

Centering Wellness and Fostering Interconnectedness With Future Educators of Color During a Global Pandemic and Racial Justice Uprising

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Abstract

With the advent of Covid-19 and classes moving online, future educators of Color (FEoC) in teacher education programs are susceptible to the same disparities in outcomes and retention that college students of Color experience. As a teacher educator of Color, I drew from *abolitionist teaching*, *restorative practices*, and *engaged pedagogy* to redesign and teach an online course for FEoC during the pandemic and racial justice uprising. I centered wellness and fostered interconnectedness through the use of restorative circles to process the pandemic and anti-Black violence and scheduled one-on-one meetings with FEoC to listen and respond to their needs. I emerged from the experience both humbled and hopeful that intentionally designing online coursework can support FEoC and inspire collective social action.

Introduction

In the Spring of 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic and stay-at-home orders began. At the time, I was preparing to teach an undergraduate

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course for future educators of Color (FEoC) at a predominantly White institution (PWI) in California. The course, *Developing Teachers of Color* (DToC), was a response to the national and regional focus on recruiting and retaining elementary and secondary (K-12) teachers of Color (Bireda & Chait, 2011). At a time when teachers of Color (ToC) are needed more than ever, African Americans, Asian Americans/Pacific Islanders, Latinx, and Native Americans collectively make up less than 20% of the national K-12 teaching force (Carver-Thomas, 2018). As a result of their minoritized status, ToC experience systemic push out (Carter Andrews, Castro, Cho, Petchauer, Richmond, & Floden, 2019; Tillman, 2004), institutional and interpersonal racism, and “racial battle fatigue” in K-12 settings (Pizarro & Kohli, 2018). Unsurprisingly they change school sites and wind up leaving the profession at higher rates than their White counterparts (Carver-Thomas, 2018).

The challenges ToCs face are not unique to the school settings in which they work, as the discrimination they experience begins in teacher preparation programs. At PWIs, FEoC endure racial microaggressions and overt racism (Irizarry, 2007; Kohli, 2009), Whitestream curriculum and social isolation (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2011; Mawhinney & Rinke, 2019), and high stakes exams that prevent them from entering and completing teacher education programs (Carter Andrews et al., 2019). Even as teacher education programs focus their attention on recruiting a more racially and ethnically diverse population of future educators, once they enroll little is done to develop them as culturally responsive educators (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2011; Gist, 2014) or to support their social-emotional well-being (Chung & Harrison, 2015).

As a former public-school teacher and current teacher educator of Color, the conditions described above prompted me to explore an undergraduate-to-teacher education pipeline for FEoC at a PWI. To this end, I created DToC, an undergraduate special topics course that examines structural factors that block access and force ToCs out of schools, explores culturally affirming and sustaining pedagogies, and culminates in an action-based research project. The course enrolls undergraduate students of Color interested in becoming culturally responsive K-16 FEoC (see Navarro, Quince, Deckman, & Hsieh, 2019 for recruitment and enrollment information). I first taught DToC in the Spring of 2019 and focused on how FEoC cultivate relationships, engage in local activism, and build ToC networks. As the Spring of 2020 approached, I was looking forward to teaching DToC again, building on the prior focus areas and emphasizing wellness in light of the spread of Covid-19 and the movement for racial justice.

Disquisition: The Unique Challenges of Moving DToC Online

At the beginning of March, I watched the spread of Covid-19 and wondered if and when it would make its way to our university. I had planned to teach the DToC class in April, but in mid-March the university stopped in-person instruction and went virtual. With only a couple of weeks to redesign the in-person class to fit a virtual format, I confronted three challenges: supporting FEOC, developing caring relationships, and building an online community.

First and foremost, I was concerned with how to design and teach a course online to support the retention, success, and well-being of FEOC. After the stay-at-home order went into effect, I investigated how I could modify my teaching and instruction to support FEOC virtually. I learned that the retention and success rates of college students of Color (SoCs)—specifically Black, Native American, Latinx, Pacific Islander, and Multi-Ethnic students—significantly decrease in online courses (Harris & Woods, 2020). According to Harris & Woods (2020), when instruction moves online, SoCs are disproportionately impacted, regardless of the delivery modality, but the greatest disparities emerge in asynchronous learning environments. As a result, I decided that I would provide real-time virtual instruction and incorporate explicit strategies to support the retention and success of the FEOC enrolled in the course. Doing so would require investigating how the context of the pandemic was affecting the well-being of FEOC. What obstacles were they facing? What type of support did they need? What adjustments would I have to make to my curriculum, course design, and instructional delivery?

Second, I wondered how I would develop relationships with FEOC while restricted to a virtual platform. Two decades ago, Gay (2000) centered caring at the heart of culturally responsive pedagogy for ethnically diverse students, and since that time scholars have reiterated that by forging connections and gaining trust, teachers positively influence the experiences and outcomes for SoC (Howard 2019). But reflecting upon my own experiences as an EoC who experienced both the sting of teacher neglect and the support of influential mentors, I knew first-hand the importance of modeling culturally responsive caring practices for FEOC and developing one-on-one relationships. Prior to the pandemic, unstructured moments before and after class provided fruitful opportunities to engage students, build rapport, and strengthen relationships. In a virtual learning environment, these types of interactions would be difficult, if not impossible to recreate. I was left contemplating, what opportunities were available within and outside of instructional time to develop caring relationships with FEOC, online?

Finally, I was concerned about creating a supportive community within the course and beyond for FEOC. Before the stay-at-home order, I had met with every new FEOC face-to-face. During our conversations, FEOC often mentioned that they were one of a few people of Color (PoC) in their classes throughout their undergraduate career. It was during these meetings that I learned how many students were not only looking forward to taking a class designed for and devoted exclusively to FEOC, but also to being part of a PoC affinity group working towards a common end. Moving to an online format, I feared that a virtual class would prevent FEOC from developing rapport and diminish the possibilities for building a supportive community. How would FEOC develop that critical network of relationships in a virtual setting? Would community-building activities like restorative circles translate to an online environment?

Dispatch

Centering Wellness Through Synchronous Circles

After reflecting on the disparities that college SoC experience in online education, especially with asynchronous instruction, I decided to hold synchronous classes. Real-time sessions also allowed me to interact virtually with FEOC and facilitate synchronous wellness activities to support their development as culturally responsive and social justice educators. In teaching DToC I wanted to provide strategies to support FEOC on their trajectory as educators and sustain them into their future as teacher activists. I wholly agree with Bettina Love (2019) when she observes that “wellness is a part of social justice work ... dark folx have to choose to see ourselves beyond our protest, beyond our fight for justice; we are more than just resistance” (pp. 156-157). Sustaining ourselves as EoC, necessitated that we center our well-being.

As the centerpiece of my wellness strategy I decided to focus on synchronous restorative circles, modeling them as a relationship-based and non-punitive approach to classroom discipline in K-12 schools. As a result, we engaged in two types of restorative circles: *proactive circles* to create a classroom learning community and learn how to participate in discussions, as well as *responsive circles* to process and address the harm within and beyond our virtual classroom we had or were experiencing (Costello et al., 2010).

Proactive circles build community in a variety of ways, from sharing teaching strategies and our struggles to affirming our experiences by collectively processing the unprecedented context within which we found ourselves. Initially, we engaged in circle check-ins to discuss the various ways we were affected by Covid-19. Later in the term, FEOC

shared culturally responsive teaching artifacts and strategies. On one occasion, a FEOC led the class with a mindfulness and breathing activity. Each of these activities proactively spoke to our wellness needs as PoC and educators, instead of letting the situation we found ourselves in overwhelm us and rob us of our agency. Through our use of responsive circles, we also engaged in collectively healing activities to address the harms experienced as PoC during this time of racial unrest. As the killings of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and many others gained media attention, a myriad of emotions began to surface among class members. During class, we used responsive circles to acknowledge, process, grieve, and heal.

Yet even as I was able to lead responsive circles effectively through the first seven weeks of class, something broke inside me when I saw George Floyd utter “please, please, I can’t breathe” on video. Floyd’s last words were not only a reminder of Eric Garner’s death and the thousands of Black men, women, and transgender folks who have died at the hands of police—they brought me to a new low and a feeling of profound hopelessness. As I tried to prepare for class that week, I simply couldn’t lesson plan or even facilitate a thoughtful conversation about Floyd’s death. I was emotionally numb and unusually silent during our next meeting, and although my students brought up Floyd’s murder, we only had a brief discussion about it.

Within a couple of days, national uprisings and demonstrations brought a much-needed response and sense of hope. Locally, several FEOC were inspired to participate in a peaceful march protesting anti-Black murder. Similar to many other protesters who took to the street across the nation, FEOC from my course were met with police tear gas and intimidation tactics. While the outpouring of response to Floyd’s killing buoyed my spirit and gave me new-found inspiration, I also felt a sense of obligation to respond to the socio-emotional and physical harm my students endured.

As a result of these events, I decided to alter the schedule and hold a responsive circle the following class meeting. In advance, I told my students that the upcoming class focus would be to process and heal from the current uprising and the police response. To unpack the recent racial unrest, I used Tanya Suzuki’s *Community-Holding Circle: A Guide for Facilitating Circle While Distance Learning*. According to Suzuki (a restorative justice educator and member of the People’s Education Movement), the circle guide is intended for K-12 students to reflect on the uprisings and anti-Black murder by police. It includes a detailed lesson for a pre-circle discussion via chat, circle agreements, circle prompts, and a closing discussion. I also reflected upon Love’s observation that “Dark folx heal in

ways that are unrecognizable to White folx because Whiteness is why we are in trauma in the first place” (2019, p. 157). Thus, I oriented the circle to have FEOC debrief on their own terms, and to discuss the racial uprising and help us heal in light of Floyd’s anti-Black murder and the police violence experienced by FEOC at a local protest.

When the class came together, I apologized for neglecting to unpack the recent events that occurred in Minneapolis with the killing of George Floyd. I let them know how Floyd’s death shook me and that I was grateful we could meet in a circle. We shared our initial thoughts on the uprising during the activity, critiqued the anti-Black news coverage and local police response, grieved prior Black murders, made connections to popular responses, and reflected on our political development. At times, we shared tears. In the closing round, FEOC affirmed each other’s comments, emotions, and vulnerability, while highlighting the power of collective healing, a key element in Ginwright’s (2016) theorizing on healing. Instead of presenting wellness as an individual venture, we shared our suffering and re-committed ourselves to anti-racism as a strategy to sustain us for the hard work ahead as FEOC (Love, 2019).

During the next check-in circle a week later, several FEOC said they were grateful that we had an in-depth discussion on the racial uprising, particularly because so few of their other courses made any mention of it. FEOC shared how they felt affirmed and compelled to take action after sharing their experiences. For example, a Latina FEOC shared that she started organizing with a non-Black PoC organization to raise funds for Black Lives Matter. Many of us shared how we recently attended protests in our respective cities, and a FEOC provided updates on an upcoming demonstration. The responsive circle activity allowed us to collectively reflect, grieve, and heal, ultimately giving us hope to continue moving toward racial justice. In the end, restorative circles allowed us to center our well-being while also practicing a classroom strategy that FEOC could use as culturally and community responsive educators.

Fostering Interconnectedness Through Close Listening

After reflecting on how I could build relationships with FEOC, I returned to bell hooks’ seminal text *Teaching to Transgress* (1994). At the end of the book, hooks explains that although she struggled to develop meaningful teacher-student relationships in large classes, one thing that helped was “to meet with each student in my class, if only briefly” (p. 204). I remember reading that passage over ten years ago and since then I have always wanted to schedule meetings with each student, but never felt as if I had enough time. In the Covid-19 context,

however, I was determined to restructure my class meeting schedule to allow time to meet with every FEOC to foster interconnectedness. More specifically, I wanted to develop one-on-one relationships, model culturally responsive care, and support their learning during the pandemic.

To this end, I made the difficult decision to cut 30 instructional minutes from each class to make time to meet with FEOC in one-on-one meetings, which I referred to as “scheduled office hours.” Before the pandemic, I could not imagine using class time to meet with students individually. My training as a K-12 teacher emphasized that you teach from bell-to-bell, and I had continued this practice as a teacher educator. I realized, however, that supporting student success and developing caring relationships ought to be prioritized in a virtual learning environment, especially during a global pandemic and the racial justice uprisings. Moreover, I wanted to extend and model the importance of culturally responsive care.

I required each FEOC to meet with me virtually, one-on-one, twice during the term. They could sign up for a 20-minute meeting during the instructional time carved into our class period or at another time. For the first round of meetings, I focused on getting to know one another, asking for feedback on how the course was or was not meeting their needs, and soliciting suggestions about how to support them in the Covid-19 context. In the second meeting, I discussed their academic progress in the class and provided feedback on a graded assignment, and we talked about their plans as educators of Color. In both meetings, I always allowed FEOC to share or ask anything that was pressing.

FEOC seemed much more candid in their one-on-one sessions than during class. They expressed gratitude that we were meeting synchronously and that the course was providing structure and routine in an unpredictable context. Most FEOC also mentioned how much they appreciated the use of circles in the class to process the pandemic collectively. They remarked that discussing the effects of Covid-19 and its impact on learning in the course was unlike what was happening in other classes. As the instructor, I felt affirmed by their positive comments, but I also solicited critiques on activities and lessons. For example, in one of the first scheduled office hour meetings, a FEOC explained that the media I used in class was “breaking up” and “difficult to view.” They recommended that I provide a link to the video or upload it to the course site to increase accessibility. In other meetings, FEOC suggested we increase opportunities for dialogue in breakout rooms instead of whole group discussions to allow for more intimate conversations with their peers. Both suggestions were implemented and proved fruitful.

My scheduled office hours with FEOC allowed me to build rapport and support their teaching trajectories, as well as revealing the dis-

tinct obstacles individual FEOC were facing. In a couple of instances, for example, FEOC shared that they were experiencing housing and food insecurity as a result of the pandemic. Consequently, I noticed that these same FEOC were struggling to complete their assignments. In response, I offered them flexible deadlines or the option to complete an alternative assignment (such as an oral presentation instead of a paper). In other instances, it was necessary to connect FEOC with external organizations or individuals to support their well-being. For example, during scheduled office hours a FEOC revealed that they were being physically harmed and were unable to focus on their classes as a result. I proceeded to connect them to the university's Dean of Students, which led to subsequent meetings with faculty and administrators to support their academic progress, ensure their safety, and connect them to university and county-wide resources.

Last Words:

Teaching with Humility & the Need for Collective Action

As I prepare to teach another term virtually, I am reminded of Bettina Love's injunction that as educators, "we must radically dream, because before Covid-19 closed our schools and dismantled our way of life, schools were failing not only children of color but all children" (2020, para. 3). This past term, radically dreaming meant centering wellness and developing relationships with FEOC, the result of which was an online course that successfully reached its goals, while attending to the very human and real needs of our FEOC. For me in particular, this experience brought to the fore the importance of teaching with humility and the need for collective action.

In the Covid-19 era of virtual learning, the desire to disconnect, dismiss, or pass judgment can be overwhelming when so much feels out of one's control. Yet in resisting this temptation, teacher educators who actively listen to our FEOC (and indeed, all of our teacher candidates) will likely discover that a missed assignment or a lack of participation typically signals a larger issue. One-on-one online meetings were insightful because they revealed the unique and individual experiences of FEOC during the pandemic. We not only made the time to connect individually, we made meaning in that time. What I heard during scheduled office hours was both inspirational and humbling; I was at once spurred towards more creative solutions in supporting FEOC and forced to acknowledge missteps in my teaching. Openly admitting how I could improve signaled to FEOC that culturally responsive educators aren't afraid to address errors in doing what is right for their students.

Perhaps the most surprising experience was listening to myself in the remarkable circle conversation in which I expressed and honored the emotions I felt after George Floyd's murder. Making time for collective healing as PoC illuminated the fact that teaching and learning need not be restricted by the virtual classroom—not during a pandemic, not during a racial justice uprising, not anywhere, ever.

To these ends, we have recently seen popular movements organizing to defund and remove school police (Leone, 2020; Retta, 2020; Toropin, 2020), cancel Teacher Performance Assessment (Valdez, Pour-Khorshid, & Cariaga, 2020), and institute ethnic studies from kindergarten to college (Dil, 2020; Elattar, 2020). These aren't new demands, but they are timely in moving us towards a more racially just society. As teacher educators, we must not sit idly by as Black lives suffer and die under the weight of systemic racism. Instead, we need to listen and work alongside those who have a history of advocating for, and working with and within communities of Color, using our virtual classrooms to inspire action and engaging in such action ourselves. Teacher activist organizations are especially vital in the ongoing movement for racial justice. Resources from Tanya Suzuki and the People's Education Movement¹ proved essential for me during this moment, and teacher activists like Farima Pour-Khorshid² and organizations such as Teacher 4 Social Justice³ and Black Lives Matter in Schools⁴ have provided invaluable resources for educators. Centering wellness, listening, and being active participants in racial and social justice movements, we can overcome the climate of disillusionment and despair and heed bell hooks (South End, 1998) call to find the hope necessary to engage in the struggle for radical change in teacher education, K-12 schools, and society as a whole.

Notes

¹ See People's *Teaching Resources* and Tanya Suzuki's *Community-Holding Circle: A Guide for Facilitating Circle While Distance Learning*: linktr.ee/peoples_ed

² See Farima's *Collection of Hella of COVID-19 Teaching/Learning/Wellness Resource*: <https://docs.google.com/document/u/1/d/1LMJeebStOBVFpey9AnV9OCvU2JuDXXAsTxBfMuhOawY/mobilebasic?fbclid=IwAR3pp5BoN0R-ydKFiUXOwaRFyCQ6JTbqpW4Sa7071ydR7Zb6iYPOlpJx4Zc>

³ See Teachers 4 Social Justice's *Statement* and additional resources in support of Black lives: <https://t4sj.org/politics-and-media/black-lives-matter/>

⁴ See *Black Lives Matter in Schools Resources*: <https://www.blacklivesmatteratschool.com/resources.html>

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