
Exploring Early Career Teachers and Fear

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ABSTRACT: When examining the barriers that early career elementary teachers faced when trying to teach for diversity, equity, and inclusion, an overwhelming theme arose: namely, a pervasive feeling of fear. This study illustrates the fear that slowed down or even paralyzed the work that new teachers wanted to do as they grappled with how to be the type of teacher they were trained to be in today's historical moment.

KEYWORDS: Pre-service teachers, teacher education, transformative education, fear

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Fear is defined by Merriam Webster's Online Dictionary as "an unpleasant, often strong emotion caused by anticipation or awareness of danger" (merriam-webster.com). While fear has been studied from a biological angle, it is important to also understand it from a social science angle, given the current political climate in the United States. Schaeffer (2024) discusses the burnout, stress, and anxiety that today's teachers are currently feeling. These emotions often contribute to a feeling of fear, especially given the surveillance of what is being taught in classrooms (Fadel et al., 2025). While there are biological indicators of when human beings feel fear, the reality is that the constant attacks on education and educators is manufacturing a perception of fear for far too many educators. While all humans experience fear at some point – fear of spiders, fear of driving in the snow, fear of death, etc. – not all humans experience fear as it pertains to executing their job in the way they know is best, without a mass of critique and questioning, and even sometimes personal attacks. Unfortunately, that type of fear is frequently reserved for educators, especially in this current historical moment. Instead of educators being positioned as experts in their field (Milner, 2024), they frequently observe media stories of school board meetings gone awry, teachers berated online, and a general lack of community support. It should not be a surprise then that many educators – particularly, new educators – feel an overwhelming

sense of fear as they enter the workforce and move through their first few years of teaching.

The purpose of this study is to answer the research question: What barriers exist for early career elementary teachers who are trained in and committed to teaching for diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice? While participants explicate a number of barriers that might make this work more difficult, the most overwhelming barrier cited by teachers in their first three years of teaching was a feeling of fear.

Literature Review

Two strands of literature support this study. The first strand speaks to preparing pre-service teachers in the area of teaching for diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice. The second strand of literature describes the emotion of fear, as well as the emotional labor and identity work involved in teaching.

Preparing Pre-service Teachers in the Area of Teaching for Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Justice

The job of teaching is not an easy one. Not only do teachers need to think about state standards, standardized assessments, grade-level curriculum, universal design for learning, and so much more, but they are also tasked with meeting the diverse needs of every student in front of them. These needs can be academic, behavioral, or social-emotional; but, no matter the need, they should be viewed through a lens of diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice. Before these words were turned into a hot-button acronym, they were genuine concepts that most teacher educators hoped to impart to their students. They were concepts that should be at the forefront of planning and preparation. They were concepts that were woven through the processes of choosing books for classroom libraries, of welcoming families to the classroom community, and of making sure every student felt seen, heard, welcomed, and celebrated in the classroom. Unfortunately, for pre-service teachers who are preparing to enter the field today, they do not necessarily have a lens through which to view this phrase that is not intertwined with the political battles of the current historical and political moment.

Gay and Kirkland (2010) explain that, when working with pre-service teachers, self-reflection and critical consciousness must be developed right alongside content knowledge and teaching methods. This level of self-reflection and critical consciousness is especially important as it relates to race, ethnicity, and culture because teachers must understand who they are before they enter a classroom and work with other people's children. Sara Ahmed (2018) echoes the need for this work, when she talks about guiding principles for how to teach and how to center social comprehension in the classroom. Notably, Ahmed tells her readers that they need to first do the work themselves and then continue to engage in identity work on a regular basis. She also mentions the importance of entering

with humility, questioning how we view others, and being okay with both silence and discomfort.

Focusing on identity work in order to build a classroom community steeped in critical consciousness, self-reflection, and an ethic of care (Noddings, 1984) gives an educator the solid foundation that is necessary to run a classroom that is inclusive, equitable, and steeped in social justice practices. These types of practices illustrate the work that educators engage in when they are concerned about teaching for diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice and they are the types of practices that not only support high level curriculum, but also support identity work, self-reflection, and critical consciousness. Picower's (2012) work illustrates these types of practices in more detail, as she spells out six elements that can support educators in teaching social justice curriculum. These elements include the following: self-love and knowledge; respect for others; issues of social injustice; social movements and social change; awareness raising; and social action. Picower makes very clear why these are important, writing, "In order to provide culturally relevant, social justice education within this context, it is critical to develop strategies for integrating the elements into the curriculum that teachers are required to teach" (Picower, 2012, p.13).

When thinking about Picower's six elements, it is important to think through all of them, as it is far too easy to fall into habits that take more of a "heroes and holidays" approach (Lee et al., 1998) instead of doing deep, sometimes uncomfortable, work. While taking a "heroes and holidays" approach might seem like a good starting point in multicultural education, the problem is that many teachers often stall out here. This stalling of the work is similar to Picower's (2012) first two elements, self-love and knowledge, as well as respect for others. Both of these elements should be non-negotiable in any classroom, or really any place where groups of people work together. Even with the youngest students, we educators can teach ideas of empathy; we can help them get to know themselves; and we can teach them about not making misinformed assumptions about other people. However, it is when teachers stop here that the problem arises. For example, once teachers lay that foundation of love, empathy, and respect, Picower (2012) asks them to move "from 'celebrating diversity' to an exploration of how diversity can be experienced as oppression that has differently impacted various groups of people" (p. 4). The problem with this suggestion, for so many teachers, is that both fear and discomfort are attached to it. Teachers often want their students to be active citizens, but they do not want to talk about the sometimes ugly history that is attached to issues of social injustice. If educators are not comfortable having these conversations, then it is very unlikely they will get to Picower's final three elements.

While Picower's six elements offer a specific way to be a teacher who teaches for diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice, the reality is that there is no "one way" to do this work. That said, the work must be done. For example, a transformative educator understands what Milner (2024) means when he describes how "inclusive curriculum practices have the potential to disrupt, nuance, or at best counter negative portraits and narratives of Black students" (para. 20).

A transformative educator knows that not every student has the same needs or learns in the same way, so they use equitable practices to give each student what they need. A transformative educator honors, respects, and sees all diverse identities in their classroom and ensures they are both seen and heard. There are many ways to be an educator who teaches for diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice; however, no matter the approach, it should not be seen as an option but rather, an imperative.

If the goal of teacher preparation programs is to equip pre-service teachers with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary to do difficult, transformative work, then it is key that programs explicitly model desired practices. Pre-service teachers must receive both support and instruction in how to be transformative educators who are capable of withstanding critique and pushback. More than that, as Cohen and Honigsfeld (2011) made clear, an important key to this work lies in having a supportive professional community, both while in school and later while in the classroom. It is imperative that pre- and in-service teachers have allies and advocates in the work that is necessary to run a productive classroom that is built on principles of diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice.

Fear and the Emotional Labor of Teaching

The feeling of fear is a universal one. It is both not new and not unique. In 1993, Massumi explained, “Fear is a staple of popular culture and politics. There is nothing new in that” (p. 23). Similarly, in 1986, Calwood wrote, “Fear is one of the fundamental human emotions, recognized for so long that it is recorded in ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics” (p. 92). In spite of the longevity of fear in the lives of humans, it seems that this emotion still plays a large role in the ways we see and move through the world. Fisher (1998) explained that fear often acts in a way that distorts reality and can eventually act as a barrier to dealing with real feelings in a healthy way. When fear bubbles up, human beings react in a variety of ways but not always in productive ways. DeBecker (1997) similarly describes fear as functioning in a way that ends up being more harmful than whatever potential outcome one was dreading. This is a hugely important idea, especially in the context of education. Schwartz (2025) found this feeling of fear in a study out of the Sandra Day O’Connor Institute, explaining that, out of 24 veteran teachers interviewed, “three-quarters of them said they have self-censored or avoided certain civics topics due to fear of pushback or controversy” (para. 2). What all of the authors above make clear is that fear can essentially paralyze us as individuals and educators.

In recent years, rather than feeling like trusted professionals, many teachers operate daily under a feeling of fear. Lumpkin (2023), for example, described the many fears that today’s teachers face, “from disruptions to hallway melees to pushy parents to anxieties around censorship and the increasingly political nature of their jobs, many educators say they are starting this school year on edge” (para. 3). Starting from a place of fear is problematic for a number of reasons but one of

the biggest is losing the ability to tease apart fears grounded in reality and those in the imagination. For example, Ahmed (2018) describes the connection between fear and the power of media rhetoric, describing the power of media as something that can take hold and plant a seed. What has grown from this seed is that many educators have been taught to be fearful; they simply know no other way. Ahmed explains,

What I have learned is that we cannot progress as a society if we rely on television images, single stories, and sensationalized headlines over getting proximate to the personal experiences and individual truths of human beings who don't look like us. (p. XV)

Teachers currently find themselves in a shadow of judgment and fear crafted by people who do not personally understand the work of teaching.

Counsell and Wright (2018), in their phenomenological study of standardized assessments in the state of Florida, found a feeling of fear across all of their participants, including teachers, parents, students, and guidance counselors. This feeling of fear was often focused on the potential (or perceived) repercussions of speaking out against widely-accepted practices, but it was also rooted in the welfare of young children. This is worth investigating, as this feeling of fear kept teachers entrenched in practices that they knew were not beneficial for young children. This feeling of fear was felt by teachers in Picower's (2012) work, as well. While many of her participants knew the good work they were doing focusing on elements of social justice in their classrooms, they were often fearful of continuing with their teaching practices. Picower speaks to this fear that teachers feel regarding being accused of indoctrinating their students when she writes, "Engaging in Element Three can be tricky, and it is at this stage that social justice teachers are sometimes accused of 'indoctrination' by their critics on the right" (p. 9). Accusations of indoctrination in education have picked up steam over the last few years in the United States, and these unfounded and misguided accusations are contributing to the feeling of fear that teachers are experiencing.

The feeling of fear discussed here is deeply enmeshed with the emotional labor of teaching. Brown et al. (2014) define emotional labor as "the way in which employees display or conceal their emotions to achieve workplace goals" (p. 205). This emotional labor is often quite heavy and has an impact on other areas of teaching; specifically, development of a professional identity is often influenced by the emotional labor of teaching (Brown et al., 2014; Nazari et al., 2023). This development of a professional identity begins during course work in teacher preparation programs and is often challenged once teachers enter the field (Brown et al., 2014). For example, when novice teachers graduate, they may leave the university with an ideal in mind regarding what it means or looks like to be a teacher; however, once they enter the field, the emotional rules of their particular environment may shift their once tightly-held ideals.

For some educators, "acting" becomes a part of their emotional labor and thus, professional identity. They learn to "play the role" in order to find success in their chosen profession of classroom teacher (Brown et al., 2014). This acting can be difficult, as there is a tension between the expectation to show some emotions

while teaching but also to suppress others (Schutz & Lee, 2014; Zembylas, 2003). The gray area surrounding the emotional rules of a setting add to the already-heavy emotional labor involved in teaching. Additionally, while the emotional labor and tension of which emotions are appropriate to convey pose challenges to novice teachers, so too does the fact that teaching is not just limited to content knowledge, but also include identity and the ways in which it is constructed (Nazari et al., 2023). Between fear, emotional labor, and identity construction, the first year of teaching for a novice teacher is much more uncomfortable and layered than many folks realize.

Megan Boler (1999) acknowledges this discomfort as it relates to teaching, while Zembylas and Chubbuck (2018) go a step further and make clear that this discomfort can often be attributed to “the ways in which politics and power relations figure importantly in teacher identity formation” (p. 183). Boler (1999) explains the difference between passive empathy and transformation, which makes sense when thinking about the politicized elements of teacher identity that Zembylas and Chubbuck (2018) describe. Discomfort, fear, and emotional labor are all amplified further by today’s political moment, which makes the already complex and layered emotional landscape of teaching that much more difficult, with the shadow of being accused of bringing politics into the classroom even darker.

The truth is that all teaching is political (Freire, 2000), not just teaching that comes from a social justice perspective. Picower (2012) reminds us that, “Good teaching, regardless of its ideological lens, should provide students with multiple perspectives about historical events, allowing them to draw their own conclusions based on evidence” (p. 9). Providing multiple perspectives, highlighting diverse voices, and ensuring representation are all practices that underscore good teaching and that have nothing to do with bringing politics into the classroom. Unfortunately, many teachers today fear accusations that they are doing just that. While many teacher educators understand that the normative discourses we embed in teacher preparation are not always aligned with the current practical trends in PK12 spaces, the desire to make necessary change in education so that PK12 spaces become spaces that serve all students continues to drive the work in university classrooms.

Theoretical Framework

Both critical pedagogy and critical media literacy help frame this research study. Critical pedagogy because we must always examine power structures and inequities in education and critical media literacy because so much of what we know and what we think we know is formed by media sources. Allowing media to inform our understanding of the world is potentially dangerous when we don’t take the time to critically question the messaging of media sources.

Critical Pedagogy

Critical pedagogy is always working toward change – both individual and collective. This is something that, ideally, all educators at all levels are working toward: Change that has a positive impact on both the individual as well as the democratic society as a whole. While the phrase ‘critical pedagogy’ was first used in 1983 by Giroux, it is a concept that grew out of a broad history and legacy of progressive educational movements, all in the interest of real social change. This kind of social change is what many current teacher preparation programs are aiming for, even when they are often up against constant discourse regarding the purpose of education and formal schooling all together. Unfortunately, the way that Darder et al. (2009) define critical pedagogy is often at odds with today’s schools. They write, “Critical pedagogy is fundamentally committed to the development and enactment of a culture of schooling that supports the empowerment of culturally marginalized and economically disenfranchised students” (p. 9). While those of us who consider ourselves critical pedagogues aim for the type of schooling described in these words, the reality is that what we see in classrooms often does not align with these views.

When thinking about critical pedagogy and today’s teachers and students, it is important to consider school as a cultural form. In the same way that forms of media like television, social media, books, and movies are cultural forms, so too are schools. With this in mind, it is important to think about the messaging that emerges in schools from teachers, students, and curricula. This messaging is often centered in the dominant discourse, which McLaren (2009) defined as “produced by the dominant culture as ‘regimes of truth’, as general economies of power/knowledge, or as multiple forms of constraint” (p. 73). Knowing this, if we do not have educators in place who are willing to take a critical stance, to question the dominant narrative, we will be left with power structures that continue to perpetuate the status quo, leaving schooling, students, and society unchanged. Unfortunately, due to a level of fear that is being amplified by political commentary, social media, and traditional media, the willingness to be a critical educator is rapidly declining.

Critical Media Literacy

Gennaro et al. (2024) describe the objective of critical media literacy as one that, “explores human interaction with media objects, texts, and structures by critically questioning representation, ideology, and economic issues within the media that explicitly and implicitly impact human social relations” (p. 1). This element of critical questioning is often lost – both on children and adults – and results in a blind acceptance of the message consumed. However, rather than blind consumption of various forms of media, a healthier approach would be to use the six themes of critical media literacy that Kellner and Share (2019) describe to help frame their interactions with different forms of media. These areas include

social constructivism, language, audience, representation, production and institutions, and social and environmental justice. By centering these six themes when consuming media, individuals have the power to question both their roles and the roles of others, while actively working to make sense of the texts swirling around them.

The issues of critical questioning and power are directly related to censorship and political surveillance in schools. While not new, the past few years have seen state legislators in the United States working to enact higher levels of educational censorship (Mitchell, 2025). Executive orders have been passed that work to restrict what teachers can and cannot say in the classroom, what books can be on their shelves, and what figures can be included in curriculum (Mitchell, 2025). Feathers and Mehrotra (2023) describe the way students are feeling about this censorship, with one student, when describing how they could not search for information regarding same sex marriage, saying, "It's just like another form of oppression" (para. 2). Not only are educators frustrated with increased levels of surveillance and censorship, but students are, too. How can educators engage in critical thought and questioning when we cannot even draw in a variety of texts and resources?

We educators must think critically about all of our interactions with media and messaging, especially since we are inundated by multiple forms of media all day long, which often contribute to our personal feelings and views on any given topic. Without engaging in critical media literacy, we run the risk of falling prey to tactics used in the media that aim to increase fear of diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice practices. For example, when a news program runs highlights of a school board meeting gone awry, or a TikTok account keeps popping up that speaks to book bans in schools, the feeling of fear might skyrocket for a new teacher in the classroom. Instead of seeking out a new source, questioning whose voices are present and whose are absent, or thinking about the reason these media messages exist, educators may retreat, get scared, or dig into their already deeply held beliefs. Without engaging in critical media literacy, we become less of an informed citizenry and more of a mass of folks beholden to our echo chambers.

Methods

This study utilized a qualitative case study design in order to understand the barriers that exist for teachers in regard to teaching for diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice. Specifically, this case study focused on teachers who are in their first three years of teaching and were trained in a program with an explicit focus in this area. Case study design was chosen as it allows for in-depth exploration from multiple sources and the ability to highlight the voices of new teachers.

Participants and Context

The participants for this research study were all graduates of an undergraduate program that focused on gaining initial teacher certification in the area of Elementary Education. This program was a traditional, 4-year program at a mid-sized university in the United States Midwest. There are currently approximately 16,000 students enrolled at the university, most of whom commute to campus, with a much smaller population who live in dorms on campus. Each of the participants was officially an in-service teacher when the research study began, with many in their first year, but a few in their second or third year of teaching. Additionally, each of the participants had previously taken a class called *Managing the Classroom for U.S. Cultural Diversity*, a class that I, the author, designed and taught. Of the 14 participants, 13 identified as female, 11 identified as white, one identified as Chaldean/Middle Eastern, one as Hispanic/Latina, and one as Asian. Finally, their ages ranged from 22 to 28.

Data Sources and Analysis

It is important to note that the data used in this manuscript was from year one of a three-year study. The first round of data collection for this qualitative case study included 14 participants but, by the third round, conducted in the third year of the study, the number of participants had dwindled to just four. While the sample size for this study is small ($n=14$), it fits the requirements for qualitative research. Vasileiou et al. (2018) suggest that researchers focus on sample composition and being intentional with sampling, rather than being overly concerned with number of participants. Additionally, these authors make clear that purposive sampling (just 6 or 7 participants) often provides rich information, which is the purpose of qualitative research. Given that the first year of data is used in this analysis, there were 14 participants in the presented study.

In the first year of data collection, data was gathered in a variety of ways. The first step of the study included an online survey which was emailed to participants after they agreed to participate. The survey included questions related to student beliefs and feelings regarding teaching for diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice, in addition to asking for their name, age, race, ethnicity, current school, current school district, and current grade level. The second step in data collection was a focus group meeting that was held in-person (with one person joining virtually) and composed of semi-structured interview questions (Yin, 2003). When the focus group was over, participants filled out an exit slip which asked for any final thoughts and if they would like to be included in a follow-up conversation. Finally, I conducted one-on-one interviews with the seven participants who were willing and able to talk further, in addition to emailing all participants a few questions that we did not get to during the focus group discussion. These multiple steps allowed for the exploration of the issue from multiple angles.

After the initial survey was sent out to participants, the responses were analyzed using Yin's (2003) explanatory case study design as a way to examine new teachers' experiences as they relate to teaching for diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice. First-, second-, and third-year teachers who graduated from my university made up the case. The focus group and individual interviews (seven total) were recorded and transcribed, and then I utilized open, axial, and selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) to develop categories and then extract themes as a way of answering the research question. Finally, Carspecken's (1996) method of open coding was used in order to make sense of the barriers, needs, and feelings that early-career teachers are experiencing in regard to teaching for diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice in their classrooms. Each data source was first analyzed independently in order to draw out codes and then all of the sources were looked at together in order to determine themes. Once the codes were refined and the data was member-checked (Creswell & Poth, 2018) (in this situation, I was only able to check the data with participants who responded back to me [n=7]), I again compared the surveys, interviews, and focus groups for overlap and divergence of ideas. At that point, the codes and themes were finalized.

As a former junior high teacher who worked predominantly with historically marginalized students and their families, as well as a current teacher educator who focuses on preparing pre-service teachers to be transformative educators, I approached the data with a sense of hopefulness. Because I knew all of the participants before they were practicing teachers, I assumed I had a sense of where their beliefs and feelings were situated as they related to teaching for diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice. That said, because of our pre-existing relationship and my willingness to always be truthful and honest with them about my own missteps, my own work reflecting on biases, and my own struggles as a new teacher, I believe that the participants were honest and vulnerable throughout each stage of data collection.

Findings

The findings illustrate a pervasive feeling of fear as it relates to teaching in a way that centers diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice. This fear is exacerbated by stories in the media, as well as colleagues who offer cautionary comments.

The Role of the Media and the Community

The power of the media and the large role that it plays in daily life is undeniable. While this is not new, it is incredibly problematic when media messaging is working to instill fear in the hearts of educators. Marshall and Sensoy (2016) made clear the strength that different forms of media possess when they wrote, "The power of popular culture and media in our lives is as indisputable and

diffuse as it is difficult to pin down” (p. 1). They go on to ask how seriously we should take social media and if we should question our favorite television shows, but, in this particular moment, whether questioned or not, it appears that media and the fear mongering inherent in it are being taken very seriously by early-career teachers.

When working with research participants, media and media messaging is a topic that came up frequently, even though that was not the focus of this particular research project. Often, when media entered the conversation, it had to do with ideas that families developed from news reports. For example, when talking about her first few weeks at a new school, one participant mentioned a father who immediately brought up critical race theory upon their first meeting at a school open house. “Last year I had a parent who was very, very concerned about critical race theory. Is that what it’s called? I mean, like, he must have asked five or six times if it was being taught last year.” Clearly, this new teacher wasn’t even familiar with critical race theory, let alone teaching it in her 5th grade classroom. But that did not stop her from feeling scared. She later told the group,

...the parents are very outspoken politically here, and so it makes me nervous that if I, like, said something the wrong way, or even if it was construed the wrong way by a student, and they went home and said, like, Mrs. D said... that they could come after me.

This participant was a strong educator, well-versed in both content knowledge and teaching dispositions, but she was held captive by fear, based on the ways in which families and community members brought their misunderstandings into her classroom.

Another research participant, Ms. S, was even more explicit, mentioning to the group that the media instills fear in people regarding what is happening in schools. This has made her fearful of teaching certain topics, even in an age-appropriate way. She shared her frustration in regard to teaching Social Studies, explaining that she and a colleague, Mrs. G., had left the university so excited to take up the methods and the big ideas that their instructors had taught them, but they quickly realized, not only how little Social Studies is being taught in schools, but also how closely topics are monitored. Ms. S. shared, “I was so fired up after my History methods, Social Studies methods course, but then you just, it just, when you get thrown into it, things fall to the back burner.” Not only was Ms. S. aware of how media was working to instill fear in folks, but she also realized that her passion to teach in the way she was trained at the university did not align with her current school district’s priorities.

Mrs. G. similarly shared,

Um, my very first year, I wanted to do, like, a mini-unit on, um, Black History Month. And I had another teacher say, like, ‘Be careful, you don’t wanna end up on the news.’ And I was, like, ‘This is my first job. Like, I don’t want to get fired. I - I wanna move outta my parents’ house.’ So I was, like, not doing it. And so, like, it’s so hard because I wanna do all these things, but at the same time, it’s like, where - where do I pick? Like, I want, I wanna

have kids, I wanna have a family, I wanna have my own life. But I'm, so, it's like, I'm either doing what I want and the service to other people, or I'm doing what they - what they need, at a disservice to myself. So it's, like, as much as I would love to do this, at what point do I put myself before them without feeling guilty?

What started as a desire to teach a mini-unit on Black History Month turned into a rapid downward spiral based on fear. The worst part here is that Mrs. G. is not the only participant who shared frustration over not feeling safe enough to celebrate Black History Month. When describing her experiences when trying to plan inclusive curriculum, Mrs. D stated, "So you're feeling paralyzed by the community." Clearly, the media and other social messaging was playing a large role in the school, the district, and the community and it struck fear in the teachers.

The influence of community was felt by other participants as well. For example, Ms. V. was very clear in how she tried to be vocal in team meetings about suggestions she had to enact more equitable practices or draw in more inclusive curriculum, but she often felt ignored or brushed aside. For her, the community of colleagues was just as big of a barrier as the community of students and families. She explained, "I believe the conservative nature of [redacted] made it difficult to have conversations with staff about specific things concerning students or education." For as much as she tried, the work stayed difficult. Ms. V. went on to explain how this impacted her practices, "I don't know how to teach diversity and inclusion where the population is conservative and not receptive to learning new things." For this participant, the community had a deep impact on her desire and ability to teach for diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice.

Fear of Losing a Job or Losing a Good Reputation

Being new to any job comes with a bit of trepidation. Between the newness of the people, the work environment, and the unspoken rules, there is a great deal of emotion that comes with starting a new job, and this is true for teachers as well. While it is understandable that new teachers want to assimilate to a new workspace, assimilation should not impact the potential learning or experiences of students in the classroom. Many participants spoke to the push and pull between wanting to be the kind of teacher they were trained to be and wanting to simply fit in or keep their job. For example, Mrs. G explained,

And I will just be, like, be, like, 'Oh.' Because I don't wanna make people uncomfortable, so it's hard for me cause, like, I will, like, let things go and sometimes, that I will look back on and be, like, I shouldn't have let that go. Um, especially when I'm in a situation where I am right now, where, like, I'm new and I don't necessarily feel, like, I want, I still wanna, like, make a good impression on people and I don't want people to, like, pin me as, like, [having] some crazy liberal agenda.

One can hear the discomfort as she is thinking out loud, describing the desire to protect her image at the expense of teaching the content she knows is important to teach. For this participant, not only was the fear about losing her job, but it was also about losing a potentially positive image.

Another participant, Ms. R., who had already expressed discomfort at discussing anything race-related in her classroom, explained,

I mean, I'm gonna say it's scary for me, just because, if I say one wrong thing, I, you know, you never know with the way people are. They can twist it and stuff like that. So I really am careful with what I say. Um, a lot of the times, if it isn't something that I'm comfortable talking about, I will say, you know, maybe ask mom or dad at home, especially with that gender and stuff like that.

This new teacher, who was trained in a program that centered issues of social justice and equity, was so fearful of her image being distorted that she steered clear of any potentially difficult conversations in the classroom, even when students asked her questions directly. Not only were her students asking her directly, but hers was a very diverse classroom, a space where supportive, honest conversation could have done so much good. Instead, students' curiosity was shut down out of fear of a tarnished image and an inability to work through discomfort.

The issue of personal image versus professional image arose throughout the research. For example, Mrs. G. shared a story about her father telling her to lie if someone asked her what church she attended. She was not religious, but many families in her school district were. Her father wanted her to be able to have a public image that aligned with what he saw as the district's values, as a way to protect herself. Mrs. G. also described the tension she felt between her own morals and how she might be perceived by the families of her students.

But like, I feel like as time goes on, the harder it is to separate your morals and your values as a human being, and what kind of characteristics you believe in instilling in the people that you're teaching, it becomes harder and harder to differentiate that from making a political statement.

For Mrs. G., this tension was an ongoing struggle for her and one that impacted how and what she taught, as well as how she felt in her classroom.

In a classroom, the space should feel safe, should feel like a community, should feel like a place where everyone is seen, heard, and represented. Instead, these two participants described their practices and their classrooms as steering clear of anything that could be construed as controversial, which included issues of race and gender. Rather than lean into the needs of their students and help contribute to a more just society, fear of losing a good reputation led them to ignore so much of their teacher training.

Discussion

Being a teacher – especially a new teacher – is hard enough without constantly operating from a place of fear. Fear can wear a person down and, in the instance of educators, can quickly cause burnout and force them out of the profession. Given how deeply these feelings of fear are impacting the instructional and curricular choices of the early-career teachers involved in this study, it is important to discuss and think critically about the roots of their fear. Additionally, it is important to question whether their feelings of fear are rooted in actual situations that they have experienced or, instead, if their feelings of fear act as a way to defend not leaning into instructional practices that they know should be happening in their classrooms. Do they have reasons to be fearful? Or are they instead using fear as an excuse to stay comfortable?

In a newspaper article examining high-profile dismissals of teachers and challenges to books in school districts in the US state where the study was conducted, Hermani (May, 2023) wrote, “The state reported 18 book bans across five school districts; by comparison, the state with the most bans – Texas, followed by Florida – reported 438 bans across seven districts and 357 bans across 13 districts, respectively” (para. 10). Additionally, outside of a few high profile instances of dismissal, none of which had anything to do with teaching inclusive curriculum, there are no recorded firings of teachers across this state for reasons connected to diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice. With all of this in mind, the following questions arose: Is the fear these early-career teachers are feeling perfectly normal or natural self-preservation? Or is the ability to hide behind fear a way to stay comfortable and not have to lean into a pedagogy of discomfort (Boler, 1999)?

I will attempt to answer each of these questions one-by-one. First, when thinking about whether or not the fear these early-career teachers feel is perfectly normal and simply an act of self-preservation, there is no one, clear answer. When looking at the data, not all participants expressed fear; however, enough participants mentioned it to make it a finding worth discussing. When looking at the participants who did mention fear, one cited fear of parents, which many new teachers often feel. Another mentioned fear arising from interactions with her departmental peers, as she was in a very conservative district. As a new teacher, very few teachers want to feel alienated by their peers. Yet, another participant shared a similar sentiment; she did not want to “make waves” as a new teacher, so she stayed silent about things that are important to her. When looking at the data in this way, it appears that these feelings of fear may be coming from a place of self-preservation. As new, young, professionals just starting out, there is already the emotional labor that comes with the job and very few new teachers were willing to move beyond their feelings of fear because they did not want to draw attention to themselves in their first teaching job.

When discussing the data, it is important to think about it through the lens of critical pedagogy. A key goal of critical pedagogy is seeking positive change,

not just for individuals, but for a democratic society. This idea of change for the greater good maps onto the complex reflective questions that some of the participants were asking; namely, how do they balance their own values with what they perceive as risk? For example, three participants shared responses that spoke to the tension involved in making transformative instructional decisions. They wanted to engage in transformative practices that they learned at the university, but they also wanted to protect themselves and their jobs. These concerns ranged from fear of being reported by parents for misspeaking, to fear of honestly answering students' questions, to fear of planning the type of curriculum they wanted to teach. Each of the participants recognized, on some level, that they were backing away from what they believed out of fear of potential repercussion.

There are no neat and easy answers to these questions. On one hand, a critical pedagogue would make clear that the commitment to empowering historically marginalized and disenfranchised students should come before anything else. On the other hand, these are teachers who were in the first year of their careers, making decisions that were steeped in feedback from veteran teachers, from media messaging, and often from school systems that did not support the type of teaching in which they wanted to engage. These new educators knew enough to question the status quo, but they were also new enough to feel uncomfortable doing so. The novice teachers in this study illustrate the tension that exists between teacher preparation programs and K12 classrooms. The practices of transformative teaching that are modeled in university classrooms are often not aligned with what new teachers witness in their buildings.

Discomfort and fear go hand in hand. That is true in all walks of life and in many different situations, from personal to professional. However, when a group of educators who claim to have personal commitments to the work of diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice and who were trained in a program grounded in these ideals fail to do this work, blaming it on fear, where does that leave the future of transformative education? Where does that leave students who both need and want an inclusive curriculum? Where does that leave students who very rarely ever see themselves represented in positive ways in schools? Where does that leave the teaching of truthful history? These questions all speak to an even bigger issue; namely, why do teacher preparation programs continue to focus on transformative education when the goals are so difficult to realize? I cannot speak for all teacher educators but, for me, I continue to hope for real, lasting change in classrooms at all levels. This hope is what keeps the pursuit of transformative education alive in my teaching.

Implications

Picower (2012) tells her readers that, when classrooms and teachers “are under attack by political and economic forces” (p. 3), it is the students who suffer, as their opportunities become limited. When teachers live in and act from a place of fear, not only is their potential as educators stifled, but the potential of their

students is squandered as well. We are living in a time where understanding history and the roots of different -isms is critically important, and if we let fear drive the ways in which we teach (or choose not to teach) these issues, then we are not living up to our responsibilities as educators. Based on the results of this study, it appears as though fear is limiting both students and teachers, which is unacceptable. We must find a way, as researchers, educators, and the public writ large, to support the work of transformative educators and to ensure that children in public school classrooms everywhere have access to people and spaces that value them, that ensure they are seen, and that model critical, thoughtful approaches to curriculum and community-building. We cannot let the feeling of fear drive the decisions of educators any longer.

With that said, it is not fair to rely on novice teachers to do this work alone. If they are feeling fearful, then they need ongoing support and education. This study initially derived from my feeling that our new graduates needed ongoing professional learning in order to retain the commitments with which they leave the university. After completing this study, I believe that my initial feeling was correct; namely, novice teachers could benefit from a program that “bridges” the gap between their university practice and their new professional practice. If they can engage in ongoing learning with other new professionals who are encountering the same issues, as well as seasoned educators who can guide them, they may begin to feel more confident in their beliefs and less stifled by fear. Additionally, in order to make ongoing commitments to practices that center diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice in the classroom even stronger, partnerships and shared learning between the university and PK12 districts could prove quite helpful. By being in community with one another, we could work toward shared understandings, shared language, and shared beliefs about the work of teaching, even when teaching is under attack. This kind of ongoing work and shared learning might make the difference between lasting change in education and perpetuating the status quo.

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