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Intention, Questions, and Creative Expression: An Antidiscriminatory Diversity Statement

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Abstract

Supporting education that reflects diversity involves maintaining awareness of one's personal positionality, creating safe and inclusive learning communities, and using creativity and choice to empower and honor student voice and individual development. When working in educational settings, teachers may involve students in selecting relevant materials, and follow their lead in creating critical dialogue about salient factors of identity.

As a teacher, promoting education that reflects diversity means maintaining awareness of personal positionality, striving to be informed about diverse perspectives and experiences, and remaining committed to an approach of life-long learning and cultural humility. In learning environments, this manifests as involving students in selecting relevant and diverse material that covers multiple perspectives; celebrating classroom diversity by emphasizing creativity, collaboration, and communication; and continually promoting and reinforcing dialogue, action, and self-actualization of students as individuals, so that they may grow to be informed and empowered actors within a larger societal structure. At the heart, it means thinking critically about identity factors to work towards a community approach that is not only nondiscriminatory, but also antidiscriminatory.

The educational philosophies elucidated by Paulo Freire (1993) clarify a challenging abstract narrative about the standing education system structure. Like many, as a student I felt personally affected by and oppressed within the established six-hour, desk-bound, academically-focused, authoritative school day structure—an uneasiness that served as the

catalyst that propelled me into the world of experiential education, workplace-based learning, and independent study. Now, as I embark on the journey on the other side of this existing power dynamic, Freire's lens on education has proven invaluably useful. He shows how the "Banking model" of education views students as reciprocals, teachers as unchecked bodies of knowledge, and school as a drone-producing training system used to create additional cogs for the perpetual capitalist societal machine. Then, Freire argues for an alternative model— the "problem-posing" model—which views education as a mode for societal transformation, in which individuals can collaborate to reach critical consciousness and full actualization in their "ontological…vocation of becoming more fully human" (Freire, 1993, p. 52). This framework provides a foundation to support education in reflecting diversity and cultivating learning spaces for the growth of action-oriented, reflective decision-makers who are empowered to take the step beyond passive nondiscrimination to promote active antidiscrimination.

A critical element in cultivating these learning spaces is the creation of genuine, inclusive learning communities. Mindfulness practices, along with educational frameworks such as the Iceberg Model, offer useful perspectives to pay attention to the suffering behind circumstances and behaviors—an intentional form of empathy that is reflected in the structure of restorative practices circles (Goodman, 2002). A key tenet of education that reflects diversity is improving group problem-solving, within and between groups. Restorative practices are a direct manifestation of this approach. The method emphasizes analyzing the circumstances behind conflicts and takes a practical and effective approach to remedying the harm done to an individual or group in whatever unique and appropriate form that remedy takes—sometimes even going so far as to include human-sized commissioned

portraits of Tinker Bell (Lucko Presentation, April 10, 2017). Restorative practices also equally stress the importance of connecting with the individual or group who caused the suffering to see what is significant and meaningful to them about the situation and about the community. (Lucko Presentation, April 10, 2017). In this way, both parties have an opportunity to heal and to benefit from a learning experience. This approach illuminates one path for how diversity of experience can be translated into a foundation for strong community and deeper mutual understanding.

Beyond facilitating community bonds, empowering students to choose, and validating their voices and creativity are lucrative ways to approach any subject, especially those as complicated and abounding as socioeconomic, racial, or gender identity. There is a strong and intriguing thread between creativity, salient factors of identity like race and gender, and academic development. Some of the essays in Mica Pollock's collection *Everyday Antiracism* (2008) highlight how by using intention in bringing these three rich areas of inquiry into dialogue with one other, each important category is enlivened and deepened through the interaction. One way of approaching this monolith of an undertaking is to draw on artistic and creative expression as a platform to explore salient factors of identity such as ethnicity, socioeconomic status, gender, sexual orientation, religion, health, and ability. In this way, creativity emerges as a bridge between personal identity and school work—an idea that manifests as a photographic documentary project for Alexandra Lightfoot, (2008) more creative and open writing prompts for Jennifer A. Mott-Smith, (2008), and an emphasis on the students' own power of choice for Christine E. Sleeter, (2008).

In their essays, *Using Photography to Explore Racial Identity* and *Exploring Racial Identity Through Writing,* Alexandra Lightfoot and Jennifer A. Mott-Smith illuminate skillful

usage of creative projects to help students connect to and think critically about their own and each other's relations to aspects of their identities. Intentional guided debriefs of open-ended creative projects like these can facilitate conducive spaces for personal and community growth in the realms of awareness, communication, and connection.

Similarly, Sleeter elucidates towards the end of her essay, "Most academic concepts can be presented from more than one point of view, or developed with reference to more than one racial group's experience" (Sleeter, 2008, p. 153) She goes on to clarify that as an educator, providing opportunities for students to choose material that they can relate to their own experience both offers them an opportunity to discuss and situate their own perspective and position in the world, and empowers them to voice those unique positions.

Literature provides an abundant resource to build intentional curriculum that includes marginalized groups and multiple perspectives. In his work, "Teaching Critical Analysis of Racial Oppression," Jeff Duncan-Andrade emphasizes the power of literature as a platform for students to explore how their lived experience interrelates to larger historical and/or societal structures at play. He references Freire's method of "reading the word and the world" (Duncan-Andrade, 158). In line with this method, literature texts can act as critical context builders for students to place their often overwhelming and indecipherable perceptions in relation to. Additionally, Duncan-Andrade argues that teaching about the lived experience of different minority groups in separate, contained units promotes an ideology of these minorities' experiences as being isolated and largely unrelatable from one another (Duncan-Andrade, 158-159). He presents a unique view of racism, as a force that not only attempts to further divide minority groups, but that could also serve as a unifying experience that can enable all of these groups to relate to one another's experiences. (Duncan-Andrade,

159-160). Supporting this perspective shift is another way that education can actively support students in managing the development of their own lived experiences.

Using diverse sources, teachers can minimize their role as the "middle-men" between students and primary narratives of diverse cultural voices in literature. Following this framework, ultimately students are connecting directly and personally to the understandings, and the instructor acts only as a guiding source to stimulate and nudge their critical thinking and creative work, while providing safe spaces for communication and collaboration with one another. In their essay, *Following Children's Leads in Conversations about Race,* Kimberly Chang and Rachel Conrad suggest, "Adults must be prepared and willing to follow children's leads by listening to children, using their terminology, building on children's ideas, and trying to understand children's statements in the contexts of their experiences" (34). Encouraging discussions around the significance of *identity* displaces much of the discomfort around gender or racial relations and allows students to speak from their own experience and wisdom to approach these huge ideas of equality, access, self-worth, and relationships—all the way to the institutional level. This structure for approaching conversations about marginalized groups and historically silenced narratives by always striving to present multiple perspectives and encouraging personal digestions and connection with the material supports students in developing skills to negotiate their own life-long processes of sorting out identity factors, group relations, and competing historical narratives.

At the heart of each of these adaptations of learning is an underlying distinct emphasis on empowering students. On one hand, empowering students to guide their own learning experience by providing the ability to explore race relations in their own way or to choose

material that they find relatable and intriguing; and on the other hand, empowering student voice through assignments that draw out individual creative expression and vision.

Though these ideas are presented as progressive and revolutionary, it seems largely fundamental that the most productive way to flesh out diversity within education is to draw on the most dynamic and diverse resource a classroom is given—the breadth and depth of knowledge of its students. In a single classroom, there exists 20-30 diverse lived experiences and individual perspectives. Empowering student experience and voice is critical to challenging opportunity denial and the Banking Model of education highlighted by Freire. We must give students the tools and information to, as Duncan-Andrade put it, "confront the contemporary legacy of racism" that they are currently growing up within (Duncan-Andrade, 156).

Though the task is daunting, Freire states, "There is, in fact, no teaching without learning. One requires the other" (Freire, 1993). This statement is representative of a key role of educators to identify as life-long learners and to promote classroom climates that emphasize open-mindedness, cultural humility, and a willingness to engage with challenging topics and material. In order to cultivate education that reflects diversity, learning environments need to actively and dynamically improve understanding of how sources of cultural identity impact the individual and the group. In the same way that this is helpful to students, it is important to continue to challenge, inform, synthesize, and diversify beliefs and practices stemming from factors that contribute to personal positionality and perspective as instructors. It is the only way to facilitate safe, inclusive, productive spaces for all individuals to stretch and grow. As an educator, I want to remain aware of the ways that my identification with being low-income, white, female, young, Jewish, educated, an older

sibling, an artist, and an American informs and influences my perspective and continue to investigate the different ways that these concepts manifest in my professional life. My intention is that in practice, exposure to various belief systems and ideas, sincere intention towards cultural humility, and desire to continue learning and growing will prove the most powerful forces in how my student-teacher dynamic is influenced by aspects of identity.

As a final point, the entire terrain of integrating identity factors, creativity, and academic expectation is an incomprehensibly sticky landscape to navigate. As educators, it is important to remember our own personal position, limitations, and cultural humility in incorporating these important discussions into our classrooms to avoid subtle and powerful dynamics such as the poignant example presented by Mott-Smith, wherein her Haitian students interpreted her "casual manner" discussing race as a reflection of her white privilege (Mott-Smith, 148). These potential misunderstandings and missteps are the primary reason that many forward-thinking, progressive teachers remain intimidated to cultivate these discussions in the classroom. It is critical to acknowledge these very real fears in order to negate their power to silence such important conversations.

Approaching gender, socioeconomic status, and race relations in education contexts can be intimidating for some of the most informed individuals. As clumsy torchbearers, it is each of our responsibility to grapple with what history and society have handed us and to be as humble and open as we can in the process of what Lightfoot deemed this "productive struggle," remembering always that our job as educators is not to provide answers, but to help students pose questions.

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