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EDU 580 Literature Synthesis

Problem of Practice: How can we, as critical teachers, emphasize intersectionality and equity in the classroom without solely exemplifying students?" Or, in other words, how do we invite students to share their experiences without turning them into targets of harassment and bullying?

Our lesson study focuses on addressing an issue that is prevalent in most classes trying to address issues of inequity in a classroom: How can the teacher engage the class in discussion about sensitive topics without inadvertently positioning a student as a point of example? To zoom out and provide context, the problem of practice for this lesson study originated from a class wherein no conversations of race, gender, etc. could happen without students calling out and exemplifying (usually erroneously and stereotypically) other students as a form of joking/bullying. The prevalence of this behavior made it near impossible to teach subjects containing or needing any amount of sensitivity because of the inevitable derailing that occurred. This provoked two separate problems to solve. The first is how to dispel or counter the problematic ideas and narratives students are operating off of and espousing. The second is how to do so in a way that will prevent or eschew the habitual pattern of students to target other students who can potentially be linked to the nuanced and difficult topics that need to be addressed and discussed.

Ultimately, we determined that we needed to address each separately and employ different methods. The first was to recreate the norms of the classroom to make sure that students felt like they had more buy in and so we could make sure to establish an understanding of what was and was not okay. The second thing we did was employ counter-narratives to help deconstruct the harmful stereotypes and narratives that students were saying and operating under when calling out students in particular when sensitive topics came up in the lesson. Our hope was that remaking the class norms would provide a solid ground work for when issues did arise, and then the norms provided a backdrop for the counternarratives employed.

Section One: Norms and equity in the class

When addressing the norms of the class, it was important to make sure that they were built on student experience and consensus. The norms of the class had been created mostly by the previous teacher with very little input from the students. Immediately, this fails to produce any buy-in with students as they feel divorced from the creation of supposedly community norms and rules. This also works in contrast with the general idea of being a social justice educator wherein, theoretically, said educator uses their position to "affect meaningful change within and despite current educational conditions and mandates" (Dover p. 519). Being that this lesson study team is trying to bring about equity in the classroom, norms are a great first (and

essential) place to begin and an instance in which we can use the role of the teacher to empower students.

The issue with teacher-assigned norms extends beyond the idea not meeting social justice standards, though, especially when considering the nature of what the lesson study is aiming to achieve (well, kind of. Most of the following points do fall under consideration for making the classroom more equitable and teaching for social justice). It's important to start with looking at the role of the teacher in the classroom. The role of the teacher brings with it a disproportionate amount of power within the classroom. There are a couple different perspectives to consider on that matter. In their article on how teachers are arbiters of safety for queer students, Vega et al look at the role of teachers through the lens of positioning theory, or "the dynamics of social exchanges and interactions that occur between people in various social, historical, and cultural contexts" (p. 254). They go on to elaborate that, "defined by their sexual orientation, heterosexual teachers are positioned as the dominant group and LGBTQI students are designated as a minority" (p. 254). While their claim is valid and important for the need of heterosexual teachers to recognize their power in the class to keep marginalized students safe, for the purposes of this lesson study, the definition can be zoomed out to include teachers overall as the dominant party to students of all backgrounds being the minority party based on the societal expectations of school. The immediate importance of this lies in the fact that the power dynamic in the classroom is traditionally imbalanced toward the teacher, and the use of that power to determine what the community rules and norms of a classroom should be fails to be equitable in lack of representation and buy-in by the majority of the people in said community. That being the case, it also makes sense why students would not feel the desire or need to maintain norms when they aren't considered as a factor in the dynamic. Students need norms that reflect their voice and needs

The other issue with teacher dictated norms that compounds upon the above is that they also don't actually reflect what students need to feel safe in their classroom. What the teacher sees as necessary for creating a safe space doesn't always reflect what students actually need, especially when there is little input from said students. In his article on the limits of safety of BIPOC queer students within schools, Pritchard discusses the fallacy of thinking that safety "operates as a normative property of youth" (p. 335). The article dissects the nature of safety (who provides it, who qualifies for it, etc.) and provides examples of how safety really is another form of control to enforce or punish "normality" especially when it comes to BIPOC queer youth. The take-away that is directly applicable to the lesson study is that if safety is not unseated "from the unquestioned position that treats it as a property right of the sufficiently normative" then "it is not safer at all; it becomes just another way to discipline and regulate non-normative subjects in order that they may qualify for protection while claiming safety and safe space as a right of all" (p. 340); if safety is a tool to be used and determined by a teacher to wield against the students, then it isn't safety, there is no buy-in, and there is no reason to expect students to feel like they can engage with their full selves feeling welcome or respected. The importance of addressing this fact first is essential for introducing counter narratives: if students don't have buy-in, if they don't feel safe, they aren't going to be open to conversations that make them reconsider their unconscious perceptions openly.

Section Two: Counter-narratives

It's important to address that counter-narratives as a form of educational praxis came about from their creation and implementation within law as a form of regaining and fighting for equity in systems that are traditionally inequitable for BIPOC individuals (Miller et al p. 272). They started to be used in educational capacities to help "achieve educational equity by giving voices to silenced and marginalized populations" with the purpose of "informing and educating dominant and elite groups" (Miller et al p. 273). The reason for backgrounding the origin of counter narratives is to establish that they came about as a way to create equity in non-equitable spaces. While that is an approach this lesson study could have used, it seemed better to go the route of encouraging student buy-in and feelings of personal safety within the classroom before trying to shake up feelings on topics that are touchy and taboo to some and personal to others (and this is a 7th grade class, so we want them to feel safe and not discouraged and scared about being wrong or being corrected on this big and seemingly nebulous topics). We felt that this approach would allow for more constructive and more impactful conversations and implementations of counter-narratives.

That wasn't the only reason for this decision, though. Another part of it was that in elaborating on the history, efficacy, and use of counter-narratives within education, Miller et al concluded that providing teachers with counter-narratives is good, it's better to have them develop their own to avoid "common pitfalls of avoiding serious discussion of race and racism, the substitution of abstract concepts for concrete issues, and the practices already identified in CRT research, such as colorblindness, the discourse of meritocracy, and so forth" (p. 293). In other words, providing counter-narratives alone doesn't necessarily mean that the purpose, intent, or knowledge are passed along with it. Counter-narratives are all about the experience of marginalized individuals and how they work to dispel and counter common stereotypes or problematic narratives that are unfortunately more prevalent in western society. By this same logic, students being given counter-narratives through some form of didactic lesson aren't necessarily going to internalize or understand them as if they created them through their own conversations and experiences.

It brings to mind Friere's message of avoiding "banking" forms of education that view education only as the "receiving, filing, and storing" of information and—especially especially in this case—avoiding seeing these counter narratives as knowledge we are "bestowing upon them" (p. 71-2). Not only would that work contrary to the advised way of interacting with, engaging with, and learning through counter-narratives above, but would also follow the same fallacious path wherein students had their norms formed largely without their input and without validating their own lived experiences.

Section Three: Results and conclusion

Honestly, it's hard to say how the lesson study went overall. It isn't something where definitive results can be seen within six weeks. The approach taken does seem to be showing small results though. We instituted a norming congress where students had to create, vote on, and argue for norms of the class. In this way, we were assured that everything on the norms list was student-decided and student-acknowledged. It helped not only prioritize student experience

and needs, but also provided us with necessary buy-in wherein the norms could be an agreed upon set of rules that, if not followed, could be referenced as a power outside of teacher control. That did seem to help with creating a more equitable classroom environment (although there were still plenty of instances of needing to refer back to the norms to curtail the initial issue of targeted call-outs and derailing problematic commentary). The norms made it easier to introduce counter-narratives as well. When someone said something that was problematic, the general trend was to stop the class, ask what norm was broken, and use that as an opportunity to discuss how it broke the norm, why, and what was wrong. There wasn't punishment doled out; just a tangent to address what needed addressing before continuing the work (we didn't want the counter-narratives associated with punishment). Over the six weeks, there was a subtle—yet notable—shift in how well students dealt with difficult topics and how they treated each other (data on the digital portfolio page).

When it came time to do the activity about counter-narratives (data on the digital portfolio page), students struggled with the notion of needing to create a narrative based off of assumptions. They seemed to recognize what was being asked and didn't want to do it. Ironically, the pivot away from that was to call people out and make jokes. The lesson learned—one that we recognized in the beginning but failed to remember at the end: we need to continuously have student buy-in and pull from their experiences. We were using a book they were reading (*Ready Player One*) as the basis of the activity and asked them to discuss quotes and how they relate to outside issues or beliefs. However, in order to make the students not feel on the spot, we pivoted from having them express any connection or common experience they had with the characters and quotes. It wasn't a failure, but it wasn't a success either.

Digressing, the immediate results of the lesson study seem small, but it is our hope that they generate larger waves the more time is given to establish buy-in and norms from the beginning of the year. There is something here that seems worth pursuing further, even if there aren't a ton of results to speak to the efficacy yet.

Works Cited

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