

2023-08-01

Reflecting On The Diversity, Equity, And Social Justice In Education (DESJE) Program

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REFLECTING ON THE DIVERSITY, EQUITY, AND SOCIAL JUSTICE IN EDUCATION
(DESJE) PROGRAM

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REFLECTING ON THE DIVERSITY, EQUITY, AND SOCIAL JUSTICE IN EDUCATION
(DESJE) PROGRAM

by

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THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at El Paso

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Department of Teacher Education

THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO

August 2023

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DESJE Program Reflection

The Diversity, Equity, and Social Justice in Education (DESJE) program is one where as an educator, I was able to expand my knowledge on theories and practices which encourage the application of equitable and culturally responsive perspectives within the classroom and the curriculum being taught to students. The DESJE program enabled me to have the relevant knowledge necessary to formulate and enact actionable strategies within my own practice which authentically support my students of diverse backgrounds and encourage them to see themselves in the material that they are learning. I have long been an advocate for social justice issues, particularly those that revolve around the LGBTQ, Latino, and multilingual communities. When I was searching for programs that would help me advance my goals, the DESJE program described teaching all the concepts I had been interested in and more for me to be able to become a more active advocate capable of enacting actual, substantial change. In this paper I reflect on the concepts, theories, and practices that I have learned in my DESJE coursework between the months of August 2021 and December 2022, and how they have helped me to better implement equity and social justice in my own practice.

One of the courses which was very influential to me was the TED 5301 Learning Contexts and Curriculum class. In this class we had the opportunity to read work by Freire (2000) which greatly informed the current views I hold as an educator. This course focused heavily on the impact that a designed curriculum has on students, including when the curriculum is made with only one group of students in mind, often the dominant group, and leaves out considerations for all others, particularly minority or oppressed groups.

I currently work as a middle school teacher at a low-income school where the majority of students are people of color. The teaching staff of this school is still largely white, I am one of

the few latinx staff of color, and one of only 6 teachers at the school who teaches students content in Spanish through the dual-language program. I have found that often white teachers tend to lower their expectations of students of color both behaviorally and academically. These low expectations lead to teachers consistently underestimating students of color and not providing them with sufficient opportunities to grow and feel challenged. Additionally, these teachers overly assist students by giving them set answers when students would be best served by being allowed to develop their own thinking and with it, their own sense of agency in their learning. A key component of the readings in this class was that oppressed groups should have a key role in their own liberation, and I translate this into my classroom. I interpret the work done by Freire (2000) to mean that in my classroom, students need accountability so that they can become responsible for their own learning and develop a sense of intrinsic motivation for their schooling. This class has helped me in clarifying a phenomenon that I have been seeing since I began my career in teaching, which is that ultimately, the students who are the most motivated to learn are those who have their own sense of self and agency. Therefore, these are the beliefs that we as educators should be fostering within our students – agency and intrinsic motivation.

Another course which deeply impacted me was the SCFE 5313 Transnational and Postcolonial Feminisms class. This class was essential in helping me to verbalize the feelings and struggles I myself have gone through as a Hispanic woman, but also to better understand the struggles that my own students in Latino communities will go through. It has always been important to me to take on a feminist perspective in the work that I do. However, there are some types of feminist ideas I find myself at odds with or wish could be improved. This course helped me to understand that there is no one size fits all version of feminism and that it is crucial to take into consideration the different needs that women have across different countries and cultures.

Later in this paper, I expand on my reflections regarding these two courses and the other types of content that they explored, as I consider all of the courses I have taken during my program.

TED 5313 Diversity in Educational Contexts

Diversity in Educational Contexts was one of the first classes in my program, and it taught me about the most effective methods that can be used in the classroom. The focus was on making curriculum diverse, while also having it be relevant to diverse groups of students. I took this course during the fall of 2021, while I was beginning my third year of teaching. This course exposed me to Culturally Relevant Pedagogies (CRP). CRP is key factor in successfully addressing equity and diversity issues in education. This course advocated for cultural relevance instead of multicultural education, because multicultural education that treats marginalized groups and their history as add-ons, instead of centering them in students' learning.

One of the most important assignments of this course was a final paper, in which I wrote about my developing theories on culturally relevant pedagogy and praxis. In this paper, I explored course readings, such as "Toward a Theory of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy," by Ladson-Billings (1995). I discussed the need for decentering whiteness in the educational system, so that we can begin to better value and validate the identities of marginalized students. In many schools across the United States, there is a push to cater to diverse students, but it is typically met with surface-level changes that give the appearance of being culturally relevant. In truth, they typically contain no substance. Ladson-Billings' (1995) work advocates for teachers to be culturally competent themselves, in order to successfully teach students in a way that authentically acknowledges students' identities and cultures.

TED 5304 Scholarly Writing for Educators

The second course I took during the Fall 2021 semester was TED 5304. This course helped me to learn the appropriate ways to structure and format scholarly essays. This course helped me to analyze and understand literature reviews and the type of research and citations that must be employed, in order to write an effective literature review. In preparation for composing our own literature reviews for the course, we were also tasked with synthesizing assigned texts that focused on topics relevant to equity and social justice issues. One such synthesis assignment that stood out to me was one where I was tasked with reading Nichols & Berliner's research on the prevalence of high-stakes testing in the public school system (Nichols & Berliner, 2008). Nichols & Berliner (2008) concluded that one main reason for high-stakes testing becoming popularized in schools was the prevalence of business culture in our society, thus schools have begun to be viewed as businesses, where student success is assumed to be measurable in the same way monetary profits can be.

TED 5319 Anti-Oppressive and Anti-Racist Education

The final class I took during the Fall 2021 semester was the Anti-Oppressive and Anti-Racist Education class in which I learned about and analyzed the major frameworks and approaches currently being used to address inequities in various educational settings. Many of the readings in this course helped me in forming my foundational knowledge of what equitable practices in classrooms can look like as well as methods and practices that can be used to question and identify where equity issues may linger in the classroom. One such reading was an article by Solórzano & Perez Huber (2020) which outlined different types of racial microaggressions people of color can face as well as the effects of such aggressions. This reading assisted me in completing an assignment where I was tasked with crafting a possible professional development presentation for teachers at my school district. This PD lesson was impactful to me because it helped me reflect on my own skills as a teacher and a facilitator and see that I was capable of designing a PD that could potentially lead to impactful equity changes within my school district. This assignment helped encourage me to see the possibilities of utilizing anti-racist and anti-oppressive texts as a means of revealing and addressing the types of equity issues that both students and staff of color face every day in the education system.

Thesis 1 Critical Discourse Analysis

I began the Thesis 1 class during the Spring 2022 semester, and during this class I was tasked with understanding how to use Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as a method of reviewing literature and media as well as analyzing the ways that recent research methods have made use of CDA in different contexts. The assignment which impacted me the most was the final project, a tale of two theses, where I was tasked with comparing and analyzing the ways that two distinct studies utilized CDA to gather information on their topics of focus. The two theses' that I analyzed were by Calaway (2020) and Bishoff (2013). The study by Calaway (2020) focused on the way that administrators' perceptions impact the implementation of LGBTQ topics into school curricula. The second thesis by Bishoff (2013) used CDA to analyze the word-choices used by hiring managers in describing their impressions of potential employees who have visible tattoos. This assignment allowed me to explore the different contexts in which CDA can be used as a method of uncovering perceptions and biases held by individuals. Ultimately this course helped me to understand how to use CDA as a method for research, including the different components of CDA, and the potential it has to uncover perceptions that can lead to inequities and the implications of such perceptions.

SCFE 5315 Queer Theory & Pedagogy

During the Spring 2022 semester I had the opportunity to take Queer Theory and Pedagogy, which I had been very interested in, due to the courses' possible connections to the LGBTQ community and LGBTQ perspectives and theories. This course taught me about queer pedagogy and the different meanings of this type of pedagogy. This course began with a history on the development of queer pedagogy and how its roots started as a type of pedagogy to use when writing and researching about the LGBTQ community. I learned that queer pedagogy has since grown in its scope, to include any pedagogies that challenge the norm and seek to view topics from a non-normative, or queer perspective. An assignment that was memorable to me during this course was a paper I wrote in which I synthesized some of my learnings from the course. For this paper I chose to use an article by Hernandez Rivera & Frias (2021), where they explained their use of *Conocimiento* as a means of healing themselves and legitimizing their identities as queer Latinas. This assignment was impactful to me because it was both a challenge and an opportunity to find a way to apply my knowledge towards advocating for intersectionality. For this paper I specifically focused on the need for queering dual-language programs, as many of them tend to embrace and uphold very heteronormative standards and beliefs. Much of the learning in this course in general was focused on the act of "queering" pedagogy, to make it into something different and outside of the norm. I think the method of queering pedagogies is essential because a lot of the issues that currently plague educational settings are due to those settings catering only to dominant groups which are then stereotyped into being the norm. When we are able to queer content and pedagogy, it allows us to take into account perspectives that are rarely considered.

TED 5301 Learning Contexts and Curriculum

The focus of Learning Contexts and Curriculum was on curriculum theory and the importance of selecting and designing curricula in ways that impact students and their learning. This course advocated for educators to implement more personalized curricula, based on their student populations. It revealed how the common core curriculum tends to place minoritized students at a disadvantage. Additionally, this course also taught me about the need for a curriculum to give students agency. This is especially important, in order to help students become active participants in their own learning and liberation. I took this course in the spring of 2022, and the most important assignment was a reflective discussion in which we discussed our understanding of Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2000). This reading was deeply impactful in its call for oppressed group to always be at the heart of any movement, and also for oppressed groups to be active participants in their own liberation. It was empowering to read a text that sought to give a marginalized group agency, instead of having that group rely solely on the work of the group in power.

As I stated earlier in this reflection, my experiences as an educator have, unfortunately, been about watching White teachers and staff attempt to teach to students of color, without success. Many of the changes to the educational system that Freire advocates for would greatly benefit the population of students I work with, as well. One of the reasons so many students tend to feel disconnected or unmotivated by schooling, is because they do not see themselves in their learning. They do not view themselves as having a say in their own education. By utilizing Freire's pedagogy, I can better ensure than in my own classroom, my students are at the heart of their own learning. They must be able to see themselves as part of their own learning, in order to become intrinsically motivated.

SCFE 5307 Language, Race and Culture in Education

In the summer of 2022, I took Language, Race, and culture in Education course. This course primarily focused on the phenomenon of raciolinguistics and the way that language use, especially English in the United States, has become a method for dominant groups to racialize marginalized groups. In this course, I learned about the ways in which language, race, and culture become interconnected. We discussed the ways in which the policing of language and the enforcement of a standardized version of a language leads to stereotyping students. Students are labeled, based on their proximity to the appropriate version of the standard language. Typically, the version of English that is deemed to be correct is that used by the dominant group, middle-class White people. The assignment that was most important to me was when I analyzed the film, *BlacKkKlansman* (Lee, 2018). I looked at the ways in which language and race were used in the film. This assignment was satisfying to take part in, as it showed the way that raciolinguistics permeate different forms of media. That is, it was not just a theory in a text, but something that can be seen and acknowledged in films and by extension, in real life.

Raciolinguistics is also important to be aware of as a concept that impacts the ways in which we refer to different groups of students at our schools. Often times, when Black and Latino/a students are referred to, there are immediate and negative assumptions, mostly from White teachers. This adds a bias to the expectations teachers have of the students. Further, raciolinguistics is also something that can harm people of color themselves, as it places stereotypes on them, and they are limited to either fitting in with the stereotype or acting against them, which then can de-legitimize their racial identities.

SCFE 5319 Comparative and Transnational Education

The second course I took during the summer of 2022 was Comparative and Transnational Education. This course helped me to learn about the issues with attempting to implement and apply educational theories and strategies across countries and cultures. Often what is deemed to be effective education in one country, may not be seen as effective when applied to another. This course revealed that when attempting to compare educational methods, there are a large variety of factors to consider. Usually, these factors include the language being spoken, the social and moral values of the culture the method was being used in, and the everyday contexts of the students' daily lives.

An assignment that stands out to me from this course was a reflective piece I wrote in response to my reading of Phillips & Schweisfurth's (2014) text on comparative and international education. This field of study is complex, and the text by Phillips & Schweisfurth (2014) helped clarify to me the importance of this field of study as a means of reflecting on our own education system. This text advocated for taking context into consideration, before attempting to adopt curricula and reforms that were successful in other countries.

SCFE 5313 Transnational and Postcolonial Feminisms

One of the most recent courses I completed was Transnational and Postcolonial Feminisms, which I took during the fall of 2022. In this course, I examined the ways in which feminism takes shape when it is not centered on the more westernized versions of feminism, which favor White, western women. This course had me examine the need for multiple perspectives of feminism, and revealed the problematic nature of a universal version of feminism. We explored feminism for women of color and women from cultures outside of the west, with an emphasis on analyzing the way colonialism continues to affect women of color and particularly Latinx women in the global north.

One of the more important assignments I completed was a reading and synthesis on an article by Anzaldúa (2012), who explored the ways in which Latina women experience feminism, and the specific obstacles they must struggle against. Anzaldúa (2012) wrote about the fact that even forms of misogyny that are specific to Latinx communities, such as *machismo*, are influenced by Anglo views of manhood and the ways that women should be subordinate to them. In dissecting this phenomenon, Anzaldúa is able to demonstrate how there are varying ways in which people have been harmed by White patriarchal beliefs. This happens within marginalized communities, as well, as the oppressed groups are often being oppressed by a larger, dominant group.

In this reflection, I have thought about the concepts, theories, and practices that I have learned in my DESJE coursework. I have described the ways in which my courses on curriculum theory and postcolonial feminism have been the most impactful to me, specifically due to the ways I see these theories helping me to be a more successful educator, and helping to empower and motivate my students. I have also included more in-depth reflections on each of the courses I

have taken, and I have considered how each course and the associated coursework has left an impression on me. I know that this coursework will allow me to continue pursuing equity and social justice in my work as an educator. Ultimately the DESJE program has supported me to have the required knowledge and skills to begin to make more actionable changes within my own classroom, my school, and within my school district as well.

**Foundational Components of Effective Equity Policies in K-12 Education:
Requirements That Schools Must Consider in Order to Create Effective Equity Policies**

In January, 2021, Washington State Senate Bill (SB) 5044 was introduced and ultimately passed by governor Jay Inslee in May of the same year. SB 5044 requires that K-12 teachers, staff, administrators, and elected school leaders be provided with equity-based professional development as a means of dismantling institutional racism in the public-school systems. With the introduction of this bill at the state level, and additional equity initiatives at the local level, many school districts and educators have been grappling with ways to create effective equity policies and practices. In the current climate of the education system, new approaches and frameworks for equity are endless and change from one school year to the next with little to no research on which methods are the most effective at creating opportunities for marginalized students. In this paper I have conducted a literature review on the most crucial components to consider when creating equity policies and practices, as well as how these components can lead to more effective equity approaches.

Educational Leaders

In beginning to explore which components are paramount to the effectiveness of equity policies, I focused my attention on an article by Turner and Spain (2020), which explicitly states what is needed of the people who are involved in the equity work. Turner and Spain (2020, p.806) claim that “Any measure to address equity will require careful consideration of what equity entails and an effort to articulate that to others”. It is imperative then, that the leaders involved in the creation and implementation of equity policies and practices are individuals who are willing to reflect on their own understanding of equity as well as the willingness and ability to communicate that understanding to others, even if they might disagree. Additionally, Turner and Spain (2020) specifically argue that it is district administrators who must be willing to create moments to expand access and opportunities for marginalized students even in the face of budgetary and environmental pressures. Although it is important to consider which teacher-leaders are engaging with equity work, it is even more imperative that administrators take the lead in clearing the path to allow equity work to take shape and develop within their schools, especially in the face of possible obstacles that may arise to prevent such work from taking place.

Inclusivity as Nonnegotiable

A crucial component which must be held as a nonnegotiable to equity policies and practices in schools is that of inclusivity. Capper and Young (2014) argue that, “purposely anchoring all equity and policy and practice in inclusion/integration at the district and school levels cannot be overemphasized” (p. 162). This call for holding inclusivity at the center of all policy decisions is also mentioned by Capper and Young in regard to the need for more conversations surrounding the intersecting identities of students. When planning for inclusivity, it must be acknowledged that simply supporting individual identities of students is not sufficient. Instead, equity leaders must ensure that inclusive policies and practices are also taking into consideration those students who have intersecting identities and are often lacking the proper support and representation in their schools. Intersectional identities can take on multiple forms such as LGBT students of color who often must contend with issues of both racism and homophobia within their communities. In order for equity leaders to sufficiently serve the needs of these students it is crucial that leaders address the full range of student differences and are not literate in simply one area of difference. Those leaders who are only literate in one area of difference risk further marginalizing students with intersecting identities by ignoring the ways these students experience inequity in relation to their specific intersecting identities.

A Dedicated Action Plan

Another crucial component to the successful implementation of equity policies and practices within schools is the existence of a dedicated action plan that gives guidance as to how educators can go about implementing such practices in their classrooms or combining them in the presence of the implementation of multiple practices. In an article by Capper and Young (2014, p.161), the authors acknowledge the need for such guidance with the following statement, “Not only are educators called on to make sense of, and then to implement, these multiple practices, which would be quite difficult to do, these practices are at times in conflict with each other”. Here, Capper and Young (2014) reveal the layered obstacles educators face when tasked with the responsibility of implementing equity practices. Educators would be more effective if the responsibility of planning implementation and making sense of frameworks was not placed solely on them. The requirement to create a dedicated action plan then, is also dependent on the educational leaders that are taking charge of equity work at school buildings. An effective action plan requires administrators who are willing to carefully consider which equity practices to implement at their schools as well as plans for where and how these practices are going to be incorporated in the classroom.

In this paper I have explored some of the foundational components that are required to create effective equity policies in K-12 schools. It is important to note that these components are some of the nonnegotiable ones that were referred to across several readings when beginning to consider effective equity work however, this list is not exhaustive. Equity work should be considered an endeavor that is continuously ongoing and equity policies likewise, should frequently be revisited and developed. Although this literature review referenced some of the more critical components to consider for developing effective equity policies, more research

must be done in order to expand upon what ongoing equity policy work should look like in k-12 schools. Lastly, equity work in k-12 schools would benefit from research that compares the way similar equity policies have been used in higher education as well as research that identifies how equity work differs between the two organizations. There is more ample research on the topic of equity policies in higher education however, research on such policies in k-12 schools is scarce. K-12 education lays the foundation for how students understand their own identities as well as their ability to identify social injustices, therefore more research is owed to implementing equity policies for these schools as a means of empowering future generations.

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Vita

Alyssa Nichole Huizar was born in El Paso, Texas in 1993 and was one of the first members of her family to obtain a degree in higher education, the first of which being a BA in Digital Media Production from the University of Texas at El Paso in El Paso, Texas. In 2020, after having moved to Seattle, Washington and changing career paths, she earned a BA in Language, Literacy, and Cultural Studies in education from Western Washington University in Bellingham, Washington.

Alyssa has worked for five years in the Highline Public Schools district in Burien, Washington in different roles. While pursuing her BA in education she worked as a bilingual paraeducator and assisted certificated teachers with small group instruction and in-class lessons. She was also tasked with facilitating small group instruction for English language learning students to support them in their bilingual language development. Additionally, she also facilitated a pilot school morning program with other paraeducators to provide a safe-space and homework support for low-income and minority students.

After receiving her BA in education, Alyssa became a secondary Dual-Language teacher, teaching social studies to middle school students through a social justice lens and through purposeful instruction that helped students develop their critical thinking skills. Alyssa currently continues teaching content in Spanish to students while utilizing strategies and techniques to allow them to develop their bilingual and biliteracy skills in English and Spanish. She also frequently teaches English language learning students by using strategies that value their native languages. This includes using culturally responsive practices to make content more accessible and relatable to minority students and students of color and modifying content to make learning more accessible to students from diverse backgrounds, primarily students from different Latin American countries. This also includes translating resources, lessons, and reading materials to Spanish from English to ensure that students are getting access to authentically translated content that uses the linguistical Spanish that students are familiar with.

In addition to her teaching responsibilities, Alyssa participates in building-wide equity committees to assess and analyze the academic and social-emotional needs of students. She participates in district wide meetings, committees, and professional development that propose and explore culturally relevant practices that can be used in the classroom as well as union meetings that give insight and suggestions to contract language meant to specifically protect and support dual-language educators. She is currently seeking her MA in Diversity, Equity, and Social Justice in Education from the University of Texas at El Paso in El Paso, Texas in order to further her understanding and knowledge of educational equity issues and continue to advocate for better practices in the education system.

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