine details when there is important information to learn. Rather than reflecting on why certain beliefs were held, some of my peers seemed to cling tighter to their beliefs.

Part of the difference can be tied towards public feeling at the time of both classes discussed earlier. In the fall of 2020, media was largely in support of the protests, and the murder of George Floyd was at the forefront of our minds. Throughout the year, people of color had their voices amplified and my classmates listened. In contrast, by the fall of 2021, there had been pushback against ideas that were championed earlier. Any ideas considered Critical Race Theory had become taboo. This had in turn shaped my classmates' perceptions before the course even started. By coming in with preconceived notions on how this class was unnecessary, students prevented many of the new ideas from taking root.

Another difference between this class in two different semesters was the textbook being used. In my first semester in this course, we used two books: *Is Everyone Really Equal* by Ozlem Sensoy and Robin DiAngelo (2017) and *Diversity Education* by Michael Vavrus (2015). Both of these books did a wonderful job of explaining the content in an impactful way. Sensoy and DiAngelo, in particular, gave relatable scenarios that demonstrated the concepts clearly. The textbook used in fall 2021 instead gave basic definitions that did not challenge you to think critically about the content.

Jacob

I hoped that our discussions on race and racism would contribute to profound understandings of oppression in the United States. In particular, I envisioned that the students

would be able to recognize and redress racial inequities prevalent within educational settings. While I do think that some students developed the critical consciousness necessary to promote justice and equity in their spheres of influence, a fair number of the students simply were not open to the shift in knowing and being. Early in the semester, we had a thorough discussion of equity that would be foundational for the rest of the course. We focused on the difference between equality and equity, using a common diagram to visualize the concepts in action. Standing on different numbers of boxes stacked on top of each other allowed some spectators at a sporting event to see the game that would have been otherwise inaccessible to them. While this diagram is certainly not perfect, it illustrates the difference between equality and equity nicely. There was heavy pushback from one student who argued that maybe the individuals received the number of boxes that they earned and that we really should be striving for equality so that everyone receives what they deserve. Several other students agreed. Such a perspective is problematic on many levels, but I realized that this classroom interaction was rooted in a lack of empathy. It was disconcerting to know that folks who felt that way about children and families would soon be in schools.

Soon afterwards, we had an in-class activity where we asked students to imagine a different world—a world where everyone might feel safe and able to flourish. Although this task was not directly related to racism, I expected that many students would identify that system of oppression as devastating enough to warrant elimination in a world that they might design. One student, in particular, struggled with this task. He expressed frustration that the task was impractical, as it is not possible to create a utopia. I am often inspired by the words of bell hooks (1994) when she argued, "The classroom remains the most radical space of possibility in the academy" (p. 12). As such, I was very disheartened by the student's perspective on the task.

Systems of oppression, especially racism, are so imbedded within the daily lives of the students that it is straining to envision a world without them.

Elena

Teaching a diversity course in a teacher education program is rarely easy, but in the fall of 2021, it was particularly hard. After five weeks of the class, I wrote in my teaching journal, "I am distraught. I am worried. I fear their anger. I fear the consequences." I felt like I was teaching in a war zone. Fears over course content persisted throughout the rest of the semester. In one notable instance, in the process of planning a session, I had to remove a story about a nine-year old McKenzie Adams who committed suicide in Linden, Alabama, because of racial bullying she experienced at school. The story had an important pedagogical point: Teachers and school personnel have to seriously consider issues of racial injustice and discrimination because choosing to ignore these issues can cost students their lives. Fearing that some stories could turn into explosive incidents, I self-censored how I presented content.

Critical Incident 1: What's the Point?

Elena

The first instance when a class session unraveled happened in response to a *New York Times* (2015) mini-film featuring Asian Americans. We had just finished discussing the cycle of socialization (Harro, 2010), and it was important for students to understand the impact of the harmful messages on children from minoritized groups. In the short clip I shared with the group, several people spoke about their childhood experiences with race. In one striking example, Hasan Minhaj shared his first memory of race: "I came up to this girl in the sandbox and told her, 'Janice, I love you,' and she said, 'You are the color of poop.'" Immediately after the video, a student of color spoke up, "What's the point of saying that all White people are racist?" His

observation was followed by three White women who agreed with his position. One said, "Such videos give White race a bad image." In a group chat after the class, one student complained to the rest of the class about "White race being crucified for even existing." While the video featured personal testimonies, statements about "all White people" were not a part of that conversation. They were a fiction that students created in response to that video themselves. This fiction also echoed the claims circulated by conservative groups that anti-racist education is racist because it blames "all White people" for the past wrongs.

Kristen

I vividly remember the discussion after the video about racism experienced by Asian Americans. One of my classmates mentioned how it seemed forced that there were no other examples given since other minorities could be racist to each other. His comments encouraged several other students to voice their agreement. While he was correct in his initial point that anyone can be prejudiced, voicing his displeasure at the idea that White people are the instigators of racism led to similar sentiments being expressed. These sentiments reflected some of my classmates' desire to not be seen as privileged because of their race.

These sentiments are normal when someone is just learning how to identify their own bias, but it is a challenging discussion to have in the classroom. These types of questions tend to imply that one is holding only a superficial understanding of the definition of racism. One of the key points Elena made throughout the semester is that racism is prejudice coming from the people who hold power. She also explained how racism affects people on a personal, institutional, and cultural level. Without understanding how ingrained racism is in our society, it is difficult for a student to interact with the topic in a meaningful way.

Since this happened early in the semester, it stifled some of the conversations about

racism later in the course. We rarely discussed current events involving the topic, despite news coverage of racially charged events. This conversation was always in the back of my mind when I participated in class discussions on this topic. Even though I did seek out news articles that followed current events, I made the decision not to share them. I was afraid of how my classmates might react and any conversations about news stories turning unproductive.

Jacob

Students' resistance to discussions of racism, which was obvious early in the semester, manifested itself through not only active opposition but also passive obstruction. When the student of color indicated that discussions of race and racism are not helpful because they tend to paint all White folks as bad, regardless of their actions or opinions, three White students expressed appreciation for his perspective. Instead of approaching racism as a system of oppression that operates at a societal level, all four students made racism operate only at an individual level. In many ways, Whiteness had prevented them from deploying their sociological imaginations to see racism as a structural problem. From this classroom interaction, I recognized that these students found comfort in placing the burden of racism on individuals who are blatantly racist instead of on the sociopolitical forces that manufacture and maintain racism. It is much easier to distance oneself from racism that way, which is yet another example of how Whiteness operates. We wanted the students to understand racism as a system of oppression. The discomfort of accepting its pervasiveness in society, however, created pedagogical hurdles that we had to negotiate the entire semester.

How do we have discussions about race and racism when the discomfort causes folks to shut down? I am not sure there is a perfect answer, but I do know that these discussions are crucial for cultivating a disposition for justice and equity among preservice teachers who will

soon be working in schools and communities. I believe the discomfort felt by students, especially White students, is a necessary part of learning about race and racism. Of course, this does not mean enacting a classroom culture of blame and shame. Such an approach is not only unproductive, but it is also erroneous. We should instead focus on naming the discomfort as part of the invasive nature of racism (i.e., Whiteness) that creeps into our socialization and plants an emotional response that can be triggered when it is called into question. This specific classroom interaction has shown me that avoidance of the discomfort keeps us from redressing inequities of the past and present in order to shape a better future for all.

Critical Incident 2: Is the United States a Meritocracy?

Kristen

One of the first assignments we did in this class was a discussion on whether or not the United States is a meritocracy. This discussion was a good example of how most discussions in the class went. Part of the assignment was to do research and then back up a point of view with a piece of evidence. Some students took the opportunity to pick quotations that only superficially supported their claims and ignored the rest of the article that contradicted their argument. This assignment demonstrated how many people wanted to cling to their beliefs despite the evidence contradicting those beliefs. Ideas about race also entered this discussion particularly to show proof that the United States is a meritocracy.

We later held a debate and discussed both points of view before writing a research paper on the topic. This debate was frustrating to listen to as someone who took the time to read multiple articles to back up my view. It was obvious that several people got only just enough to meet the assignment requirements and did very little to fully understand the text. To me, someone's choosing not to interact with the course material to prepare for these discussions hurt

the class's ability to delve into the topic at a deeper level. The debate itself devolved into a disagreement. Some students who were arguing that the United States is a meritocracy made comments about how people would be more successful if only they worked harder. They gave no consideration to outside factors that can affect a person's social mobility. At one point during the debate, I turned off my Zoom screen so that I could take a moment to collect myself. Part of what made this class so valuable was when we were able to put aside personal beliefs and have an open conversation about each topic. In this instance, that did not happen. Very little discussion took place and the debate involved refuting the other side's points without considering whether or not they had merit.

This assignment also showed a lack of willingness to reconsider personal beliefs in the event someone read evidence that disproves them. The idea of learning and thinking critically about how your personal beliefs match facts is an important skill for anyone. The discussion on whether or not the United States is a meritocracy gave a clear indication of how most discussions in the class would go.

Elena

Class conversations this semester—one-on-one, in small groups, and with the whole class—underscored the blurred boundaries between fact and fiction. The meritocracy assignment (Blumenfeld, n.d.) was supposed to help students develop cognitive skills of questioning sources and locating evidence for their claims. During the first iteration, students chose a position and looked for empirical research to support it. There were some students who stated that they did not believe the U.S. is a meritocracy; one first chose to say it is and then switched his position based on the evidence he found. There was, however, a sizable group of about five to eight students who were adamant that the U.S. is a meritocracy even after conducting their research.

During small-group time, they complained that the absence of evidence to support their position was my fault. In other words, even though they faced an objective reality that there was no empirical evidence backing their claim, they shifted responsibility for this discrepancy on their professor, continuing to believe that they were right. For most of the semester, it appeared as if for this group there was no such thing as facts. They saw *liberal propaganda*, *indoctrination*, and *brain-washing* even in tasks where they themselves had to conduct their own research and find their own evidence.

Critical Incident 3: Are You Aware of Race?

Jacob

As part of a reflection during our module on race and racism, we asked the students whether or not the university is racially diverse. The response was approximately equal on both sides. This was problematic. The university is classified as a Predominately White Institution, as 78% of the student population is White. That does not even account for faculty and staff. I was intrigued by the disconnect between perception and reality. How is it possible that so many of the students did not recognize the sea of White folks? This could be a manifestation of a colorblind ideology, which suggests that folks prefer to claim that they do not see race. What makes our context even more interesting is that the racialized composition of the university is disproportionately White compared to both the state and the community. In many ways, the university is essentially a White bubble.

Elena

To mitigate potential conflicts, the module on race and racism was scheduled for week 13. This was done to allow students to gain the conceptual, intellectual, and affective tools necessary to engage with difficult topics. But some of them continued to demonstrate active

disengagement. One of the reflection questions on race and racism was about students' own experiences with and awareness of race. To the question, "When were you first aware of people from other races? Which races?," three students responded "preschool" or "kindergarten," without elaborating or explaining. Amidst other reflections that laid out stories, specific experiences, and ponderings about specific events, these non-answers were difficult to read.

During the same week, students also had to take a short quiz. For the first time in my teaching career, out of 21 students who took a quiz on race, two left blank the answer to the question, "What is the definition of racism that today's readings provide?" Three more wrote two or three-word answers about prejudice and dislike, even though it was not even remotely close to what course readings discussed. It is not that these students ran out of time; this question was in the middle of the quiz, and they were able to complete the rest. It seemed that they refused to engage with this question altogether.

Dealing with Challenging Situations

Kristen

One of the main assignments of the course was a case study analysis where we worked in groups to apply Equity Literacy Framework (Gorski & Pothini, 2014) to a case study. We then facilitated a class discussion about the case. My group's case study covered race and ethnicity. The scenario we were given involved a teacher starting a unit on state capitals. The teacher introduced the state of California by asking questions about the state. The questions she asked in the case study did not consider students' backgrounds. Throughout the class she also singled out a student of color for speaking out of turn despite the whole class doing so. The case study ended with this student choosing to sit out for the rest of the class.

Before beginning to work on this assignment, I was nervous about the people in my

group. This assignment involved working closely together, and I had concerns about my group's ability to do so. Neither of my two partners always held the same views as I did during classes. Most of the time it was about small things that were easy to overlook, but there were enough of these small moments that I felt apprehensive about our work on the case study. Most of the problems in the case study connected to racism even if they appeared to focus on the students' other identities. But my partners tended to focus on other inequities present in the study rather than the racism itself.

In the end, we were all able to work together and complete this case study successfully. It was challenging working with people who held different views in regard to racism and other topics of course content. It is difficult to work with someone who appears to be unwilling to reflect on their personal assumptions and beliefs.

Elena

One of the most difficult moments took place during week nine of the semester when one of the students challenged a reflective task on privilege and disadvantage. The task included a survey with statements that students could mark as True or False based on their experiences. The statements ranged in what they asked. Some focused on gender ("I feel safe walking alone at night"), others on social class ("I have gone to sleep-away camps"), and some alluded to race ("My ancestors came to this country voluntarily"). The student refused to do the exercise. Instead of marking her answers on a survey sheet, she submitted a message where she wrote that we live in a time when "White people are supposed to feel guilty" and that CRT was banned in the state of Alabama. I froze when I read a full-page attack on everything that had been done in the course up to that point. My invitation to meet to talk about this went unheeded. I was at a loss on how to grade an assignment that was turned into a battleground, so I waited to hear back from the

student. When at the end of the semester, I had to grade it as an incomplete task, I received an angry email right away. In the email, the student accused me of attacking her for her beliefs and grading her down because I did not agree with her opinions.

The next 48 hours were agony. Under normal circumstances, such accusations can be addressed with a conversation. However, at this time of attacks on equity, diversity, and anti-racism, I could not be certain about what would happen next. With the help of a senior colleague, I drafted a response explaining that the grade came from an incomplete assignment, rather than differences in perspectives. The storm blew over, but the interaction left me feeling helpless, defenseless, and hurt. There is an element of privilege in this interaction. If I were a woman of color, it is unlikely that the student would have backed down. But it is nevertheless symptomatic of the polarizing time we live in—a combatant attitude, an aggressive refusal, and willingness to go to war if necessary to defend one's hurt feelings over accusations (against White people or White race) that were actually never aired, shared, or stated in class.

At the end of the semester, I wrote in my journal, “I feel that I have just gotten out of a war zone. I am mentally and physically exhausted from living in fear, from awaiting retribution.” I was drained. I could not name the causes for my state of being until I started writing out events, snippets of conversations, grading dilemmas, and email exchanges that I had had to navigate. It dawned on me then that my course had become a battlefield, and my exhaustion stemmed from a perpetual struggle to simply survive.

Final Thoughts

In this paper, we offered a collective reflection on our experiences of navigating conversations around race, racism, and other divisive concepts at the time when anti-CRT legislation was rolled out across the nation. While these conversations are never easy, the

situation became much more difficult to navigate in the fall of 2021. Unlike prior semesters, a few students were emboldened to fight, and some referenced what they heard on Fox News or on social media as the basis for their reasoning. These conversations were marked by a seeming loss of decorum and a lack of even minimal effort to maintain decency in interactions around the issues of injustice. It was as if, for some students, open cruelty was now in vogue and defending cruelties of the historic past—under the guise of White innocence and White ignorance—was the new normal.

It is important to add a caveat. Most of the students in the class were open to learning and many offered powerful observations, publicly and privately, about systems of oppression, racism, and social inequality. Many students completed assignments even if they did not agree with some of the points that readings or tasks made. Some mentioned that they were interested in having a club where more courageous conversations about race and racism could take place. Others raised questions about how they could use their privilege to right the historical wrongs and advance justice. But in the context of combative attitudes of an outspoken minority, it took extra effort to notice and cultivate these hopeful beginnings.

The crux of the matter was that the culture wars waged by the right in the broader society emboldened aggressive responses and intensified disregard for facts or evidence. News articles about anti-CRT bills regularly stated that the theory was not taught in schools, but that did not stop legislators from banning an absent entity. In this political context, urging preservice teachers to respect research or knowledge vetted by expert communities became an exercise in futility. If they came from the communities where Fox News was the main source of information, basic foundations of respecting the authority of science, scholarship, and intellectual work were constantly eroded. The danger here, ultimately, lies in the paradox of the age we live in. In a

fragmented world shattered into tiny pieces during the global pandemic, there is no shared definition of reality. In itself, this condition is not new—there have always been majoritarian narratives that excluded voices from the margins (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). The problem now is that the bridges into other worlds are lost. If some people choose to disregard evidence and refuse to consider facts or personal narratives, opportunities to create shared understandings diminish. If the conversation about socialization and a video with personal stories about microaggressions are perceived as an attack on all White people, no amount of statistical or narrative evidence can shift the frame toward considering root causes of injustice and its consequences for minoritized students. This leaves us with a conundrum—how can educators question their beliefs, critically examine their biases, or cultivate empathy for those who are different from them, if facts and evidence that go counter to their cherished beliefs are treated as indoctrination, brain-washing, and liberal propaganda? More broadly, what happens to the society if notions of fact and evidence lose meaning?

Teachers, teacher educators, and advocates for equity, diversity, and anti-racism can utilize various strategies to help students navigate the cognitive dissonance they experience when they encounter new perspectives. The difficulties preservice teachers face when they encounter information that contradicts their cherished beliefs can be acknowledged and treated with empathy. But when political pundits stoke the fire of White rage and White resentment, pedagogical tools to mitigate challenging moments appear insufficient for the battles that unfold. At times like this, bolder action in the political and social arena is urgently needed. As educators, researchers, and civic agents, we should look for ways to influence the public discourse to pursue deep civility (Woodson, 2018) and preserve democracy. In that regard, we invite the readers to consider how educators and educational researchers can collectively raise their voices and take

action to counter pervasive threats to teaching and learning about equity, diversity, and justice at all levels (Kelley et al., 2020). Together, we have to identify ways we can navigate attacks on truth and on those who teach it so that better worlds will be possible.

References

- Adams, M. E., Bell, L. A. E., & Griffin, P. E. (2007). *Teaching for diversity and social justice*, 2nd ed. Routledge.
- Ahmed, S. (2000). *On being included: Racism and diversity in institutional life*. Routledge.
- An Act Relating to Education; To Prohibit Public K-12 Schools and Public Institutions of Higher Education from Teaching Certain Concepts Regarding Race or Sex. H.B. 8. (2022).
[http://alisondb.legislature.state.al.us/ALISON/SearchableInstruments/2022RS/PrintFiles/](http://alisondb.legislature.state.al.us/ALISON/SearchableInstruments/2022RS/PrintFiles/HB8-int.pdf)
[HB8-int.pdf](http://alisondb.legislature.state.al.us/ALISON/SearchableInstruments/2022RS/PrintFiles/HB8-int.pdf)
- Banks, J. & Banks, C. M. (2019). *Multicultural education: Issues and perspectives* (10th ed.). Wiley.
- Blumefeld, W. (n.d.). Meritocracy assignment: A classroom resource.
https://www.academia.edu/17230915/Meritocracy_Assignment_A_Classroom_Resource
- Boler, & Zembylas, (2003). Discomforting truths: The emotional terrain of understanding difference. In P. Trifonas (Ed.), *Pedagogies of difference: Rethinking education for social change* (pp. 110-136). Routledge.
- Braskamp, L. A., & Engberg, M. E. (2011). How colleges can influence the development of a global perspective. *Liberal Education*, 97(3/4), 1–8.
<http://www.aacu.org/liberaleducation/le-sufal1/braskamp.cfm>
- Cabrera, N. L. (2014). Exposing whiteness in higher education: White male college students minimizing racism, claiming victimization, and recreating white supremacy. *Race*,

Ethnicity, and Education 17(1), 30–55. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13613324.2012.725040>

Carter Andrews, D. J., Brown, T., Castillo, B. M., Jackson, D., & Vellanki, V. (2019). Beyond damage-centered teacher education: Humanizing pedagogy for teacher educators and preservice teachers. *Teachers College Record*, 121(6), 1–28.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/016146811912100605>

Cochran-Smith, M. (2004). *Walking the road: Race, diversity, and social justice in teacher education*. Teachers College Press.

Crain, T. (2021, December 13). After CRT complaint, Huntsville teacher training investigated by Alabama state officials. <https://www.al.com/news/2021/12/after-crt-complaint-huntsville-teacher-training-investigated-by-alabama-state-officials.html>

Daniels, J. R., & Varghese, M. (2020). Troubling practice: Exploring the relationship between Whiteness and practice-based teacher education in considering a raciolinguicized teacher subjectivity. *Educational Researcher*, 49(1), 56–63.

<https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X19879450>

Delgado, R. & Stefancic, J. (2012). *Critical race theory: An introduction* (2nd ed.). New York University Press.

Gay, G. (2018). *Culturally responsive teaching: Theory, research, and practice* (3rd ed.). Teachers College Press.

Gorski, P. C. (2008). What we're teaching teachers: An analysis of multicultural teacher education coursework syllabi. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 25(2), 309–318.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2008.07.008>

Gorski, P. C. (2009). Cognitive dissonance as a strategy in social justice teaching. *Multicultural Education*, 17(1), 54–57. <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ871366.pdf>

- Gorski, P. C., & Pothini, S. G. (2014). *Case studies on diversity and social justice education* (1st ed.). Routledge.
- Harro, B. (2010). The cycle of socialization. In M. Adams, W. Blumenfeld, R. Castaneda, H. Hackman, M. Peters, & X. Zuniga (Eds.), *Readings for diversity and social justice*, (2nd ed., pp. 45-51). Routledge.
- Haviland, V. (2008). "Things get glossed over": Rearticulating the silencing power of Whiteness in education. *Journal of Teacher Education* 59(1), 40-54.
- Healey, M., Matthews, K. E., & Cook-Sather, A. (2020). Revealing the process: Reflective essays. In M. Healey, K. E. Matthews, & A. Cook-Sather (Eds.), *Writing about learning and teaching in higher education: Creating and contributing to scholarly conversations across a range of genres* (pp. 193–204). Elon University Center for Engaged Learning.
- hooks, b (1994). *Teaching to transgress: Education as the practice of freedom*. Routledge.
- Kelley, J., Arce-Trigatti, A., & Garner, B. (2020). Marching to a different beat: Reflections from a community of practice on diversity and equity. *Transformative Dialogues: Teaching and Learning Journal*, 13(3), 110–119. <https://doi.org/10.26209/td.v13i3.505>
- Kelley, J., Arce-Trigatti, A., & Haynes, A. (2021). Beyond the individual: Deploying the sociological imagination as a research method in the neoliberal university. In C. E. Matias (Ed.), *The handbook of critical theoretical research methods in education* (pp. 449–475). Routledge.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (2017). The (r)evolution will not be standardized: Teacher education, hip hop pedagogy, and culturally relevant pedagogy 2.0. In D. Paris & H. S. Alim (Eds.), *Culturally sustaining pedagogies: Teaching and learning for justice in a changing world* (pp. 141–156). Teachers College Press

- López, F., Molnar, A., Johnson, R., Patterson, A., Ward, L., & Kumashiro, K. (2021). *Understanding the attacks on Critical Race Theory*. Boulder, CO: National Education Policy Center. <http://nepc.colorado.edu/publication/crt>.
- McFalls, E. K., & Cobb-Roberts, D. (2001). Reducing resistance to diversity through cognitive dissonance instruction: Implications for teacher education. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 52(2), 164–172. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022487101052002007>.
- Milner, H. R. (2010). What does teacher education have to do with teaching? Implications for diversity studies. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 61(1-2), 118–131. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022487109347670>
- Milner, H. R. (2020). *Start where you are, but don't stay there: Understanding diversity, opportunity gaps, and teaching in today's classrooms* (2nd ed.). Harvard Education Press.
- New York Times. (2015). A conversation with Asian Americans on race. <https://www.nytimes.com/video/opinion/100000004308529/a-conversation-with-asians-on-race.html>
- Picower, B., & Kohli, R. (Eds.). (2017). *Confronting racism in teacher education: Counternarratives of critical practice*. Taylor & Francis.
- Pollock, M., Deckman, S., Mira, M., & Shalaby, C. (2010). “But what can I do?”: Three necessary tensions in teaching teachers about race. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 61(3), 211–224. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022487109354089>
- Sensory, O., & DiAngelo, R. J. (2017). *Is everyone really equal? An introduction to key concepts in social justice education*, 2nd ed. Teachers College Press.
- Sleeter, C. E. (2017). Critical race theory and the whiteness of teacher education. *Urban Education*, 52(2), 155–169. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085916668957>

Teachers of Color Collective & Souto-Manning, M. (2022). On the mis-education of teachers of color: A letter to teacher educators. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 73(1), 66-80.

UN General Assembly. (1948). *Universal declaration of human rights*. Paris.

Van Kessel, C., Den Heyer, K., & Schimel, J. (2020). Terror management theory and the educational situation. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 52(3), 428–442.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/00220272.2019.1659416>

Vavrus, M. (2015). *Diversity and education: A critical multicultural approach*. Teachers College Press.

Villegas, A. M., & Lucas, T. (2002). Preparing culturally responsive teachers: Rethinking the curriculum. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 53(1), 20–32.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/0022487102053001003>

Woodson, A. (2018). *Defining and practicing deep civility on college campuses*. American Council on Education. <https://www.higheredtoday.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Defining-Practicing-Deep-Civility.pdf>

Zembylas M. (2017). Wilful ignorance and the emotional regime of schools. *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 65(4), 499–515. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00071005.2017.1290785>

Zembylas M., & Papamichael, E. (2017). Pedagogies of discomfort and empathy in multicultural teacher education. *Intercultural Education*, 28(1), 1–19.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/14675986.2017.1288448>