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Lynnette Mawhinney, Tabitha Dell'Angelo, Mariah Yessenia Alston, Megan Gerity, Melissa Katz & Angelica Vanderbilt

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## Hope and struggle to decolonize the preservice teachers' mind: An urban teacher education program history

Lynnette Mawhinney , Tabitha Dell'Angelo, Mariah Yessenia Alston, Megan Gerity, Melissa Katz, and Angelica Vanderbilt

This academic year marks the tenth anniversary of the establishment of a five-year (bachelors and masters) urban teacher education program at a small, state institution in the northeast. This program was founded on the principles of social justice and decolonization *with* and *through* critical scholars such as Freire (1996), Gorski and Swalwell (2015), Delpit (2006), Ladson-Billings (2014), and Paris (2012) to name a few. We built this program with an unapologetic vision of building “social justice warriors” for education, but it was not lost on us that this sometimes seemed like a lofty goal within a Predominantly and Historically White Settler Institution, otherwise known as PWIs.

This paper focuses on addressing the development of the urban teacher education program and some of the roadblocks and challenges of trying to decolonize the mind at a PWI. Lynnette and Tabitha, the lead developers and instructors of the program, discuss the advent of the program and the struggles to support and sustain a justice-oriented program within this space, while Mariah, Megan, Melissa (Mel), and Angelica are alumni spanning the last ten years and unpack their experiences of decolonization within the conceptual model of the program. We acknowledge that there are many voices left out of this conversation. However, we feel that the discussion presented is a fair representation of opinions, dispositions, and lessons learned, as we approach this “warts and all” conversation with a critical lens on the program.

### The institution and program context

Predominantly and Historically White Settler Institutions, otherwise known as PWIs, are often criticized for their colonizing habits and ways (Edwards, 2010), and our institution is no exception. Founded in 1855 as a normal school in the heart of a small, East Coast Black city, the institution quickly moved out of the city into a White, small suburban town. More than 100

years later, the institution would controversially change its name, essentially removing any remnants of the city or any association with Black bodies. Yet we, Lynnette and Tabitha, believed that there was a great need to build an urban education program with a justice-oriented framework to decolonize the minds of our overwhelmingly White, female, monolingual preservice teacher population (Sleeter, 2001).

Tabitha was hired in 2005. Prior to that, the sitting department chair had a dream of an urban education program. She was close to retirement and wanted to see this happen before she left. Tabitha was hired with that in mind and soon after she arrived on campus, she was put on a departmental urban education committee. That committee was charged with drafting a scope and sequence of curriculum that could be an “urban option.” The chair worried that our predominantly White, middle class students would not be drawn to this program. As a way to both attract students and provide them with better credentials, we extended the program to five years. The fifth year would be primarily dedicated to graduate coursework that lead to multiple certifications (either early or elementary *and* ESL) along with a masters degree. The program was officially approved by the State in 2009. We had three graduates of the pilot program in May 2010. Our state was thrilled to have a program focused on preparing teachers for some of their most high needs and difficult to staff schools. We were the first of its kind here.

Lynnette was hired in 2010 at the official start of the program. The dean at the time hired her with the specific intention of growing the program alongside Tabitha. Lynnette created two of the four new courses added to the growing program. Ultimately, this particular five-year (articulated master’s) urban education program is designed for preservice teachers who have a particular interest in learning about and teaching in the dynamic environment of urban schools. The goals of the program are to:

- see diversity of language and culture through an asset-based lens;
- support high quality and effective teaching through providing a strong background in content that capitalizes on the richness of urban experiences; and
- encourage interdisciplinary work to understand the complex systemic issues surrounding all twenty-first century schools.

The application of these goals, and ultimately, the foundational approach to implementing a social justice program was iterative. Eventually, our conceptual framework was built on a cyclical model, or also referred as the learning cycle in teacher education (Kerr & Andreotti, 2018), that social justice and decolonization work happens continually. Decolonization, in

reference to our program, is simply based on Halagao's (2010, p. 497) definition, "decolonization is the process of humanizing the dehumanized" and to deconstruct Westernized practices (Mahabeer, 2018).

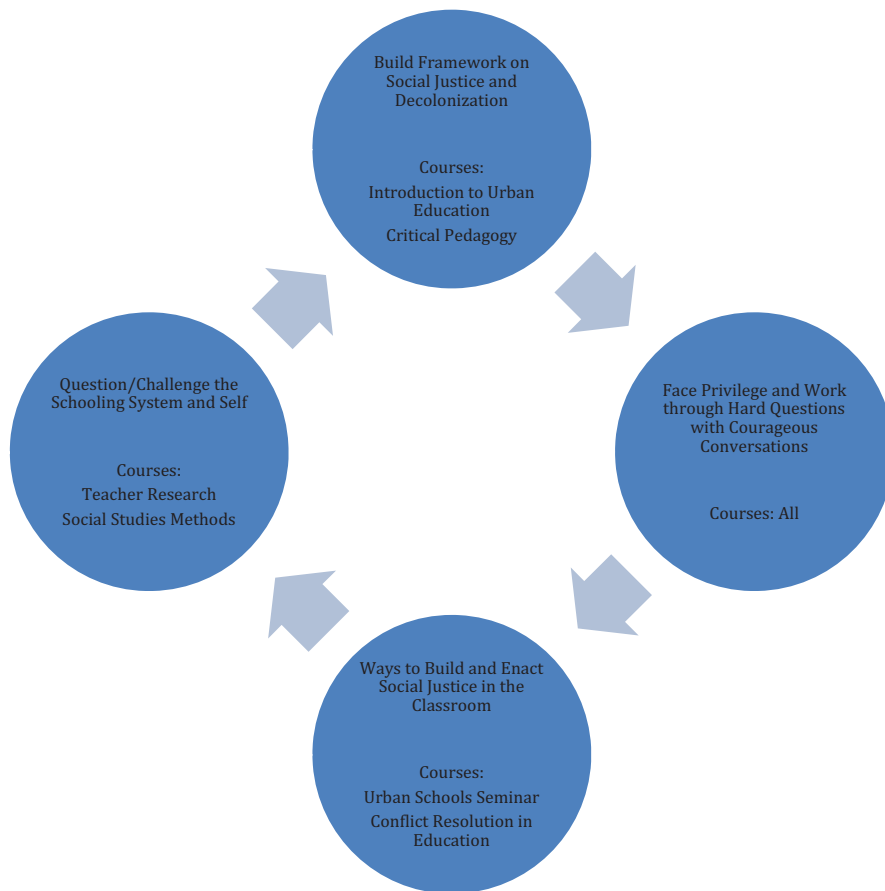
Our program was built on four conceptual ideas. First, that the program needs to provide a space for students to build a framework of foundational knowledge in, around, and about social justice and decolonization, as "teaching for social justice and equity must be an intentional decision, grounded in critical pedagogies and reflective practices" (Andrews, Moulton, & Hughes, 2018, p. 6). Second, students need to face their own privilege and work through the hard and often taboo questions (e.g. race, SES, politics, gender, etc.) with courageous conversations (Singleton & Hays, 2008). Ultimately, "teaching for social justice and equity requires conversations that can be uncomfortable" (Andrews et al., 2018, p. 6) and filled with "moments of crisis" (Kumashiro, 2015). Third, students need active pathways to build and enact social justice in the classroom, as teaching for social justice "must be committed to action" (Andrews et al., 2018, p. 6). Lastly, students need to question and/or challenge the schooling system and themselves. This inquiry stance was intended to permeate the entirety of their program. Each of these four elements builds on one another and loops back around to continue the cycle again. In essence, we embrace Hoyle's (2017) idea that "social justice teacher education must prepare teachers to understand what social justice would look like, the product... and social justice teacher education must examine the impact of power, privilege, and social oppression" (p. 3).

Various courses throughout the development of the program have been created and implemented to feed into the concepts that ground the program. For instance, the traditional, more positivistic model of research is a colonizing construct (Pine, 2009). In an attempt to decolonize minds through decolonizing ideas about research methodologies, we developed and included a course on teacher research. This has been an ever-changing process with some courses not working and needing to be dropped and other courses needing to be developed. [Figure 1](#) highlights some of the courses, to date, and how they fit within the conceptual model.

Now, after ten years, the program has expanded to include grades 7 through 12 and has 136 students representing early childhood, elementary, and secondary specializations of the urban education program. The four alumni authors of this conversational text were all elementary education specialists in the program (see [Table 1](#)).

### **Conversational approach**

Although this is not empirical research, we still wanted to capture our conversation through the written word. Since we are spread throughout the



**Figure 1.** Conceptual model for urban education social justice program.

**Table 1.** Alumni author demographics.

Former student	Racial identification	Undergraduate program graduation	Graduate program graduation	Current role
Mariah	Black/Puerto Rican	2013	2014	Masters student
Megan	White	2012	2013	Director of Curriculum and Instruction
Melissa (Mel)	White	2017	2018	Multiple Grades ESL Teacher
Angelica	White	2017	2019	6th Grade Teacher

United States, we used a writing process to capture our thoughts. Lynnette and Tabitha generated a series of prompts to guide capture the conversation. Individually, each author responded to prompts to start the conversation. The alumni (Mariah, Megan, Mel, and Angelica) responded to the following 9 prompts: (1) How did you hear about the Urban Education program?; (2) Did you know about the social justice framework prior to

coming into the program? Was that an appeal for the program? If you didn't know social justice was part of the program, how when did you find out about it?; (3) What is your first memory of encountering social justice in the Urban Education program?; (4) What are some aspects of deficit thinking you might have had going into the program? How were those challenged or changed due to the program, if at all?; (5) What class(es) in the program where the greatest benefit to becoming a social justice teacher, if at all?; (6) Are there specific books, articles, discussions, or field experiences that brought you to a greater understanding of what it means to be a justice-oriented teacher? Explain why or why not; (7) What are some of the strengths to the program/curriculum and the social justice/decolonization platform?; (8) What are some of the weaknesses/challenges to the program/curriculum and the social justice/decolonization platform?; and (9) Now that you are teaching/student teaching, do you consider yourself a justice-oriented teacher? Why or why not? What elements of your practice reflect this or not?

The program coordinators, Lynnette and Tabitha, had a different series of questions to respond to. Collectively, each of the program coordinators responded to the following 6 prompts: (1) What was your strategy for building social justice into the program?; (2) What were some of the roadblocks along the way to building a program with a social justice/decolonization model?; (3) What is the strongest memory of a preservice teacher(s) "getting it?"; (4) What are you most proud of about the social justice framework of the program?; (5) What have you learned along the way about your teaching of social justice?; and (6) What have you learned along the way about yourself? Then, each had three individual questions to respond to. Lynnette's prompts were: (1) How did you become involved in the program?; (2) What was the appeal to join in the effort to help build the program?; and (3) What were your thoughts as a WOC entering into the program and space? Tabitha's prompts were: (1) How did the program come to be?; (2) Why did the program choose to focus on social justice?; and (3) What did you learn from the pilot cohort?

There were some dialogue conversations to help us each think through the prompts with some of the authors. Lynnette and Tabitha had a number of phone conversations reflecting back on and discussing our truths. Mel visited Lynnette and had some conversation over lunch. These verbal dialoging sessions were used to help process our thoughts, but we each individually completed the written prompts. The written prompts were then collected, and we read everyone's responses on our own. Lastly, we collectively organized the responses into themes, which helped to frame out the conversation below.

## Hope in decolonizing the mind

### *Cohort structure and representation*

We, Lynnette and Tabitha, developed a cohort model of the program for the students. The purpose was to build a “family-like” model and environment where everyone can support each other. We felt this to be important, especially since most of the institution did not share the same social justice framework. Moreover, the urban education program had more students of Color than any other program in the School of Education. We hoped the cohort model would provide more comfort and less tokenism in courses, especially when the PWI was having a number of racial incidences.

There is power in solidarity, and since their first freshmen orientation, we reinforced an “academic sibling” model (Dell’Angelo, 2016). The family structure even morphed over the years where some students started calling Lynnette Mama–Whinney, which eventually morphed into Mama-Winns. We talked about our students with pride, but we also realized among faculty and students, an “us vs them” mentality was brewing between the urbans and the traditional four-year students.

### *Alumni thoughts*

Mel explains: One of the greatest strengths of the program itself is the cohort structure, which became especially evident for me toward the end of our undergraduate studies and through the graduate studies portion of the program. I developed such deep and accountable relationships with the people in the program that I still cherish to this day. I believe that the cohort structure actually became part of the curriculum and justice/decolonization process because I experienced what it felt looked to be in such sustained proximity, both in thought and physically, to educators who are both like-minded and necessarily different, in that I was challenged in ways that caused personal growth. I was able to enjoy the benefits of being so close to other educators in the program—studying together, researching together, growing together, and developing relationships outside of education. At the same time, I was lucky to experience the necessary troubles of being so close to justice-minded educators—working through personal discomfort, having my thoughts and worldview challenged, being pushed in my theory, pedagogy, and the relationship between the two, and struggling in shared community with my/our complicity in a system, especially as a White educator. Without such deep, accountable relationships, I often wonder if the level of interrogation of ourselves and U.S.-based schooling systems would have been possible.

Angelica explains: I love that our program is dominated by female professors of Color throughout the five years because that implicitly speaks to the program's commitment to intersectionality, representation in educational spaces, and involving professors who are actively doing research in the field. These teachers each have constructed incredible syllabi which I believe to be the bedrock of my education and my teaching philosophies to this day.

### ***Courageous conversations***

The first course, where most of the students meet their cohort members, is the Introduction to Urban Education course. This is the foundation-building course on justice-oriented approaches to looking at education and the world writ large. In order to provide a framework, the courses use Singleton's (2014) work on "courageous conversations." This particular phrase often becomes part of the lexicon of the students throughout the 5-years. Yet, these courageous conversations were not always welcomed in other classes. In order to protect the integrity and consistency of this course, it has only been taught by either Lynnette or Tabitha.

### ***Alumni thoughts***

Megan states: My first memory of social justice in the Urban Education program was discussing microaggressions in the Introduction to Urban Education course. This topic really stuck with me, even to this day, for a number of reasons. I began to realize that those little things that people would say, that led me to feel uncomfortable or even unsafe, were actually microaggressions all along. I then began to reflect on the impact of other common place actions and words and how they create hostile environments and make others feel unsafe as well. Becoming more aware of racial, homophobic, classist, and sexist microaggressions helped me to better inform others on the negative impact of their actions and words. It also encouraged me to be more aware of my own actions, thoughts, and words as well.

I think the strengths of the program are just starting the dialogue of social-justice/decolonization. Open and honest dialogue is essential for creating change and making people more aware of systems of oppression and privilege. Not only that, but by having these conversations teachers are informed of their responsibility to educate and create safe environments for *all* students within the school and classroom.

Angelica continues: Another blessing of the program was its size, as it allowed me to know the professors well enough to actually want to engage in courageous conversations. Its size was comparable based on the number



of students in our cohort; we became close-knit and more vulnerable in our discussions of race in the classroom, and I am so grateful the program brought me to these other future educators. These educators have helped to push me away from the bias thinking of my past, and continually push me as a battle the systemic images the media has beaten in me my entire life. I know that the program gave me a sounding board, through this close-knit staff and students' relationship, and I think that is something to be forever coveted by the department.

I entered the Urban Education program at a time when students of Color at any and all levels of education were especially vulnerable. Throughout 2016, Donald Trump's rallies swept the United States, and so with it brought overtly racist rhetoric at the forefront of everyday conversation. Trump's words attack(ed) all vulnerable populations. While my teachers in the past would usually shy away from politics talk, in Intro to Urban Education, involving yourself in what Dr. Mawhinney called "courageous conversations" was not only encouraged but modeled. Dr. Mawhinney openly spoke to how challenging it can be to engage in talks about race; after validating the challenge and the awkwardness, she encouraged us as students to be open and ask about what we did not know or understand, before openly judging. It was important that engaging in courageous conversations in the class came after we unpacked the many meanings of the term "urban" and read books that exposed how systemically students of Color are treated as criminals in the school systems. These discussions then helped me to better engage in the courageous conversations as a White person, to ask instead of assume, to read instead of lead with my own festering biases, and to speak about pertinent controversies surrounding Trump's wall and words in a space that invited all voices. These conversations were not debates; she instead created a classroom culture that did not hinge on ultimately agreeing but hearing each other's words through active listening instead of *avoiding the conversation*. To me, Dr. Mawhinney's push for courageous conversations rather than avoiding current issues of race facing our nation and students, modeled first-hand how simple it is to veer away from the color blind ideology that had become all too familiar to my previous education: talk about what is uncomfortable with open arms and questions, without hostility and with sensitivity to systemic institutions, without angry confrontation. This kind of social-justice modeling is the kind of have strived to have in my own classrooms across my student teaching experiences.

Mariah explains: I recall sitting at a table as a class and just being amazed at what things needed explicit explanation. Certain experiences of Black and Brown children and how important they are to acknowledge totally went over some of my classmates' heads.

### ***Enrichment programing***

We often worked on creating optional enrichment opportunities for students. Tabitha during one semester conducted the Introduction to Urban Education course in a prison. The course had both students from the institution learning alongside the incarcerated men. In addition, Lynnette created a long-standing course called Urban Schools Seminar (also known as the Philadelphia Urban Seminar). This was a two-week summer course that was part of a long-standing consortium of 16 universities. All the participants lived in Philadelphia for the two weeks, completed 80 hours of classroom experience, and conducted a service-learning project in the community.

Both courses were open to students outside of the urban education program. In fact, the non-urban students outnumbered the urban students in these courses. However, given the population of even our urban education students, this was a valuable experience that perhaps had added benefit beyond what we thought it would. That said, these classes were not accessible to everyone because of timing and cost.

One semester, a colleague, Dr. Brown (pseudonym) had enrichment programing built into a required social studies methods course—one of the few content area courses that has an “urban only” section. The students conducted a project-based learning curriculum called Project Citizen where they learned how to be true activists in the community. This colleague, along with others, are continuing to incorporate some of these enrichment activities, so they are not always optional programing.

### ***Alumni thoughts***

Angelica discusses: Another key strength of the program is the amount and variety of urban schools that partner with the program. For example, attending the Philadelphia Urban Seminar after my first practicum in Trenton, solidified the truth that urban is a label with great diversity; the needs of the Philadelphia school I worked in varied dramatically from the Trenton school the semester prior. I also consider the academic rigor, the text selections, and the kind of language and discussions had in each class to be the reason I had an opportunity to do a teaching fellowship in 2018 in the Bronx; I recall interviewers telling me I was “speaking their language” when talking about Urban schools as strengths rather than deficits and by talking about race openly rather than pitter patter around the obvious. I know that this program armored me with that finesse and academic language to not only receive the position, but then successfully lead a class of seventh grade students for a summer.

Dr. Brown’s social studies methods course (SOM) also changed my world as a teacher, and I am so grateful that she was a part of our program for

that particular course. In that course, she introduced the revolutionary, project-based learning concept, Project Citizen, where students use the given Project Citizen curriculum to voice real concerns about their neighborhood or school. The curriculum then takes students through the process of engaging with government to address said issue, and I had the chance to work with this curriculum and feel its impact. SOM lead me [to] understand the power of civics education and the power of showing students they have a voice and the aptitude to bring change despite their identity or age. That project rocked my world; no matter what I teach and wherever I am, I will continue to infuse civic minded exercises in the curriculum because of that course the department offered, and I am eternally grateful Urban Ed brought me to that pedagogical epiphany.

Mel adds: The Urban Seminar class was the course that stands out most to me in terms of becoming a social justice teacher. The urban seminar was especially important in my understanding of social justice education because we were working in a context very different from many of the placements I had prior to working in Philadelphia. In looking back on the assignments completed during the urban seminar, I really feel that we were asked to engage and reflect in a more intentional way than I had done in my previous courses. A lot of my reflections prior to the course were extremely surface-level and vague, never really looking at the specifics of a lesson or my own teaching practice. The work we were asked to do in the urban seminar, however, forced me in the best way possible to take ownership and responsibility for my learning in ways that would benefit the students.

Some of the assignments we had to complete include journal entries, a “Memo and Musing” paper, and a difficulty paper. Journaling daily is always something we were encouraged to do. When I look back on my journal, I can see how sharply focused I was in reflecting on specific situations and my emotions in those moments. We were encouraged to ask questions that didn’t yet, and may never, have answers, to broaden our thinking to reflect the ways that schools are microcosms of society. The Memo and Musing paper was one of the most transformative papers I wrote in college because it really wasn’t a paper; rather, it was a putting-to-paper of the inquiries and questions we had as educators. The most beautiful part of the assignment was that we didn’t immediately look to research for the answers, which is encouraged in so many pre-service education classes. Instead, we first—not as an avoidance of research, but rather a pause on sources of knowledge—asked each other. It was revolutionary to look to one another for ideas, support, challenging, affirmations, and knowledge because we had experienced so much as pre-service teachers and experienced so much of it together as a group. Perhaps my favorite assignment of the urban seminar was the difficulty paper. I read back my entire paper before writing this response and see in myself a level of nuance

that I aspire to return to. My paper, reflecting on the book *See You When We Get There: Teaching for Change in Urban Schools* by Gregory Michie (2005), included productive wrestling with the nuances of urban education, whiteness, charter schools, and capitalism. That's a level of nuance that I crave in my day-to-day teaching life now and I attribute that to the seminar class.

## **Struggles to decolonize**

### ***Not every professor is a social justice warrior***

Although Lynnette and Tabitha believed in the value of social justice and decolonization, that was not the case for all the faculty working with the students. And, because this was a program (urban education) embedded in a department (elementary and early childhood) there could be two very different course experiences. Some courses were “urban specific,” meaning they were required for students in the urban education program but only optional as electives for others. Other courses were required for all future teachers and populated by both urban and non-urban majors. Those courses were often content specific (i.e. math, science, history) and would be taught by subject matter experts who may or may not have a social justice orientation. Because of the relatively small size of the program, combined with difficulties with scheduling and staffing, there has never been a straight “urban track” where we could be sure all instructors delivered a consistent justice-oriented message.

Since we had more students of Color than other programs in the School of Education, there were also some instances of professors directing racial microaggressions toward students of Color. Early in the program, Mariah approached Tabitha about a professor who unfairly targeted her and another student from our cohort. Many meetings and difficult conversations with fellow faculty followed, and the offending faculty member never really owned their behavior. And, even after fierce protest, the offending faculty member continued to be staffed to teach this course. Often Lynnette, being a Black educator, had to have “close-doored conversations” during advising with students of Color. These conversations were on how to avoid taking a course with one of these professors or providing a safety plan if there was no choice. But the lack of decolonized minds of instructors was also felt by most students in the program, regardless of identity.

### ***Alumni thoughts***

Mariah explains: The first and biggest weakness that comes to mind are problematic professors. Not all the professors understood, cared about, or thought social justice applied to education or the classroom. It showed in

the way they spoke about children and in some of the interactions and attitudes/biases toward me and other students of Color. Having these individuals training future educators is problematic and a weakness in the program, especially when we know that many Black and Brown children are taught by White teachers. This just continues to feed the problems we have in many schools already. It is also both exhausting and bothersome trying to learn and grow but at the same time having to find ways to respectfully check your instructors for their comments. Honestly, at times I opted to keep silent to avoid being “that Black girl.” During the situation mentioned above where a classmate and I were targeted by our professor, my father sat me down and described how I had to work extra hard so that on paper there was no way possible that the professor could use her biases to affect my academics, even if it affected how she treated me. Not everyone has to have those types of conversations with their children. The issue around justice-oriented teaching was that the social justice framework was only instituted by professors with the same worldview. Otherwise, professors opted to not embed social justice into their teaching practice.

Megan explains: I feel like the bulk of the social justice/decolonization work was done in 1–2 courses, but perhaps having more courses related to social justice education solely and/or weaving the discussions into more education courses would have allowed the important dialogue to continue and extend to classmates not within the urban education program.

### ***Us versus them: The divide of programs***

What eventually started to happen was a divide between programs. Professors and students started to identify as either the “traditional” (four-year) program or as “the urbans.” Although we were one department, the division between the programs was often shared in name, advising, and scheduling.

### ***Alumni thoughts***

Angelica discusses: I do have some concrete concerns about the program, especially the way students who are in our program are separated from the “traditional” elementary/early education tracks. The divide that exists between the two programs only increases the division of thought and makes the discussion of social justice in the classroom a taboo outside of urban education classes or amongst students on the traditional track. I truly believe that a social justice focused program should not be on its own and needs to grow in numbers. Either the program needs to grow so that more students are getting a social justice-oriented slant on education, or the introduction to urban education course needs to be a foundational class

for *all* education students. This divide between urban and non-urban students' needs to be disrupted so that social justice pedagogy, Pentecostal pedagogy (Emdin, 2016), and *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire, 1996) are no longer taboos during seminar. It made it extremely hard to relate to any of the students on the traditional track, with a few more classes to introduce/normalize a common social justice dialogue would facilitate more peer teacher communication between the departments.

During my fifth year, which in fairness was and should be focused on the ESL Masters, I found myself truly missing classes where my fellow urban education majors and myself could read current texts on social justice. Our student teaching seminar class (combines the "traditional" and "urban" program students), which provided a space for us to connect theory to our student teaching, only met bi-weekly and did not quench my need to keep up with current social justice trends or read, read, read all the texts I could get my hands on that would expand my understanding of social justice teaching further. The last year in the five really lacks in its upkeep of social justice teaching. I think this could be remedied by adding an additional course that focuses on it in some way, or more likely, by having the ESL instructors infuse relevant social justice pedagogy in between discussions of language acquisition. I do not want future Urban majors to lose their fire for this educational approach, especially when placed in urban districts without support mechanisms in place for preservice teachers. The curriculum truly needs to be revamped in year five to incorporate more social justice-oriented teaching to continue fueling our understanding and passion.

Mel elaborates on this concept of the divide and how it impacts her teaching experiences to date: Just as the cohort model was one of the most beautiful parts of the program, it was also one of the biggest challenges in that we experienced something that seems so rare in systems of schooling: being surrounded by and in relationship with like-minded people. It is an internal tension I sit with when I reflect on the program. On the one hand, as described above, the cohort model changed me and my experience in the program immensely. On the other hand, what we experienced does not exist in my current school setting, which was a difficult hit to take when shifting from pre-service to in-service. This is not intended as an indictment of the cohort model itself, but rather how a cohort model can be created and sustained with the knowledge that, for many pre-service teachers, that may be the only time in one's educational journey of being surrounded by justice-oriented educators. For me, it was a very difficult transition to go from the cohort to working in a school where those deep, shared connections did not exist and would be/are hard to build because of the circumstances of schools.

### ***Single-minded approach***

Coursework in the program often functioned with the assumption that these prospective students would have their own, single classroom. The reality is that since ESL is a high needs area, many of our students are offered and accept [or are moved to] positions that are not the traditional general education classroom. While this can be seen as a positive contribution to the field, some of our graduates may feel ill prepared for both the opportunities and challenges that come with co-teaching and push-in, pull-out models.

### ***Alumni thoughts***

Mel explains: Another challenge of the program is the focus on developing teachers/educators to work in their own classrooms, with lesser attention given to working in inclusive contexts that so many schools are moving toward. I left the program expecting of myself to end up in my own classroom but instead was hired to be an English as a Second Language (ESL) co-teacher/push-in teacher for a mix of up to five grade levels. The summer before beginning my first year and throughout a lot of the beginning of the school year, I felt that I had “failed” because I wasn’t in my own classroom. This was a deeply internalized, toxic mindset steeped in individualism and whiteness that without question comes from my own socialization. At the same time, I question how the program contributed to this through our intense focus on being the “main” classroom teacher. I remember thinking back on how many discussions of classroom climate and culture we had in our classes, connected to “classroom management” and the physical environment. While I work with small groups of students, I work with six teachers who all have their own styles and approaches to the classroom environment. I felt like I didn’t have the skills to communicate with my co-teachers the struggles I was having with their approaches or to articulate my own vision around the fundamentals of classroom culture. I often wonder how this would be different if we spent more time in dialogue and had experiences working in inclusive settings.

### **Growing pains: The lessons learned individually then and now**

Ultimately, after 10 years of this program, we wanted this conversation to discuss how the alumni perceived themselves as students coming into the program and possible deficit thinking. Then, years later, do they perceive themselves now as justice-oriented teachers.

### **Mariah**

I think that even as a woman of Color, an Afrolatina woman, in particular, I had aspects of deficit thinking that stemmed from a lack of understanding of how the different systems in our society not only work but strongly influence each other. Further, having a limited yet growing understanding of how deeply racism played a role in those systems contributed to that thinking. That thinking was partially challenged by the program as I was disgusted and frustrated with the mindsets and demeanors of some of my classmates, but more so challenged by the individuals I befriended at [institution] (outside of the program) and by the in-person experiences I had in so many different classrooms due to the program.

Although I am no longer in the classroom, I do consider myself justice-oriented in my current graduate studies and did see myself justice-oriented as a teacher, although I know there is always room for growth. One of the most rewarding aspects of my work in the classroom was being able to explicitly discuss social justice with my students in regard to what we were learning as well as in regard to their lives and futures. I think this helped me be able to build deep bonds with my kids. I used social justice in how I interacted with students and parents, how I discussed issues with colleagues, how I advocated for my students and in how I molded my lessons and facilitated my classroom. I continuously work, self-reflect, and push myself to learn more and identify where my weaknesses are in awareness and understanding so I can continue to contribute to this work. Social justice now fuels the work I do and how I approach my studies, conversations, and future goals to decolonize the education system.

### **Megan**

Coming into the program, I never had discussions on privilege and what that meant. The program helped me to acknowledge the privileges I have. Being aware of my privileges has made me more aware of my responsibility to not engage in the actions that contribute to a society that perpetuates injustices.

There is always room for improvement, but I do consider myself a justice-oriented teacher, now leader. I hope to better my practice by continuing to be reflective, engaging in more dialogue, and continuing my education on the topic. In my practice as an early childhood leader, I encourage teachers to have meaningful discussions with students, even when the topics get hard, and to allow students to voice their opinions, and most importantly, be themselves. Children should own the physical space by being represented and contributing to the displays within their classroom. Diverse classroom materials, books, and resources that represent everyone



are non-negotiable resources. These resources should include diverse racial representation (*I Love My Hair*: Natasha Anastasia Tarpley), diverse families (*And Tango Makes Three*: Henry Cole), gender diversity (*From the Stars in the Sky to the Fish in the Sea*: Kai Cheng Thom and Kai Yun Ching), and various socioeconomic backgrounds (*Those Shoes*: Maribeth Boelts). I also believe it is critical to take an active role in getting to know students and their families. Family engagement is a necessary part of not only access, but also student success, and language should never be seen as a barrier. In my current school, parents are encouraged to be involved in school-wide events, participate in field trips, and be informed on academic performance throughout the year. Our school has had 100% parent attendance at conferences since opening in 2016. Translators at every event help to create this equitable access for our families. There is still so much to learn, and as I step into a leadership role, I look forward to developing curriculum with a social justice lens.

### **Mel**

I definitely entered the program with deficit thinking because I had never been called to examine my socialization around identities and systems before entering into the program. The biggest aspect of deficit thinking that I can say I entered the program with was a savior complex in terms of, “I can be a voice for the voiceless.” At the time, I had no understanding of how violent this was toward students: how this erased the voice, agency, and personhood they inherently had/have as full human beings; how this was so deeply steeped in whiteness and the belief that I could speak to experiences that were not and would never be my own; and how this was such an individualistic mindset (another trait of white supremacy) that completely ignored systemic and institutional histories of silencing that were intentional, purposeful, and I was implicated in personally. During I believe my sophomore year of college, I was lucky to attend an Undoing Racism and Community Organizing Training facilitated by The Institute for Survival and Beyond. It was a learning experience—a human experience—that I will never forget and that transformed my understanding of systems, institutions, and most importantly, myself. It was this understanding that I carried with me into and through the rest of the Urban Education program at [institution] and through my Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies program as well.

I question if a justice-oriented teacher is a label I can assign myself. I don’t mean to suggest that “justice-oriented” is a static label, but rather to question that, because my identity as an educator and as a person are always so in flux, I find it hard to say I am a justice-oriented teacher.

While it may seem the same to some people, I am much more comfortable with saying that I am constantly working toward being a justice-oriented teacher. I know the difference is extremely minor semantically, but the difference in wording suggests to me that there is no endpoint in the work, either individually, collectively, or systemically. There were moments this year that I felt strongly in my identity of working toward justice-oriented teaching and many, many moments that I felt extremely disconnected from the justice-oriented ways of teaching and learning that were so fundamental to my pre-service experience. I can't even count the number of times I said to people, "I don't feel like the Mel who graduated from [institution]. The '[institution] Mel' feels like she doesn't exist anymore." Again, identity is always so in flux, so this is to be expected to some degree. But those moments in which my capacity to hold onto this part of my deeply-held identity were really challenged felt like some of the lowest points of the year. What I've come away with after sitting for so long with this question and taking part of the summer to decompress is a reframing of what it means to work toward justice-oriented teaching: rather than simply looking at content, really, a "coming home" to the ideas and methods that I learned in the Urban Education program.

### ***Angelica***

While I carried many biases prior to my entry into this program, I think the greatest was my lack of understanding that I not only have skin privilege but that I benefit from it on a daily basis. The Urban education department and the English department both introduced the structure of privilege to me, yet another humiliating facet of my life that remains challenging for me to stomach. Therefore, because of this program, I never ever thought about the world in the same way ever again. I now explore my life and my relationships with other people (most importantly students) with the mindset that each of us based on our identity markers are given certain advantages purely based on those markers. I credit the course texts read across my urban education and English dual majors for bringing this critical, life-altering awareness to my existence through the texts I read, because without it I would still be believing in many other fallacies that my secondary education propelled. For example, I wholeheartedly believed that the American Dream is an achievable goal for all, likely because, as it is described, my mother achieved it as an immigrant. I also held the belief that people of Color were more susceptible for falling into violence or had more criminal tendencies (I cringe writing that, really despising my former self to hold on to such fallacies). I truly credit the urban education department at [institution] for dispelling that particular bias specifically through

the text *The New Jim Crow* by Michelle Alexander (2011). That text helped me to understand how weighty language is, and how language is actual weaponized to further criminalize people of Color (i.e. War on Drugs versus the Opioid Crisis). Without Alexander's heavily researched insights, I fear I would have carried this belief. Instead, I now understand that oppression of Black and Brown individuals on US soil has only taken new shapes all with the same intent: to minimize Black voices and participation in government. Alexander's (2011) text needs to be read by every individual in America.

While I want to say yes that I am a social justice-oriented teacher, I believe I one in progress. I know that as a person going on her own journey of identity and how I will broach my race in relation to my students will be a forever question that weighs on my mind, I know that I will use my classroom to dismantle inequalities in whatever ways that I can. I know every day of my life I will have to actively think through my own privileges and biases, and I like to imagine that my commitment to working through my own thinking proves I strive to my social justice-oriented within myself every day.

One of my proudest moments as a teacher who craves to be social justice-oriented, happened in a unit I taught in the Bronx called Art and Activism. I devised, led, and received daily feedback on over 100 hours of engineering, math, and civics education lessons for bilingual seventh graders. This experience culminated in individualized portfolios which contained student work samples as well as formative and summative assessments. The role allowed me to explore teaching language arts through an equity-centered approach in our art and activism unit. Students analyzed song lyrics, and also explicitly learned about prominent activists and artists of Color, which inspired a student-driven, bilingual video on "What Activism Means to Me." The video included students' original artwork and commentary on the power of nonviolence in a democratic society, giving students ample practice with their oral and written language. Students recorded their responses in both English and Spanish, and on the last day of the fellowship, the video was shown to families. Hands down, the proudest day of my teaching career. I spoke Spanish (though broken) to the families to introduce the video and listened to my students speak about the need for activism in a bilingual format. In a small way, my teacher research proposal came to life, as discussions on implicit bias and racism openly with my students lead to their vulnerability in that video.

That moment will fuel me in my first year because I know that having these courageous conversations with my future sixth graders will never be cut and dry. I know that this department prepared me well; I have done what I thought was impossible once, who is to say I cannot do it again?

## Takeaways and next steps

Although we worked hard to decolonize the mind of our students and build “social justice warriors,” we know that this was not always the case. We are aware of the flaws of our program and mistakes we may have made as program leaders and instructors along the way. For example, these conversations brought to light that the cohort “family” model provides strength in numbers in academic spaces and emotional support, but it also provides otherness and marginalization of the students. To be truly integrated into teachers’ practice, these habits of mind need to be integrated into the program as a whole, not isolated to just a few classes. We have discussed eventually becoming our own urban education department in the future. The concept is that being our own department, students will have a more visible identity and more supports within the urban education programs. Although this is a next step goal, these conversations give us pause to talk through this more as we do not want a separate department to marginalize the urban education students further.

These conversations have also highlighted the importance of enrichment courses like the Urban Schools Seminar. But these courses also cost extra money. For example, Urban Schools Seminar is a summer course and most financial aid packages will not cover summer courses. Moreover, the course also involves additional room and board costs. The 2018 cohort did benefit from a room and board reimbursement of \$500 each due to a grant, but that was a one-time offering. These conversations clarify the need for faculty to secure grants and extra funding so more students can have opportunities to partake in these developmental enrichment programs.

Lynnette and Tabitha have been aware from the beginning that not all colleagues embrace or teach from a social justice and decolonizing framework. These conversations reinforced this knowledge. But as the program expands into secondary education and the hiring of faculty continues to grow, we recognize that the issue of colleagues who are not on board begins to diminish. Yet, as teacher education programs are nationally shrinking, our program continues to grow. But we recognize this in terms of the marketing of our program and the established relationships with schools and the communities—which we need to continue to prioritize.

These conversations really made Lynnette and Tabitha take a step back hearing about the single-minded classroom approach as faulty. We have definitely been guilty of framing conversations in ways that assume that each person will have their own classroom in the future. Since these conversations, we have taken stock in the language around future classrooms with current students. Tabitha is currently developing a collaboration course that will help prepare future teachers for co-teaching models that

will inevitably be a reality in many of their careers. This is a revelation and an immediate change in pedagogical practice.

Additionally, there is a concern in our program around field placements. Although we often talk about social justice teaching, most of the future teachers have never experienced or had the opportunity to work within a social justice teacher's K-12 classroom. The institution has an office that places students in classroom, so this is often out of faculty's control. But the urban education faculty have started to discuss a way we can keep a running log of justice-oriented mentor teachers, from our partnership programs, to use for placements. On the other hand, how to do we not over utilize these placements and overburden the mentor teachers is still an issue we are struggling with.

Lastly, we realize that although we are privileged to have five years with our students, we can do more if we are able to build networks of support that continue past the completion of the program. On our final formal day with the urban education students, we call their name at a commencement ceremony. Commencement, by definition, is the beginning, not the end. We continue to think about ways to support our students out in the field as they begin to implement the ideas and strategies learned during the pre-service years.

Our critical conversation and cautionary tale have shaped our understanding of program development in various ways:

- Growing a social justice program and dismantling colonized ideals takes time and should be done slowly and deliberately.
- Do not be afraid to get rid of courses that fail to reinforce social justice.
- Students and alumni are continual partners in co-constructing for social justice.
- Decolonization is hard work that is ever shifting, and the program and faculty need to learn how to shift with it.

A decade ago, there were not many undergraduate urban education programs. Since the establishment of this program, more higher education institutions are moving in this direction. As we converse and reflect on our program in this paper, we hope that the “warts and all” perspective will be a cautionary tale to others looking to approach education with a justice-oriented way.

### **Notes on contributors**

*Lynnette Mawhinney* is in Department of Curriculum and Instruction, University of Illinois at Chicago College of Education, Chicago, IL, USA.

*Tabitha Dell'Angelo* is in The College of New Jersey, Ewing, NJ, USA.

*Mariah Yessenia Alston* is in Teachers College, Columbia University, New York, NY, USA.

*Megan Gerity* is in Cresthaven Academy Charter School, Newark, NJ, USA.

*Melissa Katz* is in New Brunswick Public Schools, New Brunswick, NJ, USA.

*Angelica Vanderbilt* is at The Anna L. Klein School, Guttenberg, NJ, USA.

## ORCID

Lynnette Mawhinney  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6662-6941>

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