Journal of Educational Controversy

Volume 16
Number 1 *Facilitating Discussions of Controversial Issues in Difficult Times*

Article 3

2024

Biographic-Storytelling Classrooms as a Workaround to Critical Race Theory Pushback

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Abstract

This article argues for *biographic-storytelling classrooms*—spaces where counter-narratives thrive, lived experience is valued, contexts are considered, and oppression is resisted. It considers how PK-12 teachers and professors can facilitate anti-racism learning environments in settings that deny structural racism. Current cultural and political pushback in the United States to the supposed use of critical race theory in education is making it harder for teachers to teach with an equity lens. Biographic storytelling offers a sense of critical hope and metaphoric nourishment for both students and teachers to thrive with their full humanity despite the toxicity of these culturally and politically divisive times.

Keywords

Critical Race Theory; Anti-Racism; Teacher Education; Storytelling

Introduction

At the year's start-up meeting with faculty at my university, a public institution in the Midwest, a faculty member asked the president if the university were prepared to remain steadfast in its commitment to diversity, equity, inclusion, accessibility, and belonging (DEI-AB) in the face of the strong cultural pushback to DEI-AB efforts in our region and spreading across the United States. The president's response was both reassuring (yes, the university remained committed to equity) and unsettling (we would do so while avoiding *trigger words*—words that have become politicized and thus polarizing, like *social justice* or *critical race theory*). As a faculty member, I wondered what the implications were of such a position at the classroom level. In particular, what would classroom conversations look like if it did reach the classroom? What would it mean, in actual practice, to avoid trigger words? I reflected more carefully upon the president's message and noted the way it both honored all students at the university with its commitment to equity and called for navigating the nuances and complexities of this historical moment with sensitivity, care, and wisdom through its prudence around language. Perhaps the president's words were not about limiting language but rather

about insisting upon moving beyond the limitations of decontextualized trigger words in the very human and necessarily nuanced terrain of DEI-AB work.

The president's words were, of course, a response to the current cultural and political pushback in the United States to the use of critical race theory (CRT) in education, which is threatening to make it harder for both university professors and PK-12 teachers to teach with an equity lens. This article considers what professors and teachers *can* do: How can they facilitate anti-racism learning environments in settings that deny structural racism? While the Movement for Black Lives has increased public attention on the ways in which racism is a system, a manifestation of the white supremacy structure of the United States, the current pushback to using CRT in educational settings evidences a strong and coordinated resistance to understanding racism in structural terms. Analysis of what this resistance is about calls for understanding the sociocultural and sociopolitical contexts of the anti-CRT sentiment that many states have been legislatively adopting. Compounding the complexity of this landscape has been an intensification of political will to frame these resistances as threats to individual rights, liberties, and freedoms and to stoke parental anger with a narrative that equity-minded classrooms are sites of left-leaning indoctrination. From protests in the street, to clashes in school board meetings, to book bans in the classroom, the United States is engulfed in what many characterize as a culture war that pits people against one another: parents vs. teachers; Democrats vs. Republicans; governors vs. professors; the immunized vs. anti-vaxxers; Black Lives Matter vs. All Lives Matter. This paper argues that the current wave of CRT pushback must be understood in these contextual terms and that both universities and PK-12 schools (and, specifically, the professors and teachers in these schools) must find pedagogical ways to navigate this toxic sociopolitical terrain that many have argued has become *the new normal*.

These changing demands on both higher and PK-12 education position teachers and professors on the front lines against the tide of CRT pushback, which characterizes this historical moment. For many pre-service and novice teachers, especially for those who were or are being prepared through an equity-minded teacher education program, this positioning is untenable as they try to reconcile their commitments to socially just teaching with the cultural and political pushback they are experiencing on the ground from parents/caregivers, administrators, policymakers, and even students themselves.

Drawing upon my experience with anti-oppression education in a predominantly White institution of higher education located in a predominantly White Midwest community where conservatism reigns, I offer an example of an undergraduate university classroom in a teacher education program that effectively supports pre-service teachers in their efforts to facilitate classrooms of equity, inclusion, and belonging in the face of this

pushback. Pre-service and novice teachers are particularly vulnerable to the cultural clashes that are fueled by the uncertainty of these polarized times as they have limited experience with how to pedagogically handle the ways in which social unrest can seep into the classroom and unsettle children and youth. How, for example, *should* a teacher respond to a student-student argument that grows into a class fight about whether or not the Covid-19 vaccine kills babies, (a situation faced by one of my university students in an elementary school classroom, February, 2022); or a situation in which one student's Black Lives Matter t-shirt becomes a point of controversy with another student's Make America Great Again cap (elementary school classroom, September, 2021); or an instance of parental outrage over the class discussion that emerged from a student asking if boys can become girls (elementary school classroom, March, 2022); or, finally, a classroom moment in which a student shouts, "I am not going to learn from any Chinese teacher" (elementary classroom, March, 2022). Classroom situations like these became more common during pandemic-fatigued times (personal communication, Boys Town National Training Consultant, March, 2022), and they continue to mirror the unrest of this current political moment in which much of the United States is galvanized to quash curricular efforts and educational policies aimed at racial and gender equity. It is critical to equip teachers with the knowledge-base and skill-set to maneuver this hotly contested terrain. In this article, I offer pedagogical paths forward for pre-service teachers who ask, "I'm a K-12 educator. I'm not sure what I can do" (Schwartz, 2021, n.p.).

Anti-Racism Feminist Critical Pedagogies

Students are entering the teaching profession at an historical moment in which equity and inclusion teaching commitments remain urgent. By *equity and inclusion,* I do not mean politically left-leaning politics, but, rather, a steadfast pedagogical commitment that each and every child's full personhood will be honored and valued in the classroom environment. It is important to understand that social justice teaching is not a political agenda in the partisan sense, although it is often highly politicized. Instead, teaching with a commitment to equity and inclusion means that five classroom conditions are met: relationships are centered; personhood is recognized, valued, and prioritized; students are valued as *solutionaries*;[1] storytelling and counter-storytelling are used as primary pedagogical approaches; and connections are made among life narratives, societal structures, and historical patterns. These are conditions of classrooms wherein official and hidden curricula are understood through an *anti-racism feminist critical*

[1] In the James & Grace Lee Boggs School, a place-based elementary school in Detroit, Michigan, students are understood to be *solutionaries*—civically engaged community members who take responsibility for addressing social problems by taking individual and collective action to create positive social change.

pedagogical lens. Invoking the deep literatures of anti-racism movement work (Boggs & Boggs, 1974; brown, 2017; Carruthers, 2019; Kaur, 2020; Petty, 2018), I offer reflections on the pedagogical implications of engaging with this historical moment with a feminist critical consciousness (hooks, 2014).

As an overall frame, anti-racism feminist critical pedagogies elevate the wisdom of lived experience and foreground how this experience is racialized. The marginalized narratives of women of color are centered and valued as testimonials to the socioecological impacts of racism and to the sagacity of the women leading visionary resistance work. There are many different feminisms, but a theme among them is attention to how power and resistance are experienced in and through the body. White supremacy disembodies (Menakem, 2017), and storytelling, as an anti-racism feminist critical pedagogical practice, is at once a resistance to this disembodiment and a claiming of one's body as part of the collective, for another theme across feminisms is an appeal to a sense of community. Here, it is important to note the failings of many feminisms to account for the ways in which experience is racialized and particularized and how *community*, if left unexamined, can be problematically normative. *Woman* is not monolithic, and there is no singular community.

Biographic-Storytelling Classrooms

Anti-racism feminist critical pedagogies inform my approach to university teaching, giving shape to the biographic-storytelling classroom which characterizes my teacher education teaching. *Biographic-storytelling classrooms* are spaces with distinctive features: counter-narratives thrive, lived experience is valued, contexts are considered, and oppression is resisted. This approach declines binary frameworks that yield toxic polarization around issues of equity and offers a sense of critical hope and metaphoric nourishment for both students and teachers to thrive with their full humanity, despite the toxicity of these anti-CRT times.

What is a teacher in Idaho, for example, where anti-CRT legislation has passed, to do? Acknowledging the societal constraints of many teaching environments, it is important to take a from-within-the-system approach to consider how to work around real-life blocks to anti-racism teaching. A key argument I want to make is that when relationships are centered; lived experience is elevated; personhood is valued; students are recognized as solutionaries; and storytelling and counter-storytelling are primary pedagogical approaches, the fifth condition of an anti-racism feminist classroom becomes possible: Connections are made among life narratives, societal structures, and historical patterns. This fifth condition is in direct tension with anti-CRT legislation, which

prohibits teaching about the structural roots of racism. Unpacking the ways in which lived experience is pedagogy, biographic storytelling offers paths forward. When lived experience is elevated as a source of knowledge, the story itself teaches. Creating biographic-storytelling classrooms can be a workaround to anti-CRT policy.

Five conditions of biographic-storytelling classrooms

In biographic-storytelling classrooms, teachers and students work together to center relationships; see the personhood of one another; value students' capacity for creating positive social change; use storytelling and counter-storytelling as primary pedagogical approaches; and, through content instruction and human interaction, make connections among one's life narratives, societal structures, and historical patterns. While these conditions are deeply interwoven, they are not sequential. The spontaneity of classroom interactions and the organic, emergent ways teachable moments arise call for tapping into any one of the following five conditions of a biographic-storytelling classroom. At the same time, the fifth condition is possible only if the other four conditions have been met, so in this sense, the final condition is a culminating one. To understand how these conditions overlap and intersect in practice, it is important to examine each condition on its own terms. What follows are more detailed explanations of the five conditions of a biographic-storytelling classroom.

Relationships are centered

Teacher education programs commonly teach pre-service teachers to be student-centered. Student-centered classrooms are spaces where student learning is the primary objective, and, toward this end, teachers attend to the myriad things that impact student learning (e. g., learning differences; home environment; individualized student needs and interests). These considerations are critical, and student learning is fundamental, but it is meaningful to reflect upon who/what is actually getting centered through the categorizing role of student; to ask how this centering frames teaching and learning; and to consider what might shift if, instead, teachers worked to create relationship-centered classrooms. The distinctions between relationship-centered and student-centered are nuanced yet significant. Biographic-storytelling classrooms are relationship-centered.

In relationship-centered classrooms, teachers (a) understand their students as multidimensional people with often complex lived experiences; (b) pedagogically prioritize attending to how these life stories impact learning and social emotional well-

being; (c) attend to the affective dimensions of teaching and learning; (d) remain cognizant of how societal dynamics and patterns intersect with cultural identities; and (e) mitigate issues of inequity through empowering classroom practices.

Centering relationships in the classroom also means being intentional about fostering a sense of community and attending to the complex dynamics between students. Just as teachers understand their students as multidimensional people, relationship-centered classrooms afford students opportunities to build community through coming to understand each other in contextual terms. This contextuality is integral to cultivating an authentic classroom community, a community that is mindful of and attentive to the complex and particular ways students' lived experiences show up and play out in the classroom. Relationship-centered classrooms create space for the realities of children's lives and for the ways that sociopolitical and sociocultural dynamics impact how children come to know themselves and their social environment.

While there is significant overlap between student-centered and relationship-centered classrooms, language matters. Being a student involves navigating external expectations of what it means to be academically successful, ideas that are entangled with public education's historical rootedness in white supremacy structures. Significant educational research has demonstrated that this history continues to play out in much of public education through conventional school policies and classroom practices, routines, and norms. Anti-racism feminist critical pedagogies interrupt these white supremacy structures and modes of operation and offer the language of relationships as one way to reconceptualize oppressive power dynamics.

Personhood is recognized, valued, and prioritized

In biographic-storytelling classrooms, personhood is not only recognized but also valued and prioritized. Understanding students in contextual terms involves being cognizant of the ways that lived experience impacts learning, plays out in social interaction, and shapes students' sense of self. Attending to who students are in context acknowledges the complexity of their lives outside of school and recognizes that students are people before they are students and multidimensional persons in their own right. Anti-racism feminist critical pedagogies understand this multidimensionality in fluid and embodied terms and invite students to show up in the classroom each day as their full, sensorial selves. From this perspective, classrooms that are rooted in the personhood of students are dynamic and animated by the fluid ways that physicality, emotionality, and cognition intersect and circulate amongst the human beings in the classroom (Perhamus, 2010; 2020). Using the language of personhood, which refers to the state of being a person, highlights the full-bodiedness of students and offers a lens

for prioritizing classroom practices that recognize and value the human beingness of students.

Consider the following example from a kindergarten classroom:[2]

> For a health unit about nutrition, a teacher prepares a lesson about how to use the Food Pyramid model as a guide for well-balanced eating. According to this pyramid, one should, "Choose a diet that is low in saturated fat and cholesterol and moderate in total fat," (USDA, 2000) and the teacher facilitates a class discussion about the importance of making alternative choices. As part of this conversation, the teacher references cooking oil as an example of a "bad fat," and students begin sharing cooking examples from their homes. Unclear about what, exactly, constitutes a fat, one student becomes upset by the teacher's moralizing message of "bad" and tries to make meaning of this message in juxtaposition to the fact that her grandmother cooks tortillas with lard.
>
> *This child's face was riddled with confusion, her body crunched over as she tried to make sense of how this cultural tradition, through which her family expresses love and togetherness, could be "bad." The student's kinesthetic experience of this message is evidenced by her body language, including a shift in posture, facial expression, and decreased engagement with the class discussion. In a subsequent interview, this student described her angst in trying to reconcile her new-found health knowledge with her fond attachment to cooking with her family. She rejected the moralizing dynamic of this health message, stating confidently that she loved her abuela (who "is not bad"), but she was affected by the message's emphasis on risk and disease. She repeated, this time more quietly, that she loved her abuela but added that she did not want anything bad to happen to her grandmother. Kinesthetically experiencing a cognitive dissonance, the student was trying to reconcile the biomedical health message that saturated fats are "bad" with what she knew and experienced in her body—that sometimes cooking with love means cooking with lard.*
> (Perhamus, 2020)

[2] This example is from the author's qualitative research about the ways students and their families navigate the dynamics of public health messages. The USDA has since updated its Food Pyramid to a My Plate food group model (Retrieved from https://www.myplate.gov/ on 9/6/22).

The teacher in this scenario did not ultimately respond to the student's distress and confusion or acknowledge that family health practices are culturally shaped. Although this excerpt describes one student, this particular classroom was comprised of a multiplicity of identities along racial, gendered, socioeconomic, and religious lines, a range that was flattened by the teacher's uncritical adoption of the Food Pyramid, a Western construct that has varying relevance to families. In practice, pedagogically valuing personhood in the classroom involves making space for the embodied ways individual students make meaning and not only acknowledging their multiple cultural truths but also attending to the ways that these truths and embodied meaning-making intersect.

Biographic--storytelling classrooms are informed by anti-racism feminist critical pedagogies, and therefore ground teaching and learning in these insights about embodiment, fluidity, and multidimensionality, ever cognizant of how lived experience gives shape to each. Prioritizing classroom practices that respect the complexity of personhood through biographic storytelling is foundational to creating anti-racist learning spaces because it values students as full human beings, an honoring that disrupts viewing children and youth through the normalizing category of student.

Students are valued as solutionaries

In biographic storytelling classrooms, the five conditions of an anti-racism feminist critical classroom are not sequential, yet valuing students as solutionaries is possible only in relationship-centered classrooms that honor the personhood of students. Solutionaries, as civically engaged community members, take responsibility for addressing social problems through individual and collective action with the expressed intent of creating positive social change. In the current climate of CRT pushback, valuing students as solutionaries is of heightened importance because cultivating a sense of agency empowers students to better understand, navigate, and resist the heteronormative racism advanced by this backlash—an advancement that devalues, disempowers, and specifies or identifies students in absolute terms according to white supremacy culture.

Equity-oriented, biographic-storytelling classrooms do not pit students of color and White-identifying students against one another, as the CRT pushback claims (e.g. through learning about concepts like white privilege) but, rather, support collective critical reflection about the ways students are each positioned by the specifying and differentiating system of racism. Biographic-storytelling classrooms inspired by anti-racism feminist critical frameworks foster inclusion and a sense of belonging and afford students opportunities to make real-life connections among honest, accurate, and

multi-perspective accounts of history and their present-day capacity to be solutionaries. Anti-racism feminist critical pedagogies are grounded in what Duncan-Andrade refers to as *critical hope*: the capacity to hope in the face of evidence that the situation is hopeless (2009). When students are equipped with accurate accounts of history, and their full selves are valued through the relationships of a classroom community, they can develop the tools and know-how for practicing critical hope as solutionaries. Because CRT pushback puts students at real risk—emotionally, relationally, and, in some cases, physically—learning how to sustain hope through solutionary practices is, arguably, a much-needed survival skill in today's educational landscape.

Storytelling and counter-storytelling are used as primary pedagogical approaches

Stories communicate. They can (a) *inform* through third-person accounts of dates, timelines, and events of a given situation; (b) *describe* through first-person narratives about the human experience of particular situations; (c) *make meaning* through offering reflective interpretations of subjective experience; and (d) *reimagine* through considering new ways to apply and integrate interpretive insights. In anti-racism feminist critical classrooms, teachers are intentional about incorporating a multiplicity of stories told from different perspectives and purposeful about engaging students in analyzing standardized content through these interpretive frames. Storytelling, when conceptualized through this lens, is a pedagogical approach for sharing a combination of stories to complexify singular historical accounts and to reimagine collective futures where people live, work, and play together in ways that honor everyone's personhood.

As a particular kind of story, counter-narratives are told by and from the vantage point of those who have been historically marginalized; are about particularity of life experiences, agency, empowerment, and resistance; and counter the hegemonizing mainstream messaging of grand narratives (Lorde, 1984; Morrison, 1993). A grand narrative is a story that is repeatedly told through the patterned practices of societal systems and institutions and that functions through these systems and institutions to maintain hegemonic relationships of power. For example, a story of racism is arguably told through any text that assumes that the audience is White. Counter-narratives are stories that counter the sociopolitical *status quo* and resist the specifying reach of grand narratives which define people according to white supremacy normative standards. Counter-narratives inform, describe, and make meaning in ways that not only complicate singular versions of reality but also purposefully reimagine a future where equitable distributions of power engender new ways of relating to one another. Counter-storytelling, or the storytelling of counter-narratives, is about empowerment, driven by and defined by the peoples and communities who have been historically

marginalized by institutions shaped by white supremacy, their policies, practices, and renditions of truth.

Storytelling and counter-storytelling are anti-racism feminist critical pedagogical approaches that both elevate lived experience and view the particularities of lived experience as valuable sources of knowledge. In anti-racism feminist critical classrooms, these pedagogical approaches are primary precisely because they facilitate valuing and knowing students in fully contextual, embodied terms, a facilitation grounded in centering relationships, honoring personhood, and understanding students as capable change-agents. The informing, describing, meaning-making, and reimagining capacities of stories and counter-narratives can yield new ways of knowing and afford students and teachers points of transformative connection.

In the face of CRT pushback, biographic storytelling and counter-storytelling offer concrete, effective, and poignant ways to continue teaching with an equity lens. Lessons about power, privilege, and oppression do not necessitate explicit instruction on these topics, a move now banned or at least viewed with suspicion and hostility in so many schools. Rather, the lessons emerge through framing lived experience as knowledge. In classrooms where students can learn these lessons through their interactions with each other, the teacher's role is to facilitate interactional boundaries that ensure each student's humanity is honored. If a classroom is racially homogenous, teachers can integrate counter-narratives to highlight discrepancies between grand narratives and lived experience. For White-identifying students whose social location, while nuanced by the intersectionality of identity, is informed by the societal privileging of Whiteness, counter-narratives offer new perspectives. For students of color who navigate this privileging in their everyday lives, counter-narratives offer validation, support, and a lens for understanding themselves as producers of knowledge. In schools where CRT pushback has led to outright bans of race dialogues that make students uncomfortable, teachers can and, this article dares to say, should utilize storytelling and counter-storytelling to help students resist viewing discomfort in negative terms. Instead, sharing stories and counter-narratives helps students to see themselves and each other in more contextual, nuanced, and full-bodied ways and to understand discomfort as the affective experience of seeing the world anew.

Connections are made between life narratives, societal structures, and historical patterns

Building on the storytelling and counter-storytelling of anti-racism feminist critical pedagogies, biographic-storytelling involves the concept of life narratives, which extend

the practice of storying by considering how one's many life experiences, and the many stories that describe these experiences, thread together to create an overall, biographical narrative arc. A life narrative reflects the way that one makes sense of one's lived experience as a whole and encompasses, as part of this sense-making, how one navigates the ways in which societal patterns, structures, and norms ascribe meaning to one's identity. Students in anti-racism feminist critical classrooms learn, through the relationally organic yet dialogically structured sharing of life narratives, how to analyze the ways in which their own identities have been shaped through the essentializing, totalizing, and homogenizing dynamics of white supremacy culture that permeate the institution of public education in the United States.

With claims of indoctrination, CRT pushback advances the idea that engaging students in honest race dialogues and encouraging students to think critically about singular accounts of history divide students based on race and teaches students a skewed version of history that portrays the United States as a violent oppressor. CRT pushback, in practice and in spirit, insists that equity-oriented classrooms are un-American. Biographic storytelling, informed by anti-racism feminist critical pedagogies, challenges the notion that honest race dialogues divide students and reframes points of difference as opportunities for students to learn from each other how they have each been societally positioned and shaped by whitewashed tellings of history.

Unpacking the concepts of white supremacy and societal structures (often referred to as social structure) is a key practice of anti-racism feminist critical pedagogies, and this remains true for biographic-storytelling classrooms. Many students think about white supremacy in terms of being a White supremacist (e.g. being a member of the Ku Klux Klan). To be clear, white supremacy refers to a

> historically based, institutionally perpetuated *system* of exploitation and oppression of continents, nations, and peoples of color by white people and nations of the European continent, for the purpose of maintaining and defending a system of wealth, power, and privilege." (Challenging White Supremacy Workshop, n.d.).

Working with students to see systems is a challenge, as systems in and of themselves are not readily identifiable in concrete terms. Rather, as a system, white supremacy is a particular distribution of power that positions White people with structural advantage over people of color. This structural arrangement of power patterns social relationships in racialized ways. Anti-racism feminist critical pedagogies purposefully interrupt these patterns and invite students to see their own and each other's life narrative in juxtaposition to the societal structures and institutions that reify these hierarchical

patterns. Societal or social structure refers to the overall arrangement of how institutions, policies, and systems in society relate to one another. For example, how does the institution of public education intersect with the juvenile justice system, and how do they both relate to socioeconomic policies in the United States?

Making these connections with students validates what most students of color already understand: U.S. society differentially and systematically (de)values people based on race. What is often harder for students of color and White-identifying students to recognize is that by coming to know each other in context through storytelling, by hearing and respecting each other's life narratives, they are empowered to understand the personhood of one another, rather than seeing each other through the specifying lens of white supremacy. Recalling that students in anti-racism feminist critical pedagogy classrooms are solutionaries, this relational repatterning can be transformational for students and, I would argue, is an instance of creating positive social change.

Because most teacher education programs in the United States are comprised of predominantly White-identifying students with largely White-identifying faculty, it is meaningful to consider how programs can prepare White students to resist color-blind frames, which necessarily position Whiteness as the norm. It is this positioning, along with recognition that white supremacy continues to afford structural advantage to White-identifying people, that the CRT pushback mischaracterizes. Anti-racism feminist critical pedagogies understand that while Whiteness is deemed superior in systems of white supremacy—and the pedagogies intentionally work to facilitate student understanding of this privileging—they simultaneously prioritize understanding people in context. In biographic-storytelling classrooms, sharing life narratives in the classroom is a pedagogical strategy for honoring the particularities of context while making critical connections among lived experience and the societal structures and systems through which context is shaped.

People who identify as White are not a monolith, just as people of color are not a monolith. Intersections of identity (e. g., gender, sexual orientation, and class) complicate singular understandings of Whiteness, as people's identities are complex and nuanced. CRT pushback decontextualizes these particularities and categorizes people based on race alone, a move that pits people against one another. It is the pushback that is divisive. Facilitating student understanding about the ways in which social issues, societal structures, and a white supremacist telling of history are connected, as well as the ways that personal situations intersect with societal patterns, is critical for equity work. Making these types of connections with students is a key area of objection in the fervor of CRT pushback, to which anti-racism feminist critical pedagogies respond with a

focus on context, relationships, and an emphasis on lessons learned through the sharing of life narratives.

Putting it All Together: Key Questions for Application

In order for all students to experience a sense of belonging in the classroom, pedagogical choices must acknowledge the intimate ways that societal inequities play out in the everyday realities of students' lives. While direct instruction about oppression, white privilege, and structural racism is arguably important, clarifying, and valuable for students, if teachers find themselves in an environment that prohibits the use of this language, thinking about ways to facilitate student understanding about the meaning of these terms without using the terms explicitly can be helpful. In other words, how can students understand the concept of historical oppression or white privilege, for example, without introducing a lesson labelled as such? It is a question reminiscent of my university president's words about remaining steadfast with equity commitments while avoiding politicized language that, in today's fraught landscape, could complicate actualizing these commitments. Fostering biographic-storytelling classrooms offers a way to teach with an equity lens without labels because, to continue with the white privilege example, when students hear the stories of each other and the counter-stories of historical figures, they are learning both what oppression and white privilege mean in practice and that these practices have occurred over time. Or, in classrooms that are racially homogenous, teachers can introduce several biographic stories about the same event, with each story telling a different perspective.

Below are some key questions that teachers can ask themselves, as they reflect upon their teaching practices, to help interrupt the centering of Whiteness in their efforts to be anti-racism educators. The list is by no means exhaustive, but it offers a starting place for each teacher's learning journey and can be used in the PK-12 and higher education classroom. The table emerged from my own experience with teaching in an undergraduate teacher education program. It was developed in direct response to teacher-education students feeling ill-equipped for navigating issues of race in their classroom and to their consistent question, "But what can I *do*?" Somehow, their professional development (PD) workshops were not translating into anti-racism pedagogical practices: They could not see how to connect the theory of the PDs with the practices of their teaching. Students consistently shared with me their frustration over this disconnect. This table, which I consider key to biographic-storytelling classrooms, is a cornerstone in my classrooms and an important tool that students integrate in their own field placements. The elements of this table are meant to serve as guideposts for pedagogical decision-making.

For each key question, the table provides a baseline idea (an evidence-based reason for posing the question); premise statements (implications of asking the question—why does this question matter?); and teaching strategies for putting the key question into curricular practice. The table is intended to be used in the context of biographic-storytelling classrooms and supports teaching with an asset mindset.

Finally, it is meaningful to reflect upon the fact that people have created racism. This means that people have the power to change it. In making teaching decisions, it is worth noting that, "What we pay attention to grows" (brown, 2017). In using this table in my own teaching, I ask students, "What do you want to grow in your classroom?" The key questions can guide this growing.

Key Question	Baseline	Premise	Teaching Strategy
Who defines the knowledge in your classroom?	Scholars with marginalized identities are often excluded from mainstream curricula.	Knowledge influences how one understands the world. Who students see positioned as the makers of knowledge affects who they value and impacts what cultural knowledge is valued. If only White scholars are studied, then students learn only some perspectives.	○ Incorporate scholars of color (as the authors) in your classes--across *all* content areas. ○ Have students study scholars and professionals of color across professional fields.
Who is centered in your classroom?	Whiteness is often assumed and centered in the classroom. Teachers often view their own experiences as the norm.	What gets centered is viewed as the norm and influences teacher expectations of students. A norm implies that everything else is not the norm	○ *Math*: Use word problems that challenge stereotypes. *Social Studies*: Use oral histories to incorporate multiple histories. *Science*: Use culturally varied materials for scientific exploration.

		("abnormal," "other"). If the norm of Whiteness is not *purposefully, actively* interrupted, then people of color are necessarily, by default, positioned as "other."	*Health & Physical Education*: Center activity that values multiple definitions of health (since health is defined with cultural values attached). *Music*: Incorporate musicians and composers of color. *Art:* Use visuals and textures that reflect the diversity of the lived realities of students' lives. *Language Arts:* Read marginalized texts. o Keep a written tracking record of 1) who you call on for answering questions in class (this will help you see if you are unintentionally practicing a bias); 2) who "gets in trouble" (again, will help you identify an unintentional bias).
How do you show all of your students that you value their personhood?	Research indicates that White students are often viewed as individuals, while students of color are often perceived as members of a group (rather than as individual people). Research also shows that White teachers discipline students of color more frequently and harshly for the same behaviors as their White peers.	Valuing the individuality and personhood of each student, through what is included in the curriculum, how teachers interact with students, and how students make discipline decisions with/about students, communicates that you *see* who they are as human beings.	o Learn the correct pronunciation of students' names. o Make eye contact consistently. o When something is going awry, reflect on your role in the situation *first*--ask, "What might I need to change for this student?" o Notice the immediate assumptions you make about children and youth. o Work with all students to develop a uniform approach to acknowledging positive and productive classroom behavior and preventing unproductive behavior.

	White teachers also tend to make more negative assumptions about the *reasons* for unproductive behavior of students of color than of White students. Finally, White teachers typically have fewer positive conversations with students of color than they do with White students.		○ Acknowledge students' lived experiences through classroom interactions and curricular choices.
How are you modeling a critical thinking approach to learning?	Often times, students are expected to learn material without questioning it. An uncritical habit of mind enables racism to grow.	Without critical thinking, racism is perpetuated. Modeling for students how to question constructively and productively teaches them how to think critically. Learning how to think critically is learning how to think in anti-racist ways.	○ Teach students to read the world when they read the word (Freire, 1983). ○ With students, re-write traditional nursery rhymes and stories with an anti-oppression lens; let students practice how to rewrite the world in this liberating way. ○ Invite students to establish the classroom expectations. ○ Practice restorative justice circles. ○ Incorporate mediation as a conflict resolution strategy. ○ Teach students how to be critical readers of numbers (statistics especially) and images as well as words.
How do you acknowledge the brilliance inherent	Teachers often have deficit thinking about students, and	An asset mindset communicates your faith in every student's success.	○ Incorporate Funds of Knowledge (Moll, et al, 1992) in your classroom.

in every student in your classroom?	students of color, in particular. Each student has knowledge to contribute, and an inclusive classroom will incorporate these knowledges.		○ Genuinely believe in each and every student's capacity and curiosity of learning. ○ Check that you have identified challenging yet supportive learning goals for each student.
How are you growing personally and professionally?	Teachers who feel the most satisfied in their careers remain committed to learning.	Authentic anti-racist teaching requires consistent, intentional self-reflection. Remaining open to feedback, allowing oneself to sit with personal discomfort when confronted with new ideas, and nourishing one's sense of curiosity will foster continued personal and professional growth.	○ Read. ○ Participate in professional development opportunities. ○ Attend conferences. ○ Stay connected with colleagues. ○ Meet new colleagues and grow your network. ○ Have a conversation with someone who holds a different view--practice those *listening to understand* skills.
How are you taking care of yourself?	Self-care is the basis of everything. You can love and support others to the degree you love and support yourself. Teacher burn-out is real. Self-care safeguards against burnout.	Self-care will help you continue to enjoy teaching, and that joy is contagious with students.	○ Pay attention to what nourishes your body and spirit. ○ Set boundaries around work time and give yourself downtime. ○ Pay attention to what invigorates you--and do more of it! ○ Spend time with people you love and who love you. ○ Practice receiving love, compliments, and other validations (and try not to be always in the giving mode). ○ Seek help and support when needed.

This table is designed to help guide the development of lesson plans as well as offer key questions for post-instruction reflection. When planning a lesson, I invite teachers to begin with a key question and to read the table from left to right. When reflecting on post-instruction, when you are beginning with the teaching strategy you employed, this table can help you unpack the implications of that strategy by reading the table from right to left.

I encourage teachers to discuss this table with colleagues as they consider how to utilize it in their own teaching practice, for although the table is simple in design, it invites teachers to question complex ideas. The key questions posed in this table challenge teachers to examine their own teaching assumptions as well as the assumptions inherent in mainstream PK-12 public education. Because assumptions are often difficult to recognize, it is important that teachers do this work in community, in spaces where a diversity of ideas, life stories, and teaching experiences can complexify and inform specific pedagogical decisions. These are spaces of biographic storytelling amongst colleagues.

Conclusion

Equity-oriented teaching is hard work during these toxically contentious times. Our university president's response to faculty, that the university remained committed to equity, but that we would do so while avoiding trigger words like *social justice* or *critical race theory*, suggests that what is needed are approaches to teaching that are both strategic and authentic. Biographic-storytelling classrooms are both. It can feel as if there is little public support when one hears the roar of CRT pushback more loudly than one hears the calls for racial justice. For teachers working in states where dialogues about race have been banned, the roar is not just frightening noise, it is law—and there are very real consequences for not abiding by its tenets. And yet, abiding by these teaching bans risks perpetuating the inequities and racialized traumas of white supremacy culture which harms all students.

Because a biographic-storytelling classroom grounds its instruction in relationships and storytelling, it less overtly contradicts CRT pushback bans and prohibitions. Stories humanize and offer people of divergent views points of connection. In storytelling, the emphasis is on personal experience rather than on *facts* that, in this day of

mis/disinformation, can be rendered as *untrue* or, at the very least, proclaimed to be politically motivated and divisive. Fostering the relationships in a biographic-storytelling classroom helps to create a sense of community that can also better withstand CRT pushback. When students are supported, even as they are challenged to consider a new perspective, their adult caregivers may, perhaps, be less mistrusting.

I end on a note of cautious, critical hope. Biographic-storytelling classrooms do not guarantee the absence of risk for university professors teaching in states where governors are trying to *root out liberals* or for teachers working in districts where CRT pushback has become law, but they do offer a plausible path forward for teachers seeking an equity framework in these environments. Stories invite the listener to imagine a different perspective and experience because stories are like invitations. Biographic-storytelling classrooms can be an effective workaround to CRT pushback precisely because they invite everyone's story, even those who are skeptical of equity work. At the same time, biographic-storytelling classrooms challenge and support students to identify how their stories relate to grand narratives and counter-narratives. Teaching and learning *is* equity work. It does not need to be labeled equity to be equity in practice. Perhaps, during these unsettled times, it is more important to focus on the practice while people work on the right to use the corresponding language.

To teachers*:* Be bold. Be brave. Be in community.

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