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Applying Relational Pedagogy in Teacher Education: Using the Case Method to Analyze Controversial Issues

Chloe S. Bolyard, Amber K. Howard, Stacie L. Finley

Ms. Thompson was a White, cisgender, female teacher who had been teaching for over two decades, mostly in affluent White neighborhoods. Her upbringing in a privileged environment had shaped her worldview in ways she wasn't fully aware of. This became evident when Sarah, a bright student from a lower-income Hispanic family, entered her classroom.

Throughout the school year, Sarah's parents, Mr. and Mrs. Rodriguez, noticed subtle signs of discomfort in Ms. Thompson's interactions with them. They attributed it to cultural differences and tried to be understanding, not wanting to jump to conclusions. However, as the months passed, it became clear that something more was amiss.

One evening, the school organized a family-teacher conference. The Rodriguez family arrived, eager to discuss Sarah's progress and any areas where she might need extra support.

As the meeting began, Ms. Thompson's unease was palpable. She shifted uncomfortably in her chair and seemed hesitant in her words. Mr. Rodriguez, noticing the discomfort, tried to break the ice by asking about Sarah's performance.

"Well, Mr. Rodriguez," Ms. Thompson began, "Sarah is a very bright student, but I'm concerned about her lack of participation in extracurricular activities. It's crucial for her overall development."

Mr. Rodriguez, who worked two jobs to make ends meet, exchanged a confused look with his wife. They were barely able to cover basic expenses, let alone afford extracurricular activities.

"I understand the importance of extracurriculars," Mr. Rodriguez replied, "but we're struggling financially. It's not easy for us to provide those opportunities for Sarah right now."

Ms. Thompson's face tightened, her discomfort now mixed with a hint of impatience. "I know it can be challenging, but there are many affordable options available in the community. You just need to make it a priority."

Mrs. Rodriguez, feeling marginalized and unsupported, gently interjected. "We're doing our best to support Sarah, but sometimes financial constraints make it difficult. We appreciate your understanding."

Ms. Thompson's privileged perspective, however, prevented her from truly comprehending the Rodriguez family's situation. She could not fathom the daily struggle they faced, and her response was rooted in a belief system that placed the onus on the family, rather than acknowledging systemic barriers.

Over the course of the year, Sarah's academic performance began to wane. It was evident that her family's financial stress was affecting her focus and motivation. However, Ms. Thompson continued to approach the situation with a lack of empathy, attributing Sarah's struggles solely to a perceived lack of effort. ("Unexamined Identity," a case scenario written by Author 2 with support from ChatGPT AI)

Introduction

Understandably, teacher candidates often lack the preparation and tools necessary to effectively navigate complex and contentious topics in their interactions with students, colleagues, and the communities they serve (Misco & Patterson, 2007). The case method has the potential to provide teacher candidates with the necessary skills to address such issues (Gorski & Pothini, 2018). Case method pedagogy has been found to facilitate changes in teacher candidates' sociocultural comprehension, bolster their classroom engagement and motivation, refine their critical thinking and problem-solving prowess, encourage perspective-taking, and strengthen the link between theory and practice.

In this paper, we advocate for a relational pedagogy approach to the case method, making it a more student-centered and meaningful strategy for aiding teacher candidates in addressing contentious matters. To this end, we provide an overview of the extant literature, in which we outline the utilization of the case method as an instructional approach, describe research to examine its efficacy in teacher education, and explore its utility in confronting contentious topics. Next, we discuss the theoretical influence of relational pedagogy on our approach to the case method in teacher preparation for addressing controversial issues. We then provide four approaches for using the case method and conclude with a discussion of our experiences as teacher educators using the case method through a relational pedagogy approach to address controversial issues.

Each of us authors works in teacher preparation at a Midwest university in the United States. Prior to our current roles, we taught various elementary grades and each holds a teaching certification in the state where the university is located. Chloe taught third grade before transitioning to teacher preparation. She earned a K-9 principal certification and later received a PhD in Educational Leadership with an emphasis on leadership, culture, and curriculum. Currently, she teaches undergraduate and graduate courses in the elementary education program at the university. Amber taught a range of grades from first through tenth during her 12 years in the K-12 setting before moving into higher education full-time. She holds

a Master's Degree in Literacy and an EdD in Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis. She also teaches graduate and undergraduate courses in the elementary education program. Stacie earned a Bachelor's degree in Psychology and a Master's in Elementary Education before teaching first grade for six years. She also worked in literacy curriculum leadership in a large school district prior to pursuing a PhD in K-12 Reading Education. At the university, she teaches graduate and undergraduate literacy courses for elementary education, early childhood education, and special education programs.

Literature Review

In this review of the literature, we describe how the case method is used as an instructional practice, research on its effectiveness in teacher education, and its usefulness in addressing controversial issues. The case method seeks to bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application, equipping learners with essential skills for navigating complex challenges in various contexts. Existing research findings on the case method have highlighted positive outcomes and benefits in teacher education as well as considerations, including challenges related to generalization in single-case studies, potential student frustration due to the demands of case analysis, and the challenges inherent in perspective-taking. Finally, this review explores the potential of the case method to address controversial topics in education, emphasizing its relevance; the role of objectivity when using the case method to discuss controversial, justice-oriented topics; the abundance of solutions it offers; and the unique perspective it provides on such issues.

The Case Method

The case method, often attributed to its origins at Harvard Law School in 1870 (Foster et al., 2010), is an instructional strategy that has gained prominence across various disciplines. At its core, the case method relies on the use of teaching cases, which are narratives designed with a specific educational purpose in mind (Foster et al., 2010). These cases present real or hypothetical situations, offering a rich context for analysis and discussion.

Foster and colleagues (2010) described a teaching case as "a story, a narrative if you will, usually based on actual events and told with a definite teaching purpose" (p. 523). When students engage with a teaching case, they are not merely reading about general theories; instead, they are immersed in the intricacies of a situation that demands thoughtful decision-making (Leonard & Cook, 2010).

One distinctive advantage of the teaching case is its ability to facilitate exploration from multiple perspectives and angles. This aspect of the case method promotes critical thinking, empathy, and a deeper understanding of the complexities inherent in real-world situations (Gorski & Pothini, 2018). By

encouraging case analysts–teacher candidates in the context of this paper—to consider diverse viewpoints, the method equips them to respond mindfully and effectively to educational challenges.

During case study discussions, students actively question and evaluate their own thought processes. With formative assessments as the standard practice, students assess their own assertions and contrast them with those of their peers, identifying weaknesses in their reasoning in a secure setting (Gallucci, 2006). This reflective process is integral to the case method, fostering self-awareness and continuous improvement among learners.

The ultimate goal of the case method in education is to bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application. Through the analysis and discussion of teaching cases, teacher candidates are encouraged to apply abstract concepts and theories to real-world scenarios (Leonard & Cook, 2010). This approach not only enhances their comprehension of the subject matter but also equips them with the skills necessary to navigate complex classroom situations thoughtfully.

Through employing the case method, the instructor's function shifts from being a mere provider of information to serving as a democratic leader within a closely integrated group, contributing significantly to learning outcomes and yielding enhanced teacher evaluations (Leonard & Cook, 2010). The case method promotes an interactive and collaborative learning environment in which instructors guide students through the process, facilitating meaningful discussions and fostering deeper understanding.

Research on the Case Method in Teacher Education

This section reviews the existing body of research on the case method, focusing on its numerous positive outcomes and benefits in teacher education. By examining the findings of multiple studies, we gain valuable insights into how the case method facilitates shifts in sociocultural understanding, enhances motivation and engagement among teacher candidates, improves critical thinking and problem-solving skills, and fosters a peer-driven evaluation process that deepens the knowledge acquired. However, this review also acknowledges the limitations and challenges associated with the case method, such as the issue of generalization in single-case studies, potential student frustration due to the demands of case analysis, and the inherent challenges with perspective-taking.

Positive Outcomes and Benefits of the Case Method in Teacher Education

Researchers have identified numerous positive outcomes associated with case method implementation in teacher education. Four are described in this section: shifts in sociocultural understanding, enhanced motivation and

engagement, improved problem-solving and critical thinking skills, and peer evaluation and depth of knowledge.

Shifts in Sociocultural Understanding. One notable contribution of the case method in teacher education is its potential to facilitate shifts in understanding regarding the influence of sociocultural factors in schools (Brown & Kraehe, 2010a). Teacher candidates engage with teaching cases that encompass diverse sociocultural contexts, enabling them to develop a deeper comprehension of the complexities and influences present in educational settings. This exposure to real-world scenarios has the potential to foster cultural humility and the ability to navigate diverse classrooms effectively.

Enhanced Motivation and Engagement. Multiple studies have demonstrated that the case method increases motivation and engagement among teacher candidates (Ozdilek et al., 2018; Richman, 2015). This heightened engagement translates into improved student achievement, as teacher candidates are more invested in the learning process. Moreover, the case method enables teacher candidates to establish meaningful connections between course concepts and real-life situations, leading to a more profound perception of learning gains (Bonney, 2015; Richman, 2015).

Improved Problem-Solving and Critical Thinking Skills. Research findings consistently indicate that the case method enhances teacher candidates' skills in problem-solving, analytical and critical thinking, and decision-making (Diamantes & Ovington, 2003; Hunt, 2009; Pindiprolu et al., 2003; Zottman et al., 2012). Through the analysis and discussion of teaching cases, teacher candidates develop the ability to navigate complex educational scenarios. They learn to think critically, consider multiple perspectives, and make informed decisions—a skill set essential for effective teaching and leadership in educational settings.

Peer Evaluation and Depth of Knowledge. The case method promotes peer evaluation and deepens the knowledge gained in the classroom environment (Leonard & Cook, 2010). Classmates critically evaluate each student's analysis and decisions, requiring them to justify their solutions. This rigorous process compels students to assume the role of decision-makers and develop solutions appropriate to the situation at hand. This peer-driven evaluation fosters a collaborative learning environment that enhances the depth of knowledge acquired.

Considerations of the Case Method in Teacher Education

While the case method offers numerous advantages, it is not without important considerations. One central theoretical and practical challenge identified in the

literature pertains to the generalization of problems in single-case studies (Rosenbaum et al., 2014). As teacher candidates engage with specific cases, there is a concern about the extent to which the insights gained can be applied to broader educational contexts. Generalizing from individual cases to universal principles can be challenging and requires careful consideration.

Another consideration highlighted by research is the potential for some students to report frustration due to the additional time needed to participate in the case method (Richman, 2015). The intensive nature of case analysis and discussion may demand more time and effort from students, and this could lead to feelings of frustration or be overwhelming, particularly in contexts with heavy course loads.

A final consideration has to do with the challenges inherent to perspective-taking. One step that many case analysis methods use involves taking stock of varying perspectives within a case (Gorski & Pothini, 2018; Leonard & Cook, 2010). It is vital that instructors who utilize the case method are aware that students from privileged identities will never be able to truly take on the perspective of someone within the case who is from a minoritized population. “The Other remains infinitely transcendent, infinitely foreign” (Levinas, 1985, p. 194). However, with critical reflection and careful guidance, instructors can build a practice of imagination (Hinsdale, 2016) to allow their students to enter that space between their lived experiences and the experiences of others.

The Case Method and Controversial Topics

The case method provides potential for addressing controversial topics in education. This section synthesizes findings from multiple sources to explore four themes identified in the literature related to the case method and controversial topics: the relevance and responsibility of using the case method in addressing such topics, the role of objectivity in facilitating discussions on controversial topics, the abundance of solutions it offers, and the distance it provides from the issues being studied. Throughout our discussion of each of these themes, we revisit the opening case scenario.

Relevance and Responsibility

The relevance of incorporating the case method in addressing controversial topics in education is underscored by the imperative to prepare teacher candidates to work effectively with students from diverse sociocultural backgrounds (Brown & Kraehe, 2010a). In an increasingly diverse society, educators must use assessment data to reflect, learn, grow, and adapt to meet the needs of all students (Seguin & Ambrosio, 2002). It is the responsibility of teacher preparation programs to ensure that teacher candidates recognize the intricate role that sociocultural factors play in education and teaching, with the aim of providing a quality and equitable educational experience for all (Brown & Kraehe, 2010a).

However, addressing controversial topics can be daunting for educators, as many feel uncomfortable or even afraid to engage in such discussions (Muth et al., 2007). The fear of uncomfortable discussions or potential consequences, such as legal issues or job security, can deter educators from approaching these topics. Hence, the case method can serve as a structured and supportive approach to navigating these complex and sensitive issues in the educational context.

A case like “Unexamined Identity” at the opening of this paper provides a scenario teacher candidates can use to examine sociocultural factors such as differences in teacher, student, and caregiver identities. As teacher candidates examine the perspectives within “Unexamined Identity,” they are asked to consider how each character might feel during the family-teacher conference, illuminating potential assumptions and biases.

Objectivity

Once the case is introduced and students begin grappling with the content, it is important for the instructor to examine the role of objectivity, especially with cases concerning controversial topics of social justice. While objectivity certainly plays a role in facilitating case analysis, all teaching is political, and it would be shortsighted to center objectivity in this process (Freire, 1970). Objectivity is linked to neutrality. Educators must not remain neutral with issues of justice and equity, as this can lead to perpetuating misinformation and divisiveness in society (Walker, 2021). As Shevrin Venet (2019) aptly wrote, “Educators cannot say we are trauma-informed and also remain silent on the unjust systems and conditions that cause trauma” (para 15). Once students have grappled with their own biases and the biases present within the case, Gorski and Pothini (2024) advocated for exploring equitable outcomes. During this process, it is important to pose curious questions that guide students’ thinking toward just and equitable actions that should be taken within the case. Curious questioning and creating trusting educational environments (Wansink et al., 2023) are imperative for using the case method to approach controversial issues, starting with objectivity and then moving toward taking a solid stance on issues of justice.

To support teacher candidates in understanding the limitations of objectivity and the importance of positionality when examining various school and classroom issues, an instructor can use a case like “Unexamined Identity” to facilitate a discussion on varied interpretations of the case based on teacher candidates’ diverse identities and lived experiences. Such conversations can support teacher candidates in identifying how sociocultural factors inform how an individual views everything. In other words, why do two teacher candidates reading the same case have different interpretations? It requires adept facilitation by the instructor to ensure that polarization does not occur when students share their interpretations and thoughts around this and other cases. For example, it would be easy for students to villainize

the teacher in the “Unexamined Identity” case, but a skilled facilitator would encourage students to examine the root of their perspectives from a more objective stance while still investigating how the teacher’s bias led her to act on inequitable beliefs.

Abundance of Solutions

The case method's strength in addressing controversial topics lies in its ability to present scenarios that do not have a single, correct answer (Foster et al., 2010). Choices between right and wrong alternatives represent simpler decisions; therefore, cases should introduce dilemmas, conflicts, competing solutions, and decisions to be made under time pressure and with imperfect information (Foster et al., 2010). This multifaceted approach encourages teacher candidates to explore the complexities of controversial topics, fostering a deeper understanding and the development of critical thinking skills.

As teacher candidates consider the challenges and opportunities present in a case like “Unexamined Identity,” they grapple with complex phenomena like class privilege, overt and covert biases, and teacher-family communication. Identifying recommendations for Ms. Thompson, the teacher in the case, requires teacher candidates to consider several elements. And in doing so collaboratively, they have an opportunity to consider multiple interpretations and viable solutions.

Distance from the Issue(s)

Utilizing the case method to address controversial topics allows teacher candidates to approach these issues from a certain distance, providing a level of detachment that simplifies evaluation but complicates analysis. This detachment from the issues within the case allows teacher candidates to witness circumstances and behaviors with a more critical lens than if it were directly happening in their lived experiences. This can be particularly valuable when dealing with emotionally charged or sensitive topics (Brown & Kraehe, 2010a) because it can better prepare them for navigating those emotions and topics by experiencing them in a safe setting through the case analysis.

Moreover, when the case method incorporates cases that align closely with course content, teacher candidates have the opportunity to grasp how sociocultural constructs, such as race, operate in the real world, often with structural and material consequences (Brown & Kraehe, 2010a). This proximity to real-life scenarios enhances their comprehension of the complexities of these issues.

In our teacher preparation program, teacher candidates read and discuss “Unexamined Identity” during the semester prior to student teaching. Using the case at this point in the program supports programmatic goals related to the necessity of critically examining one’s identity and its intersection with one’s experiences in schools as both a student and a teacher. While teacher candidates

eventually conduct an autoethnographic study later in the semester, this case sets the stage for why such work is important. It allows teacher candidates to examine the importance of identity from a distance before examining their own up close, hence clearly establishing a *why* for the deep identity work they embark on the rest of the semester.

Theoretical Influence: Why Relational Pedagogy is Necessary for the Case Method

Every teaching approach is influenced by a variety of educational and psychological theories and philosophies (hooks, 1994; Schonwetter et al., 2010). That is certainly true for using the case method. From our own experience with the case method and examining our teaching philosophies, we believe a student-centered approach with relational pedagogy (Hinsdale, 2016) is foundational to using the case method in a meaningful way.

Student-centered learning is imperative when using the case method (Wright, 2011). Weimer (2013) explained that in student-centered learning, power is shared, and the role of the teacher is more of a facilitator rather than the owner of knowledge. These are important components of student-centered learning when it comes to utilizing the case method effectively. Leonard and Cook (2010) connected student-centeredness to the case method when they outlined what instructors need to do in order to implement the case method in a way that centers student knowledge and experiences and allows the instructor to move into the role of a facilitator rather than that of a lecturer. To help with this shift from teacher-centeredness to student-centered practices, Leonard and Cook (2010) explained that instructors must be good listeners to interpret the students' words, feelings, and attitudes. The instructor must help students progress by doing the following:

- 1) asking questions—the right kinds of questions;
- 2) helping them express their ideas—but not distorting those ideas; and
- 3) voicing opinions and drawing upon knowledge appropriate to the situation. Instructors' questions should not be designed to steer the students on a predetermined course nor should they be designed to test or embarrass students. (Leonard & Cook, 2010, p. 97)

To enact these three skills outlined by Leonard and Cook (2010), instructors must embrace the four tenets of relational pedagogy (Hinsdale, 2016), starting with listening. Hinsdale explained that to be good listeners who can help interpret students' words, feelings, and attitudes in a way that allows us to explore the Other through digging into our own biases, instructors must become students of their

students' lives (Valenzuela, 1999). Fundamental to using the case method are listening to our students in this way and knowing who they are. Understanding the sociocultural makeup of the class must be the foundation on which any case is analyzed, especially cases involving challenging topics. For example, one case that Stacie, Author 3, has used in her literacy courses involves a teacher who uses Huck Finn for a lesson. Within the case, the racialized language of the book is not avoided, and no instruction is given about how to navigate this language. When facilitating this case analysis, Stacie recognized there were a few students of color in the room who may be triggered by events within the case, so she instructed them to pay attention to their needs and do what they need to process the case, even if that involved stepping out of the room. While she challenged students to lean into discomfort when opportunities for growth were presented, ultimately, Stacie was acknowledging the dynamics within her class and how the dynamics may impact them in the case. Her permission for students to take what they needed showcased an important part of applying relational pedagogy to case analysis.

This process of developing our understanding of our students can lead to discomfort, which is the second part of relational pedagogy. Hinsdale (2016) framed her writing about discomfort by discussing ignorance toward the Other and that navigating the gap between ourselves and the Other will certainly cause discomfort, especially for educators from dominant backgrounds. Instructors of the case method must ask students the right questions that will allow students to “tarry” with the discomfort (Yancy, 2012, p. 44) that arises when we reflect on the ways in which we might be privileged by race, ethnicity, gender, heteronormativity, ability, or by our position in the academic hierarchy. Yancy encouraged people to dwell near the differences they notice rather than simply noticing them and walking away.

Understanding the sociocultural dynamics within the group with which one is facilitating a case analysis is imperative for a meaningful level of deep analysis (Brown & Kraehe, 2010b). Through examining sociocultural dynamics within the group analyzing a case and within a case itself, Brown and Kraehe (2010b) found that preservice teachers expanded their knowledge base around issues of historical inequalities in schools, institutional barriers, and teaching around difference. When students are required to examine who has the privilege and power within a case through a sociocultural and systemic lens, they have the potential to begin the work of dismantling an unjust system. As Johnson (2005) wrote:

Privilege increases the odds of having things your own way, of being able to set the agenda in a social situation and determine the rules and standards and how they're applied. Privilege grants the cultural authority to make judgments about others and to have those judgments stick. It allows

people to define reality and to have prevailing definitions of reality fit their experience. Privilege means being able to decide who gets taken seriously, who receives attention, who is accountable to whom and for what. And it grants a presumption of superiority and social permission to act on that presumption without having to worry about being challenged. (pp. 31-32)

Gorski and Pothini (2018) supported this critical analysis of cases that focuses on inequities, power imbalances, and the role of privilege. In step two of their equity literacy process, Gorski and Pothini urged case analysts to “read between the lines. Practice *recognizing* conditions and context you might not usually recognize or seeing what you might be conditioned not to see” (p. 14). In order to truly examine cases that get students to explore the lived experiences of the Other and to see what they may be conditioned not to see requires adept facilitation and a deep understanding of who is in the room. From our own experiences facilitating cases within a predominantly White, middle-class, cis-gendered university, we have learned the necessity of asking preservice teachers to examine their own identities and biases at a deep level prior to presenting a case that requires them to examine privilege, power, and difference. Ample research confirms the need to lean into the discomfort of examining personal biases and identities as a foundation for developing preservice teachers’ equity-centeredness (Kleinrock, 2021; Milner et al., 2019; Palmer, 1997), and the case method provides one avenue for this examination practice.

Listening and leaning into discomfort will build strong relationships but ultimately will not bridge the gap between the self and the Other (Biesta, 2012). That is where imagination is needed as the third component of relational pedagogy. While listening itself allows us to create an openness to the Other, it can also lead us to imagine together as we construct stories from multiple perspectives, which is a core piece of using the case method. A vital aspect of this imagination process is that students from privileged identities will never be able to truly understand and take on the perspective of an oppressed population. Allowing students to voice their opinions and honor one another’s different perspectives as well as the perspectives of those in the case can increase empathy and relational openness, according to Hinsdale (2016). We see this in our own courses as well. Amber, Author 2, teaches a course for elementary education teacher candidates focused on the connections between homes, schools, and communities. In this course, she utilizes case analysis to increase teacher candidates’ equity-centered decision-making skills. Students reported that utilizing cases has had a significant impact on the development of their equity mindsets overall. Many of the teacher candidates in our courses share a similar identity as the teacher in the opening case. Analyzing the case allows them

to begin to dig into their own identities and biases as they explore the potential harm that those biases may have if acted on in ways similar to those of the case teacher. To facilitate this, imagining potential equitable outcomes is imperative as teacher candidates begin grappling with the importance of examining their own identities.

Trust, the fourth and final tenet of relational pedagogy, is imperative when utilizing the case method. Hinsdale (2016) explained how trust is a component of relational pedagogy:

[To] nurture trust across difference is a complicated matter, but there are certain steps educators can take toward this goal. Self-reflective teachers who are at ease with the discomfort that can arise in reexamining their worldviews can become vulnerable to their students by voicing their critical understanding of whiteness, power, and privilege. (p. 18)

In order to help teacher candidates express their ideas without distorting them during case analysis, this kind of vulnerable trust must be developed in classrooms. There is an important component of vulnerability when it comes to trust building in classrooms. This is supported by hooks (1994) who wrote, “Empowerment cannot happen if we refuse to be vulnerable while encouraging students to take risks” (p. 21). All three of us model vulnerability in our classes by sharing our own experiences, modeling our thinking about when we do fall short, and sharing our own transformation of thought and how we arrived where we are today. There are clear connections between these tenets of relational pedagogy and the case method. But *how* do you use the case method? That will be explored in the next section.

Using the Case Method

In our review of research on the case method, we found several researchers who outlined steps or a process for using the case method (Foster et al., 2010; Glendon & Ulrich, 2001; Nohria, 2021), but we felt that Galucci (2006) summed up these steps from other researchers most concisely. Galucci’s method of case analysis applies to analyzing scientific cases, but we expand these steps to apply more broadly to a variety of cases, including cases that examine controversial topics.

In step one of case analysis, Galucci (2006) explained that students need to identify alternative conceptions of the phenomena in the case. This is essentially identifying what deeper concepts are at play within the case being examined. Based on other research on the case method by numerous scholars, such as Leonard and Cook (2010) and Brown and Kraehe (2010a), we believe this is the step when students and teachers need to examine their personal biases and prior knowledge to determine how their interpretation of the case may impact the discussion. Examining biases is especially important when exploring controversial topics. This

is supported by Gorski and Pothini (2024) who explained that the first step in the case analysis process is to identify examples of bias and equity present in the case. The relational pedagogy tenet most relevant to this part of the analysis is listening, as students should be encouraged to listen to one another as they explore their biases and preconceptions. Trust must be built as well during all steps of this process to ensure a safe learning environment to explore the controversial issues within the case.

In step two of using the case method, Galucci (2006) explained that the teacher needs to build a conceptual framework. This is when a teacher has the freedom to customize the analysis process to meet the learning goals of the course. There are numerous ways an instructor may customize this step of the analysis based on the learning goals of the course or lesson.

The final step of the case method process outlined by Galucci (2006) may take the longest and involves metacognition. During this phase, students typically engage in conversation or take on the roles of the people within the case to examine the case from multiple perspectives. During the metacognition phase, the instructor should guide students to engage in questioning and monitor their thinking. This is where Hinsdale's (2016) concept of imagination should be woven in to help students see the case from different perspectives.

Approaching controversial issues using the case method requires intentionality and preparation. Outlined below are four possible ways to approach controversial cases.

Case Analysis Method 1: Equity Literacy

Gorski and Pothini (2018) outlined how to analyze cases using the Equity Literacy Process in their book, *Case Studies on Diversity and Social Justice in Education*. This is a seven-step process that begins with identifying implicit and overt biases within the case as well as any biased or inequitable policies that may be at play. Second, the analysts should take stock of the varying perspectives within the case. This act of perspective-taking aligns with the imagination tenet of relational pedagogy (Hinsdale, 2016). The third step is to consider possible challenges and opportunities in the case. Step four involves imagining possible outcomes in the short term and long term. This leads right into step five, which is to brainstorm immediate responses, and step six, which is to brainstorm longer-term policy and practice adjustments the case may bring up. In the final step, a plan of action is crafted. This equity literacy process can be applied to nearly any case but works especially well for cases focused on controversial topics because it delves specifically into bias, equity, and justice.

In "Unexamined Identity," the case at the opening of this paper, components of the equity literacy process were used when analyzing the case with teacher candidates. Amber, Author 2, instructed students to identify biases that were

present in the case after they had read it. Students identified that the teacher's own biases around the importance of extracurriculars were getting in the way of acknowledging the barriers for the Rodriguez family to access these activities. Next, teacher candidates worked together to take stock of the different perspectives and identified that the case teacher's lack of intentionality with examining her own identity and biases was a possible root of the problem in the case. They then explored equitable outcomes and connected the overall case back to their own identity work that they were exploring throughout the semester.

Case Analysis Method 2: Problem-Solving Approach

Leonard and Cook (2010) outlined another method for analyzing cases to help support "students who possess superior communication, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills" (p. 95). They outlined a similar seven-step approach to equity literacy that is intended to center student voices and help instructors step away from a lecture style of teaching.

1. Read the case very carefully.
2. Ask yourself: What is the problem?
3. Seek alternative solutions.
4. Analyze the solutions.
5. Select the most workable solution.
6. Implement the proposed solution.
7. Follow up and reappraise. (Leonard & Cook, 2010, p. 99)

Both Gorski and Pothini's (2018) equity literacy and Leonard and Cook's (2010) problem-solving approach could be applied broadly to any case for critical analysis. There are clear overlaps between the two approaches, with the main difference being that the equity literacy process centers equity in the analysis when examining the problems and solutions.

Case Analysis Method 3: Existing Conceptual Framework

The goal of some case analyses is for students to apply a specific conceptual framework or theory to the case. One example of this could involve asking teacher candidates to apply the principles of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy outlined by Brown-Jeffy and Cooper (2011) to analyze a case to determine if the teacher in the case responded in a culturally relevant way. This could be expanded broadly to allow students to apply any framework or theory to a case selected by an instructor. When one considers the potential for analyzing cases with controversial topics, there are a variety of frameworks that may be useful to help students develop their critical analysis skills and better equip them for working with those issues in their future careers.

In one of Amber's courses, she used this method for analyzing several cases focused on equitable family engagement. Using multiple cases from the Harvard Family Research Project (2014), she asked students to apply Lott and Torres' (2014) framework for equitable family engagement to each of the cases. Through this process, teacher candidates used learning from Ishimaru's (2020) book, *Just Schools*, as well as the equitable family engagement framework to explore whether each case included equitable family engagement and, if not, what could be improved. This class session was a powerful way for teacher candidates to examine real-world scenarios they will face with families through a lens of equity.

Case Analysis Method 4: Application of Course Learning

Depending on what type of case is selected and the instructional goals outlined, students could apply concepts from a course reading to a case. For example, in a course taught by both Amber (Author 2) and Chloe (Author 1), teacher candidates read a chapter by Howard et al. (2020) about building positive relationships with students. Part of this chapter lists several recommendations for being more aware of how teachers communicate with students to build relationships. Amber and Chloe used a case study from the Gorski and Pothini (2018) book but had teacher candidates use the recommendations outlined by Howard et al. (2020) to analyze the case and propose how the teacher in the case either did or did not use the tips suggested by Howard et al. This could be widely applied depending on course readings and learning objectives.

The summary of all of these methods is to begin with the end in mind (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005) when deciding on your instructional goals. Once you have your objectives selected, choose an analysis method that will facilitate meeting those goals and find or write a case for analysis.

The Case Method, Relational Pedagogy, and Controversial Issues

The following section will outline how each author of this article has applied the case method within their instruction. This will include how we use the case method, how we have intentionally approached it through a relational pedagogy lens, how we approach controversial issues, and what impact we believe the case method is having within our classrooms.

Using the Case Method in Teacher Education Courses

Amber

I am using the case method in my Home, School, and Community course to help teacher candidates explore the ways these spaces are framed in our current educational system. A recent example of how I utilized a case in this class was a class session in which the objective was to analyze how our ways of thinking may

impact relationships with parents, relationships with students, and the overall school climate. To approach this topic, I used ChatGPT generative artificial intelligence to assist me in developing a case based on a parent-teacher interaction I observed while teaching fourth grade that was framed using deficit thinking. After some adjustments of my own based on how Howard et al. (2020) framed deficit thinking and including phrases I remember from the interaction I observed, I gave it to my class. As they read, there were visible reactions from teacher candidates when they read portions in the case when the teacher was interacting with a parent. One teacher candidate gasped, another grunted, and others jotted notes along their paper about the problematic language that was used. The engagement in the room during the initial reading of the case confirmed that using cases can increase student engagement with content (Ozdilek et al., 2018; Richman, 2015).

We discussed the case after they read it, and teacher candidates were shocked that this would ever happen. When I revealed to them that this case was based on a family-teacher conference a colleague had when I was an elementary teacher, they were shocked and then began connecting how they had observed different aspects of the case in their practicum placements. While they felt initially surprised that such a case could really happen, teacher candidates were able to dig into the case more carefully, examine the sociocultural context of the case, and make connections to their own experiences, showcasing how the case method can contribute to higher levels of critical thinking (Diamantes & Ovington, 2003; Hunt, 2009; Pindiprolu et al., 2003; Zottman et al., 2012). It was simple for them to identify biases and inequities present in the case as instructed by Gorski and Pothini (2018). The discussion then turned toward alternative ways of thinking in order to practice step four of the equity literacy case analysis method, which involved exploring equitable outcomes (Gorski & Pothini, 2018). Teacher candidates ultimately practiced reframing the entire case using asset mindsets (Gorski, 2011) instead of the deficit mindset that schools are steeped in and that was part of the case they analyzed (Dutro, 2019).

Chloe

In my Introduction to Elementary Education course, I have used Gorski and Pothini's (2018) cases related to social justice issues during two class sessions. In the first, teacher candidates engaged in case analysis methods one and four, described above: application of the equity literacy analysis process (Gorski & Pothini, 2018) and application of course learning. More specifically, the first case promoted a discussion about how teachers assign value to students' varied contributions during a class discussion. Teacher candidates read the case and responded to the provided questions, which focused on enhancing their equity literacy, individually first and then by sharing their responses through round robin with their teammates. Later during the same class session, teacher candidates

returned to the case using a course reading on teachers' communication styles to consider how the case teacher's communication approach promoted or hindered relationship building. This case examination and dialogue facilitated a shift in teacher candidates' sociocultural understanding (Brown & Kraehe, 2010a) as they considered how teachers privilege certain students' experiences over those of other students.

In the second class session, which focused on differentiated instruction, teacher candidates began class by reading and analyzing a case by Gorski and Pothini (2018) that problematizes the way grit is approached in schools. Teacher candidates followed the equity literacy case analysis method to consider how the way grit is used in schools works against the goals of equity literacy. This case became a springboard for the rest of the class session on being responsive to all students. Toward the end of this class session, teacher candidates utilized course learnings on Universal Design for Learning to make recommendations for the case teacher to address the case student's incomplete homework. The case used in this way promotes teacher candidates' problem-solving, critical thinking, and decision-making skills (Diamantes & Ovington, 2003; Hunt, 2009; Pindiprolu et al., 2003; Zottman et al., 2012).

Stacie

In previous semesters, I have used Gorski and Pothini's (2018) cases to examine racialized language within a text. As a professor of literacy, I often focus on the printed curriculum (picture books and chapter books) that are used in classrooms and provide opportunities for teacher candidates to consider how these printed curriculum choices impact students. Robles and Baker (2019) asserted that cases should allow readers to engage with detailed, everyday situations they might actually experience in the field, and "they must include information about interpersonal issues, organizational personnel, organizational hierarchy, and other organizational details" (p. 195). Teacher candidates read the case, which centers on scenarios they will likely encounter once they are in the classroom, and then engaged in small-group discussion around the case before moving to whole-group discussion. Currently, I am writing cases, using ChatGPT to help generate cases, and using the work of Gorski and Pothini (2018). While teacher candidates in my classes and I have used many of the questions Gorski and Pothini's (2018) work has generated, we have also examined the results of decisions made within the case. Teacher candidates have considered the importance of relational pedagogy as they examined these decisions. Part of our discussions also included considering how different decisions might lead to different outcomes, as the cases are generally open-ended and can have various outcomes depending on the different decisions teachers might make, just as Robles and Baker (2019) suggested when they explained that cases should allow for "interpretative freedoms" (p. 194).

Relational Pedagogy and the Case Method

Amber

I was not intentional about using relational pedagogy when I first started using cases, but I realized in the course of this research that I was indeed applying components of relational pedagogy when utilizing the case method. A big part of relational pedagogy is listening to various perspectives, which is always embedded in our analysis, and which is similar to how Hinsdale (2013) described the “visceral imperative that we listen and respond to one another” (p. 88). For example, in the asset/deficit case analysis, I asked teacher candidates to imagine what the teacher in the case had experienced that led her to that mindset. They could easily take on her perspective and had empathy for her and the way the system is set up to lead to her deficit views. During this analysis, deep listening occurred between students to truly hear one another’s perspectives. Another component of relational pedagogy occurs when we lean into the discomfort caused by each case. In one session I was leading with colleagues using the case method, we examined a case about race and how problematic language is used in literature. It was uncomfortable for some in the room to explore the implications of such cases in schools, but ultimately, we asked them to lean into or *tarry* with that discomfort, as Yancy (2012) said, so that we could explore equitable outcomes in the scenario. That discomfort ultimately required vulnerability which teacher candidates could not demonstrate without the trust that is part of the way I structure my class. I teach from a place of vulnerability as recommended by hooks (1994) in order to demonstrate to my students that taking risks is all right in this space. That takes a lot of intentional trust-building, which is always part of every class session.

Chloe

Relational pedagogy (Hinsdale, 2016) connects to, (a) how I utilize the case in my class with teacher candidates, and (b) how I hope that I model for teacher candidates the four tenets of relational pedagogy so that they will, in turn, carry those forward in their interactions with students. From the first day of class forward, I work to establish teacher-student and student-student trust through relationship-building efforts such as weekly, low-stakes check-ins at the start of class. To promote openness and listening, teacher candidates are asked to identify the perspective of each actor in the case scenario, and during their discussions with their teammates, they consider their peers’ varied perspectives. Prior to each case, I explicitly identify the potential for cases to evoke or activate certain emotional responses, and I encourage teacher candidates to take the necessary time and resources to support themselves as they engage with the case, but ultimately, we are going to lean into the discomfort that may arise.

Stacie

Within the course as a whole, practices are in place to begin establishing trust, listening, openness, and leaning into discomfort (Hinsdale, 2016) at the start of the semester. We do this through playing student-created music playlists as students come in and get settled for class, sharing “Good News” (Kay, 2018), examining our personal funds of knowledge, using cooperative learning structures, and more. When we examine cases, we begin by discussing each of the people within the case, what their role is, what information we know about them, what assumptions we are making, which may need to be challenged, as we construct their identities within the case. Much like Amber, I lean into hooks’ (1994) work about teaching from a place of vulnerability, in addition to Kay’s (2018) work about bringing students safely into and out of tough conversations. Considerable time is spent ensuring my instruction is centered on relational pedagogy, as I am in agreement with Kay (2024) when he stated,

They should know that their teacher is not reckless or cavalier about their text selection, their facilitation of conversations, or any other aspect of the class. They should feel like their teacher makes a legitimate effort to know them and is willing to make reasonable adjustments based on this knowledge. (para. 7)

Approaching Controversial Topics

Amber

I see cases as a way for teacher candidates in my classes to imagine what their future classrooms might be like. Many times when we read a case, their response is often something like, “Wow, I never thought about how I would handle this.” I am also able to incorporate cases based on experiences from my own 12 years of teaching in K-12 education. When I explain to my students that this actually happened just a few years ago in a classroom not far from our university classroom, they often respond with surprise that something that seems so controversial was discussed in an elementary school classroom. One example is a case I share about a fourth-grader who shouted out during a read-aloud, “These books are racist,” when we were reading *Each Kindness* by Jacqueline Woodson. Every time I have used this case from my own classroom, teacher candidates’ initial reaction and response is to silence the student who shouted out. This opens the class to a deep discussion on ways we can address race and inequity in elementary classrooms in ways that are both developmentally appropriate and justice-oriented. Drawing on the scholarship of teachers such as Kleinrock (2021), Dutro (2019), Shalaby (2017), and Shevrin Venet (2021) helps provide teacher candidates with frameworks for navigating these controversial topics with young children.

Chloe

Using cases, while allowing for connections, provides a detached, depersonalized scenario with actors who are not familiar to teacher candidates in my class (Brown & Kraehe, 2010a). Such an educational tool, I hope, makes it more comfortable for teacher candidates to engage with controversial issues as outsiders. With the tenets of relational pedagogy in place, teacher candidates can freely discuss multiple angles of a case and consider various perspectives. I hope such discussions provide them with the skills needed and the confidence to use taboo topics as teachable moments with their students (Kleinrock, 2021).

Stacie

Using cases has allowed teacher candidates to discuss controversial issues with more ease. Teacher candidates read the cases and have thoughts about them; however, they feel uncomfortable talking about some topics at the beginning of the semester. As we engage in more discussion around the cases and the topics, I see more teacher candidates taking on controversial topics. Often, they recognize a certain perspective they had not considered, or they realize the impact of a decision they had not grappled with, which does not occur until we begin discussing the topic through the case. The case method allows them to process a scenario in more thoughtful and curious ways (Gorski & Pothini, 2024). Gorski and Pothini (2024) described how the case method allows us to practice the “thoughtful analysis and problem-solving skills” needed to “recognize what is happening in our classrooms and schools” in a way that is “unconstrained by our existing biases, ideologies,” and personal pedagogies (p. 9). Additionally, teacher candidates are able to see their professor modeling how to have controversial conversations, which they can use as a guideline and apply to their future classrooms.

Perceptions of Impact

Amber

The power that comes with using cases for teacher candidates is partly in developing their understanding of how controversial topics are approached in schools in both problematic and equity-centered ways. I often share cases about what I did during my K-12 experience, and we analyze what I should have done differently to ensure equity and justice were centered over the comfort of those present. These allow me to both connect with teacher candidates and humanize the learning process. It shows them that they may not be ready to conduct controversial conversations with their students, but that there is a future where they will develop the skills needed for that. Utilizing case analysis helps develop their education equity mindset (Nadelson et al., 2022) and allows them to feel like they do not have to know it all right now. I emphasize this by modeling failures from my own

teaching career so that they will not repeat my mistakes, and by explaining that they will make mistakes of their own, from which they will learn.

Chloe

When I hear teacher candidates in my class referring to previously discussed cases throughout the semester, I feel encouraged by the impact of this instructional decision. Cases provide a shared touchpoint that teacher candidates use to deepen their learning through connections across the semester. I also think that it helps them empathize with the actors involved in the case (Gorski & Pothini, 2018). Moving forward, I would like to think through ways to intentionally assess the impact of the case method on their thinking, particularly related to issues of equity in schools.

Stacie

I hope that it is helping teacher candidates to see how the decisions we make in the classroom can either create equitable learning spaces or perpetuate inequities. Racism and oppression do not always show up as a grand scene in the classroom, but rather in the seemingly small moments, which add up to create inequities. Gorski and Pothini (2024) discussed how educators do not always recognize how we contribute to some of the barriers students face in school around equity and justice. When teacher candidates start unpacking cases, they are able to notice how something a teacher says, the text they select, and how they might dismiss a student's voice all add up to create problematic spaces. We spend time considering how the information we process informs the decision-making of the people within the case after we have considered all who are represented in the case. For example, in a case where there was an interaction between a teacher and a student in a classroom in which many believe the teacher needed to repair the harm done to the student, teacher candidates originally identified only the teacher and student as being part of the case. Through discussion, teacher candidates eventually realized that the rest of the students in the class were also impacted by the interaction between the teacher and the student, and additional work was needed on the part of the teacher to repair with the rest of the students in the classroom. As we progress through the semester and take on more cases, teacher candidates show growth in their abilities to consider everyone involved in the case and in what actions teachers can take in their classrooms. Talking about how different decisions can lead to different outcomes allows them to see how important their decision-making is and gives them a sense of empowerment within their classroom, and this is, I believe, what they start recognizing.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we have demonstrated that teacher candidates often face challenges when dealing with complex and contentious subjects in their interactions with students, colleagues, and the communities they serve. We have proposed the case method as a solution to this issue, as it equips teacher candidates with the essential skills to address such matters, as suggested by Gorski and Pothini (2018). Throughout this paper, we have discussed the impact of the case method on teacher candidates, highlighting its positive effects on sociocultural understanding, classroom engagement, motivation, critical thinking, problem-solving abilities, perspective-taking, and the connection between theory and practice.

Furthermore, we have advocated for an approach that integrates relational pedagogy into the case method, transforming it into a meaningful, student-centered strategy for assisting teacher candidates in tackling contentious subjects. Our review has included an exploration of existing literature, examining the use of the case method as an instructional technique, its effectiveness in teacher education, and its applicability to addressing controversial topics. We also detailed the theoretical underpinnings of relational pedagogy in the context of our approach to using the case method in teacher preparation for addressing contentious matters.

Additionally, we provided four distinct approaches to implementing the case method, and we concluded our discussion by sharing our experiences of employing the case method with a relational pedagogy approach to address controversial topics.

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