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# Learning Through Crisis and Paradox in Justice-Oriented Teacher Education

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## Learning Through Crisis and Paradox in Justice-Oriented Teacher Education

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### Abstract

In this article we explore some of the challenges, constraints, and what we refer to as glimmers of revelation that occurred during an experiential, community-based teacher education course that we designed and co-taught in spring 2015. Trying to take seriously Kumashiro's (2009) notions that justice-oriented teacher education happens "only when *we ourselves* are still struggling with questions about the 'what else,' 'how else,' and 'where else' that are involved" in this kind of teaching [emphasis added] (p. xxv), we explore moments where we grappled with the paradox, partiality, uncertainty, and discomfort (Kumashiro, 2009) that often accompany our commitments as middle grades teacher educators attempting to enact anti-oppressive teaching practices.

### INTRODUCTION

Over the past few decades, critical, justice-oriented teacher educators have been charged with teaching about equitable teaching and learning practices (hooks, 1994), including multicultural education and culturally responsive pedagogies (Banks et al., 2005; Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1995); social justice and anti-oppressive pedagogies (Cochran-Smith, 2010; Dover, 2013; Kumashiro, 2009; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Lensmire et al., 2013; Picower, 2011); a variety of critical pedagogies (cf., Jones & Hughes-Decatur, 2012; McDonald & Zeichner, 2009; McLaren, 2009); and developing critical consciousness and praxis (Apple, Au, & Gandin, 2009; Brown, 2011; Gay, 2000).

More recently, some scholars suggest that we should also model those equitable teaching and learning practices in our teacher education programs (Conklin, 2008; Conklin & Hughes, 2015). In this article, we draw on Kumashiro's (2009) conceptualization of moments of crisis in critical, justice-oriented teacher education to examine our own struggles as teacher educators attempting to enact anti-oppressive practices in a middle grades teacher education course.

Why focus on our struggle with enacting critical, justice-oriented, and anti-oppressive practices when preparing *middle grades* teachers—those educators who will be working with young adolescents, kids ages 9-15? The literature surrounding middle grades education has historically highlighted the imperative for middle grades educators to be developmentally responsive to young adolescents (e.g., Eichhorn, 1966; George & Alexander, 2003; Jackson & Davis, 2000; Nesin & Brazee, 2013). Nesin and Brazee define developmental responsiveness: "Developmental responsiveness is the knowledge and ability to develop schools, classrooms, and programs that take into consideration the full range of young adolescent growth and development" (p. 469).

Hughes (2011) pushes the notion of developmental responsiveness into considering young adolescents' bodies, specifically what she terms their sense of bodily "not-enoughness": not white or Black enough, not thin enough, not smart enough, not normal enough, not rich enough, just not enough. Hughes-Decatur (2012) contends that middle grades educators have tremendous opportunities to learn from young adolescents about how to "talk back" to the notion of not being enough, and teachers can take up the

charge to both initiate and respond to young adolescents' strengths and concerns about what it means to be enough. We argue that critical, justice-oriented approaches in middle grades teacher education are absolutely vital to *our* charge, as teacher educators, to prepare middle grades teachers to support the growth and development of every student.

Critical, justice-oriented teacher education for preservice middle grades educators also seems essential given the critical role that middle grades educators play in fostering a positive climate in middle grades schools. Bullying behaviors – physical, verbal, and relational – peak in grades 6-8 (Nansel, Overpeck, Pilla, Ruan, Simons-Morton, & Scheidt, 2001; Robers, Zhang, & Truman, 2010). Raczynski, Orpinas, and Horne (2013) use a nested ecological model as a comprehensive framework to describe the risk factors that make bullying/aggressive behaviors more likely and the protective factors that lessen the likelihood of aggressive behaviors. In the nested ecological model, the child is nested within the family, classroom and school, and the community. Middle grades educators can influence nearly every aspect of the ecological model, particularly the child (e.g., enhancing social competence, empathy for others); the classroom and school (e.g., modeling respect and acceptance); and the community and culture (e.g., emphasizing collaboration rather than competition for scarce resources).

In fact, a positive school climate is the most important factor in reducing bullying (Bosworth, Orpinas, & Hein, 2009). Teachers shape school climate in nearly every decision they make over the course of a school day. To reduce aggressive behaviors and support a positive school climate, middle grades educators' decisions must be based in two commitments at the heart of justice-oriented teacher education: "(1) all students can learn and (2) every person is treated with dignity and respect" (Raczynski et al., 2013, p. 429).

## THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

Kumashiro (2009) writes that "learning things that reveal the partial and oppressive aspects of our knowledge of and actions in the world can lead us into crisis" (p. 30). By "crisis," Kumashiro means "a state of emotional discomfort and disorientation that calls on students to make some change" (p. 30). Sometimes the crises students experience are "visceral and noticeable, as when students express feelings of guilt or anger, or in some way resist continuing with the lesson" (p. 30), and other times these crises for students are "subdued and subconscious, as when students feel discomfort but are unable to name that feeling" (p. 30). As critical, justice-oriented teacher educators, we, too, experience these moments of crisis with our students.

In his article, "Against Repetition: Addressing Resistance to Anti-Oppressive Change in the Practices of Learning, Teaching, Supervising, and Researching," Kumashiro (2002) draws on Butler's (1997) work describing oppression "as harmful repetitions of certain privileged knowledge and practices" (p. 67). Kumashiro highlights the dangers of repeatedly privileging certain perspectives, identities, knowledge, and practices while simultaneously marginalizing others. Whether intentional or unintentional, the repetition of privilege and marginalization elevates some individuals, ideas, and practices and denigrates, undermines, or even caricatures others. Kumashiro highlights the oppressive repetitions associated with gender, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, nation (even neighborhood) of origin, among others. We would add to the list the repetition of rhetoric, policy, and practice that tends to marginalize and even caricature young adolescents, middle grades schools, middle grades educators, and middle grades teacher education (e.g., Andrews, 2011, 2013a, 2013b).

To avoid the oppressive repetitions of privilege and marginalization, Kumashiro (2009) contends that social justice [teacher] education happens "only when *we ourselves* are still struggling with questions about the 'what else,' 'how else,' and

‘where else’ that are involved in this kind of teaching [emphasis added] (p. xxv). We ponder those “what else,” “how else,” and “where else” questions related to some of the challenges and constraints we encountered, as well as moments when some kind of apparent shift in thinking took place among preservice teachers (PSTs) in our course, moments that we call glimmers of revelation. Given our perspectives as middle grades teacher educators, we also explore our struggles with the paradox, partiality, uncertainty, and discomfort (Kumashiro) that often accompany our commitments to social justice.

We begin with the complexities and significance of geographical place in teacher education and provide a description of the cultural and physical locations our middle grades teacher education course is placed within, which we believe is of paramount consideration. We describe the experiential, community-based course the three of us designed and co-taught in 2015 and provide brief descriptions of the major assignments and final project, as they are pertinent to this reflective journey. We then present for consideration a vignette describing just one of the tense moments of crisis that we experienced while teaching. Drawing specifically on our experiences with three PSTs and their contributions to the course, we illustrate some of the challenges, constraints, and glimmers we encountered. Molded by our challenges and constraints, our perception of PSTs is personified by Keyser Soze.<sup>1</sup> We conclude describing how we constantly work to embrace the paradox, partiality, uncertainty, and discomfort we often experience when doing this kind of equity-oriented work.

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<sup>1</sup> Keyser Soze is a character in the 1995 movie, *The Usual Suspects* (Singer, 1995). Spoiler alert: Keyser Soze turns out not to be the person he seems to be. Thus, Keyser Soze is used to imply that PSTs intentionally present a false narrative in order to humor us instructors into believing that their feelings are genuine.

## Place Matters in Teacher Education

In his call for the incorporation of place into theory, research, and practice education, Gruendewald (2003) suggested that “places teach us about how the world works and how our lives fit into the spaces we occupy. Further, places make us: as occupants of particular places with particular attributes, our identity and our possibilities are shaped” (p. 621). Our teacher education program, and our PSTs’ experiences within that program, occur in a specific, idiosyncratic, complex place with particular attributes. Our literal geographic place – a teacher education classroom within a middle school on any given day at any given moment – is nested within multiple places like a set of Russian dolls. For example, our classroom is nested within the middle school itself, a Title One school where 78% of the student body are students of color and more than 80% of its students qualify for free or reduced lunch prices.

The middle school where we taught our class is part of a professional development school district partnership with our university. [The third author] serves as a “professor-in-residence” at the school, teaching initial certification courses and graduate courses on site, participating in the school’s leadership team, working alongside the faculty and staff on school improvement initiatives, brokering connections between the school and university resources, programs, and departments, etc. The middle school is also nested within a community that includes the students and families connected to the school and many community members and organizations with no defined (or desired) connection to the school.

The school’s community is one of the most impoverished communities per capita in the country and is nested within a small city with a history of generational poverty where the residue of Jim Crow perseveres. We and the PSTs, by and large, live in that same small city dominated by the university itself, with the classic town/gown dynamics complicated by poverty issues that are not typical of university towns. Our small city is nested just outside the bounds of “metro Atlanta,”

but inextricably bound to the state's largest city nevertheless. We are also nested within a "red" state that is conservative on almost every dimension (e.g., fiscal, social).

Our teacher education program and our course are nested within a large public university in the *Deep South*<sup>2</sup>, with all that location implies with regard to discrimination, segregation, and, perhaps most importantly, disenfranchisement that situated African Americans as the minority in Deep South states where they actually represent a majority or at least a very large voting block in the years post-Civil War up to present day (Chin & Wagner, 2007). More specifically, as Carmichael (2007) and others (e.g., George, Patton, & Noize, 1995) have asserted, we are located within the *Dirty South*, a place characterized by the subtle and not-so-subtle forms of oppression that diminish, even silence, the voices of what Hobson (in press) calls, "the black masses."

CeeLo [Green] explains how even a city like Atlanta, despite being run almost exclusively by blacks in government at the time, can still perpetuate systemic racism. "It can be black folk working in the government, but it's hard to walk straight on tracks that's been laid down crooked in the first place. So as long as this system is still crooked, we're still gonna get treated [crooked]," he says. (Carmichael, 2015, ¶176-77)

The population in the state of Georgia is 31% Black,<sup>3</sup> but the public university student

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<sup>2</sup> Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, and South Carolina.

<sup>3</sup> In the 6th edition of the American Psychological Association Manual, the "Reducing Bias and Language" (2009, pp. 76-77) section states: "*Black* and *White* should be capitalized because those words, like other racial and ethnic group designations, are proper nouns. That is, *Caucasian*, *African American*, *White*, and *Black* are all capitalized in APA Style." However, throughout this essay we intentionally do not capitalize the "w" in white and do capitalize the "b" in

population is 7% Black, and only 26% of all the university's students are students of color (Funke, 2015; Moore, 2014; U.S. Census Bureau, 2014).

As Theroux (2014) points out:  
...the deep South has some of the highest rates of unemployment, some of the worst schools, the poorest housing and medical care, a vast number of dying and depopulated towns... [and] the Deep South has nearly 20% of their people living below the poverty line, more than the national average of 16%. (¶4)

Staying consistent with these numbers, 25% of the university student population qualify for Federal Pell Grants<sup>4</sup> (Moore, 2014).

Teacher education exists within a national place that de-emphasizes the value of both teachers and teacher educators in keeping with the history of teaching in the US as tied to women and all the de-valuing and limitations placed on women in a patriarchal society. Our place in teacher education, then, is nested within successive layers of "place." Each layer of place has its own particular attributes that define and constrain our work while also opening up opportunities for our work.

### COURSE DESCRIPTION

In line with other teacher educators who have been engaging in community-based approaches (e.g., Brayko, 2013; Cooper, 2007; Hallman, 2012;

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Black, because we agree with the Black assistant professor from Temple University, Dr. Lori Tharps (2014, p. A25) who wrote, "Black should always be written with a capital B. We are indeed a people, a race, a tribe. It's only correct." And, frankly, we also believe that any time we can subtract power away from white people--and we are all three white--we should.

<sup>4</sup> "The Federal Pell Grant Program provides need-based grants to low-income undergraduate and certain post-baccalaureate students to promote access to postsecondary education" (U.S. Department of Education, 2015, ¶1)

Zeichner, 2010), we designed an experiential, community-based teacher education course for spring 2015. Our goal for the course was to create experiences outside of the traditional university classroom that allowed PSTs to develop more open and curious habits of mind regarding young adolescents of color and/or those living in poverty, and the communities in which they live. Even more, because children of color and those living in poverty are so often overgeneralized as less capable, less cultured, and less motivated as learners (Sato & Lensmire, 2009), we hoped that the community-based experiences PSTs had in the course would allow them to (re)see children and their families as “historied and cultural beings, full persons with dreams and aspirations of success, with abilities to use language with sophistication, and with intelligences that may be underappreciated in schools as institutions” (Sato & Lensmire, p. 365). Four questions framed the course and the assignments:

- Where am I from and how do my cultural and historical locations influence how I read the world?
- How will I discover where my students are from and how their cultural and historical locations influence how they read the world?
- Knowing that who I am and how I read the world intersects with whom my students are and how they read the world, what will I do with what I learn?
- Understanding that language influences how we make meaning, how will I use language in ways that promote equity and support my students and the community?

In the semester we describe, we offered a pilot version of the course that counted for only one credit hour, and met for two hours every other week over the course of a 15-week semester for a total of 7 face-to-face class meetings. Most of the 35 PSTs were white, Christian, and female. The class included 7 men and 28 women. Three students self-identified as Black, one as Chinese, one as Korean, and one as West Indian. Twenty-two of the 35 identified themselves as Christian either in conversations or assignments.

## Course Assignments

Over the course of the semester, PSTs completed a series of assignments that offered opportunities for them to consider their own historical and cultural locations and engaged them with the communities surrounding the middle school. We defined community settings as spaces inside the middle school, the surrounding neighborhoods where students attending the middle school and their families live, and places near the school where middle school students and their families shop, eat, play, and work. The initial assignment was an essay entitled “From Where Do I Read The World.”<sup>5</sup> The purpose of the “From Where” essay was for students to first identify and then unpack some of the ways in which their historical and cultural locations influence how they currently perceive people and situations in their daily lives.

When assigning this essay, we explained that by thinking about where we come from and the cultural locations in our community contexts that have influenced us, we can more easily recognize our assumptions, judgments, questions, etc., and work toward understanding new and different perceptions and perspectives. Potential prompts PSTs might choose to frame their writing included, for example, where and with whom they felt most “normal,” accepted, and respected; with whom they felt marginalized and/or disrespected; if they saw themselves in media and in what ways; in what ways body image played a role in their lives, if at all; how they might identify or describe themselves related to sexual orientation, religion, social class, race/ethnicity, education, geographic influence, etc., and how any of these might impact their status in different parts of society – to name a few.

Conducting the course onsite at a middle school provided opportunities for our PSTs to interact with middle grades students in multiple ways. Each of them hung out with a group of seventh

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<sup>5</sup> This assignment was adapted from Stephanie Jones at University of Georgia

graders during at least one physical education class, with the goal of helping the PSTs and this particular group of seventh graders become more comfortable and familiar with one another. Those same seventh graders then became the focus of the Structured Conversation and Student Shadowing assignments. For the Structured Conversation, the PSTs got to know a seventh grader from that PE class during a paired, structured conversation. The PSTs then shadowed that same seventh grade student for at least three consecutive hours during another school day, which allowed PSTs to experience a seventh grader's multiple class changes, lunches, and plenty of laps in the gym during PE.

The final project presented the PSTs with an open-ended prompt to communicate what they learned from their experiences related to the four questions that framed the course. They had the option of working independently, in pairs, or in small groups. The final projects varied greatly in content and the formats students chose to communicate that content, including singing songs, performance poetry, PowerPoints with pictures and quotes or voice-overs illustrating some aspect of their journey, essays, Pinterest pages, and Instagram postings, to name a few.

### **Struggles in Social Justice Teacher Education**

Part of the difficulty of enacting anti-oppressive practices in a middle grades teacher education course lies within the day-to-day modeling of equitable practices. The vignette that follows is just one example of the personal crises that we as instructors experienced through the implementation and modeling of anti-oppressive, equitable practices.

“Well, it was *totally* uncomfortable, if you want to know the truth,” one of the white, middle-class, woman PST education students muttered through a slightly nervous giggle, as she looked around to her (white, women) friends sitting on either side of her for reassurance. They nodded in agreement.

“What *specifically* was uncomfortable about it?” Hilary (first author) responded, hoping the question was not inviting the PST to contribute to the problematic comments that had already begun piling up during this conversation about the visual ethnography assignment students were assigned two weeks prior – an assignment that had received some serious pushback from several students in the course.

“Well, when we were walking around [one of the neighborhoods students were assigned to visit], some kind of security guard slowed down in his car and followed us for a while, and then he stopped us and asked what we were doing there. He asked all of these questions and it made us feel really uncomfortable.” More nervous giggles and head nods from a few of the white women sitting around the student recalling the story. “It really annoyed me too,” she continued, “because, what right did he have asking us what we were doing walking on a public street? How did he know we didn't live there?”

More nods of approval and agreement from several students around the room. Several white students, that is. The Black students were *not* nodding in agreement as this student continued lamenting her frustrations as a white woman who was stopped and questioned by a security guard in a mostly Black neighborhood about her reasons for being in that neighborhood – her white instructors were also *not* nodding in agreement.

So we told him we were students at the university and explained the assignment – like y'all told us to do if anyone asked what we were doing – and then he told us to be careful and drove off. I don't know what he meant when he told us to be careful – because it was the middle of the day – but it was really uncomfortable having someone stop and question what we were doing – especially when we weren't even doing anything wrong.

The tension in the classroom was already so thick it was stifling, and this declaration had not provided any relief to that tension. The 35

unsettled PSTs sat in a large circle around the room, and the three of us who were co-teaching the course stood at three different points on the outside of the circle. The scene felt like a visual metaphor of the way the class dynamics had congealed over the past few class meetings: the three of us positioned on the outside of some impenetrable barrier that enveloped our class, constantly attempting to create fissures at different points of the barrier to open up new and different ways for our students (and us) to think about young adolescents, and more specifically, young adolescents of color from working-class and working-poor families. We knew the moment of crisis (Kumashiro, 2009) we were all experiencing (teacher educators and preservice teachers, alike) was necessary for some kind of change to occur during this class or any time in the future. However, we also knew that this student's declaration of frustration – veiled through her privilege as a white, upper-middle-class woman – would soon be added to the laundry list of challenges we encountered each time our class met to discuss one of the community-based assignments in which our PSTs had engaged.

No matter the amount of preparation and strategizing, we encountered these detours consistently throughout course. To spotlight our struggles as social justice-oriented teacher educators, we examine our experiences with three PSTs – Rachel, Michelle, and Alexis – enrolled in the course, including discussions within and outside of class meetings and their submitted course assignments.

These three PSTs do not necessarily represent archetypes or factions within the cohort. Although they share growing up in the Deep South and attending a largely white university, their lived experiences were quite different. Rachel<sup>6</sup>, a Black woman who grew up in metro Atlanta and attended an all-Black high school, is enrolled in a university that is predominantly white. As the Black undergraduate student who serves as

director of student affairs for the Student Government Association noted in a recent interview about “the 7%” (of students at the university who are Black), “When you step onto this campus and all you see is white people – that’s real. For a place where you’re supposed to be learning, it’s uncomfortable” (Funke, 2015).

Michelle and Alexis, both white, grew up in two different parts of the state: one in the typically affluent metro Atlanta suburbs and the other in rural south Georgia. Michelle attended a large suburban high school with more of an international student demographic while Alexis went to a small and largely white high school in the deepest south of Georgia. Though the places where Michelle and Alexis each grew up represent different demographics, economic climates, and educational and cultural opportunities, the conclusions they each reached about their places in the world seem to represent some common and often-unacknowledged assumptions of privilege by virtue of their position as part of a “righteous” ruling majority that views itself as occupying a post-racial, colorblind world.

For all three PSTs, attending the flagship state university brings both recognition for their academic success and also exposure to widely varying viewpoints. The university often brings them into juxtaposition, sometimes uncomfortable juxtaposition, with those whose backgrounds and perspectives seem in stark contrast to their own. However, their particular contributions to the course provided us with multiple complex and memorable moments when our intentions and the three PSTs' actions and reactions aligned or collided, pushing us to reflect, reconsider, revamp, and revise our choices in the moment and for the future.

We feature the final projects these PSTs submitted – Rachel completed hers individually and Michelle and Alexis worked together on theirs – because the final projects were designed to give PSTs an opportunity to capture and synthesize their learning relative to the course as a whole. Our descriptions, analysis, and interpretations of these two final projects offer the opportunity to

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<sup>6</sup> Names for PSTs are pseudonyms.

explore some of the challenges, constraints, and glimmers of revelation we experienced as middle grades teacher educators oriented toward and grappling with social justice.

### **“Well This Is Awkward”: Glimmers of Revelation**

Rachel began the semester as a bit of an enigma to us. We had heard from her previous field experience supervisor that she was reserved and did not feel very confident in the classroom during her practicum experience. We, at first, saw similar behaviors in our class until she stayed after to talk to us one day, and then things changed for Rachel and for us. Rachel explained to us that day that she was having a difficult time as a Black woman, both in our class and at the university, because she had never been surrounded by so much whiteness (our words, not hers). She felt objectified in most of her classes as one of the only Black students, and she was frustrated by classmates’ and professors’ naive and ignorant comments that oftentimes felt racist to her.

For her final project, Rachel wrote two free verse poems and created two different picture collages representing, (a) how she as a Black woman and people “similar to her” view the world, and (b) how she thinks people view her as a Black woman. For the purposes of space, we focus on the first poem Rachel wrote, as well as her reflection. In the poem, Rachel wrote about how uncomfortable she was at the beginning of our class and how she was waiting for the white people to say something ignorant: “I sit back, listen, and wait for the wrong words to be said, / Which was one thing we all had in common / someone says something ignorant, then I get eye contact / So I proceeded with caution.” Toward the middle of the poem, Rachel seemed unsure, even critical, about how we asked students to consider their conceptions of ignorance differently, including our comments regarding how people might educate themselves about their own assumptions so they could do something different for the next generation. Recreating something she heard one of us say during a class discussion, Rachel wrote, “If you

notice an issue with the way you think or feel, just educate yourself about it. / Don’t be set in your ways and pass the ignorance on to the next generation/” and then she ended that verse with, “Well...this is awkward.” For us, this line demonstrates that perhaps she was still feeling a bit uneasy about the way we were approaching conversations about students’ assumptions through our use of the term *ignorance*, because it was new to her – and to most students in the class.

During the discussion about ignorance to which Rachel referred in her poem, a few students asked if we could use a different term, because “ignorance” had such negative connotations and, to them, meant that we (the instructors) were calling them narrow minded. The awkwardness Rachel referred to in her poem, then, might have come from our response to those students as we explained that the meaning tied to ignorance is often misunderstood. We then provided them with an alternate definition, one that implicates all of us as limited and partial in our ways of making sense of the world (Kumashiro, 2009), and then invited the class to join us in the difficult work of practicing openness to new and different ways of thinking, so we all might make the world a better place for the next generation. Subsequently, the term *ignorance* and its misunderstood and newly understood meanings surfaced in numerous final projects. We interpret those moments as PSTs trying to make sense of their new understandings and consider what they might do with that knowledge in the future.

After the last “Well this is awkward” line in Rachel’s poem, the tone seemed to shift to her feeling a little more comfortable broaching the subject of ignorance. The next verse, for example, began with a question that one of us had asked a PST during a class discussion one day, “Why do you think you feel that way?” To begin illustrating her shift in thinking, Rachel continued with, “After comparing thoughts and emotions I can hear and feel a change of heart/ There seems to be less foul play.” Interestingly enough, while Rachel ended every other verse of her poem with

“Well...this is awkward,” she ended this next to last verse with, “Well...this is interesting.”

The last verse of the poem referenced back to a few more statements she might have also been paraphrasing from one of us during class: “You see, people, should be able to express themselves respectfully/ No one wants to get their feelings hurt/ Since we are all educated we are capable of doing this exceptionally” – and then she added, “Well...this could be awkward” to hint back to how she first felt in class when the discussions felt uncomfortable and/or uncertain for her. In the last line of the poem she then writes, “But, surprisingly, it’s not,” illustrating that her views had shifted and she felt more comfortable – or less awkward, at least.

In her reflection, Rachel spent dedicated time writing about how the class “actually changed the way [she] view[ed] the world” and that she felt “better equipped to be in uncomfortable circumstances,” which we would not have fully surmised from only reading her poem. Rachel elaborated on her shifting thoughts in her reflection:

You can tell the difference in my opinion of the class throughout the poem. You can also tell the difference in the way I view the world because of this class. It went from being an extremely awkward experience to being a very meaningful learning experience that has allowed me to change the way I think about people as a whole. It has also made me think about the types of things my future students may say or do that may make me feel uncomfortable. Now, I think that I am better equipped to be in uncomfortable circumstances.

Rachel’s comments in her reflection provide an example of the glimmers of revelation we encountered within all the challenges and constraints of our equity-oriented attempted fissures. These glimmers represent moments when our struggles and self doubts about our pedagogies were assuaged, if even temporarily. Recognizing that the PSTs engaged in authentic personal work and genuinely wrestled with

concepts provided us reprieve, albeit sometimes fleeting, when we as instructors could feel an almost tangible sense of hope and possibility.

Something that Rachel’s reflection opened our eyes to (perhaps because the three of us are white) was that all of the awkward or disorienting moments of crisis that she experienced during the class were occurring in concert with other PSTs’ moments of crisis, but the impetus for these crises were drastically different. And while many or all of our PSTs might have been experiencing a crisis in one way or another several times throughout the semester, Rachel’s project and reflection reminded us that the reasons for those crises can be so very different for every student in every class.

Rachel grappled with how her future middle grades students might make negative assumptions about her as a Black teacher because of the negative assumptions some of her white peers made about people of color in our class and other classes. Intentionally or unintentionally in our course, white PSTs publicly confessed their many assumptions about people of color, reflecting their lack of life experiences with and ignorance about the racialized suffering people of color – and particularly Black people – are subjected to every day in the US. While many of Rachel’s white peers in the class simultaneously experienced moments of crisis *alongside* Rachel, the content that fueled their crises was drastically different. In other words, the white PSTs’ crises arose out of the challenges to their commonsensical (white) ways of knowing.

Simultaneously, they were learning that those ways of knowing could indeed be the very same practices that were systemically oppressive (Kumashiro, 2009). For example, during a tense and candid class discussion about racism, one white PST, who was usually guarded during class and deflected uncomfortable situations through humor, questioned out loud what to do when what she was learning about the world contradicted the white supremacist narrative she grew up with (our words, not hers). In another glimmer of revelation (for us and for her), this

PST commented that her parents would never have considered themselves racists but, given what she was learning about systemic and institutional racism, she had indeed been raised to see the world through a blind-to-privilege white-washed lens.

Commonsensical ideas, according to Kumashiro (2009), often give us some sense of comfort, making us feel at ease with things that get repeated in our everyday lives. Were we to learn that prevailing views – of schooling, of people, of justice – are actually quite oppressive, we might end up feeling quite disoriented or uncertain or even guilty (p. xxxv). For the white PST in that moment, it was as if she was disoriented, uncertain, and feeling guilty all at once. For us, her declarations of disorientation, uncertainty, and guilt signified a glimmer, a shift in thinking away from oppression as common sense, toward anti-oppression as cold, hard reality and (we hope) a call to action.

### **“Our Normal Is Not Your Normal, and That Is OK”**

Michelle and Alexis’s moments of crises during our class were the kind of crises Kumashiro (2009) refers to as visceral and noticeable: “as when students express feelings of guilt or anger, or in some way resist continuing with the lesson” (p. 30). Michelle and Alexis began embodying that resistance, guilt, and maybe a bit of anger on the first day of class as we explained the purposes of the class and some of the assignments students would be engaging in. They dialed up the resistance, guilt, and anger a few notches once we assigned the visual ethnography. Their noticeably visceral discomfort and disorientation continued throughout the rest of the semester. Sometimes it felt to us that they were masters of the blatant eye roll and whispered side conversation to express displeasure in reaction to comments any one of us made about practicing openness or becoming aware of our assumptions. Their participation in discussions often focused on defending themselves, and unconsciously defending whiteness, and they generated myriad “why do we have to do this” questions after we gave an assignment.

Although we wanted to embrace the idea that “desire and resistance are central to the process of learning” rather than being viewed as “hindrances to learning, and thus... repressed or ignored or overpowered” (Kumashiro, 2009, p. 26), we found ourselves many times wanting to repress or overpower those moments when students resisted, because that resistance sometimes served as the fodder for our *own* moments of crisis. Just like our students did not like feeling disoriented, we too, did not know what to do with those uncomfortable emotions we experienced when we thought a moment might go one way during class and it careened in the opposite direction. Michelle and Alexis’ final project is one example of something we expected to go one way careening another, leaving us in paradox and disorientation once more.

For their final project, Michelle and Alexis developed a *VoiceThread*, which is a picture slideshow with an audio narration. The pictures they chose to include were stills from the 1995 motion picture *Dangerous Minds* (1995) showing Michelle Pfeiffer as a white substitute teacher in an impoverished inner-city, majority minority high school. While we could focus our entire analysis solely on Michelle and Alexis’s choice of movie and the still pictures they selected from that movie for their slides, we will bypass that golden nugget and move onto the audio narration they chose to include. The PSTs’ *VoiceThread* began with the high school students of color launching a verbal attack against their white substitute teacher, and then a (somewhat problematic for us) dialogue that the PSTs invented unfolds between teacher and students.

In the *VoiceThread*, Michelle and Alexis seemed to fumble through enacting some of the practices we discussed in class, such as a mantra we often referred to when trying to remind PSTs that we all come from different cultural and historical locations and experiences: “Your normal is not my normal, and that’s OK.” For example, they narrated a student saying, “Lady, I ain’t learnin’ ‘bout no damn poetry,” and then had the teacher ask, “Why do you need to call it *damn poetry*?” to

which the student responded, “What’s wrong with that word?” The teacher replied, “Where I come from, that adjective [damn] is inappropriate and there are other adjectives we can use in this classroom....” The PSTs’ narration then suddenly changes in tone from stern to almost sing-song-like and pleasant, and the narration continues: “But, your normal is not my normal, and that is OK,” to which they narrate another student in the class responding with, “*Huh?*”

The “normal” quote came directly from our class and was a central idea to what we as instructors believe is vital for our PSTs to think about regarding their future middle grades students. However, the delivery seemed to be an attempt at a compromise between their personal feelings and ours as instructors. When exploring our different interpretations of that segment further, we concluded that the PSTs might have been simply throwing us a bone by using the “normal” phrase to placate us in anticipation of the grades we would assign to their project. Michelle and Alexis’s final project reflections both describe the phrase “My normal is not your normal, and that is OK” as their new ambition and guiding light – an ambition that, according to their claims in their reflections, will persevere throughout the rest of their teaching careers. If this were truly their perception, however, the class turned water into wine over the course of 15 weeks. In other words, we found that their delivery of the mantra was not consistent through their class projects, contributions during class discussions, and assignment reflections.

In her “From Where Do I Read the World” essay, for example, Alexis wrote, “When I meet someone for the first time I notice their eyes, what they are wearing, their smile, their gender and unfortunately, I notice their skin color. This can be attributed to my past experiences and the way I grew up.” During a class discussion months later when the topic of racism had yet again cropped up, she declared that she “didn’t see color” because of her past experiences dating a man who was Indian. Because some of her written assignments seemed to contradict her contributions to class discussions, we were left

wondering how Alexis might take up concepts such as “my normal is not your normal and that is ok” in her future classroom, as well as many of the other concepts within the four questions that framed the class.

The next segment of Michelle and Alexis’s *VoiceThread* illustrates another example of the inconsistency we found in these PSTs’ views about how they were considering and addressing the four questions that framed the course and the final project. Because this is a longer segment, we have included a transcript from the *VoiceThread* below.

Sub: When I first walked in I know you called me just another white girl, so why are you being negative towards me?

Student 1: Well, people like you walk up in here always trying to fix us.

Student 2: Yeah, you think you are better than us.

Sub: Did you have a teacher who thought that?

Multiple student voices: Yeah, all of them.

Sub: Why are you putting me in the same category with them? You are single storying me.<sup>7</sup>

Student 1: What’s that supposed to mean?

Sub: Single story means to create one picture of someone based on one single event, or one group of people based on your only encounter with them.

Student 1: Yeah, like this one time I took a shortcut on my way home and I was stopped by a neighborhood watch and asked what I was doing there.

Student 2: Is that a single story?

Sub: Absolutely, that is 100% a single story. Do either of you know what ignorance is?

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<sup>7</sup> Students watched a TED talk, “The Danger of a Single Story,” by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2009) about how she was “single storied” given her status as a native Nigerian and all the assumptions and misconceptions she has faced about who she is and what she has and has not experienced.

Student 1: Yeah, it means you are narrow minded.

Student 2: Not exactly. Mr. E told me the other day that ignorance is more about a lack of knowledge of a topic.

Sub: Exactly. It is not necessarily a bad thing.

Student: But, it is a bad thing if someone chooses to stay ignorant and not educate themselves, right?

Sub: Correct. So, if I had chosen to walk into this classroom and form assumptions about you without knowing your life, then that would be ignorant. Now that we have clarified this I hope that when you meet someone, you think twice about making assumptions and single storying them.

This segment is illustrative of one of the challenges we mentioned earlier that leaves us in paradox, uncertainty, and discomfort. Michelle and Alexis's projects, individual reflections, and attitudes during most of our class meetings embodied similar messages of resistance, disorientation, and/or fear. Yet, the way they chose to present their understandings of the four questions that framed the course in their final project, using the language and examples that they did, left us feeling...confused, bamboozled, catawampus, unsettled, unresolved. And here is where it gets even more paradoxical and partial for us – where it gets even more uncomfortable and uncertain. All of this contemplation we are grappling with here is just that: contemplation and grappling. Beyond what is presented in their final project and related reflections, we find ourselves still wondering what these two women took from the experiential, community-based assignments we had them engage in during the semester, including what they took from the hour and sometimes two-hour class discussions, usually centered around race and racism, that we all found ourselves in due to those experiential, community-based assignments.

Each time the three of us met to discuss final projects, class assignments, and class discussions for the purposes of future course design and this article, we found ourselves coming up with

contradictory explanations as to what might have been happening with these two women during those disorienting moments in class – or well after – when we ourselves were left wondering what the hell had just happened, what we could have done differently, and if we did something differently, what the hell that could have been. Our most recent conclusion is that perhaps PSTs like Michelle and Alexis were performing what Matthew (second author) refers to as *the Keyser Soze*. In other words, maybe the Michelle's and Alexis's of the world are just doing what they need to do in our teacher education programs in order to get by in a context where their “normal” or commonsensical ways of knowing are being rocked and they simply cannot – or do not know how to – acknowledge or participate in those new ways of knowing. So the Michelle's and the Alexis's create *VoiceThreads* with still pictures they include from “white savior” movies like *Dangerous Minds* as the first *Keyser Soze* “in your face,” and then as a second *Soze* in your face, they include various mantras their teacher educators have woven into every assignment, discussion, and purpose of the course in the hopes that somehow that mantra will stick somewhere on one or two PSTs' physical or spiritual beings before the semester's end.

### WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

As middle grades teacher educators committed to social justice, we want to work against the notion of the “drive-by teacher” who experiences interactions with children and families in a vacuum of oblivion created by the fleeting images seen in driving by communities. Those fleeting images, by default, blur and smudge reality, leaving only the briefest of glimpses that often do more to mislead than inform. We designed an experiential course that (we hoped) would allow middle grades preservice teachers to, literally and figuratively, get out of the car and investigate how community contexts influence middle grades students' and educators' decisions, relationships, and created learning environments. Before, during, and after this experiential course, we have struggled mightily with questions of “‘what else,’ ‘how else,’ and ‘where else’” (Kumashiro, 2009, p.

xxv). What else could we have done? How else might we have done it? Where else might we have gone?

As teachers and scholars, we have read masterful accounts of teaching very difficult topics, accounts in which the teacher educator seemed to know what to say and how to say it to push a PST's thinking or action toward an anti-oppressive direction (cf., Banks, et al., 2005; Gay, 2000; hooks, 1994; Kumashiro, 2009; Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2000; McDonald & Zeichner, 2009). While those accounts are helpful on one level, such descriptions of well-timed or well-worded responses to PSTs sometimes leave us, well, in crises. As Ladson-Billings (2009) contends,

We all have ideal notions of what teachers are and should be. But ideal notions are just that – ideals. The real work of teaching is messy and complex. It does not conform to the neat conceptions of anti-racist, anti-sexist, anti-homophobic, anti-oppressive education about which we theorize. (p. xviii)

In other words, yes, it would be great if we always thought quickly on our feet and knew just what to say – and how best and when to say it. But we splutter along, making progress in fits and starts as evidenced by the glimmers of revelation we have described, and we sometimes move backward, sideways, or perhaps not at all, as captured by the *Keyser Soze* scenario. And just as Kumashiro (2009) assures us that anti-oppressive education work never has a period at its end, we know that our work, too, will always be a work in progress.

We mess up and we clean up, as we find ourselves constantly interrogating our designs, decisions, and experiences to consider what else, how else, and where else. And in doing that work we have come to know quite well that learning is not a comfortable process that “merely repeats or affirms” what we have already learned as teacher educators. Just like learning (through crisis) for our PSTs is sometimes a “disarming process that allows students to escape the uncritical,

complacent repetition of their prior knowledge and actions,” (Kumashiro, 2009, p. 32), learning is also sometimes a disarming process for us as teacher educators that helps us both release our dependence on what we think we know about social justice teacher education, and escape the repetition of marching in lockstep through a commonsensical curriculum for PSTs that exists in its own vacuum, absent the reality of children and communities. For all of us, learning involves looking beyond what we think we already know, “not by rejecting such knowledge, but by treating it paradoxically...such a process cannot help but to be uncomfortable” (Kumashiro, 2009, p. 32). ❖

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