

# *When No One is Looking*

## *Assessing Internalization of Experiential Learning in Multicultural Education*

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### **Abstract**

The current global climate is a glaring reminder of the consistent struggle for equality and equity both nationally and abroad. Here in the U.S., the education system has been identified as a major stage for shifting race relations and engendering pluralism as it is a microcosm of the larger society. The way youth are taught to understand and engage with difference while in school sets the stage for the views they carry as adult citizens. The scholarship of teaching and learning is focused on taking a scholarly approach to measuring individual learning during instruction and nurturing holistic educational spaces. The following project is aimed at the intersection of this research and practice towards advocacy and equity. It assesses the impact of experiential learning within the context of multicultural education and diversity work. Students enrolled in the course were asked to track their personal process and growth across the semester to evaluate the impact of the practical curriculum. The main focus of the article is a tailored assignment testing how well students have internalized class lessons and what students would actually do when presented with an inequitable situation. This work holds a mirror up to those professing to do intrapersonal and interpersonal work.

**Keywords:** *Holistic Educational Praxis, Transpersonal Experiential Learning, SoTL and Equity Education, Authentic Educational Experiences*

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### **Introduction**

The current climate worldwide is proof that there needs to be a significant shift in culture and race relations across the globe. The 400+ year struggle for equality and equity between people of color and White citizens has come to a head with numerous recorded instances of the racism, discrimination, and homicide that have plagued the

world for centuries. The education system, which is fighting through curriculum content and book bans, has been identified as a major stage for shifting race relations and building a new foundation based in pluralism. This is partly why it has become a focus of scrutiny in suppressing diverse content. As a microcosm of society, schools feed and are fed by the larger American culture (Gregorčič, 2009; Richardson, 2021; Singh,

2011). The way youth are taught to understand and engage with difference while in school sets the stage for the views they will carry and act upon when they step out into the world.

This is a vital point because teachers are essential experts. There are many who believe that teaching is an easy endeavor. There are those who think that anyone can teach. What they do not realize is that teaching is actually an intricate art that can be done wrong. Just because someone knows their subject in-depth and may be brilliant in their field, does not mean that they are able to effectively relay that information to someone to the point where they internalize it and are able to put it into practice. This is where the science of teaching and learning comes in. The effectiveness of instruction is measured by learning objectives, the science of instruction, engaging theory, and perceived versus real outcomes (Poole & Chick, 2022). Holistic education enters as all parts of the learner (mind, body, and spirit) are engaged in the process of disseminating instruction. As teachers work to understand developmental levels and the impact of prior knowledge and making information meaningful, they impart knowledge and model ideology and behavior. It is not an easy task, but it is a gift.

Based on the premise that teachers have a major impact on the social and moral development of students, the school environment has been identified as a vital mechanism of socialization towards a particular ideology. The education system since its inception has been based in whiteness, furthering a monocultural view of achievement and worth (Grant & Gillespie, 1993; Ladson-Billings, 2017; Paris, 2012; Richardson, 2021). Schools have the potential to both directly and indirectly influence and perpetuate beliefs; thus, they are the ideal space to initiate impactful change (Gregorčič, 2009; Richardson, 2021; Singh, 2011). In order to be qualified to nurture and lead this charge, teachers would need to engage in

introspective processes and be equipped with antiracist tools during their educator preparation.

Research has shown that diversity and multiculturalism has consistently been glossed over and treated as supplemental to mandatory curriculum in these programs (Hsaio, 2015; Ladson-Billings, 2014; Renner et al., 2004; Villegas & Lucas, 2007). As is the case at many professional conference convenings, many of these programs are most likely having cursory discussions about the importance of recognizing culture. But how are they challenging students to feel the repercussions of the lack of doing so? How are they training teachers to engage culture meaningfully and in depth? These questions are the impetus for the creation of the assignment that is the focus of exploration in this article. It is understood that transformative learning must be felt and not simply read about or discussed (Richardson, 2021).

The compartmentalization of culture engendered by superficial application leaves teachers to feel overwhelmed at the idea of adding it as a focus in lesson planning. It feels like extra burdensome work. This treatment indirectly adds to culture remaining in the margins in societal contexts as students move into the profession with the same views. It is not surprising that diversity has recently come under direct attack through book bans, conversation/content bans, and state policies aimed at censorship and teaching redacted history to avoid discomfort. Due to this forced omission, teachers continue to perpetuate monocultural curriculum in schools across the nation. Whether this is a purposeful decision or conducted out of fear, it does a disservice to all students, not just those whose histories and realities have been omitted from historical record.

A shift needs to take place, situating culture at the center of educational research and practice to reflect the multiple and varied identities of the

students who are being served. Holistic (higher) education (HE) is a step in the right direction towards this shift as it promotes a student-centered approach to learning. This focus goes beyond learning for the moment, or the grade, and generates internalization of content and lifelong learning and application (Eady et al., 2021). The goal is to create educational experiences that surpass the semester requirements, are carried with students into their professional careers, and put into praxis with their k-12 students. HE merges academic knowledge with holistic tools to assist students in engaging in introspective processes and transforming into informed advocates.

The following project showcases a holistic way to enhance the education and experience of pre-service teachers leading to the preparation of intentional and culturally sustaining educators. Through the science of teaching and learning (SoTL), which guides research-based teaching practice (Poole & Chick, 2022), student experiences and responses to an experiential assignment are presented and discussed. The assignment has been tailored to test how well students have internalized class lessons and what they would actually do when presented with an inequitable situation. Introspection is central to SoTL as it guides inquiry into what and how we think and why we hold certain beliefs. It also helps us to understand the meaning behind beliefs, foundations for our ideology (Poole & Chick, 2022), and assists in making necessary shifts.

This project was conducted in a Multicultural Education course across four semesters tracking student experiences. Given the rapidly changing demographics in our state and country, this course is designed to equip future teachers with the fundamental knowledge of understanding culture and teaching children from diverse backgrounds. Specifically, this course is intended to examine: 1) the nature and function of culture; 2) the development of individual and group cultural

identity; 3) definitions and implications of diversity; 4) the influences of culture on learning, development, and pedagogy; and 5) to challenge and confront biases. It is a practical demonstration of culturally sustaining practice. The purpose is for students to experience difference through difficult discussions and authentic experiences that prompt them to challenge their biases towards race, class, gender, sexual orientation, ability/disability, and spirituality/religion head on, to consider differing perspectives, to process their thoughts and feelings, to sit with and push through discomfort, and to hopefully grow and go on to challenge inequity.

### **The Process**

Multicultural Education is offered in both the fall and spring semesters each year with enrollment fluctuating between 15 and 30 students. All education majors are required to take the course, but there are usually students from different majors enrolled. The syllabus and exercises remain the same across both semesters, although there are different discussions and outcomes based on the students that participate, how fully they engage, and the topics they may bring up. In this way, the course shifts with the enrolled participants.

During the class's first meeting, students are given the following memorandum of understanding to guide them into both a brave and safe space for full participation on the first day of class. Students are asked to be vulnerable and transparent with one another in order to illicit introspection and personal growth. After reading through it with the class and checking in with each student to ensure they have the capacity to engage in this difficult work, the professor personally signs each memorandum. It is important that the students understand what will be asked of them throughout the course.

### Memorandum of Understanding

Learning is basically the process of human growth and/or development. There is wide ranging agreement that effective and transformational growth and development (i.e. learning) involves some form of discomfort or dis-ease. This discomfort has been described as disequilibrium (Piaget), zone of proximal development (Vygotsky) or cognitive dissonance (Festinger). People respond differently to dis-ease or the experience of uncomfortable feelings, therefore, depending on your personal disposition you may respond to transformational learning with feelings of **anger, joy, shock, relief, denial, enthusiasm, and/or confusion**. Remember that growth unfolds/flows from discomfort, but only when you sit within it and push through it in a meaningful way.

\_\_\_\_\_ (initials) I understand that I will be guided out of my comfort zone.

\_\_\_\_\_ (initials) I understand that when transformational learning has taken place, feelings of discomfort are an indication that something has gone right.

\_\_\_\_\_ (initials) I understand that during effective learning experiences the teacher, the curriculum or other students may be the stimulus of my discomfort.

\_\_\_\_\_ (initials) While I understand that in any given learning context every student may have a different learning curve, I hope to experience some transformational growth and/or development in this class.

\_\_\_\_\_ (initials) I understand that this is a Brave Space and I commit to sitting with my discomfort.

\_\_\_\_\_ (initials) I understand that this is a Brave Space and I commit to pushing through my discomfort.

\_\_\_\_\_ (initials) I understand that this is also a Safe Space and I agree not to repeat class disclosures to others who are not experiencing this class with us.

Signed \_\_\_\_\_  
(learner)

I \_\_\_\_\_ as facilitator of this class session will do my best to create a learning experience that will be conducive to your growth and development.

In the beginning two weeks of the course, time is taken to set discussion norms, to get to know one another, and to build trust and community amongst the professor and students. Students are asked to come to class prepared, already having completed the reading for the week as discussions, simulations, and experiential activities will draw on that content taking it a step deeper. Throughout the semester, students are tasked with facing and embracing discomfort. Around the midterm of the semester, they are presented with a task that appears to be a basic class assignment, but it actually tests their educational integrity and willingness to challenge the status quo. Though they do not realize it, students are prepared for this assignment from the first class meeting. The first thing that is said to them after welcome is “If you do not like children, if you do not seek to understand children, or if you do not make room for the full humanity of children, then please do not become a teacher. We do not need warm bodies; we need intentional bodies.” Conversations around equity and disproportionate representation prepare students on the content. This assignment is the practical application of that knowledge. In the tradition of HE, this assignment engages multiple aspects of the student—again tapping into mind, emotion, spirit and action (Saggar et al., 2023).

The assignment in question, titled *Your 1<sup>st</sup> Teaching Interview*, is employed as a midsemester check-in to measure whether students are actually internalizing the lessons learned in the course via readings, authentic experiences, and discussions. Students will often regurgitate what they think the professor wants to hear. This assignment is designed to test their resolve. It was developed by Dr. Miles Anthony Irving and Dr. Darnell

Underdue as a way to determine student-centered ideology. *Your 1<sup>st</sup> Teaching Interview* encompasses the National Society for Experiential Education’s (1998) eight experiential educational principles of good practice which have been further researched and has guided curriculum development for two and a half decades (Saggar et al., 2023). The principles are *intention, preparedness and planning, authenticity, reflection, orientation and training, monitoring and continuous improvement, assessment and evaluation, and acknowledgment.*

Creating these types of assignments takes the developer through a growth process that begins with intention and requires authenticity. It requires introspection and self-check-ins, or monitoring and reflection, to ensure the ability to meaningfully lead students through the activity. This leads to preparedness and planning to engage the experience correctly and with sufficient depth. Then assessment, evaluation, and continuous improvement of the assignment sheet to make sure that the wording is precise yet broad enough to elicit the desired outcome lessons. Students are asked to undergo a similar procedure as they mentally and emotionally process through the choices they made.

*Your 1<sup>st</sup> Teaching Interview* consists of an assignment sheet containing instructions and information about three five-year-old Black boys; Darius, Jacob, and Larry (see assignment below). Once class begins, students are asked to put everything away and to complete the assignment independently and quietly. They are told they cannot ask any questions or discuss the assignment with one another until the instructor leads the conversation once everyone has finished.

It is your first teaching interview. After viewing the school and discussing your background, the principal puts information in front of you regarding 3 students. You are asked to fill out the form based on the information given. Current statistics suggest that one African American Male will end up going to prison, one will drop out of school, and one will graduate from high school. Based on what you have learned about these kindergarten children what do you think is in store for each child's future?

Child	In the space below write Prison Dropping Out, or Graduating	Based on your thoughts and what you have learned about each child, please explain your predications.
Darius: enjoys school and likes constructing things with his hands. He comes from a single-parent home. His father works long hours and does not have a lot of time to be involved in school activities.		
Jacob: sometimes has difficulty controlling his temper. However, he already knows how to read. He lives with his grandmother in a house three miles from the school in a difficult part of town. He does not have contact with his mother or father.		
Larry: is very good at art and has a vivid imagination. He lives with both parents. Neither of his parents graduated from high school and they are both recovering from past substance abuse issues. His mom is not currently working, and his dad works part time at a local fast-food restaurant.		

The instructor walks around as students quietly consider the assignment. The longer students take and the more they write communicates to the instructor that they have failed the assignment because this means they have made a choice and are defending their position. There are only two ways to correctly complete this assignment. The first is for the student to write in that all students will graduate from high school, and the second is to refuse to complete the assignment and (respectfully) challenge the instructor. Unfortunately, the latter never happens.

### The Experience

As students finish completing the assignment, the facilitator draws a grid on the board with each of the boys names going down the left column and across the right top row there is a G for graduating, a DO for dropping out, and a P for prison. The students are then asked to raise their hand and to indicate which choice they have made for each child. After bringing attention to the completed visual on the board, the instructor turns to the students and begins to have a casual conversation about what we can expect from the children. The instructor then abruptly switches up to a harsh tone asking the students why they would say that a five-year-old child would either drop out of school or go to prison. They are asked why anyone would relegate five- year-old children to negative

outcomes. The floor is then opened up to students to explain why they made their decisions.

Once the instructor’s energy shifts, students begin to realize their mistake. The following table shows student initial responses on the forms across the four semesters.

	Fall 2021	Spr. 2022	Fall 2022	Spr. 2023	Fall 2023	Spr. 2024
	<b>G</b>	<b>G</b>	<b>G</b>	<b>G</b>	<b>G</b>	<b>G</b>
	<b>DO</b>	<b>DO</b>	<b>DO</b>	<b>DO</b>	<b>DO</b>	<b>DO</b>
	<b>P</b>	<b>P</b>	<b>P</b>	<b>P</b>	<b>P</b>	<b>P</b>
<b>Darius</b>			0 1 15	0 1 12	1 3 15	1 1 6
<b>Jacob</b>			12 1 3	10 2 1	15 3 1	3 3 2
<b>Larry</b>			1 14 1	0 10 3	2 12 5	0 3 5
Deter minati on N=			15 16	13 13	19 19	7 8
Total N=						

Interestingly enough, every time this assignment is discussed with class participants, the students begin by saying “we made a determination because you asked us to.” There is an initial need for them to externalize the blame. Students are then asked to read the instructions again, and then to read them out loud. The instructor repeats them for emphasis.

The instructions say, “Based on what you have learned about these kindergarten children, what do YOU think is in store for each child’s future.” It is reiterated that although they were asked to write prison, dropping out, or graduating in the cell to the right of the names, there is nothing that says they have to choose only one, nor that they cannot write graduating for every child. The students usually look confused at this point. Some are visibly upset. One student became so angry and sad during the simulation that she began to tear up. They say they were tricked. They say that it was the instructor’s expectation. They are asked to search deep inside themselves, engaging introspection, to figure out where they got this idea.

The student who was visually emotionally impacted, began to cry and said “How dare you think that I don’t care about my students?” The response to her was:

“It’s not about what I think. It is about what you chose to do. What is missing here for each of you is accountability and acknowledgment that you made a clear choice for whatever reason. It does not matter who you say you are or what you say you would do if you do not take a stand when it really matters! You can respectfully say that assignment is harmful to children. You do not have to make a determination because the professor put a paper in front of you.”

There is usually also a conversation surrounding power and privilege. Students say they do not speak up because they fear repercussions from the professor, even though they’ve gotten to know this particular professor and have been moving within a “safe and brave space.” The conversation steers toward the students having more power than they realize. Of course there is always risk in advocacy.

It is true that a professor could respond negatively to what they perceive to be insubordination. However, it is also a true educator's responsibility to move past that fear and ask themselves the following question: What are you willing to risk to do what is right instead of what is "expected"?

Before the class is dismissed, the facilitator spends time processing through the assignment and student feelings so that no one leaves feeling upset or defeated. This is vital because there is a lot of hurt and pain in the room, specifically because students learned something about themselves that they do not like or may not want to face. They usually learn a hard lesson about either what they really think about a population, or what they are willing to do for a grade. Or that they have been taught to blindly follow and this assignment holistically shakes their foundation. In the process of that discussion, it is made clear to students that this is the last time that they will make this mistake. They are asked to sit with the feeling and take responsibility rather than misplacing anger. They are given a charge to avoid being "regular." They are told that they are being raised in the moment to be different and to be better from this moment on. They are asked to take this feeling forward and be the difference in the lives of the children that need people to fight for them. They will be the ones who change the system from the ground up rather than those upholding systemic inequity.

In the way of assessment and continued development, it would be accurate to say that this assignment began as a semester check-in to see what students would actually do when presented with student data. In the initial stages, there was a hope for different results. Over time and through self-assessment, the hope has shifted away from seeking positive results to facilitating deep impact. It has become a wakeup call for students who are used to performing within a template that is predicated on the wishes of the teacher. It is a

wakeup call for students who will produce whatever the professor wants so that they might get a good grade or remain in favor. This assignment is teaching students that they actually have a lot to teach those who would be guiding them. Students are asked to ponder the following questions:

"Why wouldn't you tell me that I am wrong?"

"If it is going to save three children, why wouldn't you speak up and say that this assignment is harmful?"

"Why would you continue to participate in something that you feel is morally wrong?"

One student explained that she did not speak up because she is used to teachers wanting students to follow directions by the book instead of standing up for what they think is right.

Some of the students still feel frustrated when they leave because they are still refusing to acknowledge their choice. Some swear that things would be different in "a real-world situation," or that their responses do not reflect their beliefs. Many of them check in with me later on what *Your 1<sup>st</sup> Teaching Interview* meant to/for them after they have had a bit more time to process and think about their reaction. One student explained that sometimes we become suspect to inappropriate stereotypes because of how we have been conditioned to think. Students tend to appreciate and thank me for the experience after the fact.

## Discussion

This exercise is a growth opportunity for students that clearly defines bravery and what it means to advocate for children, especially when it is not ideal. Students learn a valuable lesson about shaking the foundation when it is rotten. One student explained that "courage requires a shift of perspective" because of the fear of repercussions and prior conditioning. Part of the work is to

condition students to see the repercussions of remaining compliant to that conditioning.

Darnell Underdue used to come to my classroom to speak with students after completing the assignment. He explains that he actually would use this in interviews with teaching candidates when he was a principal. If applicants made a decision, he would explain to them that he could not trust them with his babies because they either believed negative outcomes or they were not willing to serve as advocates. As a student-centered teacher and advocate, it is important to elevate student voices in the process of discussing their experiences and outcomes. As such, it is apropos to end with their words regarding their experiences. The following is an immediate reflection from Student 1:

I messed up. The worst part is that I knew better, and still did it. I have gotten into the habit of being complacent and feeling like I am in a box. I should have challenged this assignment and stood up for what I believe in. I have a responsibility as a teacher to advocate for my students.

This student was very frustrated with herself, but she immediately took responsibility for her choice and actions. She and a few of her colleagues discussed the conditioning of “following the rules” and how sometimes “the rules” are not equitable and must be challenged. They have unfortunately not been provided with a template for how to challenge as thoroughly as they have for falling in line. Student 1 will be embarking on her student teaching journey soon, and it will be interesting to see how this experience informs her movements.

Student 2 had the following to say in retrospective reflection of her course experience:

Since taking Multicultural Education, I have grown more than I could ever fully articulate. I am more aware than ever of

how my words and actions can alter a student’s thinking and self-esteem. I always have resources available. I’m more vocal than ever and I make it a point to connect with my students personally to pinpoint their specific needs.

She has since gone on to challenge administration in their unfair treatment of a child leading to disproportionate discipline practices during field experience and her internship experience.

The student who cried during the simulation, Student 3, had the following to say in reflection of her experience.

On day one of the class, I was unsure how I could get more “multicultural” than I already was as a Black woman in her fourth year at an HBCU. I was excited about the class but had no idea what it was about. I have grown so much since taking this class. Taking the course during my student teaching has allowed me to rethink education. I realize education can take many forms and that most of my educational perceptions were Eurocentric. I am starting to open up, understand, and embrace new ways of thinking, but I still have so much to learn. Multicultural Education definitely contributed to my growth as an individual and a teacher. Fear has blocked my development. I have been afraid to challenge the systems I’ve always known because of the pushback I get. Side note...Dr. Richardson’s course has been imperative in helping me understand how I want to show up as a teacher. I’ll never forget the day she gave us an assignment about three Black boys asking us who would go to prison, who would drop out, and who would graduate. The exercise aimed to expand our thinking

and hope for students. The activity made me angry, but it also fueled my passion for my students. It challenged how I view my students, speak about them, and work to make sure they are growing. The entire class grounded me in my vision for student success.

She actually called me after and explained that although she was initially furious with me, she deeply appreciated being presented with this challenge. She discussed it with her mother and understood the gift that this experience gave her in making her aware of the self-work needed to ensure that she acts in alignment with her values.

These final two responses reflect back the essence of the intersection of HE and the science of teaching and learning as they demonstrate the introspective process students engaged in order to reconcile the emotions generated by the activity and their feelings of authenticity in how they present as educators (Poole & Chick, 2022). These two students in particular have intentionally continued to engage the work with the children they encounter. Student 2 reported back that she embraced a male student that had been written off by other teachers. She thought back to this lesson and found a way to connect with him through his interests and to interact meaningfully with his family. That connection changed how he experienced learning. At the end of the school year, he told her she changed his life and that he loves her because she saw him when no one else did. For both of these students, theory has translated into holistic and authentic practice. This is why testing the efficacy of methods is important. This experiential work is vital to nurture intentional educators who see students, recognize their humanity, learn and employ their cultures, and fight for them to have the positive outcomes they deserve.

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### Author Bio

Dr. Chateé Omísadé Richardson is an educator, educational psychologist, and growth facilitator. Her work is at the intersection of the head and the heart. She has 20+ years of experience in education and psychology researching how people learn and applying that knowledge through the creation of engaging content, training educators, and teaching K-12th grade, and at the collegiate level. She has dedicated her professional work to optimal development, serving underserved populations (urban educational excellence), metacognitive teaching/learning practices, trauma responsive and developmentally appropriate practices, culturally sustaining practice, and transforming the American education system from the ground up; beginning with teacher preparation.