

Reclaiming Uplift

Caring for Teacher Candidates During the Covid-19 Crisis

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Abstract

Teachers in the US have historically served affective roles of uplift and civic engagement (Fultz, 1995; Gere, 2005), but reforms in the last century privileged technical aspects of the profession (Buchanan, 2015). The Covid-19 crisis, which shifted learning online and isolated students, revealed the limitations of a technical focus in teacher education, and compelled me to reclaim the affective domain via strategies grounded in uplift and *cariño* (Ramirez, et al., 2016). These strategies included (1) mindfulness and emotional awareness activities; (2) curriculum emphasizing social-emotional learning; and (3) asynchronous supports highlighting self-care, antiracism, and trauma-informed pedagogy. My adaptations modeled the ways teacher candidates might expand their notions of “teacher identity” (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009) as they imagine future work with students.

Introduction

My teaching career began in 2000, and was immediately altered by the impact of 9/11, the subsequent War on Terror, and the implementa-

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tion of No Child Left Behind. These conflicts and dynamics shaped my sense of what it meant to be a teacher during a national crisis, in a moment of profound reformation of the profession. Likewise, 20 years later, the Covid-19 pandemic transformed how I thought about my teacher identity (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009), as the nation moved from in-person teaching to an entirely online format, struggled to respond to a deadly virus, and confronted long-standing racial and economic inequities. In both moments—2001 and today—I recognized that an essential part of my work was “uplift,” which I define as work rooted in caring, empowerment, and advocacy (Hill-Brisbane, 2005; Powell et al, 2007). In this narrative, I begin with a historical overview, before exploring the ways that the Covid-19 crisis motivated me to reclaim uplift as a fundamental aspect of my work with students.

In the 19th century, teacher professionalism was primarily defined by moral and ethical standards, rather than technical ones, in line with the pastoral and clerical origins of the profession in the United States (Elsbree, 1939). Even more relevant to today, some teachers in the 19th century cast their professional duties in terms of social or racial uplift, specifically. For example, Prudence Crandall and Myrtilla Miner (both involved in abolitionist movements) built schools for young Black women in the 1830s and 40s and fought to keep them open (Foner & Pacheco, 1984). Native American women in the 19th century shaped teaching as an opportunity to teach young indigenous students about their languages and advocate for cultural preservation (Gere, 2005). Similarly, in a study of Black teachers between 1890-1940, Fultz (1995) describes how these educators provided racial uplift and advocated for social justice in marginalized communities throughout the South. Some teacher associations in the 20th century also focused on moral advocacy: the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) called for more inclusive practices that would uplift African-American students and communities (Eaton, 1975), while teachers in the American School Peace League (ASPL) rallied against militarism in schools during WWI (Zeiger, 2003). As these cases illustrate, teachers in the United States have often worked as agents of uplift, demonstrating care for the empowerment and wellbeing of students.

The affective dimensions of teaching diminished, however, as Cold War reforms framed teachers as figures who could advantage the United States against the Soviet Union (Tröhler, 2013); major curricular overhauls in various subjects led to professionalization measures that linked teacher effectiveness to American power (Boyce & Mitchell, 2010; Champagne, 1997; Goodman, 2011; Klein, 2003; Saxe, 2004). Teachers’ roles became further entrenched in technical standards following the

publication of *A Nation at Risk* (Gardner, 1983), and when President Bush signed the NCLB Act in 2002, a wave of new professional reforms required teachers to complete extensive pre-service training and induction (Wong & Sunderman, 2007). Obama-era reforms like “Race to the Top” were no different, as student success was measured through the use of standardized tests, the outcomes of which could be used to determine teachers’ merit pay or employment (Goldstein, 2017). Thus, over the last 100 years, “standardization, tight coupling, and ubiquitous testing practices [reshaped] the nature of many teachers’ professional identities” (Buchanan, 2015, p. 700). Such reconfiguring of the teacher role did not sit well with me during my own years in K-12 education, and I carried that concern with me into higher education as a teacher educator.

Disquisition

Upon my arrival at the University of La Verne in 2017, the teacher education program was reshaping itself to align more closely with the California Teaching Performance Expectations (TPEs) and the California Teaching Performance Assessments (TPAs). I became increasingly frustrated over the last few years of teaching in the revised program, however, as I noted the disconnect between the TPEs and what I believed was essential to good teaching. Nowhere in the current TPEs is the word “equity,” for example, and the term “caring” is found in just one substandard. While the term “culturally responsive” is used in another substandard, the TPEs on the whole offer little guidance as to what such an approach means in actual practice. Disconcertingly, I found myself once again mired in a set of standards that did not capture the day-to-day relationship at the core of good teaching and learning. There was little in the TPEs or TPAs that was grounded in moral and ethical commitments to the uplift of students (e.g., Gay, 2018; Giroux, Freire, & McLaren, 1988; Milner et al, 2019). Fundamentally, in trying to map out all the elements that comprise teaching practices, the TPEs fail to prioritize or elevate the essential components of caring for young people. They also fail to emphasize the importance of adolescent developmental processes, or the value of designing active learning experiences that tap into student interests and provide opportunities for processing. Burying these elements within a larger framework of 50 standards converts teaching into a technical endeavor, rather than a relational one rooted in the affective—i.e., in emotions, attitudes, and feelings—or in a moral obligation that prioritizes nurturing and uplift.

This mismatch manifested distinctly in two of the courses I taught. In the first class, “Theories of Learning,” teacher candidates (TCs) read

Better than Carrots or Sticks (Smith, Fisher, & Frey, 2015), a book about restorative practices and positive classroom environments. The authors argue that the punitive approach to discipline unfairly affects students of color in ways that have long-reaching impacts in their lives, and cast such punishment as “diametrically opposed to the social and emotional well-being we are trying to foster” (p. 9). Many of my TCs found the text valuable, and agreed that a restorative approach is more moral and ethical than traditional disciplinary methods. Yet TCs struggled with the book’s emphasis on cultivating meaningful relationships, student agency and autonomy, peaceful conflict resolution, and social-emotional learning. Indeed, for some, my course was the first time they recognized that students’ emotional lives must be taken into account by teachers, and that teaching adolescents is not just about delivering curriculum or constructing lesson plans. Moreover, in their fieldwork, many reported that the restorative practices described in the book were not evident in the classrooms they observed. As TCs, they struggled with what it would actually mean to cultivate a positive learning environment, one in which the social and emotional needs of learners are taken into account.

In my other course, “Foundations of Teaching,” my syllabus included concepts of teacher identity, critical pedagogy, equity, and culturally-sustaining teaching. I intentionally designed the course to include these topics, in defiance of the TPEs, and TCs responded well to the central texts, *Reaching and Teaching Students in Poverty* by Paul Gorski (2017) and Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970). Gorski argues that teachers have a responsibility to “ensure that we do not reproduce inequitable conditions in our own classrooms and schools” (p. 3), while Freire builds toward a problem-posing, humanistic pedagogy grounded in liberation. In our discussions of these texts, TCs conveyed apprehension about how to cultivate equity in schools where colleagues propagate biases or stereotypes, do not discuss injustices, or even recognize inequities. They also wondered how they could practice equitable strategies grounded in problem-posing praxis in settings where such approaches were not commonplace or were considered “too idealistic.” Notably, some TCs felt unable to clearly identify or analyze inequities in the short amount of observation hours allotted to fieldwork, making them feel ill-prepared to act upon any structural inequalities they witnessed. In other words, TCs did not see how the teacher role could realistically be expanded to include advocacy work within systems that did not recognize the humanity of students, confront systemic biases, or create space for a transformative pedagogy rooted in lived experiences.

Overall, in the years and months prior to the Covid-19 crisis, I noted that teacher candidates had a hard time connecting to the affec-

tive domains of teaching. Many did not feel able to engage in teaching practices informed by commitments to care, justice, equity, or activism when working in schools besieged by technical standards and frameworks. Crucially, while some candidates agreed that teachers ought to consider the moral, ethical, or social-emotional dimensions of the work, they did not see these components attended to by the educators they observed. I struggled with the recognition that, in trying to cover all the TPEs as well as to incorporate material related to caring and social justice, TCs did not feel equipped to embrace the relational aspects of teaching. My concerns would soon deepen, as the world plunged into a massive crisis that radically transformed the nature of teaching and learning.

Dispatch

On March 12, 2020, our university leaders directed faculty to shift all courses into remote learning environments, and gave us only seven days to submit revised syllabi reflecting our adaptations. Initially, like many of my colleagues, I opted for a hybrid synchronous and asynchronous model that alternated by week. I also removed a few assignments from each course to lighten the load, while maintaining fidelity to our learning objectives and the TPEs. These changes satisfied the university's requirements in the initial two weeks of the pandemic, but as we approached April, I realized that what I had imagined was not enough. In actuality, my modifications appeared to be making things worse for teacher candidates, some of whom were flailing, scared, uncertain, and frankly, traumatized. In our first synchronous sessions, I realized how much they needed to be uplifted, and I understood that it was time for me to lean into this affective role in ways that showed authentic care, or *cariño*. Ramirez, Ross, and Jimenez-Silva (2016) draw on Valenzuela (1999), to consider *cariño*, a core aspect of border pedagogy that emphasizes critical thinking, culturally-sustaining curriculum, intersectional identities, liminality, and strong bonds between student and teacher. Indeed, as a Latino professor working at a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI), the pandemic revealed the importance of calling on my own cultural models for care as I performed my duties as an educator. As in 2001, I recognized that the social and political context made it necessary for me to reconfigure my work toward a different purpose, beyond the delivery of academic content. The Covid-19 crisis inspired me to shift my sense of professional identity from content expert to agent of uplift, and from deliverer of curriculum to human being caring for others. In effect, I reclaimed the moral and ethical dimensions of the teacher educator role.

The first major change I made to my classes was to integrate mindfulness practices linked to emotional awareness. For the past 15 years, I have been part of a nonviolence education collective of teachers studying practices like guided breathing and meditation. Though such practices were initially met with skepticism in the 2000s, by the end of the 2010s, they were more mainstream, with some schools and districts making efforts to include them in their curriculum and instruction. The Covid-19 crisis made me realize that, as with any other educational skill or practice, my TCs needed to experience mindfulness so that they could see its value in their own classrooms. To this end, at the beginning of each synchronous session we used a breathing app from the website Calm, to take one minute to breathe deeply and center ourselves, before moving into the agenda and objectives for the session. I then integrated another activity designed to cultivate emotional awareness: personal check-ins. Using various graphics that were circulating widely on social media, such as a chart developed by the Genesis Healing Institute on “Healing During Covid-19” (Ren & Puente, 2020) and an emotions chart adapted from work by Gloria Wilcox (1982), TCs identified their emotions with more nuanced language and examined their emotional trajectories as the crisis evolved and deepened. I aligned every personal check-in conversation with Ramirez, Ross, and Jimenez-Silva’s border pedagogy concept of *conocimiento*, “an epistemology that tries to encompass all dimensions of life: inner (emotional states) and outer (social and political influences) that create lived experiences” (2016, p. 305), as a means to connect with our inner selves and with each other in a non-judgmental way.

As we engaged in these conversations, we were also reading *Better than Carrots or Sticks*, and many TCs connected our check-ins to the wheel of Social-Emotional Learning Competencies developed by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), featured prominently in the Smith, Fisher, and Frey book. TCs explained that they had not fully grasped why social-emotional learning was considered an essential aspect of K-12 teaching, but in the context of the pandemic and their own emotional states, they now recognized its significance. Some affirmed that including activities about self-awareness and self-management also served to honor students’ personal experiences and knowledge. Indeed, when I included a discussion of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs (1970) into our synchronous sessions, TCs were able to identify how “outer states” (lived realities) and “inner states” (emotions and feelings) can prohibit or maximize a student’s capacity to engage in educational activities in school. This led to a fruitful discussion affirming care as a critical component of effective teaching.

As the semester progressed and the uncertainties of the pandemic became more complicated and disconcerting, TCs seemed to want more time to connect with each other and me in both synchronous and asynchronous settings. I recognized that providing such opportunities would be one way of modeling what Smith, Fisher, and Frey (2015) call an “intentionally inviting” teacher: one who is consistently positive, purposeful, sensitive to student needs, and willing to take appropriate actions to meet those needs (p. 23). Thus, in my effort to care for TCs who were struggling, I modified my approach to be more available to TCs in ways that did not significantly add to my workload, such as offering optional synchronous sessions on the weeks already designed as asynchronous. These meetings were usually informal, like a book club discussion or a game night, and focused on bonding and building community. I also took about an hour a week to develop a “Weekly Digest” with resources, activities, and ideas responsive to the conversations we were having, such as teaching through crisis and trauma, being culturally sustaining, and enacting restorative practices. Some TCs responded strongly to the resources I shared about grief, such as those produced by the National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement and Edutopia, as the nation worked not only through the loss of human lives to the coronavirus, but the collective trauma in evidence as structures and support systems crumbled. Acknowledging that TCs wanted even more opportunities to connect, I converted office hours into “coffee hours,” giving them the chance to stop by, say hello, chat, and/or unburden themselves as they struggled to adapt to the ongoing crisis. I also offered the chance to talk by phone, and over the semester I spoke with several individuals about their experiences and challenges. It seemed that students valued all of these adjustments, but recognizing the time constraints of many teacher educators, I would encourage others to consider providing informal opportunities to meet with students once or twice a semester. This might take the form of an optional activity in an asynchronous week, such as watching a film together, or changing one week’s office hours into a “coffee hour,” open to all.

One of the major topics that TCs also wanted to know more about was the way Covid-19 revealed systemic inequities in our K-12 schools, not only in relation to structural racism, but also poverty and access. Some TCs had a hard time accessing technologies that would allow them to connect to our synchronous sessions and were disheartened to learn that many students in their fieldwork contexts were unable to connect at home. Reading the Gorski text in my Foundations of Teaching course, many students articulated that the digital divide (which the Covid-19 crisis worsened) offered a tangible example through which they could

understand Gorski's discussion of systemic inequality in the United States. My sense was that although many of them understood the idea of equity (personally or intellectually), the new context demonstrated to them the interconnected ways that students of color and students in poverty experience inequity in schools. This conversation deepened when TCs learned about the deaths of Ahmaud Arbery and Breonna Taylor; many wanted to know more about antiracist education as a framework for cultivating racial equity and social justice. Thereafter, I began integrating works by Ibram X. Kendi, resources from the National Museum of African-American History and Culture, and articles from *Teaching Tolerance* in the weekly digests. I also provided links to resources about teacher activism, nonviolence, trauma-informed pedagogies, and the school-to-prison pipeline. This led to rich conversations in synchronous sessions and via email about the complex roles teachers play in diverse societies, and why teachers need to engage in antiracist work. My actions were rooted in *cariño*, in authentic care that I hoped would uplift TCs grappling with new feelings, as the twin crises of Covid-19 and racial protests revealed systemic issues they were not all ready to address, traumatizing them in ways they were unprepared to deal with alone. My aim was to be an intentionally inviting teacher educator who responded with care to the needs of the moment, rather than staying handcuffed to a syllabus drafted well before the pandemic began. Students' comments in class, emails, and course evaluations suggested they felt cared for and understood. They also expressed a newfound appreciation for the moral and ethical roles educators can and must play, especially during times of crisis.

Conclusion

In teacher education, we often talk about "affective filters" (Krashen, 1988) that can prohibit students from feeling safe or confident in a classroom setting. As teacher educators, we sometimes forget that our teacher candidates also have their own filters; they too are humans who need to feel safe and cared for, especially in times of crisis. We must model for them the kind of care we would want them to convey to their own students. My shifts in practice reflected responsiveness, empathy, and uplift, elements that harken back to some of the moral and ethical foundations on which teaching was built in the United States (Elsbree, 1939; Kaestle, 1983), as well as to more contemporary approaches that recognize the unique dynamics of working in diverse contexts (Gorski, 2017; Smith, Fisher & Frey, 2015; Ramirez, Ross, and Jimenez-Silva, 2016). Leaning into social-emotional learning and

wellbeing while making myself available in multiple formats allowed me to reconfigure my teacher identity (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009) toward caring and advocacy, while remaining attuned to instructional standards and performance expectations. Connecting more regularly, being responsive to students' emotional states, and demonstrating care through uplifting activities can aid in orienting teacher education away from a technical configuration, grounded in standardized frameworks such as the TPEs. Centering the affective dimensions in our work with TCs, we can promote teacher roles that are contextual, relational, and humanistic—once again reclaiming uplift as an essential component of our work as educators.

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against militarism in the schools, 1914-1918. *Journal of Women's History*, 15(2), 150-179.

Appendix: Related Resources

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