“I CANNOT DO THIS ANYMORE”: A TEACHER EDUCATOR RESPONDS TO THE COVID-19 AND RACISM PANDEMICS OF 2020

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ABSTRACT: In this reflective self-study, the author explores how she transformed one teacher education course from the status quo in response to the dual pandemics of Covid-19 and racism during the summer of 2020 in the United States. Using a critical approach to language use in teacher preparation, Kirton, an African American mother of two young sons, examines the importance of silences and race conscious language in the preparation of teachers. Findings indicate that the work of critical approaches to the study of race and racism in teacher education requires an ongoing archeology of the self (Sealey-Ruiz, 2020), which can be sustained through multi-modal approaches to language, time to journal and reflect, and the co-creation of shared space to ask and respond to the most difficult questions in education.

KEY WORDS: Teacher formation, Race-consciousness, Self-study.

Introduction

I can still recall the moment in March, 2020 when the New York City Department of Education made the announcement that schools would be closed for several weeks due to the quick spreading Covid-19 virus. The morning had started off as a regular day. My children were finishing homework assignments for the weekend, and I was thinking about the upcoming school week. My workdays were very busy in my roles as a teacher educator working with graduate students in education and as an educational consultant facilitating professional learning opportunities in early childhood private and public schools. When my phone vibrated on Sunday, March 15, 2020 to indicate a new message, I did not give it much thought, at first. However, that changed upon a careful examination of the message. I first learned of the school shutdown when a colleague texted me to see if I had heard the news about the closures for the next several weeks. Shocked by their text and the idea of schools closing temporarily, I immediately responded “no” and turned the television on to find out more information. As the realization of the news settled in, I began to wonder how I could

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transform my busy life into a virtual format with two children at home during the day.

Like many other working parents, my work life functioned well when my children were in school under the guidance of their teachers to help them remain on task and support their learning. How would I be able to support my graduate students, continue to do consultation work, *and* make sure that my children were remaining up to date with their schoolwork while navigating new online tools for remote learning? I had the slight advantage of already being familiar with Zoom through my work as an online workshop facilitator helping teachers become certified. However, my comfort with Zoom was still considered at the beginner level. Feelings of overwhelm and panic quickly consumed my brain. New York City was the epicenter for the pandemic in the United States (U.S.) in March, 2020, and my location in Queens, NY was considered the center of that epicenter. It was common to hear from colleagues and friends who contracted the virus or people who were worried about a sick loved one. Some Covid cases were mild, while others were fatal. All the information surrounding the virus was still new and developing with each passing moment, which added to the anxiety around it. I wondered if and how I would be able to continue teaching my graduate students during such a stressful period. Many of my students were concerned about their own health or that of a family member, in addition to the uncertainty of what the shutdowns would mean for their student teaching opportunities, their upcoming graduation, and job prospects upon the completion of their degrees. Carrying the weight from the anxiety of my students added to the heavy burden that I was already feeling. As time went on, I temporarily found ways to restore balance in my life through activities of self-care which included prayer, meditation, physical activity, and completing puzzles with my family. My role as a teacher educator during the pandemic was beginning to feel less stressful. Then, George Floyd was murdered, and everything changed, again.

In this paper I will reflect on the ways that the Covid-19 pandemic and the global racial unrest following George Floyd's murder in 2020 forced me to reevaluate my pedagogy as a teacher educator and the tensions that followed when I made a conscious effort to bring deeper and more explicit conversations about race and racism into my graduate course. "I cannot do this anymore" was my response to the notion of moving forward as though things were normal during the summer of 2020, which was a most unusual and *abnormal* year. "I

cannot do this anymore" was a message for my students and colleagues but most importantly, it was a message for myself to signal the required shift in my thinking and in my actions moving forward. My personal and professional life were entangled in this shift. As Baldwin (1963) reminds us, efforts to correct generations of harm enacted in society and in classrooms will be met with fierce resistance. My experience of trying to right some of those wrongs through my pedagogical practice was no different. Resistance settled into my Zoom online space as was expected. I will share strategies that I implemented to co-create a space where conversations about racial justice could take place, including revisions that I made to my course in support of the important work of facilitating conversations about race and racism. I also discuss the implications for moving forward in these critical conversations in teacher education.

Anti-Blackness Never Rests

George Floyd was a 46-year-old Black man who was brutally murdered in the U.S. at the hands of law enforcement in May 2020 after a store clerk called the police because they thought Floyd used a counterfeit bill to pay for merchandise (Hill et al., 2020). Floyd's death was recorded for all of the world to see, and it was shared widely on digital platforms and in the media, which led to widespread protests around the globe. The tragic event took place after the spring semester had ended and the first summer semester was already underway at the small, urban, progressive educator preparation program where I worked at the time. The program was largely comprised of white women; however, Black, Latinx, Asian and multi-ethnic students were also represented in the program.

George Floyd's murder deeply disturbed me as a Black mother with two Black sons growing taller and bigger every day. Although it can be rare in white households, it is very common in Black families to begin conversations with children about racism (Ramachandran, 2021) from an early age (Robinson, 2020) to prepare them for the racialized world in which they live and provide armor to battle the misinformation they will encounter about Black people (Woodson, 1933) throughout their lives. As a mother and educator, I am intentional about co-creating open and ongoing dialogues with my husband and children about the (un)spoken messages that exist about Black people. I remain vigilant around my children at all times while at home and also when we are outside of our home. I know anti-Blackness never

rests; therefore I need to remain ready to counter the narratives my children hear by highlighting the tenderness of Black love, the beauty of Black joy, and the richness of Black lives. I wanted our sons to hear explicit language around the realities of race and racism (DuBois, 1903). Most importantly, I wanted and *needed* them to hear affirmations about who they are and who their ancestors were to build up their pride and to challenge the miseducation (Woodson, 1933) they were subjected to on a daily basis as Black children growing up in an overtly and covertly racist world.

My sons were 11 and 10 years old at the time of Floyd's murder which clearly indicated their youth and innocence in my eyes, but I was very aware that they do not get the luxury of being perceived as innocent in this country due to the adultification of Black children (Cooke & Halberstadt, 2021; Madkins, 2021; Morris, 2016). George Floyd's death deeply concerned me which occurred around the same time that Breonna Taylor (BBC News, 2020) and Ahmaud Arbery were murdered (BBC News, 2021) in the U.S. as well. My soul and my heart felt weak. I simply could not take hearing about another senseless loss of life for the sole reason that the person murdered was Black. However, I knew the list of senseless Black murders would continue to grow almost immediately due to the way anti-Blackness works. The constant disregard for Black lives as highlighted during the summer of 2020, in conjunction with the Covid-19 pandemic, was exhausting. I had already signed a contract to teach a graduate course that semester; however, I was not quite sure how I would be able to fulfill my role given the heaviness in my heart. The Covid-19 pandemic changed everything that was once taken for granted. Work was home and home was work. Home was also school, a 24-hour restaurant, an entertainment center, a fitness center, and a place to celebrate holidays and special occasions over the phone or on Zoom. Covid-19 created a unique pace of life that was slow and fast at the same time. Lines that were once distinct felt blurred because of the lockdown requirement. Perhaps that was why George Floyd's brutal murder touched me so deeply, interrupting my ability to work and function as normal. While I never expected the pandemic to cure systemic racism, I thought it could at least slow down the racial assaults aimed at Black bodies that have been present dating back to the start of slavery in the United States (hooks, 1999; Jones, 2021). I clearly underestimated the tenacity of white supremacy. "I cannot do this anymore" started off as a whisper in my head that seemed to grow louder and more persistent each day until the message finally became too loud to ignore. It was time to

make a change.

Revamping My Course Syllabus

I leaned into reality pedagogy (Emdin, 2016) an approach to teaching that connects the reality of students' lives with the content being taught in classrooms--reframing the student as the expert in their learning experiences with the teacher being positioned as the learner. This shift in my practice required a thorough but quick review of my syllabus to bring explicit language and more intentional experiences into our work as we grappled with the ongoing realities of racism, Covid-19 and their impacts in education into a course focused on teachers working with young children and families. Recognizing that many children and families were also struggling with the anger and frustration of seeing people who look like them marginalized and harmed solely because of their race, while also managing the ongoing stress of the pandemic, I made the course speak back to the silent ways that race and racism impact children's experiences in schools through readings, online resources, and guest speakers.

What should I *say*? I wondered what the right words would be to engage in difficult conversations about the reality and harms of racism and anti-Blackness. Where should I *begin*? I questioned what the right starting point to the conversation would be and how many other opportunities my students had within their educator preparation program and outside of the program to deeply reflect on the role of racism and other forms of oppression, and how it impacted their lives, the lives of their neighbors and colleagues, as well as the lives of the students and families they worked with. How could I teach a lesson on interacting with children and families when the world feels upside down? I did not know how to approach such an important topic in the midst of *everything* we were all dealing with as humans while considering our different positionalities. These were some of the questions and thoughts that I pondered over and over as I tried desperately to find the words to help me move forward with my summer course. There was so much for me to consider as I began to reinvent my course and present a new and improved version of it.

My students were diverse in terms of race,ethnicity, and teaching settings, and they were all women working as in-service and preservice teachers. Despite this,, race and other identity markers like socioeconomic status had remained largely unspoken in the course unless

I initiated the topic. The overall feeling that I sensed from my students was that race was not a consideration in our work or it was not something that needed to be talked about in an explicit way. The course felt race neutral or race evasive (Bonilla-Silva, 2017). That sentiment changed as the course progressed and my students began to initiate conversations around race, racism and different power dynamics present in their work environments. I wanted time to process my frustration and sadness after the George Floyd murder, but I also had a responsibility as an instructor that summer. I struggled to find words to convey my frustration and feeling of hopelessness. I was angry at the state of the world and as a result my thoughts felt unclear. My words continued to elude me so I searched for a quote or an image to help articulate my feelings and hope for a better world. A popular quote and image by the late author and activist, James Baldwin, caught my attention online,"Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced" (1962, final para.). Baldwin's quote gave me the language I was searching for,providing my entry point to begin a difficult but necessary conversation which began one particular evening and continued for the remainder of our 2020 summer term together.

Regardless of how much I struggled to find the right words or the right entry point, one thing that I was certain of was that silence was *not* an option. I refused to remain silent in that pivotal moment, and I would not pretend as though it was "business as usual." As I began the class that night I told my students that I was showing up in the virtual space with a heavy heart and raw emotions. I expressed my feelings of sadness and my commitment to the course, and I also noted that our work would be different from that point on. I then explained why. The course was already designed to discuss race and racism (see Figure 1 and 2), however, very direct and explicit conversations on the topic only showed up a handful of times. A clear throughline could not be traced from the start of the semester until the end that demonstrated pointed conversations about racial oppression. News of George Floyd's murder changed me, and it changed how I taught this course.

Methodology

This reflective manuscript was a self-study (Loughran, 2005; Sealey-Ruiz, 2020) conducted while processing my experience through an analysis of language and silences as a teacher educator while dealing with the ongoing stress of the Covid-19 and racism pandemics

(see Buffalo & Souto-Manning, this issue) in 2020. My summer course was taught at a small, progressive predominately white institution located in an urban setting that espouses inclusivity through justice and equity-oriented work. The course focused on interactions between children, families, and teachers in diverse and inclusive settings. Sixteen students were enrolled in the class, most of whom identified as women of Color and a few students who identified as white women. It was rare to have a majorityof students of Color in one course at the institution; however, this course's makeup included students who were a part of a special cohort of teachers who had a few years of teaching experience and were full time teachers working in urban educational environments, thus attracting more teachers of Color than usual to the program. Many of the cohort members were juggling full time jobs, coursework, and the needs of their own families. More than half of the students were working in communities that were considered low-income and consisted largely of Black and Latino/a/x children and families.

Mixed Reviews

The changes to my course received mixed reviews from students almost immediately. While some seemed appreciative of the new direction we were going in, expressing that they too were finding it difficult to focus on "business as usual" while being traumatized by the brutal murder of George Floyd, other students chose to remain silent on the issue. Silence can be seen as a form of resistance when engaging in interracial conversations about race; however, that is not always the case (Ladson-Billings, 1996; Singleton & Hays, 2008). Since race is seen as a taboo topic it is not uncommon for people to need time to process the cognitive dissonance that they may be experiencing when learning new information. In some cases, however, silence is weaponized and used as a form of resistance (Ladson-Billings, 1996). As the semester progressed, I began to see resistance to our ongoing conversations about race show up in different ways. At times the resistance was clear and explicit with students moving the topic in the direction of gender or religion without discussing how racialized intersectionality compounds oppression for marginalized communities. More explicit forms of resistance showed up when teachers expressed their discomfort around having conversations about race in schools (Picower, 2009) and when they verbally expressed their belief that race conversations belonged at home between families and children.

I appreciated the candor of students when they shared these sentiments, but I countered by asking how they knew these conversations were in fact happening at home and how they knew these conversations were responding to children in a way that would clear up any misinformation about race and leave space for further inquiry. My questions gave teachers a space to pause and reflect on their comments. Sometimes the resistance was so subtle that it made me question whether it was real, or simply imagined. I knew it was important to include opportunities for self-reflection as my students engaged in conversations about race and racism. While it was critically important for all of us to engage in conversations as a group, it was equally important to me that my students were engaged in conversations with themselves to unpack their views on their identity as well as people they came into contact with (or did not) in the world. This deep reflective work is a critical component of "The archeology of the self," a larger racial literacy development framework theorized by Yolanda Sealey-Ruiz (2020),and it served as a lens that was pivotal in our work of understanding the way race and racism functioned in our society. The co-creation of these reflective spaces during class and through course assignments gave me the opportunity to analyze the language my students used and design a counter-pedagogy to make race visible in all our words and push the conversation around race, racism and other forms of oppression forward in a way that felt tangible in our work as educators and educational leaders.

Resistance around race conversations in teacher education is not new (Ohito, 2016; Mensah, 2019) and should not come as a surprise in education considering how often these conversations are evaded in society. Since before 2020, state legislators in the U.S. have gone to great lengths to ensure that conversations about race and racism do not happen in schools by banning books and passing laws to censor librarians, teachers and school districts that attempt to defy the "law" by teaching accurate historical information in addition to other banned topics (Park, 2022). With all of this information in mind, I knew that conversations about race and racism might feel tense and uncomfortable, but I also knew that it was necessary to engage in these conversations nonetheless.

If the racial unrest and gross disparities of the pandemic across racial lines had taught us anything, it was that we needed to begin conversations about inequity as early as possible and provide plenty of space to unpack these issues and challenge our beliefs and assumptions. As a teacher educator I knew that my role was to be in community with my students and

facilitate a learning space that would allow them to engage with each other and also with me. I knew the silence that emerged during our conversations about race and racism needed to be acknowledged *and* we needed to find a way to move through our discomfort to emerge stronger and better informed as educators and as humans. I also recognized that the best learning moments for me always included times that felt somewhat tense, uncertain, and a little bit scary. Why then should the expectation for learning be different when talking about race and racism? Our conversations needed to be viewed as educational experiences, similar to other educational experiences like learning statistics, science, or another subject where the information might come easily to some and not so easy for others. In other words, learning about race and racism should be just as complex, if not more so, than learning about other subjects. When I viewed our work in that way, I felt more confident about my next steps in having conversations about the ongoing racial unrest in 2020 and connecting it to our work as educators.

Laying the Groundwork for Critical Conversations

History had provided me with numerous examples to know that everyone would not welcome my new approach to talking about race and racism. Based on past experiences in a number of settings in both early childhood education and while working with graduate students and colleagues, I knew that silence and averted eyes were normal when engaging in these conversations. This reality would be made even more difficult in my mind due to our virtual learning format. When Zoom videos were suddenly turned off, I immediately wondered if it was due to a comment that was made. When some students kept their video and audio off for almost the entire class session I wondered if anyone was present on the other end of the dark screen or if they just had their device running unattended in the background. I began to question my decisions more than I had in the pas; however, I was encouraged by the knowledge that our work was important and essential to the role of early childhood educators. I continued moving forward.

The use of community norms (agreed upon protocols) was helpful and allowed us to enter conversations about issues that were happening in real time which felt applicable to my students. Students posed questions that were on their minds based on interactions with colleagues or families in their childcare centers and they also posed general questions about

engaging in conversations about race and racism with young children. We discussed the tensions felt when a family insisted that their child be excluded from conversations about Black Lives Matter (BBC News, 2020) and the protests against state sanctioned violence. Recognizing that we were all entering this work from different positionalities, I made a point of beginning each session with a "pause," a quiet meditative moment that I initially led, which ranged from taking two to three minutes to draw a picture, free write, check in with our breathing, or listen to music. A rotation schedule was created with my students as the semester progressed. At the start of each session, one or two students would lead an activity together or independently. This practice allowed time for students to settle into the virtual learning space and have a moment to pause before we moved into the topic for the night. Many of my students were leaving work and rushing home to join our online class, while some students were still at work when we began our session in the early evening.

A similar practice was modeled for me during my time as a graduate student. I always appreciated the way the practice of engaging in meditation at the start of class created a space for deeper learning and engagement. I valued the opportunity to provide a similar experience for my students where they could settle into class rather than rush into the session without a transition to bring us together in a meaningful way. My hope was that our "pause" during each session would also allow students to dig deep within themselves to gather up the courage to enter honest conversations about race, if not for themselves, then for the families (and future families) they made a commitment to work with as teachers and future administrators. The use of norms was helpful; however, it did not feel supportive enough as time went on. By the end of the semester, I felt that we had developed a good place to start but something more was needed. That is when the Courageous Conversations (Singleton & Hays, 2008) framework for engaging in conversations about race became more central to our learning space that semester.

The Courageous Conversations framework was created to help provide "the conditions for safe exploration and profound learning for all" (p. 18), and it includes four agreements that participants adhere to during conversations about race. The four agreements are "stay engaged, expect to experience discomfort, speak your truth, and expect and accept a lack of closure" (p. 19). While I did not fully employ the "Courageous Conversations" (Singleton & Hays, 2008) framework at the start of virtual learning during the summer of 2020, once fully incorporated, I found the review of the four agreements at the start of each session to be very

helpful. The framework reminded us that the dialogic work we were planning to engage in would not be easy, but it served as a foundation to return to when moments felt tense or uncertain.

I checked in with individual students regularly through email and by asking them to show up in the Zoom meeting early or remain online after class ended. Students were also encouraged to schedule meetings with me if they wanted to connect. Relationship building was essential in creating the trust that would be needed to engage in race conversations and sustain them throughout the semester. As the summer semester ended and I moved towards the fall of 2020, I reached out to a colleague and former peer mentor to share my plans for revamping another course that I taught to center conversations about race and racism. My colleague was known for engaging in deep conversations about race, and I wanted their guidance as I thought deeply about making the learning environment more conducive to race conversations. With my colleague's help I began to explore podcasts, videos, and social media posts as a way to add depth to the conversations around race and racism in my fall course.

It Takes a Village

I relied on experts in various areas to support the ongoing development of my students to engage in critical conversations around race and racism during my 2020 summer course. My knowledge about the topic was developed but emerging more each day so I reached out to a race scholar, an anti-racist early childhood educator, and advocates who fought for children marginalized due to their race, socioeconomic status, and disability. My guests visited our online course sharing information about their work and leading us through activities to engage in deeper conversations and reflections about race, racism, and other forms of oppression. They also showed videos demonstrating their antiracist pedagogy to provide my students with examples about how this work could look on a daily basis, and they shared stories about what it is like to advocate for children with disabilities. This strategy proved to be especially effective since it allowed some of the learning to come from new voices, and it reinforced the idea that educators are advocates. Gaining new insights from the guest speakers was invaluable.

I also explored journaling with my students as we moved from the fall semester of

2020 into the spring semester of 2021. Ladson-Billings (1996) discussed how students who were silent at times led her to believe that they were in agreement with what was being said in her course; however, student reflective journals revealed a different story. Mentor and Sealey-Ruiz (2021) also examined the benefits of using journals in racial literacy development. I witnessed the benefits of this reflective practice firsthand in my identity as an emerging scholar and doctoral student in the spring of 2021. I became familiar with the benefits of journaling as a part of my ongoing racial literacy development in a doctoral course for my program, so I brought that aspect into my course by requiring racial literacy journal entries at the start of each session. The journals provided a space for students to examine and unpack videos, social media posts, poems, quotes, and images from a racial or intersectional lens in an emotionally safe place. In some cases, the journal entries would reveal a misunderstanding that needed to be addressed so I linked articles or other resources in my response to provide students with possible next steps to learn more about the topic mentioned in their journal entry. Journal reflections were used as a tool for students to engage in deep reflection with themselves. They were not shared with the whole group.

Self-reflection is a tool to aid in conversations about race. Mentor and Sealey-Ruiz (2021) offer a framework for racial literacy development developed by Sealey-Ruiz that includes looking within and interrogating oneself on the path of becoming a disruptor when racial incidents occur that need to be challenged. Sealey-Ruiz (2020) refers to this self-work as the "Archaeology of the Self," and it is one aspect of her racial literacy development framework that I have explored with students. Mensah in Gist et al. (2021), discussed the importance of creating multiple opportunities for teacher candidates to unpack race including through discussions and writings. I allotted roughly five minutes at the start of each class for racial literacy journaling. I believe that small but important addition aided the small group and whole group discussions that we later engaged in during the class session. I was grateful that I had seen the use of journaling around racial literacy modeled for me in my doctoral program, because it provided me with the firsthand knowledge of how supportive this class time could be on our journey to examining and working to disrupt racism and other forms of oppression. I could have assigned the journaling as an assignment each week; however, the use of class time sent an important message that time spent reflecting on the role that race and racism plays in our lives as humans and educators is valuable.

Finally, the most recent addition to my courses has been in the form of identity maps and "Where I'm From" (Lyon, n.d.) poems. Identity maps are visual representations of your identity that tell a story of who you are and who you are in the process of becoming. A map might include information about positionality and the different roles that you play in life as a parent, teacher, or teacher educator, in addition to other identity markers. Identity maps often include images and words that map your identity. Similarly, (Lyon, n.d.) "Where I'm From" poems (http://georgeellalyon.com/where.html) allow individuals to examine themselves and parts of their identity through words and images, although some poems only include words. I now use the two tools (identity maps and Where I'm From poems) as a starting point to move into my semester-long inquiry with students into the topic of race and racism. It is extremely important to begin by centering identity and positionality before exploring our relationship to peers and society at large.

Where I'm From

By Tara Kirton

I am from the home of Hip Hop music and Yankee Stadium
from bodegas and quarter waters[2].
I am from reggae, soca, calypso and reggaeton
all rolled into the same night.
I am from patois or "broken English"
depending on who you ask.
But there's nothing broken about our language to me.
Our language feels safe, warm, loving.
It feels like…home.

I am from "come home before the street lights come on!"

2 Quarter waters are small juice drinks that were sold for $0.25 in bodegas. Bodegas are small convenience stores that typically sell food, lottery tickets, and household goods often found in many Spanish-speaking communities.

From Saturday morning cartoons

And Sunday School followed by regular church service immediately afterwards.

I am from snacks my mama (grandmother) packed for me to eat in church

and roller skating at "Skate Key"[3] on weekends.

I am from bun and cheese, ginger beer[4] and sorrel.

I am from beef patties, saltfish and dumplings

Tamarind balls[5], black cake[6] and rum and raisin ice cream.

I am from double dutch and spades[7],

The uptown 6 train, the 4 train, the 2 and the 5.

I am from a legacy of strong women who love hard, laugh often

And model what community feels and looks like in practice.

I am from "the city that never sleeps."

I am from NYC but my ancestors were brought to the

West Indies, Antigua to be precise.

Findings

Loughran (2005) discusses three different ways of presenting the understandings from self- study as noted in the literature on self-study: axioms, tensions and assertions. My axioms throughout my self-study were "Lean into the discomfort," "Lead with questions" and "Remain open and curious."

"Lean into the discomfort" was a reminder for me that some of the best learning often happens in moments of discomfort or uncertainty. This was true for me in my K-12 experiences as a student, and it was also true for me as an adult learner. New understandings are often a result of some sort of struggle cognitively, emotionally, and sometimes both. Through my self-study I was able to see how I developed as a teacher educator and moved

3 "Skate Key" was a popular roller skating rink located in the borough of the Bronx in New York City.
4 Ginger beer does not contain alcohol.
5 Tamarind balls are sweet and spicy flavored treats that are popular in the Caribbean.
6 Black cake is a popular cake that has alcohol in it enjoyed by many Caribbean households during celebrations and holidays, especially weddings and Christmas.
7 Spades is a card game.

away from the idea that moments of silence were to be avoided or filled with my questions or comments, and I moved towards the idea that moments of silence might represent processing time, an attempt to make a connection to the question or prompt, or in some cases, it could represent resistance. Since there was no way for me to know what the silence meant, particularly on Zoom, I leaned into my own discomfort of not always knowing what the silences meant but recognizing that we could still move forward as a learning community, as long as I continued to co-construct spaces for my students to continue learning, questioning, and growing.

"Lead with questions" was the way I approached interactions with students. Instead of responding to their comments with a comment of my own, I often responded with questions. I used this method as needed and when faced with an uncomfortable situation due to a comment someone made about the racial protests organized by the organization Black Lives Matter (BBC News, 2020), or if students wanted to discuss concerns raised by families in their settings around the types of discussions that might take place in their child's school during the racial unrest. I was able to move conversations forward by leading with questions and reminding my students that we were all on the path to deeper understanding and racial literacy development together.

The phrase "Remain open and curious" reminded me to remain open to responses that might at first feel jarring or might cause discomfort. This was not always easy, particularly when a comment from a student felt divisive or controversial; however, it was important to maintain an environment that allowed for further conversation and learning, and the whole learning environment was cultivated with this value in mind. My word choice was carefully planned to further our growth and development as teachers and learners. As such my practice included longer pauses while I took a moment to gather my thoughts or additional wait time after posing a question to provide the space for my students to respond to my question. The chat function and online tools like Padlet and Jamboard were extremely helpful during our discussions and allowed for a level of anonymity that might have encouraged my students to engage fuller in our discussions without feeling like they had to attach their name and identity to a specific comment being made. It was clear that some of my students did not feel comfortable having conversations about race and racism. Thus, it was important to me to provide multiple entry points for them to enter our discussions and

continue to reflect long after our sessions ended.

"Together and apart" describes one of the tensions I experienced in the summer course. Most of the students already knew each other from being in the same cohort all year longl; however, at least one student was not in the cohort. The student who was not in the cohort worked in a different setting, with a different age group, and they did not identify as a student of Color. The effort to make language around race and racism visible was collective. However, it was also work that was very individual and required each student to engage in moments where we were apart from the collective deep in reflection.

As the semester progressed and my self-study for the semester ended my assertions of teaching during the dual pandemic of Covid-19 and racism were:

1. Unlearn, learn, relearn, and repeat.
2. Learning to talk about race and racism requires ongoing practice.

Life before the covid-19 pandemic was not idyllic and perfect. Racism still existed, anti-Blackness was very real, and many of the systemic inequities highlighted during Covid-19 had been in place for centuries. In many ways, the world was not so different during the pandemic than it was prior to it. However, *I* was different. "Unlearn, learn, relearn and repeat" is an essential element of "the work." Recognizing that we have all been taught half-truths and intentional misinformation to justify the inhumane treatment of Black people (Woodson, 1933) "our work" included opportunities to carefully examine how these untruths remain present unless challenged continuously. Racial assaults are a constant for Black people, therefore, the process of unlearning, learning and relearning needs to be a constant too.

Another assertion is "Learning to talk about race and racism requires ongoing practice." Race and racism are not easy topics for many people to engage in which often causes them to avoid the topic altogether. However, avoiding conversations about race and racism is not helpful, nor is it practical to steer clear of a topic that impacts so much of our lives and our livelihood. In the absence of language our silence about race and racism adds to the dehumanization of Black people by allowing false narratives to remain unchallenged. Therefore, we must find ways to acknowledge our discomfort, and engage in discussions

about race, racism, and other forms of oppression in a direct way in an effort to make the topic less taboo. More importantly, educational transformation requires us to talk about race and racism and then move into collective action to affirm the lived experiences of our students and our students' students.

Conclusion

Souto-Manning et al., (2018) ask early childhood preservice teachers to consider the story they tell through their classroom and materials because materials and storytelling are so closely intertwined. I cannot overstate the importance of critically analyzing the intersection of our lives (Emdin, 2020) with material artifacts and the stories they tell in classrooms. Such critical approaches to language and artifacts in teacher education is worthy of our continued attention and continued research, especially in early childhood education since teachers pursuing degrees in that area have the responsibility of working with our youngest learners. Young children begin to grapple with understandings about race and racism from a very young age (Daniel-Tatum, 2017; Weir, 2021) and this happens with or without the explicit guidance of a trusted adult. Thus, it is essential that early childhood teachers critically analyze the stories they tell in their classrooms every day.

George Floyd's murder in 2020 forced me to reexamine the story that my virtual classroom was conveying to my graduate students during the dual pandemics of Covid-19 and racism. The story that I was telling did not accurately match my deep commitment to antiracist teaching and the liberation of people from marginalized groups. However, I was able to move conversations about race and racism from the edge of my course into the center of our work by pausing momentarily and looking inwards. I did not ask permission, and I did not seek advice. I simply trusted the voice in my head and the urgent feeling to follow my intuition and my heart. I implemented the "Courageous Conversations" (Singleton & Hays, 2008) framework in my learning community as a resource to engage in interracial conversations about race. Collaborating with a colleague who was already engaged in work around race and racism later on proved to be invaluable as were the strategies of inviting guest speakers to provide additional insight and using multiple modalities to unpack race. I

moved away from using mostly texts and articles in my course to including podcasts, music videos, poems, quotes, and social media posts to provide additional spaces for us to engage in conversations about the realities of race and racism. Finally, I created a space to journal in response to various prompts to help my students continue to develop their racial literacy and we started our journey into race conversations by examining our positionalities.

The Covid-19 pandemic initially led me to feel a sense of fear and anxiety when I considered all of the ways that I would have to change my teaching practice to meet the needs of my students at a time when the pace of life felt disorienting. Back then I could not have imagined how much the pandemic and the racial unrest of 2020 would have caused me to reconsider other aspects of my practice as an educator, like where my focus was and where it needed to be. My pedagogy is more clearly defined now, and my professional and personal commitments are better aligned. While the pandemic required me to pause momentarily, it also provided me with opportunities to explore race and racism by leaning into reality pedagogy (Emdin, 2016) and opportunities to give language to the lived experiences of my students and their students. Teacher educators can and should make it a regular practice to examine the story being told through their syllabus, and they should also consider when and how conversations about race and racism enter their learning spaces. My summer course of 2020 felt richer and more humane as a result of the changes that I made to my pedagogy. Each course that I have taught since that time has benefited from those initial changes as well as additional adjustments that I make each semester in collaboration with my students. I may not always find the right words to say or the right way to say it, but I will always learn from my mistakes. I will also use the many tools available from online sources and the growing community of educators who share a similar commitment to transforming education, and I will continue to try again and again and again.

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“EU NÃO POSSO MAIS FAZER ISSO”: UMA PROFESSORA FORMADORA RESPONDE ÀS PANDEMIAS DE COVID-19 E RACISMO DE 2020

RESUMO: Neste autoestudo reflexivo, a autora explora como ela transformou um curso de formação de professores do status quo em resposta dupla à pandemia de Covid-19 e ao racismo, durante o verão de 2020. Usando uma abordagem crítica para o uso da linguagem na formação de professores, Kirton, uma mãe afro-americana de dois filhos pequenos, examina a importância dos silêncios e da linguagem na consciência racial para a preparação dos professores. Os resultados indicam que o trabalho de abordagens críticas para o estudo de raça e racismo na formação de professores requer uma arqueologia contínua do eu (Sealey-Ruiz, 2020), que pode ser sustentada por meio de abordagens multimodais à linguagem, tempo para registrar e refletir, e a co-criação de espaço compartilhado para perguntar e responder às questões mais difíceis em educação.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Formação de professores, Raça-consciência, Autoestudo.

Figure 1

Excerpt from my course syllabus (Summer, 2020)

Readings for Session #6 - June 8, 2020 - Race- Teachers and Families

Coates, Ta-Nehisi (2015). The black family in the age of mass incarceration. *The Atlantic*.

https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/10/the-black-family-in-the-age-of-mass-incarceration/403246/

Mehta, J. (2017). The white journey to racial awareness. *Education Week,* July 27.

http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/learning_deeply/2017/07/the_white_journey_to_racial_awareness_a_stage_theory.html

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Session #7 - June 10, 2020 - Families' Funds of Knowledge

Moll, L. C., Amanti, C. A., Neff, D., & Gonzalez, N. (1992). Funds of knowledge for teaching: Using a qualitative approach to connect homes and classrooms, *Theory Into Practice, 31*(2), 132-141. **(Canvas)**

Spielman, J. (2001). The Family Photography Project: "We will just read what the pictures tell us." *The Reading Teacher*, *54*(8) 762-770. **(Canvas)**

Figure 2

Additional excerpt from my course syllabus (Summer, 2020)

Session #8 - June 15, 2020 - Schools and Our Communities

Fadiman, A. (1997). *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down*. NY: Farrar, Straus & Giroux. Continue reading book. By now you should be near the end of the text.

Required Listening: Schools in our communities **(choose ONE podcast)**

Power Lines- Brian Lerher: Zoning Schools in Brooklyn.
PS 8 Brooklyn Heights & PS 307 Vinegar Hill
https://www.wnyc.org/story/more-our-segregated-neighborhood-schools/

This American Life- The Problem We All Live With: 562 7/31/15
Prologue with Nikole Hannah-Jones 58 min.
Normandy School District, borders Ferguson, Missouri (Michael Brown)
Resisting integration at every turn
https://www.thisamericanlife.org/radio-archives/episode/562/the-problem-we-all-live-with-part-one?act=1