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Shadowing students and schools in the time of COVID: One teacher education program's solution

Janel Janiczek Smith & Taylor Norman

Introduction

As professors in an initial teacher preparation program, we seek to prepare teacher candidates to understand the social, emotional, physical, moral, and intellectual development of students within diverse settings in which each candidate prepares to teach. We understand and attempt to foster each teacher candidate's understanding of supporting these aspects of adolescent development in their own learners. Before the global pandemic of 2020, serious discussions and debates occurred among our program faculty surrounding issues of race and inequity in our nation's schools. Discussions surrounded how to begin these difficult conversations with our teacher candidates in order for each individual to begin the reflective and introspective process of analyzing one's own beliefs and biases on these difficult topics. In this chapter, we discuss one possibility for using a documentary and subsequent course assignments to build space for teacher candidates to examine their own beliefs and biases by witnessing the lives of diverse students in the documentary and completing assignments designed through a social justice lens.

This idea manifested in two ways. First, our program had been casually discussing how to revise and revitalize a frequently used assignment known as the Shadow Study. This assignment's intention was to give teacher candidates the opportunity to analyze their beliefs and biases related to the systemic inequities found in American schools. Because the Shadow Study required teacher candidates to study students from inside their school sites, over the course of several semesters, faculty debated possibilities for taking our teacher candidates out of the school site and into the communities and homes of the students. "To be a teacher in the current, contested, educational landscape is to live a life of challenge. We need to see our students as complex, three-dimensional, valuable and unique human beings beyond pervasive and distorting labels" (Ayers et al., 2008, p. 321). Like Ayers, our thinking behind taking teacher candidates out of the classroom and into the community would allow for a change in setting, a recognition of the differences between one's own self and the student, and an awareness of the student population of the school. However, we could not figure out how to do this without invading the privacy of the students and families themselves. Many of our new teacher candidates are hired into high-needs schools with students of diverse socioeconomic, racial, and ethnic backgrounds, yet there are immense limitations on protecting the privacy of the students. Additionally, because our teacher candidates were placed across several counties in our geographic

region, our program faculty were limited in building relationships with a community and/or family to permit our teacher candidates to enter students' homes and community spaces.

Without the resources to put teacher candidates in their students' homes and community spaces, the 2020 global pandemic would be the crisis to push forward the revision and revitalization of the Shadow Study. In pre-COVID times, the Shadow Study required that teacher candidates examine a particular student from their classroom on which to focus their analysis. This student was to be different from themselves, which could be identified as a student of a different race, ethnic background, first language, or other identifier as determined by the teacher candidate. Shadowing the student included following the student's schedule for that day, beyond only the space of the content classroom. Teacher candidates took notes on student behaviors and looked at how the student acts and reacts in different school settings. The portions of the assignment involved reflecting on interactions between the focus student and oneself as well as observing how this student interacted with other members of the school community, including in different settings. The goal of this assignment was to view this student to see how actions, reactions, and achievement were impacted within the school by different contextual factors. Yet, this design would no longer work in the time of social distancing and contact tracing.

Observing a student in a school setting alone is not enough to recognize the ways in which the student is affected by factors within the school environment. Teacher candidates must make sense of what was seen and heard through their reflection and narration during the Shadow Study. Requirements of our teacher education program require candidates to reflect in writing throughout semesters, including the observation of the focus student as a way to process the student's abilities and challenges. Todd (2009) comments, "it is that if humanity is to guide our teaching, it must do so in ways that acknowledge the profound difficulties faced by the children themselves - difficulties which originate in particularly fragile relations across difference" (p. 20). Writing assignments after observations encouraged candidates to look at the student as a complex human with needs beyond the taught content. By including a written reflection, this allowed candidates to put into words the meaning of the interactions observed. Through this manner, a social justice lens was introduced to the activity to identify contradictions and differences. While this assignment examined this one student based on interests, achievement levels, and modes of learning, it also moved the candidate to planning for practice. Finally, each teacher candidate planned a content lesson with the focus

student's personal needs in mind to take the experience and knowledge into practice within a classroom.

Although the Shadow Study was used throughout the program as a way to examine schools, each semester we examine ways of enhancing and adjusting course curriculum to be relevant to current trends in middle and secondary classrooms. Beginning in early 2020, circumstances shifted in which our teacher preparation faculty realized the potential of digging deeply into difficult and necessary topics for teacher candidates and ultimately ourselves. With political movements evolving and emerging as powerful action for adolescent students, we participated with a group of our fellow teacher educators viewing the documentary *America to Me* while meeting regularly to discuss the complex topics and their implications for adolescents and adults in middle and high schools. This viewing and discussion moved across boundaries to look within our local, regional, and national communities. We believed that in order to prepare our teacher candidates in exploring complex topics of race and inequity, we as faculty also needed to engage in those difficult conversations first. Furthermore, as the global pandemic struck, we saw how families and students were affected when school support systems were removed from their day-to-day lives. When families needed to choose between health and work, difficult and consequential decisions were made.

Through the process of meeting during the summer of 2020, we discussed the ways in which teachers of Oak Park engaged students positively, the systems that provided or did not provide equal opportunities for students, and the roles in which different teachers and support personnel filled within the students' lives. "Explaining one's point of view while working to understand others' in dialogical encounters enacts a pedagogical model of the public sphere wherein social relationships become less combative, manipulative, and self-serving, and, instead, more educational" (Pinar, 2006, p. 8). Although much of our attention was drawn to the structures of inequity, the more debatable topics included the stories of the students and their personal struggles to navigate the high school experience presented in the documentary. Some students were aided through extracurricular events that supported their diverse and personal experiences to navigate sexuality and trauma. Teachers were limited by the power structures of the school system while coaches served as a personal support to help individual students navigate their personal and family struggles. As educators, we know we must examine all aspects of the school, and this position is supported by Goodson and Sikes (2001) as they state, "Researchers should, however, try to ensure that they include some negative or discrepant examples"

(p. 23). Specifically in these discussions, faculty had intense conversations regarding the use of language by teachers, coaches, and students themselves. In some cases, the language included expletives by coaches in extracurricular activities while students also used this language within classroom writing exercises. Questions were raised as to the role of the teacher as supportive of student voice while also ensuring an appropriate balance was maintained between the role of the teacher or teacher as coach and the students. We critiqued deficit language used by teachers and administrators and cases in which teachers did not create a safe and supportive learning environment. We explored concerns regarding how the teachers could not maintain a safe learning environment for their students while simultaneously supporting high achievement for all students.

Throughout the virtual sessions, faculty engaged in more questions than answers. Debates were had linking our lives and careers to those of the teachers and students in the documentary. Although we are all university professors today, many of these faculty bring to this space a past position of teacher and teacher-as-coach in a public school setting. Our unique experiences were informed and complicated by unique positions of race, gender, class, place, and experience. Each member of the discussion was informed by their identity to view and interpret the nuances of the students' experiences in the documentary. "The educational possibility of curriculum theory is to help you reflect more profoundly, and not without humor on occasion, on your individual, specific situation" (Pinar et al., 2004, p. 9). Similarly, the viewing and accompanying dialogue helped us to see Others through different perspectives and lenses.

As viewers, faculty did not have personal experience with the students, teachers, administrators, coaches, and parents presented in the documentary. Our opinions and perspectives were informed by the words of the participants themselves and not clouded by the opinions of others. By distancing ourselves from the place of the school and contextual setting, we were able to gain new perspectives and insights into the school setting and interactions. "Attention to place as inquiry heightens our senses to both the physical and social textures of our surrounding environment, natural and artificial. Life takes place somewhere. Place is where we go, where we find ourselves, and where we live and 'belong'" (Meyer, 2010, p. 86). We had internal dialogue with our place within this school system. As authors and practitioners, we personally engaged in dialogue about place as we are both white women early in our collegiate careers. Our personal identities of our lives and professions informed our views through the lens of our cultural backgrounds. Through dialogue, we were able to experience

perspectives of Others from different backgrounds and cultures through a shared experience.

In planning for a new semester as COVID-19 continued to limit movement and interactions with students, we then specifically looked at our course format and goals for opportunities. How could we overcome limitations of space and time to move experiences to a digital format? How did we adjust course assignments to highlight social justice and movements of our nation's recent past? How do we plan for a new school year with COVID-19 still impacting our schools? We did not know how schools would operate, whether in school, virtual, or a combination. We did not know about how teacher candidates would have opportunities to engage personally with students if teaching virtually or through socially distanced formats. The need for our teacher candidates to meet students and intimately develop personal connections is fundamental to building positive relationships and beginning to recognize the students as complex people with diverse needs and cultures. Yet how would this be possible across a screen or through limited movements?

As the opportunities for personal development and instructional improvement were obvious to those of us engaging in the community viewing and discussion of the documentary, the authors were exploring how to provide similar opportunities for exploration and growth through meaningful reflection and dialogue. To do this, we explored previous iterations of the Shadow Study for improvement. A large majority of our graduate teacher candidates have returned to the communities in which they were raised. They are often hired as teachers in the same buildings in which they were once students. Their own perspectives of students are a product of their upbringing and personal experiences, and those experiences are informed as products of the institutions with little to no knowledge of the structures of power in which experiences lie. In order for these teacher candidates to create a teacher identity, they must look differently at the social, economic, political, and racial identities that are part of the community and school. "Who we are, to some variable extent, determines what we notice and, at another level of intellectual activity, what we regard as worthy of notice, what we find significant" (Coles, 1997, p. 89). For those who do teach in a different system from where they lived, their identities and perspectives are also informed by their past experiences and student identities. To make a shift and look at circumstances with a critical lens, our role as faculty is to push them beyond what they know and believe; our role is to make teacher candidates question and think.

Instead of stopping the Shadow Study assignment due to limitations put on by the pandemic, the authors saw possibilities for growth through the same documentary in which we had personally engaged. "What is necessary in order to portray human activity and experience more accurately is descriptions of particular individuals, on particular days, in particular circumstances" (Pinar, 1994, p. 105). Because we witnessed *America to Me* to be an opportunity for educators at all levels to question, debate, and grow, we saw power in using this documentary as curriculum. Therefore, in the next section, we will describe documentaries as curriculum and how *America to Me* exemplifies this curriculum. Then we will explain the assignments we developed to engage this curriculum, and finally, we identify how this curriculum follows the tenets of social justice education.

Documentaries

The documentary as curriculum is important to the presentation of lived experience due to the purpose and creation of its format. Nichols (2001) describes, "Documentaries of social reproduction offer us new views of our common world to explore and understand" (p. 2). Chanan (2007) similarly notes, "But the documentary camera is always pointing directly at the social and the anthropological, spaces where the lifeworld is dominated, controlled and shaped by power and authority, sometimes visible, mostly invisible" (p. 16). Both of these scholars indicate that the documentary form lies in the social world. Further, the filmmaker seeks to deliver specific messages about that social world to the viewer through the film. Chanan notes that powers within the social context may be visible or hidden, and it is often this hidden agenda that filmmakers probe through their work, encouraging the audience to question these situations. Because documentary film speaks to the viewer as a part of a social world, links are found between the subject of the film and the life of the viewer. As fiction films use the narrative form to address emotions such as fears, hopes, and dreams, documentaries, too, create an emotional response within the viewer, tied not to an author's narrative but to the social world and context of the viewer and their response to the content.

America to Me is a ten-episode documentary that lies in the social world by focusing on student participants in one particular high school, Oak Park and River Forest High School (OPRFHS). This suburban school lies outside of Chicago, Illinois and serves more than 3,400 students in grades nine through twelve. In looking at the school's website and demographics, the school prides itself on academic excellence through "more than 200 academically rigorous courses in nine academic divisions

at transition, college preparatory, honors, and Advanced Placement levels" (Oak Park and River Forest High School, 2021, para. 1). The school also offers more than 100 extracurricular clubs, activities, and athletic teams. The documentary is presented in ten episodes to follow students of different races through one year at OPRFHS. Students and families gave consent for their lives to be recorded and narrated through an autobiographical lens. Each episode shows the lived experiences of students within the context of the school and surrounding community, including within the students' homes. Each episode portrays the stories of success and struggle through the students' words.

The format of *America to Me* as a documentary is an opportunity for teacher candidates to see, hear, and feel experiences of those within the OPRFHS community. Individuals present their own lived experiences within their own contexts, and the candidates as viewers respond to those experiences through their own social worlds and contexts. The documentary invites the viewer to interpret its curriculum by not explicitly supplying meaning, but instead requiring inferences of the sights and sounds, an understanding and interpretation of lived experience. One use of footage that requires interpretation is the repetition of similar experiences through different students' lives. For example, some students are seen applying to colleges and receiving successful acceptance while other students struggle with application requirements. In other situations, students are presented in academic settings in which they struggle to achieve success of a passing score while others celebrate accomplishments of awards and high achievement. In social settings, some students are seen losing their home and continuity of the school experience as other families move and risk separation of the family unit to maintain their homes. Oftentimes, these events are juxtaposed across episodes and accompanied by presentation of other situations within students of a similar race or social position. "Stories function as arguments in which we learn something essentially human by understanding an actual life or community as lived" (Connelly & Clandinin, 1991, p. 136). Repeatedly, the viewer is required to analyze the significance of these social actors and their social situation in both the film and life. "Life's narratives are the context for making meaning of school situations" (Connelly & Clandinin, 1991, p. 124). The narrative presented visually and through the actors' own words provides a situation to be reflected upon and explored. As the student KeShawn is seen returning to the school to support his partner in an afterschool presentation, the context of his suspension is highlighted to show the inequality of opportunity based on previous events. As Kendale races between wrestling practice and an award ceremony for band, the social groups in which he finds

himself are highlighted by his words, behaviors, and physical actions in both settings. The students' own stories provide the experience to be interpreted as a social representation of their own place.

Another way in which a documentary invites the spectator into the analysis is by openly analyzing and questioning the documentary as a form of communication. Traditionally, documentary did not include shots of the camera, cameraman, or the editor. Yet, in *America to Me*, cameramen are sometimes seen interviewing and questioning students and family members. "One key consideration is the multiplicity of voices, both for participants and for researchers" (Connelly & Clandinin, 1991, p. 147). For example, when Tiara is observed skipping school, the cameraman questions her actions and the impact of these decisions on her education. In other cases, interviews are conducted to explicitly gather stories through the autobiographical story of the participants themselves. The struggles of Charles' family are explored through their lived experiences to move Charles from a community where he was shot at exiting a middle school bus and the political struggle of living in the OPRFHS school attendance zone. This series of events is described in the words of the characters themselves. Life experiences of Grant's family are highlighted as his mother and father share stories of a mixed-race family and how racial profiling has impacted their lives in the past. At important points during the documentary, the narrator is heard giving background to the lack of participation of some administrators within the filming and narration. Although a board member and assistant principal are participants, other administrators refused to participate in the story, highlighting an absence of voice and message within the context of the film. "As we try to capture this multiplicity, we need to consider the voices heard and the voices not heard" (Connelly & Clandinin, 1991, p. 147). The narrator's voice is added to the documentary to highlight absence of voice and perspective while the interpretation of this omission is left to the interpretation of the viewer. The narrator's voice adds complexity to the documentary to highlight those who are willing to tell their story and those who remove their own perspective from the social setting. Both the inclusion of one's story and the absence provide and leave out aspects of the context that are important to the totality of the social experience. "Context is necessary for making sense of any person, event, or thing" (Connelly & Clandinin, 1991, p. 32). By acknowledging the missing voices, the documentary cites the purpose of *America to Me* to the viewer as a social reproduction and complicates the viewing of the context to the audience.

The reality of lived experience is brought to the forefront in *America to Me* through the words of the

students, teachers, coaches, and family members acting as themselves. In sharing their stories through their own words, an autobiographical narrative is presented to the viewer. The actors share their own experiences in their own words, giving power to lived experience through emotional accounts of stories. Pinar (1994) asserts the importance of the inclusion of students' and parents' voices as, "Autobiography offers the curriculum field a point of view it simply has not had. In the literature we have no concrete descriptions of an individual's experiences of texts, teachers, students" (p. 130). If we are to explore and look at the experiences of students within a school setting, we must acknowledge and interpret the words of those embedded inside the school setting for meaning. We must explore the problems that occur within that setting and look for opportunities to address inequity. Teachers must place value on the lived experiences of their students in a context to learn from the students as participants themselves. "Autobiography has a political function as well" (Pinar, 1994, p. 130). By placing the student at the center of meaning making, we can then explore the contextual elements of the school.

However, documentary films are sometimes assumed to be the truthful view of life or a situation as it occurs; yet, when filming the social world, some question whether the camera can actually capture life as it truly exists. When viewing *America to Me*, questions arise to the authenticity of the stories of the students. Are adolescents acting on screen or elaborating examples of their lives? Are adolescents capable of presenting an honest and neutral perspective of lived events to be seen and heard by the viewer? "It seems that questioning the integrity or authenticity of a documentary sooner or later comes down to the truth value of the individual image, the fragment seized from reality" (Chanan, 2007, p. 47). In this manner, the question of the reality of the film or the truth of the presentation is often questioned in documentaries due to the limited nature of the camera's shot. Nichols (2001) attempts to clarify this question of the documentary's content. "But documentary is not a reproduction of reality, it is a representation of the world we already occupy. It stands for a particular view of the world" (p. 20). Similarly, Coles (1997) argues, "a documentary report offers authentication of what is otherwise speculation" (p. 5). Nichols and Coles importantly describe that the documentary film is not intended to present the social world as a complete depiction of reality. There are limitations to what can be taped and the extent to which the film can convey that footage. In particular, as Nichols supports, a particular view is presented through the film that offers to "authenticate" or confirm a perspective of the world. Throughout the focus documentary, we see the students in their own environment as students. *America to Me* fills

a space as reality of the lived experience of the participants in the scenes captured and presented by the filmmakers themselves.

With limitations on the length of each episode, it is natural to question what occurs off screen or when the cameras are not capturing events. The importance of this mode of communication lies in the fact that the camera captures events that occur in reality, in the lives of the students as lived. The documentary does not provide a fictional school within an imaginary context of society; it is rooted in the systems of power and oppression in which the students attempt to live and survive. It is clear that key limitations hinder the ability to shoot footage and organize it within a suitable form. These constraints are not the only things that influence what is produced or how it is arranged. For one, the filmmaker's intentions and bias can create differences in the reality or truth that is represented. Each filmmaker usually creates with a particular goal in mind. This aim can impact the type of film that is designed or produced. Although different scholars have their own views on the types of films, Nichols' view is of value when discussing *America to Me*. "There are two kinds of film: (1) documentaries of wish-fulfillment and (2) documentaries of social representation. Each type tells a story, but the stories, or narratives, are of different sorts" (Nichols, 2001, p. 1). In this definition, the documentary as a form of social reproduction is the focus of this chapter and serves to meet the filmmaker's purpose for *America to Me* as well as an inclusion in course materials for our teacher candidates.

The function of *America to Me* as a documentary serves as a social representation of existing circumstances within our nation's school systems. The experiences and systems within OPFRHS are unique to that school setting, yet similar trends and systems have been established in schools across our country through systems of power. By presenting this representation to teacher candidates, we are inviting individuals to view, interpret, and ultimately question the existence of situations to support and limit achievement for individual students. "Autobiographical work can be instructive in this quest for contradictions in both individual and social spheres" (Edgerton, 1991, p. 86). As each teacher candidate sits within a contextual place of his or her own school building, the power of the process is then brought back to one's own context and place. The viewer questions one's significance with the film and the greater social realm. "People must become aware of the ways they construct their realities as they live together - how they grasp the appearances of things, how and when they interrogate their lived worlds, how they acknowledge the multiple perspectives that exist for making sense of the commonsense world" (Greene, 1995, p. 65). Nichols

(1991) suggests that documentaries do exactly this, they provide a "commonsensical view of the world...[that] addresses or resolves contradictions that remain intractable to reason or that follow from patterns of social organization" (p. 166). With candidates given the opportunity to reimagine their reason and patterns regarding elements of systemic oppression, we were able to ask candidates to think critically and objectively about the functions and social representations within American middle and high schools.

As the authors engaged in the private viewing and online discussions of the documentary with other colleagues, different topics were addressed from our own perspective and through our own lenses. By having online discussions, a privacy of space was maintained that allowed us to share about our own experiences as teachers and coaches. At other times, we could listen to the perspectives of Others as the events unfolded in the documentary and mirrored their own experiences and lives. The impact of having repeated meetings and discussions was further developed as we independently reflected upon further episodes and personal connections. At a time when protests were happening across our country and inequity was highlighted in society, the documentary provided a new way of seeing the world through one American school system with one group of students, and heightened the potential for learning about the perspectives of Others by sharing stories and personal experiences. After the transformational work we experienced while viewing the documentary with a community, we believed the documentary and the accompanying assignments we designed would give teacher candidates the ability to look critically and explore the commonalities of race, space, gender, inequity, and our American educational systems by looking directly at one American school system outside of their social worlds.

Social Justice Education

The purpose of our course is to introduce first-year teacher candidates to the history and philosophies within American middle and high schools. Engaging the documentary as curriculum by way of course materials and assignments in this particular course was the first intentional step to address social and political concerns relevant to our current circumstances, situations in schools, and observational practices of students in multiple settings. Although viewing was an important component of changes to the course, we recognized the need to push teacher candidates to see and experience the lives of Others both through one's own lens and in relation to current educational theory. Surrounding the

viewing and reflection pieces within current theory was necessary to support a recognition of bias, ability to critically analyze the work, and language to support growth. "Social justice is the process, both in theory and practice, that ensures the protection and capabilities of participatory growth processes" (Klaasen, 2020, p. 4). As previously stated, many of our program's teacher candidates return to communities in which they once lived and in the same schools they attended. Fewer of our candidates instruct and support students and communities much different than themselves. Our background is similar to the latter group. To provide support for teacher candidates in critically viewing and examining a social world different from their own, the events of the documentary were analyzed through deliberate reading and opportunities for collaborative experiences. We designed these ancillary tasks to support the teacher candidates while working with diverse perspectives, and to encourage their personal growth and reflection. Below, we describe how these tasks alongside the viewing of *American to Me* engaged the five components of Hackman's (2005) social justice education (SJE).

Fundamentally, SJE reinforces academic achievement in the core curricular areas, but also teaches students problem-posing skills that are key readiness indicators for college, career, and beyond to tackle social problems (Welton et al., 2015). This curricula covers and allows students to experience and grapple with concepts such as racism, prejudice, power, privilege, and oppression (Miller, 2010). Moreover, SJE intends to be "democratic and participatory, inclusive and affirming of human agency and human capacities for working collaboratively to create change" (Bell, 1997, p. 4). *American to Me* permitted students exposure to these tenets while the viewing guides, their associated reflections, and the Shadow Study were designed to fit within these tenets. To describe how we activated SJE as well as how we grounded these assignments in such a way, we defer to Hackman's (2005) five components of SJE.

According to Hackman (2005), "Social justice education requires an examination of systems of power and oppression combined with a prolonged emphasis on social change and student agency in and outside of the classroom" (p. 104). At the beginning of their careers, teacher candidates have limited opportunities to express their understanding of power and agency within themselves and their students while working in the boundaries of the schoolhouse. First, the viewing guides and their associated reflections asked our teacher candidates to consider how the systems of oppression play out in the documentary. The viewing guides pushed

students to look at specific events and problems presented in the documentary. Assigned readings attempt to give teacher candidates language to analyze and articulate their own understanding of the events both in the documentary and through reflection in their own social worlds of their schools and classrooms. Additionally, the shadow study summarized their work with the series over the course of a semester. These assignments assisted us in emphasizing the importance of a sustained and prolonged commitment to studying power and agency within middle and high schools. As stated above, designing these assignments engaged Hackman's five components of SJE. Figure 1 visualizes how we see the assignments fitting within Hackman's components.

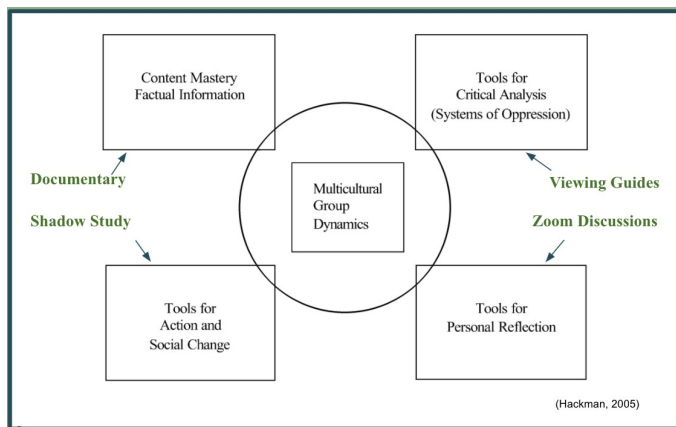


Figure 1 – Assignments in green added by the authors

The first component is content mastery. Presenting students with content material that is factual, historically situated, and analyzes content from the micro and macro levels promotes learning that exposes students to a range of ideas and encourages reflective and critical dialogue across students about their social world. We see adding the documentary to the content in our course as a use of this first component. The second component is tools for critical analysis. Presenting students with content that is dynamic without giving them the tools to employ their understanding of this material is wasted effort. In this same vein, we designed viewing guides to maximize our candidates' understanding of such content. The third component is tools for action and social change. Hackman says that this component "is critical to help move students from cynicism and despair to hope and possibility" (p. 106). We used the revision of our program's Shadow Study to provide the candidates an outlet for their social discoveries that enlisted hope

rather than despair and possibility rather than cynicism. The fourth component, tools for personal reflection, opens space for self-reflection that aims to produce action from its reflection. Since this is an online program, virtual discussions were implemented for this reason. All assignments come together to contribute to each other through the fifth and final component, multicultural group dynamics. Having an awareness of their racial and ethnic group dynamics as well as their need to be aware of their classrooms' group dynamics are the building blocks for adding *America to Me* to our curriculum.

Designing curricula with a social justice lens is an intentional process that must be tended to with care. However, its work cannot be resisted. Similar to Osei-Kofi et al. (2010), we believe that it is our duty to teach different ways of knowing and provide an inclusive education so that the academy can truly become an environment committed to social change. As teacher educators, this commitment is important since our graduates are the next generation of American middle and high school teachers. As we have both engaged in this reflective process during our own coursework and ongoing discussions in professional settings, it is an intentional design element of our course to push teacher candidates beyond their own sense of truth to recognize how their lives have been grounded in their lived experience while also problematizing views of those labeled as Other who embody the seats in their classrooms each day.

Accompanying Assignments *Let America be America again. Let it be the dream it used to be. Let it be the pioneer on the plain Seeking a home where he himself is free. (America never was America to me.)* - Langston Hughes

America to Me was titled based on Langston Hughes's 1938 poem "Let America be America Again" published in *Esquire* magazine. In this allusion, the social world presented by the documentary illustrates Hughes's sentiments. The students documented grapple with their feelings of non-belonging to the country to which they pledge their allegiance each morning at the start of the school day. For the same purpose, we designed the curriculum associated with the candidates' viewing the documentary to ask candidates to question Hughes's sentiment--to whom is America, America?

Consequently, we added the acts of writing and reflecting to give the candidates capacity to examine their narratives and social worlds from outside of the candidates' lived experience. In practice, a barrier often exists between teachers and students when situations of inequity occur within a system; participants protect their own position and identities as actors within a setting. The

opportunity to view *America to Me* provides a perspective of education beyond one's own experience. It provides autobiographical accounts of the students and family members that would otherwise not be heard by the teachers. Furthermore, teacher candidates can observe interactions between teachers and students, teachers and administrators, and teachers with other teachers. These conversations are often not encountered when recognizing the stories of education and the teacher's own story.

Content Mastery

Content mastery is the presentation of materials that are factual, historically situated, and analyze content from the micro and macro levels to promote equitable learning experiences for all. As described above, the power documentaries have to support students' learning at micro and macro levels adheres to Hackman's SJE component of content mastery. By nature, the documentary provides an unedited and unscripted account of the characters recorded by the lens. In this case, the documentary includes the words, actions, interactions, and feelings of the families, students, teachers, and administrators of OPRFHS. By situating the students in a time and place that is real, relevant, and relatable, the content of the documentary is explored by teacher candidates. *America to Me* provided footage that shows the trajectory of actions and consequences that have long-term significance in students' lives. By looking at school programs and data over the course of a year, candidates have the opportunity to engage with possibilities for change and the impact on students. By looking at interactions between students and parents, parents and teachers, and even community members and the school board, the potential for understanding how choices made in the schoolhouse are complex, authentic, and true.

The use of *America to Me* as content is made possible by understanding that the documentary produces a true perspective of the lives lived within its frames. The use of autobiographical voice of the students and teachers in *America to Me* highlights the importance of one's own lived experience as truth. It also complicates candidate understanding of school experiences to recognize the various parts of life, culture, and school that must be examined for each student. This gives teachers potential to recognize the complexity of their position in an understanding of teaching and relationships with students through the mastery of content on the micro and macro levels.

Tools for Critical Analysis. To explore the visual found within the documentary's frames, teacher candidates engaged in readings and written reflections on a bi-weekly basis. Two episodes were assigned at a time and each viewing guide focused students' attention to issues of systemic oppression such as school integration, color blindness, and bodily privilege. We asked students to reflect on these issues via the documentary, their personal and professional experiences, and selected readings that define such issues. For example, for the bodily privilege focus we assigned Brent Staples's 1986 essay titled "Black Man in Public Space" to be read alongside episodes 7 and 8. Teacher candidates were able to engage with the documentary as a text that extends thinking beyond what is actually viewed in the documentary. As Pinar points out, "Theory enables scholars to understand the present relations among culture, society, and politics in the intellectual structuration of school curriculum, curriculum research and development, and in the interpellation of curriculum studies specialists" (Pinar, 2006, p. 166). Instead of relying on their own and those of the documentary filmmakers' interpretations, teacher candidates further reflected upon and analyzed experiences of the documentary and their own lives in relation to the paired theoretical discussion we assigned alongside the documentary's viewing. This added a separate element to the interpretive process whereby perspective was engaged to inspire perspectives not noticed or considered before viewing the documentary and completing the tasks presented in the viewing guides.

Tools for Action and Social Change. The Shadow Study and its associated responsibilities, a student asset chart and tailored lesson plan, were all created as tools for action. These tools were introduced for social change. When beginning to examine one's role with students, a limitation exists as teacher candidates are able to see a student perform in their class based on one particular content area. The limitations to this practice include not experiencing and understanding the day-to-day life, interests, difficulties, and abilities of the student. Masemann (2007) identifies the multi-faceted needs of teacher candidates to explore and examine as:

Culture refers to all the aspects of life, including the mental, social, linguistic, and physical forms of culture. It refers to ideas people have, the relationships they have with others in their families and with larger social institutions, and the languages they speak, and the symbolic forms they share, such as written language or art/music forms. (p. 1)

In order for meaningful instruction to take place, cultural identity of students must be understood by the

school system and teachers. Ways of communicating and representation are essential to be an active and contributing part of the school experience. Prior to the pandemic, a course assignment would require our teacher candidates to follow a particular student throughout several classes to see how he or she interacts in a variety of classroom and school environments. Seeing a student beyond one's classroom walls allows teachers to experience formal and informal communication and ways of being within the school including with other teachers, administrators, coaches, peers, and close friends. By shadowing the student, a teacher candidate is able to see more about the educational experience of the focus student, and hopefully begin to identify assets of that student. Due to the pandemic, teacher candidates were isolated in online environments and unable to move throughout the school building.

Although a Shadow Study looks at different environments within a school building, a gap remains in seeing the student in his or her home community including how the student learns from the community and family. To help teacher candidates examine the holistic development of the students and ways in which the students and families interacted with the education system, we utilized the *America to Me* documentary to conduct a Shadow Study. "In order to teach in a meaningful and engaging manner, an understanding of, and sensitivity to, the home culture is a necessary foundation before curricula and methodology is considered" (Carger, 2005, p. 241). This allowed teacher candidates to critically examine the experiences of students similar to and different from themselves while also looking into experiences beyond the classroom. This activity filled a void to allow teacher candidates to probe the complexities of students beyond classroom walls.

To facilitate brainstorming of the dynamic characteristics of adolescents in the school environment, an assets chart is completed with details about all characters in the documentary. This shift has been made to focus teacher candidates on preferences and assets of students instead of deficit thinking focusing on gaps, weaknesses, or threats to the learning environment. This asset chart is also used in other courses of the graduate program as teacher candidates examine the unique makeup of their own students so the use of asset-based thinking is supported across the entire program. Viewing the documentary was conducted in the beginning eleven weeks of the semester that developmentally allowed teacher candidates to grapple with issues of race, ability, gender, inequity, and families through the presented images and experiences of OPFRHS. In the following weeks, additional readings and supports were given to

explore trauma and the needs of adolescents in the classroom. This pairing of experience with additional experiences of the developmental needs prepared teacher candidates to take a second look at the characters of the documentary through the Shadow Study in the later weeks of the semester.

An accompanying detail of the larger assignment was to look at the demographics of the school and student success based on state evaluations. Teacher candidates are bombarded with data within their school buildings to examine the whole population on state exams as well as county testing programs and in-class assignments. Examining these data reports is part of the requirements of educational systems to identify students achieving and falling behind. When looking beyond one's own place throughout the documentary, students see inequity as it occurs within experiences, courses, and interactions with teachers. By looking at reported data for OPFRHS, students are provided a different perspective of the school's successes and failures based on sub-populations of the students. "Combining life stories with contextual history seems therefore a strategy for building on the wide range of case study, evaluative and interactionist work" (Goodson, 1985, p. 127). The state data reports provide further contextualization and insight into the perceived accomplishments of the high school students within *America to Me*. The data brings another experience to look at the whole for those most affected by political and educational decisions and those who are not supported in their endeavors.

Lastly, as part of the Shadow Study project, teacher candidates pair understanding of the characters in *America to Me* and reported assets of these figures to planned instruction. The viewing and reflecting upon the documentary powerfully engage teacher candidates in a deep reflection process. By participating in the analysis and reflection, one explores the role he or she takes with individual students. In linking knowledge of students to planning, teacher candidates bridge the gap between theory and practice of one's own teaching and instruction. Reflecting upon one's place to problematize systems is important; adjusting the role of education and how to meet student needs is the next step. Each teacher candidate submits a lesson plan that has been adjusted to meet the needs, interests, and assets of a particular student within the documentary. Pairing content with instruction allows for the reflective practice to take place and shows teacher candidates the possibilities for instructional changes in today's classrooms.

Tools for Personal Reflection. The virtual discussions via Zoom™ were implemented for the purpose of giving students space to reflect. We wanted

our candidates to have a safe space to reflect as we did when we participated in the community viewing alongside our colleagues. Written products have demonstrated evidence of analysis, interpretation, and problematizing events in the documentary. More importantly, though, we have experienced a level of autobiographical reflection on the parts of the teacher candidates themselves. As individuals look back on their own lived experiences, some ask themselves questions regarding particular situations. Some have noted limitations of their cultural experiences in relation to their students. Some have honestly provided emotional reflections of the monocultural lens through which they have been raised. Some have noted that they do not have the skills to interpret their new position as a teacher of diverse students. Some have questioned their own past actions as a teacher within systems of power. Some have commented on the mental efforts and struggles that the documentary and assignments have brought. As teacher candidates now write reflective narratives to answer questions and explore their own experiences, they are now participating in the deconstruction of reality through their own autobiographical lens. Edgerton (1991) describes this process and interpretation as:

Autobiographical writing enables students to study themselves. Such study links self to place, and place is simultaneously historical, cultural, and radical. The autobiography of the "other" - indeed an "other" who shares a geographical place can provide, in a sense, a foil to one's own life history. Via another's life one understands more fully one's own, as well as the social and historical ties that link both lives to a particular place, in this instance, the South. (p. 78)

Problematizing one's own place within a school system highlights the power held by the teacher, administrators, and systems.

The autobiographical reflection allows teachers to take the first step to problematizing situations and structures that exist in their own contexts. By removing themselves from the personal setting through viewing the documentary, a process is initiated that highlights contradictions from what one had previously experienced or accepted as fact. By placing theory into this reflective practice, other perspectives add depth to the process and vocabulary to assist in questioning circumstances in a concrete way. Our goal is not for teacher candidates to explore how best to teach students or the ways in which they deliver content. The purpose of this reflection moves students beyond their own perspectives of truth to recognize the powerful systems that exist. A means to question what exists supports growth.

During the 2020-2021 school year, the authors completed weekly and bi-weekly discussions with students during virtual meetings regarding events within the documentary. Due to changes in the online program during the fall of 2021, these discussions were removed from the course. As teacher candidates viewed the documentary from their own place and culture, they had limitations in interpreting and expressing their understanding of events in particular episodes. Allowing for dialogue within the space of a virtual meeting permitted the sharing of personal stories and the ways in which they perceived events in the lives of the characters. This also allowed for the authors as instructors to probe for meaning behind the events and make connections to prior readings and theoretical frameworks from other course assignments. These interactions were limited, though, by the optional requirements to meet and some students' hesitance to engage honestly and openly in an online virtual meeting. With the changes to the program in the fall of 2021, we also have had a shift in the demographics of our teacher candidates. All but one admitted teacher candidate is a teacher of record. In addition, teacher candidates are more diverse in race, gender, and socioeconomic status than in previous cohorts. By moving our program online, we have begun to attract a different audience which facilitates changes to the methods of teaching and instruction within the online course.

Multicultural Group Dynamics. We see all assignments connecting via the fifth component. The viewing guides provided further readings that also engaged content mastery; the virtual discussions provided an additional tool for critical analysis; the Shadow Study was not only a tool for action and social change but also a tool for critical analysis; and, finally, the lesson plan designed for an OPRFHS student enlists all four components while asking candidates to analyze the group dynamics of OPRFHS. The act of viewing one's role within a system of education is a skill necessary to reflect upon one's place within that system as well as how to look at the variety of assets and cultures within one's classroom. Throughout observations and reflection activities related to *America to Me*, teacher candidates looked a place beyond themselves to a system of which they were not a part. The process of examining one's own place and role within teaching students must also begin as teacher candidates continue the process of looking inward. Teacher candidates must examine their own practices, biases, and perspectives on education as they relate to their students in the classroom. "Place is where the action occurs, where characters are formed and live out their stories and where cultural and social context play constraining and enabling roles" (Connelly & Clandinin, 1991, p. 136).

As most of our teacher candidates are teachers of record, hired with a provisional license as a full-time teacher, the urgency of this transition from viewing to enacting is amplified as each day more than one hundred students move throughout their classrooms. In the case of teacher candidates during the 2020-2021 school year, virtual learning was taking teacher candidates directly into homes as classroom walls were blurred by the pandemic. As the authors have continued the use of the documentary during this semester, it is important to note that teacher candidates will now be paired in completing the asset chart. This decision was made after reflection upon weekly assignments, sharing of teacher candidate narratives, and commenting on ways to increase discussions among teacher candidates within an online program. Students have actively participated in virtual meetings to discuss articles related to theoretical frameworks and many commented upon the ways in which this form of meetings supported learning and interpretation. Furthermore, we recognize the importance of dialogue in continuing the process of unpacking the topics of race, gender, and oppression within the documentary. "Dialogue and deliberation, it is assumed, can lead us, optimally, toward more peaceful forms of coexistence and, minimally, to a reaction of conflict and violence between cultural communities" (Todd, 2009, p. 99). We hope that continued dialogue within our course framework will allow teacher candidates to see themselves for the potential to change their environments while communicating actively with another who shares similar perspectives and identifies problems. This grouping can be a support for our teacher candidates to continue the reflective process with others in similar situations.

Tools for Agency and Voice. In light of the parental backlash that resulted from the COVID pandemic, the use of a docuseries like *America to Me* can give teachers agency and voice when communicating with parents about their classroom choices surrounding sensitive topics. Because parents were isolated with their children during the pandemic, educational policy entered the homes as well as day-to-day decisions made by classroom teachers. Not only could students analyze the docuseries for reasons for classroom and school-wide decisions, but they became equipped with the language to defend and articulate their own planning and instructional decisions evident through the materials and instruction seen in the home.

One reason for the shift in student agency and voice is the emotional impact of the docuseries on students to perceive events viewed while making connections to their own Place. With critiques directed at teachers during the COVID pandemic, comments became personal as

materials and instruction were challenged on social media and even the news. What is pedagogically appropriate for the development of adolescents, including social and racial options, became a sounding point for parents and the public and was directly aimed at teachers themselves. "Emotions add relevance and human beings are compelled to pay attention to what matters" (Ginsberg & Wlodkowski, 2020, p. 92). By seeing and critically analyzing circumstances within the school settings, students are able to see the characters as complex people with their Place impacted by teachers, administrators, and policies within the school. Furthermore, this recognition and movement to label inequity "is important according to their values and perspectives, their motivation emerges" (Ginsberg & Wlodkowski, 2020, p. 93). As students transfer the experiences of the docuseries to their own past and current experiences, emotions are recognized and language is given to the conditions. No longer was the school a focus of critique; the personal attacks on teachers led to emotional reactions and a need to process through reflection.

Through this recognition of past experiences and seeing the impact of situations in schools, students begin to develop the vocabulary to identify inequities, the need for relevant topics and instruction, and the impact on students. Connelly and Clandinin (1995) describe this transformation as:

Teachers become active agents, pulling themselves into the future with their own inevitable social agendas, rather than passive agents merely pushed into the future by others' social agendas; they become knowing persons with their own epistemological relations to the milieu and to their students, rather than persons merely responsible for transmitting socially valued knowledge. (p. 26)

Through the shift in personal identity and recognition of one's Place, students situate themselves through a lens of social justice to become active agents of change within the school situation. It must be noted that the ability of all students to take action may not be immediate or possible within the political situation at the time; one's job is needed to financially care for oneself and family. Nevertheless, the active agency of students begins first by recognizing, labeling, and describing situations within one's own environment - protecting one's own Place in a classroom. Action was necessary to take place within one's own classroom, albeit an online and digital classroom, without greater steps throughout the school. The importance, though, is that students are able to transfer and build knowledge through the docuseries

that accompanies them through these political, professional, and now personal situations.

Throughout written reflections, the authors saw this growth within the student reflections within the depth of reflection and recognition of personal bias and analysis of daily decisions. This is a direct intention of planned assignments and written products. An indirect product, though, is the ways in which students begin to defend their own Place and the safe space of their classroom. Over time, students would question the political and social dynamics within their own school buildings, but the priorities during COVID and immediately after were focused on protecting one's Place and personal decisions, including cultural and political topics within curricular decisions. Students developed language to defend oneself and critique policy thus enabling them to respond to situations, offer informed critiques, and take agency to offer solutions.

Reflections on Implementation Based on the online format of our program, the written reflections are read independently by authors as we provide feedback to our students. Although we are isolated in an online environment across university campuses, we speak frequently regarding the performance of students overall and as individuals. We track student progress throughout the semester to look for change and development throughout the course. At one point during the first iteration of this implementation, one author brought concerns regarding written comments of a teacher candidate. This information was triangulated with another course instructor as she observed similar comments. In this case, we met privately with the teacher candidate to have an honest conversation regarding his use of language, our perceptions of his work, and ways to improve. This level of intervention is rare, yet conversations in real time are necessary to ensure that teacher candidates are engaging with personal beliefs, biases, and possible ways that these thoughts may impact interactions with students.

Throughout both semesters of implementation, teacher candidates have submitted autobiographical reflections highlighting shifted perspectives of candidates in a new understanding of events in their past. These reflections are only possible through an understanding of content and social justice pedagogy. In some cases, some have highlighted trauma or inequity in their own schooling and families. They have shared about personal experiences of living with family members or living in constant transition. At other times, candidates share experiences about their own school and students. Connections are made to restorative justice practices implemented in the schools and how candidates perceive

inequity within discipline within their own schools. Candidates also make connections to their role as teachers and role of teachers as coaches. They examine the ways in which opportunities are presented to some or all students in classes or how expectations are shared within the school for only some groups. These autobiographical stories are inspired through reference to situations within America to Me and assigned readings. These examples highlight the use of social justice pedagogy to pair content with tools for critical analysis.

As previously noted, there are limitations of the shadow study as one assignment to help teacher candidates gain understanding of diverse students. Specifically, limitations of this activity focused only on the school environment which narrowed understanding of the home life of the student. When we ask teacher candidates to consider the strengths and challenges of a particular student, an understanding of only the school performance of the focus student often omits a full understanding of community and cultural factors that impact the social, emotional, physical, and cognitive development of that student. Statistically, the identities of our nation's teacher candidates do not match that of the students in their classrooms. In cases where teacher candidates do return to the areas in which they were raised, the socioeconomic status and cultural identity of the teacher candidate does not always match that of diverse students in the classroom. Overcoming previously developed expectations and norms impacts bias and is enacted by teachers within classrooms. Although the shadow study is a traditional assignment to help candidates develop awareness of differences, the expanded implementation and inclusion of America to Me has demonstrated that we have helped teachers to develop perspectives and knowledge, ultimately impacting classroom practice. Through the inclusion of components from Hackman's social justice education framework, we have moved students beyond the use of discussions and reflections to a deeper use of social justice education throughout the course.

In specific cases, we are able to informally report on tremendous progress and content development of candidate use of pedagogical elements in all course assignments. In year two of implementation, we have commented on an increased focus on use of autobiographical reflection to make connections between content of the readings and challenges of the course content. The inclusion of content and tools for social change have also been used by students beyond these targeted course assignments to include other readings and shared discussions. In later portions of the course, we have viewed that teacher candidates make connections between the documentary and reading about

topics such as risk-taking behaviors, family structures and dynamics, and gender expectations. In this manner, candidates have moved beyond singular viewing and reflection to understanding of multicultural group dynamics, Hackman's fifth component.

Although we are still in the midst of teaching this course for the second time, the overall product of the shadow study in the previous semester was a success. Teacher candidates completed the needs and assets chart along with a lesson plan specific to the needs of the focus student. This summative product meets the goals of adjusting the overall assignment and developing an awareness of diversity within a student population. In the second iteration this semester, we have found the written reflections to be more powerful to the growth of the teacher candidates than the final product of the shadow study. In the examples noted previously, we communicate the success observed through the specific language use and reflection of the candidates not only in isolated reflections but also through elaboration of ongoing assignments.

Conclusion Solorzano (1997) explains how teacher educators can use content such as documentary film to combat mainstream narratives about race in America. In the conclusion, teacher educators are given four actionable exercises that promote critical race theory in teacher education programs. Solorzano charges teacher educators to design curricula with (1) examples of concepts, (2) images of media stereotypes, (3) images of professional stereotypes, and (4) examples that challenge those concepts and stereotypes (pp. 14-15). Using a documentary with real-life narratives that speak back at the narratives we are told about integration and segregation in America via stereotypical images is an example of the fourth exercise. America to Me and the curricular materials we constructed provided our teacher candidates with examples of concepts and stereotypes associated with race and racism so that our learners can name and claim the personal, professional, and social stereotypes they trust in order to break those images and revise those words based on examples from the real world rather than from the media.

During the last semester, some teacher candidates had difficulty identifying themselves as part of the narrative to disrupt thinking. Some relied on stereotypical thinking to guide reflection with little actionable change. Others had difficulty making meaning of their own upbringing and contextual role within the school system. This hesitance to disrupt one's sense of Self by problematizing power structures can be anticipated during this first semester in a graduate program when being exposed to required reflection and

deep analysis. These are some of the students, and not all. In these cases, we sometimes engaged students in deliberate and necessary discussions to recognize their role in schools and how their perspectives can further perpetuate inequity within the classroom. This work, though, is meaningful and necessary. Munro (1998) reminds us that "Self-representation occurs within and through the discourses made available to us" (p. 111). More importantly, we share the stories of power, reflection, and insight that are presented to us by the majority of students in our classes. Personal reflections that we do receive have questioned one's upbringing in and out of school, one's current role as a teacher within a system that seeks to maintain the status quo, and continued questions as to how one can disrupt the narrative while maintaining employment. Some students have communicated that they feel more empowered with language and capacity to become allies for marginalized students. Others have shared experiences of relationships with mixed-race relationships and their own children to further deepen their understanding of the role not only in this generation but the next. Some have actively shared additional resources and techniques they are personally researching to continue this personal journey. These written words urge us to continue the use of the documentary, assigned readings, and dialogue as necessary to our role as teacher educators and to best prepare these teachers as the next generation of change.

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