A Case Study of Teachers' Critically Conscious Discourse in an Online Graduate Asset-Based Social Justice Curriculum

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Abstract

The purpose of this small-group case study was to determine to what extent an asset-based social justice curriculum could cultivate critical consciousness as evidenced by teachers' written discourse about students of color and students living in poverty. Participants were selected based on enrollment in an online graduate course in diversity in the college of education of a state university in the southern United States. Participants wrote reflective responses and contributed to online discussion forums before, during, and after exposure to curriculum that was explicit in its social justice and asset-based approach. From a critical lens, analysis of discourse was applied to 7 weeks of participants' reflective writing in discussion forums and individual self-reflective assignments. Participants in this study exhibited varying degrees self-reflection and critical consciousness based on analysis of written discourse. Findings indicate participants' ability to engage

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in critically conscious thought coalesced into three categories of interaction with course content: (a) resistance, (b) critical consciousness interspersed with cognitive dissonance, and (c) adoption. Participants' discourse indicated the continued presence of deficit thinking and reliance on anecdotal evidence to support claims. Participants used a variety of strategies to avoid or minimize cognitive dissonance, including distancing language, reinterpretation, and anecdotal evidence. When participants were resistant or struggled with cognitive dissonance, anecdotal evidence served as a defense mechanism to support their beliefs.

Introduction

Teachers in the United States are increasingly demographically divergent from the student population in terms of social class and race (Boser, 2014; Geiger, 2018; Matias & Mackey, 2015). The U.S. government projects that by 2029, non-White students will make up over 56% of the student population in our country (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020). Yet only 20% of teachers are non-White. Thus the teaching force is considerably less diverse in terms of race and ethnicity than the student population *and* the general population of the United States (Geiger, 2018; National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). These statistics reflect a widening diversity gap in public education. If teachers do not come from similar racial or socioeconomic backgrounds as their students, it may be difficult for them to relate to their students due to lack of cultural synchronicity (Ingersoll & May, 2011) and an understanding of how White privilege is constructed (Matias & Mackey, 2015). Furthermore, White teachers often have limited experiences with students and families who are different from themselves in terms of race, language, and social class (Gay, 2013; Gay & Kirkland, 2003; Henfield & Washington, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 2005).

To offset the growing diversity gap and to close the distance between teachers' and students' experiences, it is vital that teacher education programs provide space for White, middle-class teachers to examine the roots of their assumptions about students of color and students who are experiencing poverty (Feistritzer, 2011; Matias & Mackey, 2015; Nieto & Bode, 2012). One space to accomplish this goal is in graduate and undergraduate education courses that support the development of a personal and professional critical consciousness about critical topics for teaching students in a diverse society (Gay, 2013; Gay & Kirkland, 2003). Therefore findings from this study are acutely relevant for faculty who teach diversity- and social justice–related courses in the more than 300 public and private institutions of higher education that offer online graduate programs in education ("Best Online Master's," 2020). Furthermore, most research on diversity-related topics in teacher education focus on undergraduate preservice teachers. This study contributes to the literature with its focus on graduate students in education programs, specifically graduate students' written discourse as they are exposed to curriculum that intends to foster the development of critical consciousness and asset-based perspectives.

Therefore the purpose of this small-group case study (Creswell, 2013) was to determine to what extent an asset-based, social justice curriculum in an online graduate course in diversity in education could cultivate critical consciousness and facilitate a change in participants' discourse about students of color and students living in poverty. The central research questions were as follows:

1. To what extent does participants' written discourse present evidence of critical consciousness?

2. In what ways do participants use deficit-laden discourse to write about students living in poverty and students of color after explicit exposure to asset-based social justice curriculum?

In the course curriculum, deficit-based perspectives about students of color and students living in poverty were explicitly challenged with asset-based perspectives. Specifically, the culture of poverty (Lewis, 1961; Payne, 1996) paradigm represented deficit-based perspectives in course content, whereas the theory-to-practice funds of knowledge (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005) approach represented asset-based perspectives. During the course, participants read three articles (Gorski, 2008; Gorski & Swalwell, 2015; Ladson-Billings, 2006) and two chapters (González et al., 2005) from various scholars that explicitly challenged deficit-based perspectives and encouraged the adoption of asset-based perspectives about students and families living in poverty. In biweekly discussion forums, participants were challenged to reflect upon their preconceived assumptions about the nature of social reality through written dialogue with other participants. Biweekly written reflective assignments served a similar purpose. The reflective assignments provided a space for students to develop a critical consciousness of their social positionality (race, class, gender) and how it affected their understanding of social reality (Freire, 1970).

Researchers' Positionality

Owing to the critical lens employed in this study, it is imperative that the researchers disclose their social positionality as White, CIS-gender, educated women (Kincheloe, McLaren, & Steinberg, 2011; Milner, 2007). Our positionality and privilege influenced and informed our research. Both researchers embody the statistically average educator in the United States, also reflected in the composition of our sample. In this study, 18 out of the 20 participants were White, and 19 were female. Our White, CIS-gender, and middle-class participants' discourse may have been influenced by our similar race, gender, and social class status in unanticipated ways (Milner, 2007). However, we strived to be aware that our experiences as White, middle-class females do not reflect the experiences many families of color and families experiencing poverty have with public schools.

As critical researchers, we were guided in this inquiry by the epistemologi-

cal assumptions of Kincheloe et al. (2011) about social structure and the roots of social inequality, and we intend for this work to offer a critique of phenomena that perpetuate inequalities of power based on racial, class, and gender. In the context of this study, the researchers explicitly contend the following:

> All thought is fundamentally mediated by power relations that are social and historically constituted. . . . (2) Facts can never be isolated from the domain of values or removed from some form of ideological inscription. . . . (3) Language is central to the formation of subjectivity (conscious and unconscious awareness). (Kincheloe et al., 2011, p. 164)

The disclosure of the researchers' positionality and the epistemology of this inquiry align with the investigation of participants' discourse of critical consciousness about students of color and students experiencing poverty. From a critical perspective, our research sought to challenge deficit perspectives. However, Milner (2007) pointed out an important caveat—deficit discourses can arise from teachers, practitioners, administrators and policy makers, and *researchers*. Therefore the researchers made every attempt to be mindful of their positionality and use of deficit thinking as applied to participants, students, and families throughout the research process.

Review of Literature

Critical consciousness, culture of poverty, and funds of knowledge were fundamental concepts for participants to reflect on in the curriculum of this study; these concepts also theoretically support this research. Historically, deficit perspectives have shaped U.S. public education beliefs and policy for decades. However, challenges to deficit perspectives by social scientists and educators have led to renewed efforts to view communities of color and communities experiencing poverty in more positive, asset-based ways (Gardner & Toope, 2011; González et al., 2005; Greenbaum, 2015; Rodriguez, 2013).

Critical Consciousness

To determine whether the readings facilitated a shift from the use of deficit discourse to asset discourse, participants needed to demonstrate through their writing the ability to analyze course content through the lens of critical consciousness. Critical consciousness represents "the ability to recognize and analyze systems of inequality and the commitment to take action against these systems" (El-Amin et al., 2017, p. 18). Howard (2003) discussed how essential, albeit arduous, critical self-reflection is for teachers to process content related to equity and social justice. The researchers hypothesized that once participants reflected on the course readings through a lens of critical consciousness, they could shift from a focus on what students lacked to community-based knowledge and assets that teachers could utilize to relevantly engage students of color and students experiencing poverty.

Additionally, participants could apply a critically conscious lens to acknowledge and develop an understanding of structural, institutional inequity in public schooling and how it influenced their beliefs about their students. Participants would also be able to identify steps they could take as educators to engage students of color and students experiencing poverty from a more relevant, reflective, and culturally responsive perspective (Ebersole, Kanahele-Mossman, & Kawakami, 2016; Gay, 2013, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 2011).

Culture of Poverty

Since politician Daniel Patrick Moynihan's (1965) report *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, education policies and popular thought have focused on alleviating the perceived deficits of Black communities and/or families living in poverty. A popular manifestation of the deficit perspective in education is the belief in a culture of poverty (Lewis, 1961; Payne, 1996). The concept of a culture of poverty reinforces deficit-laden beliefs that people living in poverty share a "monolithic and predictable set of beliefs, values, and behaviors" (Gorski, 2008, p. 32). Deficit perspectives directed at communities of color and lower income communities, including the culture of poverty, have been criticized by social scientists for blaming the victim and ignoring structural conditions that perpetuate social inequities (Gorski, 2008; Greenbaum, 2015; Ryan, 1971). Scholars have criticized the existence of a culture of poverty for perpetuating unfair myths and stereotypes about students living in poverty (Gorski, 2008; Ladson-Billings, 2006). Deficit beliefs often lead to teachers' lowered expectations for students of color and students living in poverty, thus perpetuating inequities in education and limiting the possibility of public education to provide equality of educational opportunity (Gorski, 2008; Nieto & Bode, 2012).

Funds of Knowledge

In opposition to the historically entrenched deficit perspectives that are prevalent in schooling, asset-based perspectives focus on strengths within the family and community. An example of this is the funds of knowledge approach, which examines "historically developed and accumulated strategies or bodies of knowledge that are essential to household functioning and well-being" (González et al., 2005, pp. 91–92). The funds of knowledge approach highlights "abundant and diverse" skills within households and communities, including social networks, the development and exchange of resources, and practical activities that bind households and communities together (González et al., 2005, p. 92). This asset-based approach focuses on strengths within a community that provide learning contexts for participants and community support through reciprocal economic activities. Research has indicated that reciprocal and supportive social networks are often an overlooked strength in lower income communities of color (Greenbaum, 2015; Stack, 1975). Conversely, the

funds of knowledge approach allows teachers to integrate into academics "students' out-of-school experience, knowledge, and cultural practices" (Rodriguez, 2013, p. 115) by intentionally engaging supportive family and community networks.

The mechanisms behind the funds of knowledge approach require teachers to become ethnographic researchers in the context of the communities where they teach. Inquiry is central to this approach, where teachers use a variety of qualitative methods to learn about their students and families to discover ways to engage students and to design socioculturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995). To investigate students' funds of knowledge, a teacher may use a combination of ethnographic methods, such as case studies, interviews, life histories, or participant observation (González et al., 2005). Essentially, the teacher must engage in community and household ethnography to learn authentically about the strength-based aspects of the communities where they teach. Funds of knowledge is a research-based strategy for facilitating positive and authentic teacher–community relations. However, the funds of knowledge approach is also an acknowledgment that deficit-laden perspectives about lower income families and communities of color are one-dimensional and fail to capture the complex wealth of knowledge that exists within these communities. In the graduate course that yielded data for this case study, participants read several chapters from the book *Funds of Knowledge* (González et al., 2005) to learn about the method and epistemology and to explicitly read about and reflect on the problematization of deficit perspectives, such as the culture of poverty.

Method

Sample

Twenty participants for this small-group case study (Creswell, 2013) were selected using criterion sampling (Patton, 2002) from certified, K–12 teachers enrolled in an online graduate course on diversity in education at a large state school in the southern United States. All 20 students in the course were invited to participate in the study through the informed consent process. As part of the informed consent process, participants were told, in writing, that their written reflections and responses to writing prompts in discussion forums would be used for data collection purposes and that pseudonyms would be used to preserve anonymity in the publication of findings. They were also told that it was their choice to participate in the study and that their participation would have no effect on their course grades. Furthermore, data collection would occur as part of the course curriculum, and there would be no additional time commitments required on their part. Students in the course were also informed that they could decide to withdraw from this study at any time throughout the semester by notifying the instructor-researcher via email or over the phone. Lastly, they were reminded that there would be no bias or penalty to withdraw from the study by the instructor-researcher if they decided not to participate *or* if they decided to stop participating in the research. Subsequently, all 20

students enrolled in the course signed the informed consent document and agreed to participate in the study.

As part of an online master's program in education, the 20 participants lived throughout the state and were not required to travel to campus to earn their master's degree. The state where the sample originated is politically conservative; 58% of all voters in the state who participated in the 2016 election voted for the Republican presidential candidate ("Election Results," 2017). Although the political affiliations of the participants in this study were unknown, they lived and taught in this sociopolitical milieu.

The K–12 student population in the state includes a large number of students living in poverty, with 27.7% of children under 18 years old living below the poverty level. Students of color compose 49% of the school age population, whereas 44% of the student population is White (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017). The K–12 teaching force is White (74.4%), and the percentage of teachers of color in the state has dropped from 30% to 22% (Jones, 2018). The study sample is reflective of the racial composition of the state teaching force; 2 of the participants were Black women, and 17 of the teachers were White women; one participant was a White man.

Curriculum

The instructional methods for the online course included weekly assigned readings, multimedia presentations, and asynchronous discussion groups. Over 7 weeks, participants were exposed to and interacted with peers and one of the researchers with regard to diversity-related topics from a social justice perspective that explicitly challenged deficit perspectives and advocated for culturally relevant pedagogy (Freire, 1970; González et al., 2005; Gorski, 2014, 2008; Ladson-Billings, 2006). During the first week of the course, Sensoy and DiAngelo's (2017) guidelines for constructive engagement in courses with a social justice approach were assigned to students to set the tone for asynchronous discourse in the discussion forum and reflective writing assignments. These guidelines included the following: (a) Strive for intellectual humility, (b) know the difference between opinion and informed knowledge, (c) let go of anecdotal evidence and look for patterns, (d) examine your reactions to gain deeper self-awareness, and (e) recognize how your social position informs your relationships with others.

In following weeks, students were assigned asset-based, social justice literature, including articles or chapters written by Gorski and Swalwell (2015), Gorski (2008), Ladson-Billings (2006), and González et al. (2005). For 7 weeks, participants wrote 250-word reflections in a discussion forum and responded with two 125-word posts to classmates. In addition to the discussion forums, participants wrote 1,500-word reflective papers every other week. The 7 weeks of discussion forums and 3 weeks of reflective papers composed the data set for this case study.

The course assignments were designed to facilitate the development and

practice of critical consciousness through written reflections and interactions with peers and the instructor. In this capacity, the instructor's role was to model critically conscious self-reflection (Gay & Kirkland, 2003). The instructor, who was one of the researchers, moderated the discussion forums by reinforcing course content and providing specific and constructive feedback on students' reflections. Questioning was a technique used by the instructor to reframe students' misconceptions of course content and to challenge logical fallacies. Several times, the instructor intervened to redirect students to examine structural reasons for inequities and to move beyond the use of anecdotal evidence, as instructed in the initial course reading by Sensoy and DiAngelo (2017). Anecdotal evidence was problematized because, by definition, it is evidence "drawn from hearsay or limited personal experience" (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017, p. 11). The social justice approach to the course called for a structural analysis of inequity. Anecdotal evidence was counterproductive because of its focus on exceptions or unanalyzed personal experiences that prevent students from examining holistic social phenomenon (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017, p. 12).

Data Analysis

Deficit perspectives and asset-based perspectives are reflected in the ways that educators use discourse to describe, explain, interpret, and represent their understanding of the social world, including inequities in educational contexts (Rogers, Malancharuvil-Berkes, Mosley, Hui, & Joseph, 2005). In this inquiry, the researchers applied an eclectic approach to analyzing the discourse of teachers, drawing on the works of Fairclough (2001), Meyer (2001), van Dijk (1984, 2001, 2005), Wodak (2001), and Wodak and Reisigl (1999). The textual data were examined for lexical and semiotic evidence of structural versus individual explanations for inequalities; explanatory discourse about culture, power, and society; and consciousness of social representations and identity (van Dijk, 2003). Data were coded based on semiotic evidence of deficit and asset perspectives (Fairclough, 2001; Wodak, 2001), including "stereotypical and evaluative attributions of positive and negative traits" (Meyer, 2001, p. 27) and linguistic evidence of the seven *D*s of discrimination: "dominance, differentiation, distance, diffusion, diversion, depersonalization or destruction, and daily discrimination" (van Dijk, 1984, p. 40).

To increase validity, the data were audited through a peer review audit process (Loh, 2013). A peer reviewer was given written and verbal explanations of the coding procedure, including the inductive development of initial codes. The initial inductive, exploratory codes were compared with the codes used by the peer reviewer. Once discrepancies between codes were recorded and discussed, the data were reviewed again to verify the existence of themes. This process facilitated intercoder agreement (Saldaña, 2015). Exploratory codes developed from the data included deficit language, asset language, critical consciousness, cognitive dissonance, defensiveness, distancing, reinterpretation, color-blind language, and anecdotal evidence.

The themes that emerged when these codes were combined were (a) resistance, (b) critical consciousness interspersed with cognitive dissonance, and (c) adoption. A code that became especially robust in the data, (d) anecdotal evidence, emerged as a theme in participants' discourse as a coping mechanism to defend, explain, or justify their beliefs when struggling with cognitive dissonance.

Results

Analysis of discourse revealed that participants reacted to the ideas presented in the course materials in three ways: (a) resistance, (b) critical consciousness interspersed with cognitive dissonance, and (c) adoption. All 20 participants used deficit discourse and anecdotal evidence to support their reflections at some point during the course, although participants' resistance to asset-based perspectives was varied. In the following excerpts of discourse, pseudonyms are used to protect the anonymity of participants and places.

Resistance

The data indicated that some participants became defensive when they were resistant to the ideas presented in course content or that they struggled to process the asset-based literature into their schemas about minorities and people living in poverty. Two participants were consistently resistant to the ideas presented in course readings and struggled throughout the course with integrating the content into their weekly reflections. The participants expressed frustration with course content in the form of defensiveness and consistently used anecdotal evidence. For example, Mary was defensive and used self-referent anecdotal evidence in her response, despite having been reminded to avoid anecdotal evidence since the first week of class. Mary's defensiveness was embodied in her discourse of being blamed for her successes as a White woman:

> I found myself frustrated while reading the articles and felt as though I was being blamed for my success and the fact that others have not been as successful as I have been merely because of race. I took issue with the suggestion made by Gorski (2008) that economically advantage [*sic*] students excel at the expense of working class and poor students and that the poor are cheated out of opportunities that wealthier students take for granted. It bothers me that successful individuals and their children are blamed for their success and how their success supposedly affects those who, for whatever reason, have not been as successful. . . . When I was growing up we were poor, and my parents worked real hard, but we were still poor. I was the child who never got to go on any of the school trips because we could not afford the cost of the trips. However, we blamed no one for the fact that we had very little and others had much more than we had.

Mary was defensive in terms of how her ideas may be perceived, and that "bothers" and "frustrated" her; she was dismissive of structural social issues that

may have contributed to "others'" lack of success, such as institutionalized racism and classism. Those "for whatever reason" or "merely because of race" issues are brushed aside.

Six participants struggled to master course content related to the funds of knowledge. They recontextualized the asset-based discourse in the readings to fit their prior deficit-laden schemas. In these instances, "funds of knowledge" became the new "culture of poverty." Quotes from two participants, Karen and Cecilia, respectively, exemplify this phenomenon:

> I previously taught at a low SES school with the majority of our students being from an ESL population. These students entered our school and community with very little "funds of knowledge," if any at all in some cases. It was not uncommon to meet a fifth grader who had never been to a grocery store, or park before. They were amazed to go on field trips that allowed them to experience, what would seem like to us, insignificant things. Their faces would light up whenever we'd get off the bus at our destinations.

Karen's written discourse indicated that she believed that funds of knowledge were lacking in communities of color and communities experiencing poverty. Specifically, students who did not speak English as a first language possessed little, if any, funds of knowledge. Karen's deficit-laden reflection on the concept of funds of knowledge demonstrated she was unable to interpret its meaning as intended and instead integrated the concept into previously held deficit beliefs about students of color living in poverty. Cecilia also voiced her belief that students living in poverty lacked funds of knowledge. She wrote,

> It is typically the lower SES students who come to us with little background knowledge due to their circumstances, whether it be due to poverty, lack of educational value, or any other reason, and therefore, we see their academics suffer because they lack the funds of knowledge to connect the new content with. So, yes, I do believe poverty effects [*sic*] a child's ability to learn and the degree to witch [*sic*] he/she can continue to excel.

Participants' use of words such as "lack," "little," "never," and "insignificant" provided semiotic evidence of a complete misunderstanding of the concept of funds of knowledge. Cecilia's assumptions were an evaluative attribution of negative traits—a predication of deficit-laden discourse (Wodak, 2001).

Thus students who were resistant to asset-based course content either (a) adamantly rejected the ideas, interpreting them as a personal attack and using anecdotal evidence as narratives to defend themselves, or (b) reinterpreted the ideas to fit what they already believed and used the asset-based concept of funds of knowledge as a synonym to replace the deficit-laden concept of a culture of poverty.

Critical Consciousness Interspersed With Cognitive Dissonance

Most of the participants, 16 out of 20, provided evidence of critical conscious-

ness in their discourse, although they did not consistently adopt or apply asset-based discourse in their reflections. There were penetrations of the deficit-laden false consciousness (Willis, 1977) where participants were able to view course content through a lens of critical consciousness (Freire, 1970). For some students, such as Tiffany, this glimpse into the nature of inequity raised more questions than it answered:

> I realized that I always thought about a students [*sic*] background and what I considered to be their culture. I just never really studied or researched the concept of funds of knowledge. I feel it is almost impossible to meet students who will be in our classrooms and not immediately begin to form ideas about where they are coming from and what they know. These thoughts and ideas will also begin to evolve as the year goes on. Before the . . . readings, I always had a mind set that some students would always step into my classroom not wanting to learn and this negative reaction towards learning could possibly have started at home. As teachers we all experience those challenging students who are siblings or relatives to other challenging students we have had in the past. Does this have something to do with them not wanting to have a positive educational experience? I must admit that I now have many more questions that [*sic*] before readings. Should we as teachers try to forget everything we have heard or know about culture and society in order to give all students a "fair" chance?

In the preceding example, Tiffany used discourse to both reproduce and challenge dominant beliefs about students (van Dijk, 1984). Tiffany acknowledged that myths about people living in poverty were stereotypes and that she had bought into the stereotypes (Gorski, 2008). This discourse challenged the dominant viewpoint. However, Tiffany used distancing discourse—saying "as teachers" and asking questions—to suggest that she was still beholden to the dominant point of view.

Angie's excerpt of discourse also exemplified distancing discourse:

> You will never fully understand someone else's journey and struggles until you have walked in their shoes, and secondly this course reminded me that everyone is fighting their own battles, and a little bit of kindness and understanding can go a long way. As teachers we must be advocates for kindness, understanding, and patience. Modeling these things for our students are probably more important than the curriculum. Lastly, one of my favorite quotes frequently came to mind throughout my reflections on the weekly reading assignments. It is by Maya Angelou, "People will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel." In regards to this course changing or educating me on students and poverty, I have learned that not all people who live in poverty can be classified under the same stereotypes. It is simple and easy to assume that people who are poor do not care about education, and consequently will never get out of poverty because of those reasons. That is not always correct. It is possible that students who are raised in a household that is classified at the "poverty" level greatly care about their education.

Cristina echoed this sentiment and also utilized distancing discourse. At the beginning of Cristina's written reflection, she utilized "I" statements, yet by the end of

the passage, she had switched to an impersonal and distancing tone demonstrated by "it is up to the teacher":

> The assigned readings for this week gave me a better understanding of how people and children are judged because of living in poverty. These readings also made me aware of how I see my students and their families and how I may unconsciously be creating a stereotype about them without realizing I am doing it. All children have the right to an education and all students can learn. It is up to the teacher to see the students and their families as any other family and not be so quick to judge them because of their financial situation. Everyone has the chance to be successful in school and in life and while poverty may make it harder for some, which does not mean that they are not trying to be successful.

Katelyn expressed confusion about explaining poverty in terms of structural versus individual causes. This participant considered statistics and anecdotal evidence as equally problematic. Even though statistics were used in the course to explain structural inequity, whereas anecdotal evidence was problematized for highlighting individual causes for poverty, in this excerpt of discourse, statistics, theory, and anecdotal evidence were perceived of as equally problematic:

> A week ago, I would have been quick to write about the large correlation between low socioeconomic status and cognitive delays. I would have written about Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. I would have written about the effects of stress on the learning process. I would have written about all of the theories and numbers that have been accumulated over time, in connection with this widespread problem. I could have expressed tons of anecdotal evidence to show that I have experience with the issue. I could have written about experiences when I thought that I helped students who were struggling in poverty. Today, though, I am going to say that what I have done in the past is not enough. Relying only on statistics, theories, and even anecdotal evidence, only opens the door for educators to make assumptions, make excuses, and rely on stereotypes.

For some participants, the use of *I* in their discourse indicated that they were willing to take responsibility for their role in perpetuating inequities. However, *I* was frequently interspersed with *we*, indicating continued use of discourse that signified their disownership of patterns of inequitable behavior on the part of the teacher. Tracy's quote is an example of this form of discourse:

> As this class progresses, I am beginning to see how my own practices and the practices of my school are a large determining factor in the involvement of the parents and the success of the students. In addition to how we educate our students, the interactions with [*sic*] have with them, their parents, and our available hours before and after school are larger factors in student success than I once thought.

For participants who fit into the understanding interspersed with cognitive dissonance theme, there was a lack of agency or willingness to take action. Unlike participants who adopted asset-based perspectives, as discussed in the next section, these participants did not offer a systemic critique of their own classroom practices

and failed to communicate what they could do as teachers to strive to create a more equitable classroom experience for students living in poverty.

Adoption

Three participants, Linda, Stephanie, and Taryn, demonstrated an awareness of the structural causes of inequity, used asset-based discourse in their reflections, and conceptualized socially just actions. They discussed how the course readings allowed them to critically reflect on the institution of education and their own role within that institution. These participants understood that they had agency as classroom teachers to empower students and that they could have a transformative role in an inequitable system. Linda wrote about the importance of having high expectations for students living in poverty (Nieto & Bode, 2012), an indication of asset-based discourse:

> This class changed my understanding of poverty and education in that educating students requires rejecting stereotypes and teaching the student regardless of background and current performance. By forming a relationship and knowing the student I can better validate and access the student to help the student achieve. Poverty does not limit what a student can achieve—the limitations come from low expectations and the ceiling placed by the teacher.

Stephanie offered a critique of her prior assumptions and noted that her identity as an outsider may have led to her assumption:

> In Ladson-Billing's article, she poses the question asking how many of the school's faculty has attended events in the schools local community (108)? When I think about this I realize that, for me, the answer is none. Not only have I not attended any events in the community but I am not a native. . . . I am an outsider, which I imagine, in as close of a community that Cypress seems to be, is difficult for parents to accept. In addition to this many of the faculty at my school, myself included, jump to the immediate conclusion that the parents who are hard to get ahold of must not care about their child's education.

Taryn exemplified a critical consciousness of her role and the role of the school in perpetuating inequities:

> As this class progresses, I am beginning to see how my own practices and the practices of my school are a large determining factor in the involvement of the parents and the success of the students. In addition to how we educate our students, the interactions we have with them, their parents, and our available hours before and after school are larger factors in student success than I once thought.

Based on their discourse, these participants were able to recognize their agency as teachers, challenge deficit perspectives, and identify solutions to develop a more asset-based outlook on students of color and students experiencing poverty.

Several participants who adopted the asset-based perspective explicitly cri-

tiqued their previous actions and assumptions regarding students living in poverty. However, participants often stopped short of an awareness of their own agency or specific actions they could take to create a more culturally relevant, responsive, and sustaining education for students (Paris, 2012; Thomas & Warren, 2017). It was this lack of identifying actions that limited participants' ability to fully develop critically conscious thought; participants may have benefited from more opportunities to develop their thinking to the point of concretely conceptualizing action.

Anecdotal Evidence

All participants relied on anecdotal evidence in their reflections despite instructions introduced during the first week of class and reminders in the weekly discussion forum to avoid doing so (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017). Three students questioned this guideline because they asserted that it discounted their experiences and realities. Melissa voiced her resistance by evoking language that suggested concern with the exclusion of political views from class:

> One topic in the article that really made me think and question was letting go of anecdotal evidence and examine patterns instead. I understand the concept but what happens when you have tried very hard to let go of the anecdotal evidence but the examination of the patterns continue [*sic*] to support the anecdotal evidence. Are you expected to ignore or abandon the anecdotal evidence just because it is unpopular or not politically correct?

This excerpt of discourse unveiled two important elements of discourse. The first was Melissa's use of the contrast relation—understanding that she needed to let go of anecdotal evidence, but then providing a rationale for why she refused (van Dijk, 1984). From there, the participant utilized a diversion strategy of argumentation (Wodak, 2001) to shift the focus away from the rationale given in Sensoy and DiAngelo (2017) to avoid anecdotal evidence. She argued the reason she was instructed to abandon anecdotal evidence was due to political correctness, a diversion that justified the suppression of evidence of the oppression of others (Wodak, 2001). Melissa used discourse to link the loaded term of "politically correct" to her more conservative political beliefs that she equated to "unpopular" (Wodak, 2001). Melissa failed to grasp the fallacious habit of overreliance on anecdotal evidence. Her discourse indicated that she struggled with prioritizing evidence of patterns of discrimination over anecdotal evidence.

Another theme that emerged from the data was participants' support of deficit perspectives with anecdotal evidence. For example, Rose wrote,

> I was drawn to one little boy who I will call "D." I remember coming into the classroom on a daily basis and I could tell if he was in the room or not without even seeing him. You see, D would sleep with his little brother every night and the both of them had bed-wetting issues. The mother worked two jobs and was never home in the morning to get the kids off to school. They would sleep in their

uniforms so they could just get up in the morning and be ready for school. They would soil these uniforms every night and come to school in them every day. . . . This child lives in the projects and his mother is still working two jobs. He still comes to school in soiled clothes. He is not the same sweet child I taught in first grade. He has become mean and very defiant. I believe that he has become this way because it is his only way he knows how to "survive."

Participants' stories about students they taught and self-referent life stories composed the bulk of the anecdotal evidence. Several participants wrote about how they grew up in poverty and with hard work were able to improve their socioeconomic status. Lisa wrote,

If society were forced to recognize the work that went into accomplishments it would take away the notion that there is a "disadvantage" and that only people of a certain race or gender or [*sic*] capable of being really successful or prominent. I consider myself to be an accomplished young woman. I am proud of myself, yet I know I still have a long ways to go. I realize that I am who I am and have what I have because I worked diligently, and respectfully. I set goals for myself, and I made smart/sound decisions. America has more opportunity than any other country in the world. There are people that risk their lives to come here everyday, so they can work and make a better life for themselves and their families.

In this excerpt, self-referent anecdotal evidence echoed bootstrap myths and tokenism and reinforced in the participant's schema the notion of the United States as a social meritocracy.

Participants' continued reliance on anecdotal evidence was a resilient theme that emerged from the data. This may be because, as van Dijk (1984) noted, stories are important persuasion devices and "a form of subjective social information processing" (p. 80). For the most part, participants' anecdotal evidence was used to justify their assumptions and beliefs (Solly, 2016) about students based on their experiences. Data indicate that participants' experiences, as communicated through anecdotal evidence, remained an important part of their discourse on race and poverty despite previous warnings about the overreliance on anecdotal evidence.

Discussion

This study investigated two important and related dynamics in online graduate courses in diversity and education: (a) the importance of developing and providing opportunity for teachers to develop critical consciousness through self-reflection and (b) the presence of deficit thinking about students of color and students experiencing poverty. Findings from this case study indicate that graduate education majors' deficit discourse about students of color and students experiencing poverty can be changed with an asset-based and social justice curriculum, although participants struggle with resistance and cognitive dissonance and reliance on self-referent anecdotal evidence. As many participants reflected on course content, their cognitive

dissonance was interspersed with asset-based discourse, an indication of ideological flexibility in their thinking. Research by Gardner and Toope (2011) supported the finding that teachers' flexibility is an important characteristic for adopting and being responsive to social justice–related issues in educational settings.

Similar to research by Ebersole et al. (2016), the participants in this study exhibited varying degrees of self-reflection and critical consciousness. Teachers' resistance, whether conscious or unconscious, to change patterns of deficit thinking about students and families was apparent in the data for this study. Research indicated that people resist and become defensive when presented with scientifically backed social facts that challenge their perspectives (Friesen, Campbell, & Kay, 2015). Participants' discourse provided evidence of resistance in the form of defensiveness and avoidance of critical self-reflection on social justice issues such as poverty and race in education (Gay & Kirkland, 2003). This is not surprising, as research has indicated that White teacher candidates express guilt, anger, and defensiveness when learning antiracist pedagogies in diversity courses in education (Gay & Kirkland, 2003; Matias & Mackey, 2015; Matias & Zembylas, 2014). Our findings are further supported by Clark and Zygmunt's (2014) study of teachers' implicit bias in an online graduate course. They found that participants struggled with disregard, disbelief, acceptance, discomfort, and distress when challenged with curriculum on implicit bias.

In other participants' written discourse, there was evidence of critical consciousness intermingled with cognitive dissonance as they attempted to incorporate course content into their previously socialized beliefs about students of color and students experiencing poverty. Comparably, Bradley-Levine's (2012) qualitative study of educators enrolled in a teacher-leadership graduate program demonstrated that the process of developing critical consciousness is arduous; educators often struggle with critical reflection and with "accepting responsibility for creating more socially just schools" (p. 767). However, 3 of the 20 participants consistently applied critically conscious discourse to course content. These participants' discourse indicated that they were able to offer a critique of social inequity in education and how their agency and actions may determine how students of color and students living in poverty experience schooling.

A compelling finding illuminated by the data was participants' continued use of anecdotal evidence in their discourse about equity and social justice. In discourse, the use of anecdotal evidence serves several purposes, including "exemplification, argumentation, explanation and justification of knowledge, beliefs, values and attitudes" (Solly, 2016, p. 125). In this inquiry, data indicate that when participants were resistant or struggled with cognitive dissonance, they relied on anecdotal evidence as a defense mechanism to explain and justify their beliefs about students of color and students experiencing poverty. Research on the use of anecdotal evidence by teachers is not abundant in the literature, so this finding may be a fruitful path for further research on teacher rationale and explanation of education-related beliefs.

Conclusion

Findings suggest that a 7-week online graduate course was insufficient to provide participants with opportunities to explore and practice self-reflection to foster critical consciousness for long-lasting change. Gardner and Toope (2011) found that challenging teachers' deficit-based discourses required them to identify students' strengths based on a commitment to "flexibility, democracy, critical consciousness, and attention to students' complex contexts" (p. 98). This commitment to cultivate socially just thought (Grant, 2012) takes time and practice beyond what can reasonably be expected in a three-credit-hour, 7-week online graduate course. Our findings corroborate Boyd and Glazier's (2017) contention that programs of teacher education should provide more opportunities for educators to engage in discourse on social justice topics with the intent to encourage open and analytical dialogue. Therefore we recommend that institutions of higher education that offer graduate online courses in education substantially increase students' exposure to asset-based, social justice content, especially if their graduate program offers accelerated courses or courses in truncated, 8-week sessions.

Based on these considerations, improvements to the course curriculum to increase participants' opportunities to practice self-reflection for critical consciousness might include redesigning the course to have a hybrid or in-person format and making the course a full semester. Other instructional strategies have been proven to facilitate critically conscious thought. Although counterintuitive to the warning to avoid anecdotal evidence, limited research has indicated that the use of counternarratives, as a form of analogic reasoning, may be an effective strategy to challenge teachers' beliefs about students of color and students experiencing poverty (Bohannon, 2016; Jordan, 2018). Research that contributes to the incorporation of innovative strategies for teaching race and social class in online courses may yield different results and is strongly encouraged at both the graduate and undergraduate levels.

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