Using Transformational Leadership to Create Brave Space in Teaching Multicultural Education

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ABSTRACT: The study explores how multicultural education instructors use transformational leadership to establish "brave space" as a foundation for critical conversations about identity. Establishing brave space within education courses is essential to facilitating pre-service teachers' understanding of social justice; yet, little research exists regarding the use of transformational classroom leadership to achieve this. This qualitative study is comprised of semi-structured interviews with three instructors through a lens of transformational classroom leadership. Our findings suggest that transformational leadership practices such as modeling the way, challenging the process, encouraging the heart, etc. facilitate students' understanding of identity, relational trust, and their tacit values.

KEYWORDS: multicultural education, transformational leadership, teacher education, pre-service teachers, brave space

"Multicultural education is designed to help unify a deeply divided nation rather than to divide a highly cohesive one."
James Banks, Professor & Founder of Multicultural Education

Theoretical Perspectives and Context

Multicultural education recognizes the significant influence of culture on teaching and learning, integrates a range of cultural, gender, and class perspectives, and addresses the critical need to advocate for social justice and provide equitable learning opportunities (Banks & Banks, 2019; Hall et al., 2018; Howe & Lisi, 2018; Sleeter & Grant, 2007). Banks (2006) conceptualized five dimensions for multicultural education, which include content integration, knowledge construction, prejudice reduction, equity pedagogy, and empowering school culture and social structure. Content integration of diverse perspectives in the curriculum is only one dimension of multicultural education. At a deeper level, multicultural education is a process of creating transformational experiences to empower individuals, school, and society (Thompson, 2014). In addition, as a critical pedagogy, multicultural education draws upon the life experiences of students through their psychological, emotional, moral, academic, cognitive, social, personal, and other forms of diversity and cultural knowledge (Ford, 2011; Gay, 2000). Gay (2000) coined the term "culturally responsive teaching" as "[u]sing the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for them. It teaches to and through the strengths of these students" (Gay, 2000, p. 29). In other words, through cultural responsiveness, educators validate students' cultural and linguistic strengths, which in turn empowers learners' voices and choices (Brazill, 2021, 2022).

According to Vavrus (2002), a multicultural education course requires turning fearful attitudes into positive sensibilities instead of implementing traditional teaching and learning techniques. Thus, creating brave spaces and applying transformational teaching and leadership practices are especially crucial for creating a learner-centered environment to engage students in difficult conversations. In brave space, students are unafraid to speak about their identity, describe harms they have suffered, and engage in courageous conversations with one another (Germer & Neff, 2019). Likewise, brave space creates disorientation and transformation for individuals to discuss social justice issues. In brave space, individuals become comfortable with discomfort about controversial issues, and become responsible for determining how far outside of their comfort zone they are willing to go in contributing to critical discourse (Arao & Clemens, 2013; Brazill & Munday, 2022; Cook-Sather, 2016; Stanlick, 2015). To this end, brave space is co-constructed by students and instructors.

Further, five important reasons support the need to create brave space in multicultural education courses for students who are pre-service teachers. First, brave space is the core to building trusting relationships among educators and learners, allowing them to connect on a personal level and empowering students to speak freely (Ashlee & Ashlee, 2015). Second, safe space is established through mutual respect and consensus built on group norms (Brazill, 2020). Third, safe space overemphasizes protection from discomfort. This third point means that safe space alone does not allow students to learn from different perspectives or

discuss difficult topics (Mattingly et al., 2018; Stanlick, 2015). In contrast, in brave space, students learn to welcome diverse perspectives that challenge their beliefs. This is especially important for difficult dialogues about intersectionality, privilege, racism, and discrimination. Fourth, brave space allows educators to examine the dispositions of people with diverse values and different identities. Therefore, we will have the opportunity to grow, embrace cultural humility, and build a strong community (Mattingly et al., 2018). Finally, brave space acknowledges the emotional struggles associated with identity development and prepares us to address students who experience negative emotions by providing a mutually respectful and supportive learning environment (Gloria et al., 2000). McAllister & Irvine (2002) emphasized that empathy for students, subject matter, and self is crucial to creating a positive learning environment. Undeniably, the classroom dimensions are important to the construction of brave spaces that facilitate student interaction with the subject, teacher, and multicultural peers (Quinlan, 2016).

The creation of brave space requires a classroom culture that embraces difficult dialogues. Yet, as Argyris (1999) noted in his seminal work on organizational learning, most organizational cultures seek to minimize strife by avoiding confrontation, and he labeled this Model I behavior. Such avoidance results in conflicting assumptions becoming undiscussable and a shared tacit understanding that the existence of undiscussables is itself undiscussable. Thus, the detection of false assumptions leading to misunderstandings becomes improbable. Most higher education classroom cultures are structured to support this Model I behavior. Shifting the culture of the classroom requires leadership capable of transforming the classroom culture. That is, shifting support of Model I behaviors to Model II organizational behaviors, where tacit assumptions can be questioned and discussed among the group, can co-construct a brave space that better incorporates multiple perceptions.

Transformational leadership provides a model for the behaviors necessary to precipitate change in a classroom culture. This leadership approach stresses the need to understand and adapt to the needs and motives of followers (Northouse, 2011). Kouzes and Posner (2007) highlighted five practices which transformational leaders use in guiding others through change processes—model the way, inspire a shared vision, challenge the process, enable others to act, and encourage the heart. A few studies have looked at the use of transformational leadership practices in the classroom. The findings of these studies have demonstrated that such leadership practices have led to increased student perceptions of instructor trustworthiness and effectiveness as well as increased student effort and satisfaction (Harvey et al., 2004; Pounder, 2008). Additionally, Bolkan and Goodboy (2009) reported that instructor transformational leadership behaviors were correlated to increased learning outcomes and attributed this to increased opportunities for personalized education. Despite these positive findings, there remains a dearth of research in the area of transformational classroom leadership (Pounder, 2014), and no studies were found relating this model to students' questioning of identity, any other form of tacit knowledge, or emotional intelligence.

To construct an inclusive educational setting, pre-service teachers must understand social justice and diverse identity, and examine their own beliefs, biases, and prejudices (Howe & Lisi, 2018). An inclusive learning environment is one that embraces cultural diversity, brings people together, and respects freedom of expression in order to prepare students for the future world (Quinlan & Hone, 2020). According to Mattingly et al. (2018), it is vital to promote meaningful dialogue among diverse cultural and ideological groups while acknowledging diverse viewpoints, respecting diverse values, and avoiding judgment. Therefore, modeling vulnerability and cultural humility can help build connections and personal relationships in order to create an inclusive learning environment. Vulnerability is about being authentic, honest, and humble in one's social justice journey (Ashlee & Ashlee, 2015). Cultural humility is defined as an ongoing process of self-reflection and self-critique of our experiences, assumptions, and biases instead of claiming to be experts of another culture (Danso, 2018). Moreover, cultural humility facilitates relationships with trust, respect, and love (Brazill et al., 2021; Foronda et al., 2016). According to Marshall (2010), cultural humility goes beyond cultural competence by embracing lifelong learning and committing to critical self-evaluation in order to develop awareness of one's own biases as well as appreciation of others' cultural backgrounds, worldviews, and beliefs.

Unfortunately, not all students in multicultural education courses are self-aware of their cultural essence, identity development, or learning process (Hall et al., 2018). Some students simply view the course as a requirement while others consider it critical to their personal and professional growth (Gloria et al., 2000). Consequently, Gloria et al. (2000) provided practical recommendations for teaching sensitive topics. For instance, acknowledging the emotional struggles associated with identity development and preparing to address students who experience negative emotions in class by providing a mutually respectful and supportive environment. Additionally, students who have negative feelings about course content might react by withdrawing from class activities, denying the validity of course materials, and blaming the instructor for being biased (Gloria et al., 2000). A strategy for avoiding the assumption that all learners are aware of the value of multicultural education is to apply the self-regulated learner's pedagogy (Ludvik et al., 2016; Svinicki, 2010). This is done by asking pre-service teachers to share aspects of the course that they want to develop or learn from, or to identify actions to "Start-Continue-Stop" in their own multicultural education journey. Another way to promote self-regulated learning is to define clearly how the course activities and assessments relate to students' learning outcomes and engagement (Svinicki, 2014). This idea of self-regulated learning relates to multicultural education because it emphasizes the individual's self-reflection and self-awareness of their own identity while encouraging open-mindedness to diverse perspectives.

Establishing brave space within multicultural education courses facilitates pre-service teachers' understanding of social justice and transformation at both the conceptual level and in practice, such as creating an inclusive educational environment. Using transformational classroom leadership in teaching

multicultural education provides a possible way to create brave space within such courses. Yet, there is little literature regarding the efficacy of transformational classroom leadership in creating brave space or an environment that invites the questioning of tacit assumptions.

Study Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this qualitative study is to understand how multicultural education instructors use the five practices of transformational leadership (model the way, inspire a shared vision, challenge the process, enable others to act, and encourage the heart) to establish "brave space" as a foundation for critical conversations about identity and intersectionality. Specifically, this study used a single instrumental case study design and semi-structured interviews with three instructors to answer the following research questions:

1. How do instructors perceive their efforts toward creating brave space among pre-service teachers?
2. How do instructors evaluate the use of brave space toward achieving course objectives?
3. How do instructors perceive the use of brave space in shaping pre-service teachers' personal epistemologies?

Methods

This study used a single instrumental case study design (Yin, 2018). We established the boundary for the case study through purposeful sampling of the instruction in different sections of an undergraduate multicultural education course taught at a land-grant university by instructors with at least four semesters of experience teaching the course. This course was selected because of an explicit course goal to create and model brave space for pre-service teachers. We established trustworthiness by disclosing our positionality, triangulating data, triangulating analysis, thick and rich description, and a member check of findings (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Our Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved the participant informed consent form and the study as exempt from human subjects' review. All participants were anonymous with no personal identifiers used in the interview data.

The first author has much personal experience and scholarly expertise in teaching and researching multicultural education. She has taught a total of eight sections of the Multicultural Education course with over 300 students and has mentored new instructors over the years. Her multicultural experiences have shaped her scholarship to build a more just society through improved educational success for diverse students and helping dominant groups practice multicultural

inclusion. The second author's expertise in culturally responsive leadership helped validate the data, especially with his experiences in advocating for social justice issues.

Data Sources and Evidence

The primary data for this study was comprised of transcripts of semi-structured interviews with three experienced and culturally diverse instructors (Asian American, Latina American, and white American) from a racially homogenous (predominantly white) university. Each face-to-face interview lasted approximately 50-70 minutes. The specific goal of the semi-structured interviews was to understand and describe individual instructors' experiences in how they applied transformational leadership to create brave space when teaching multicultural education. The instructors were asked six open-ended interview questions with sub-questions (see Appendix) focusing on their identity, how they created brave space in the classroom, the interactions that sustained brave space, and the values that guided their teaching and leadership within the classroom. The coding process was guided by Saldana's (2015) approach of first and second cycle coding. The constant-comparative method (Fram, 2013; Strauss, 1994) was used for data analysis.

Key Findings and Discussions

The findings from this study synthesized instructors' perceptions of pre-service teachers' understanding of the interplay among culture, diversity, and identity, as well as evaluated how this understanding developed throughout the course. Thematic coding was used to identify four emergent themes to address the research questions: (1) cultivate relational trust; (2) value diverse identities; (3) welcome different perspectives; and (4) model cultural humility.

Theme One: Cultivate Relational Trust

The theme "cultivate relational trust" accounts for instructors' perspectives in identifying trust as a foundation for creating brave space in a multicultural education classroom. Brave space is about building trust and relationships to enable students to learn, care, and act. An essential element of brave space is to give students a voice in the four dimensions of relationships, which include: student-teacher connections, peer relationships/student interactions, student connection with the course content, and student connections with their own growth. The instructors indicated that creating a shared understanding was key to cultivating deep connections and relationships in brave space. For example, one

participant shared that the importance of cultivating relational trust is fundamental in creating brave space, saying,

> We talk about trust, vulnerability, respect, and brave space. I think they are two-way streets. When everybody is vulnerable, when you have this brave space, you trust each other. I literally don't even need a PowerPoint. Instead, I could sit down and talk to students from my heart. So, we go with whatever the students want to learn. My students guide me in my teaching because I trust that it will build brave spaces by hearing their perspectives.

Two additional instructors indicated that multicultural educators could build trust by showing genuine interest in students and exposing them to various perspectives that are different from the instructors' or students' perspectives. One instructor said, "As multicultural educators, we can build trust by breaking down the barriers of authority that separate teachers and students so we can relate directly with students' lived experiences."

Cultivating relational trust to build brave space allows students to freely express their ideas and thought processes. As a student shared, "being vulnerable and able to share and listen from our hearts helps build the trust in brave space." Indeed, trust leads to many important qualities needed in the classroom, such as respect, compassion, and authenticity. Without trusting the process, we would not be able to cultivate relationships with students. Besides, trust in the classroom leads to the creation of brave spaces.

Theme Two: Value Diverse Identities

Valuing diverse identities is an essential element of transformational leadership and vital for building brave space. First, our participants showed great respect for students' social identities and voices. Second, participants found transformational leadership to be related to their personal and cultural identity. Third, transformational leadership reflects the holistic approach participants used to promote student development and relationship building. Moreover, in interviews, participants reflected that being open-minded to self-transformation of one's social identity was important in creating brave space. One instructor stated "you need to be as authentic as possible. I bring my identities and funds of knowledge. Students also bring their identities and funds of knowledge, and we can try to help each other learn." Another instructor shared similar thoughts, "I was able to listen to those who come from this background and gain some insight into how students see families, relationships, and cultural traditions."

Along the same lines, one instructor shared that "valuing diverse identities" is one of the most important objectives for the multicultural education course. In other words, valuing diverse identities is what makes brave space possible:

> The most important outcome for this multicultural education course is realizing that everyone has different identities and, because everyone has different stories, that will affect how they learn and how they teach, as well,

based on that journey that they've been on. If they see things differently, of course they are going to teach it the way that they see it and that it's important to consider. Acknowledging your biases is probably the most important part of teaching a multicultural education course because you don't really want to teach your biases to your students and make something seem unimportant when it might be important to them.

Another instructor explained that:

We do this walk-a-mile activity and it's a vulnerable activity. You have a worksheet where you have a couple of different phrases like "my parents went to college" or "I never had to go for a day without food." So, you'll fill it out and then I pick them up, scramble them up, and then everyone gets a paper that is not their own. So, then every time I read a statement, they'll go inside the circle and see how many people within the group had similar identities and experiences.

Identity is shaped by a mixture of individual experiences and a sense of belonging to different social groups. Therefore, it is important for instructors to model respect for diverse identities (race, gender, sexuality, spirituality, age, socioeconomic status, ability status, etc.) and be self-aware about how these identities might impact learning and teaching. In this sense, brave space allows multicultural educators and pre-service teachers to work actively towards addressing their own biases and stereotypes.

Theme Three: Welcome Different Perspectives

A vital aspect of using transformational leadership to create brave space is to welcome diverse perspectives, allowing students to talk about their most important beliefs and values. Respect for diverse values is an important part of transformational leadership in creating brave space. One instructor shared that "safe space is the absence of that difficult conversation" while another instructor highlighted the importance of inviting different perspectives with care in discussing various topics related to race and ethnicity:

When I give the Asian American lecture, a topic I am comfortable with, I don't want the students to hear one perspective or one voice and that's my voice. The connection is not very direct between Asian Americans and other students in the classroom when you don't have a brave space for different perspectives. So, I brought a few guest speakers who have diverse experiences with Asian Americans. One is an Asian American who grew up locally. She connected with students immediately as they shared similar experiences and educational backgrounds. We also invited colleagues from the U.S. and France who have profound experiences teaching and living in Asian countries.

Instructors play a major role in setting the boundaries for brave space and then encouraging students to co-construct that space.

Another instructor shared that:

> When I examine my assumptions about the students and welcome different perspectives, it helps create the brave space. Because then, when they say something that was so black and white, I was able to validate them. I still validate that black and white perspective. But I asked them about the intention and the impact that it could bring to either me, their peers, or people who they are going to serve.

This instructor's perspective emphasizes that intellectual stimulation is an essential facet of transformational leadership, providing students opportunities to appreciate different perspectives. This complements brave space, which is about welcoming different perspectives with open minds. In general, when students encounter a confrontational situation, they just want to walk away from it. Instead, brave space helps cultivate a social justice mindset, push past the feeling of discomfort, and engage in deeper conversations. Brave space is a space where we are not afraid to listen to different perspectives and disturb the comfortableness in traditional classrooms. As one instructor put it, "social justice is you standing up, saying something about it if you see something wrong." In brave space, we have the courage to turn fearful attitudes into positive responsibilities to create a welcoming learning community.

Theme Four: Model Cultural Humility

An important component of transformational leadership is inspirational motivation, establishing a shared vision for a course within the brave space. As indicated by the instructors, "brave space is about the shared experiences, and every class is a shared experience." To build brave space, instructors should model cultural humility for pre-service teachers. Cultural humility provides opportunities to learn from others with curiosity and it gives individuals power to share their own culture and values.

Brave space is about using cultural humility to shape the way a course is taught through authentic relationships and meaningful conversations. For instance, an instructor shared their perspective about the importance of modeling cultural humility for pre-service teachers:

> Parker Palmer once said that "what makes teaching great is the congruency between the teacher's identity and the teaching techniques." So, I always know that you can learn about brave space, you can learn about all kinds of theory and techniques, but at the end of the day you'll have to have this congruency with who you are as a teacher and a person, and then, you know, use those appropriately, in a culturally attuned manner.

Similarly, another instructor amplified the need to show empathy and cultural humility when interacting with one another:

> I learned that you never know what a person's story might be. You don't know if that person might have just had a relative that passed away. Once I accepted that, because I had to accept that, it revolutionized my view of education and how to approach everything.

In turn, the act of instructors showing cultural humility and vulnerability helps to build brave space among pre-service teachers. For example, if instructors make a mistake, they should allow students the opportunity to correct them and show that they are also on the learning journey.

> One instructor shared their experience embracing mistakes:

> At the beginning of the semester, I told students that, "If you hear something that I have no idea about or if I'm saying something incorrectly, call me on it because I might not know if I'm saying it right or wrong."

Cultural humility is about being a lifelong learner and always looking to understand more about a culture from the people of that culture. It is also about understanding you will never be an expert in someone else's experience. Through these concrete ways of creating brave space, instructors and pre-service teachers can then learn from each other and ask questions with an open mind in an inclusive learning environment. In order to become effective multicultural educators and transformational leaders, we need to allow students to teach us who they are and what their backgrounds are, so that we can better understand how to teach them in a culturally responsive way and honor their cultural knowledge as strengths.

Recommendations and Implications

Findings from this qualitative study suggest four specific pedagogical ways for using transformational leadership practices to create brave space. First, cultivate relational trust by giving students a voice in the learning community. A major finding of this study is that creating a shared understanding is key to cultivating relational trust in brave space. This trust enables students to engage in activities to learn about the values they carry with them and how these values might influence their learning. Second, value diverse identities by showing great respect for students' multiple identities and voices. Likewise, transformational leadership reflects the holistic approach instructors use to promote student development and relationship building. Third, encourage students to welcome different perspectives with an open mind. Respect for tacit values is an important part of creating brave space. It is our responsibility as transformational leaders to meet learners where they are in their identity development. Fourth, model cultural humility for students and respect their identity while teaching the course in an authentic way. In brave space, instructors aim to be positive role models for students.

There are several additional implications and impacts of this study. Our findings suggest that transformational leadership practices such as inspire a shared vision, model the way, encourage the heart, challenge the process, and

enable others to act, facilitate students' understanding of identity, relational trust, and their tacit values. Such understandings are essential for pre-service teachers.

Our unique contribution to the literature is the linking of the four emergent themes with transformational leadership practices. As shown in Figure 1 below, multicultural educators can apply transformational leadership practices to create brave space for a multicultural education course through (1) "inspire a shared vision," i.e., creating brave space as a shared vision, listening to each other with an open heart, and being aware of positionalities and values; (2) "model the way," i.e., modeling cultural humility in the P-12 classroom for pre-service teachers by providing culturally responsive examples and setting clear expectations for the dispositions of students and instructors; (3) "encourage the heart," i.e., cultivating relational trust by focusing on individual strengths, identities, and experiences, showing appreciation to pre-service teachers, and celebrating the collective values of the learning community; (4) "challenge the process," i.e., welcoming different perspectives and beliefs, embracing transparency, looking for opportunities to support each other, and providing critical feedback to make improvements of the course; and (5) "enable others to act," i.e., valuing diverse identities by shifting power to students through student-led discussions or presentations, building trust and relationships with students, enabling others to learn from teamwork, and promoting collaboration through story-telling.

Creating a shared vision of a "brave space' classroom is easier explained than done. As with any shared classroom vision, the instructor must have a clear idea of what brave space would look like in the interactions of the class. Next, they must be able to explicitly describe the ideas holding the vision together in ways that enable students to align their behaviors to the shared vision. This must make the vision concrete by the instructor modeling the way, enabling others to act, encouraging the heart through personal commitment, and challenging the process. Such modeling, enabling, encouraging, and challenging starts with the instructor; yet, the most effective brave spaces occur when both instructors and students engage in such actions and demonstrate daily the shared vision of brave space that they have created with each other. Through such a process, the initial vision held by the instructor may be much different from the shared reality of brave space that emerges in the classroom.

This shared reality, as a shared vision, contains a multitude of perspectives and not the instructor's single perspective. In the process of valuing student perspectives, the shared vision of a brave space is instantiated differently and uniquely among the students and instructor, as a group, for each situated classroom. Student pushback on the instructor's concept and description of brave space can be a catalyst for the development of individual visions that are accepted and made part of the group's reality.

Furthermore, transformational leadership is a phenomenon that focuses on individual considerations. For example, each instructor shapes the process based on their organic educational and teaching experiences in higher education, and how this guides them to be personable and approachable with students. Their cultural background also guides how they individually consider students. In the

end, transformational classroom leadership hinges on teaching students as individuals to promote their self-transformation, allow their authentic selves to emerge, and facilitate the incorporation of their perspectives in the shared vision of the classroom. As a result, brave space appears different in each classroom and yet retains its essence—sustaining cultural curiosity.

Figure 1

Brave Space as a Shared Vision for Transformational Leadership Practices
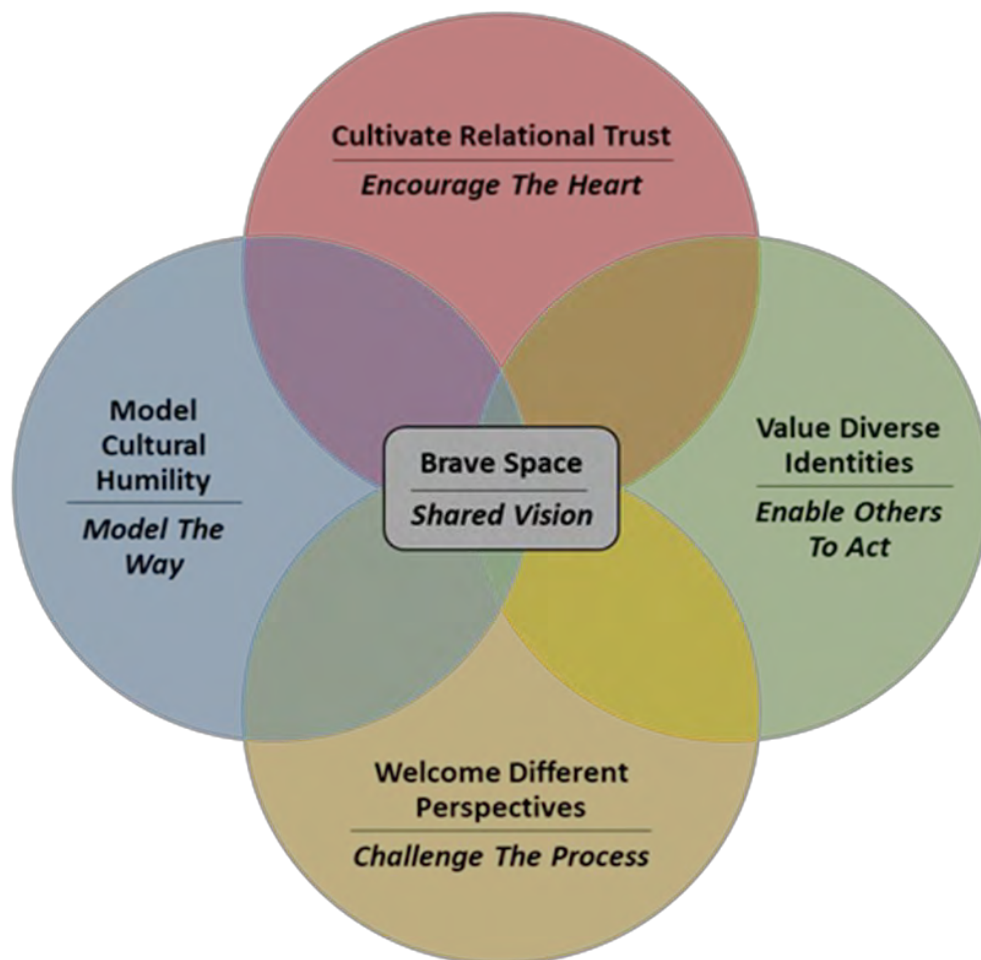
Significance and Concluding Thoughts

In conclusion, this study developed practical recommendations through interviewing instructors of multicultural education classes to better understand how brave space works in the classroom for pre-service teachers. This qualitative

research offers perspectives on the impact of a multicultural education course and provides insights into how this course or other similar courses might be improved by having a deeper understanding of brave space. It is important to create safe space in the classroom; however, it can be a passive approach that hinders students from welcoming diverse perspectives. In contract, brave space is a proactive approach to discussing social justice issues because it sparks dialogue, promotes community engagement, and gives students voice and power in the learning environment.

The integration of brave space and transformational leadership creates an environment that embraces student diversity and social justice as a critical disposition for pre-service teachers. Still, as Arao and Clemens (2013) point out, brave space is a new theoretical framework that would benefit from studies to better measure how it is experienced and how it influences learning and teaching. Our qualitative study addresses this gap. Brave space and transformational leadership are vital aspects of the learning environment for a multicultural education course because of the challenge of discussing different social justice issues. As we face challenges of the 21st century in higher education, brave space will likely become a cornerstone of multicultural pedagogy.

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Appendix: Interview Table of Specifications

Interview Protocol
Q1: Can you share a story about what's important in teaching multicultural education? • Experiences that guide teaching the class. • How does your identity shape the class? • What theories guide your teaching?
Q2: How do you use the idea of brave space in your classroom? • Define brave space. • How do you model brave space? • What relationships are important to build that will allow brave space to occur? • Why are these relationships important? • How do you know when you have achieved brave space?
Q3: What do you believe is the most important outcome for this multicultural education and how do you get your students to this outcome? • How does your teaching of the class contribute to this outcome? • Tell me a story about how you facilitated a student's learning? • What is important for your students to take away from the class? • What role does the students' identity play in your lesson planning and delivery?
Q4: Tell me about your typical interactions with students and how these interactions guide you. • What interactions are most beneficial to increasing student engagement with the content? • What interactions are most beneficial to cultivating brave space? • What interactions are most beneficial to helping you adapt the class to achieve the desired outcomes?
Q5: In building brave space, what works best and what are the most challenging aspects of the process? • How have students reacted to co-creating the brave space within a class or learning community? • What assumptions do students hold about multicultural education and how do those assumptions play as the semester progresses? • How do your assumptions about the students change as the semester progresses? • What tips would you give to new instructors trying to create brave space in their classrooms?
Q6: In thinking about brave space what questions have I not asked you about?

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