

Vignettes As Tools For Exploring Complexities In Classrooms:

One HBCU's Action Research Case Study

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Abstract—This paper explores the results of an action research case study that examined the implementation of vignettes as simulation tools for exploring complexities of race, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, etc. This approach was introduced to students enrolled in either undergraduate internship courses or alternative master's entry-level courses to determine to what extent teachers' confidence in their abilities to address complexities in the classroom increased.

Keywords—social-emotional teaching and learning; race; gender; simulations; vignettes; complexities; difficult conversations

I. INTRODUCTION

Teaching requires careful attention to the needs of all learners. How do we ensure we consistently meet them holistically? Though we live in what is considered a post-racial society, there are several injustices suffered by minority groups. To combat this, many have adopted anti-racist pedagogy (Abi-Hanna, Harushimana, & Bayne, 2022; King & Chandler, 2016). Research suggests, however, that anti-racist teaching should be combined with social-emotional learning to combat negative stereotypes about various minority groups fully (Caven, 2020; Jagers, Rivas-Drake, & Borowski, 2018). How can we combine anti-racist teaching and social-emotional learning for sustained academic success in elementary classrooms? One method we have employed at our HBCU is the implementation of vignettes as a type of simulation for exploring the complexities of race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation.

Students, enrolled in our college of education, are in unique positions as preservice and newly assigned in-service teachers. As our candidates primarily come from minority-designated demographics, they enter local, predominantly White school systems able to empower cooperating teachers on best practices for increasing student engagement in minority groups.

When allowed to complete a confidence survey, however, most candidates initially indicated they did not feel particularly comfortable engaging in

conversations with students, parents, and other colleagues from differing demographics. While they understood the research surrounding best practices on working with underrepresented populations, the caveat most candidates faced, however, was knowing how to effectively communicate with those whose lived experiences may differ from their own. In response to our candidates' surveys, I decided to embed vignettes that were created by me and two other colleagues in a collaborative effort with BranchEd Alliance for Education, into a few of my courses.

II. COMPLEXITIES IN THE CLASSROOM: AN OVERVIEW

Complexities in the classroom can be defined as classroom situations that may be difficult to discuss, e.g. race, ethnicity, culture, color, religion, gender identity and expression, sexual orientation, disabilities, loss, etc. As U.S. classrooms are becoming more diverse (NCES, 2019), new teachers need to be equipped with the tools to meet the needs of all learners. Research indicates suicide rates and bullying are at unprecedented levels amongst all learning groups (Goto, 2022; Limbana, Khan, Eskander, Emany, & Jahan; 2020; Popoola, Olagundoye, & Alugo, 2020). The epicenter of most bullying and other adverse experiences in these complex situations happens in and around schools (Waseem, 2022).

Students from certain groups are at an increased risk of being bullied (Johns, et.al., 2019). Students who may express non-traditional gender identities or sexual orientation are at the most risk of falling into suicidal ideations due to bullying and other acts of intolerance from their peers (Johns, et.al., 2019).

III. PROBLEM STATEMENT

While we know the goal of most teacher prep programs is to ensure graduates have the

pedagogical content knowledge (Shulman, 1986) to elicit 21st-century, futuristic thinking, there is often a minimal emphasis on equipping teacher candidates with the ability to engage in critical conversations on complexities in the classroom. As such, this action research study aimed to increase our candidates' abilities to not only engage in those critical conversations but to also create safe and brave spaces, through those talks, for their students to holistically thrive. As this research is one of emerging literature on how to best incorporate vignettes as part of social emotional teaching and learning of students, there were some limitations due to sample size. As a result of this limitation, the surveys collected could not be statistically computed for purposes of generalization. To gain more insight into the participants' thinking, a focus group was held to determine themes for data.

IV. CASE STUDY ACTION RESEARCH TO EXAMINE EFFECTIVENESS OF VIGNETTES AS TOOLS FOR TOUGH CONVERSATIONS

In the planning phase of this action research case study, my colleagues and I, along with BranchEd Alliance for Education, created five vignettes for our students. According to Hughes and Huby, "vignettes can provide a useful focus and stimulus for discussion of difficult-to-explore and sensitive topics" (p. 19). As vignettes possess the ability to "simulate elements of reality" they are "effective tools for unraveling complexities and conflicts presented in real-life contexts and situations" as they promote "critical thinking, reflection, and problem-solving skills" (Feldman-Abe, et.al., p.8).

For the implementation of these vignettes with my preservice teachers, these simulations were used in the following manners:

1. as diagnostic tools to gain information regarding teacher candidates' prior knowledge, misconceptions, and self-efficacy in responding to complex, real-life situations;
2. as instructional tools for teacher candidates to explore the complexities teachers encounter in the classroom—situations for which there is not necessarily a single right answer (although there are *definitely wrong ones*) [emphasis added]; and
3. as assessment tools to evaluate teacher candidates' learning or content mastery (p.8)

V. IMPLEMENTATION OF VIGNETTES IN METHODS AND FOUNDATIONS COURSES

In introducing these vignettes to my preservice and newly in-service teacher candidates, I surveyed them on their levels of confidence in introducing certain topics within the classroom. After collecting the

results of the surveys, I met with a group of students and listed the phrase *complexities in the classroom*. Each participant was asked if they could think about how this phrase works within the confines of a modern classroom.

We then discussed certain topics from a critical perspective and their beliefs on the importance of the implementation of these issues in grades PreK through 12. Students were then invited to delve deeper into this action research case study by participating in newly created simulations.

Once students consented to participate, they were introduced (one at a time) to the following 5 scenarios:

1. You are teaching a diverse 8th-grade Language Arts class where the majority of class is Caucasian. You have selected a series of books to teach the standards this semester and all the grades will come from these books. During the introduction to the first book, Blake, an African American student yells out, "This book is stupid, and this is not real life!" Furthermore, Blake refuses to read these books because the characters do not look like them.
2. You are teaching a diverse 5th grade Social Studies class, that is comprised predominantly of Hispanic students. During a discussion about previous presidential policy, Sebastian, a Caucasian student, says to Antonio, a Hispanic student in his group, "My grandpa says if our old president was still in office, you and your family would have to go back to Mexico where you all belong." Antonio begins to cry hysterically and has to leave school early for the day.
3. During a PLC (Professional Learning Community) meeting, your department lead, Susan, a Caucasian veteran teacher, says that she doesn't even bother to teach a particular group of students (all African American) in her class because they are "dumb as a box of rocks" and will not get the content anyway. She goes on to say that they are going to be pushed through school and will get a check for the rest of their lives, which is all their families want and care about."
4. You are the first African American principal of a diverse high school in an upper-echelon suburban area in the South, where the population is as follows: Caucasian: 40%, African American: 40%, Asian: 5%, Hispanic: 10%, Other: 5%. In the wake of what is happening in the news with unarmed African American people being killed by police, some of the students (none of the

Caucasian students) decide to wear "Black Lives Matter" t-shirts to school to show support for the movement. A parent of one of the Caucasian students complains to you, the principal, about the shirts and states that her husband is a police officer, the shirts are offensive and demands something be done or she will report this to the Superintendent, a Caucasian man, her neighbor, and close personal friend.

5. You have a Caucasian intern who is reading a book you suggested to the students. The main character's name is Quvenzhane. Rather than learning the correct way to pronounce the character's name, you observe the intern say, "Her name is too difficult for me to say, so we will just call her Q anytime we see her name." You intervene and tell the intern the correct pronunciation; however, the intern says, "Phonetically, her name does not read that way, so I will continue to call her Q".

- a. Consider how your identity/role in society may impact your response and your actions
- b. Consider how these actions might impact the social-emotional wellness of the child
- c. Consider how the parent/community might respond
- d. Consider any relevant legal/policy considerations
- e. Consider your professional responsibilities

4. Think about and list any resources that would be of assistance in your response to the situation described in the vignette

5. List any additional information you would like to know to respond

After providing each participant a copy of the vignette and allowing them time to read, the students were asked to rate the levels of confidence, from very confident to not at all confident, in their ability to:

1. Create a learning environment and curriculum that celebrates historically marginalized populations
2. Create a learning environment where you can elicit authentic engagement in critical conversations on diversity, immigration, and politics
3. Respond, as a novice teacher, to a veteran teacher's blatant biases towards marginalized groups, while maintaining professional dignity
4. Advocate for a culture of understanding in your school and district in which students are free to express themselves and support causes that are important to them and their community
5. Help students develop an appreciation for diverse names and customs

After rating their ability to confidently address the prompt, the candidates were asked to do the following:

1. List issue(s) presented in the vignette
2. Provide 3-5 examples of action that could be taken to address the situation
3. Think about the actions listed and consider the lenses below stated and describe any intended or unintended consequences (positive and/or negative) related to the actions listed above:

After completing these for all five scenarios, the participants engaged in a focus group to qualify their answers. This process was the most informative as it allowed participants to openly discuss their subjectivity as it relates to grappling with complex issues in the classrooms. After the focus group, a thematic analysis was conducted, and the following themes emerged:

1. Universal disrespect and intolerance
2. Bullying as a societal norm
3. Misinformation
4. Uncertainty

When delving deeper into the data, the primary theme was centered on Universal Disrespect. Each of the candidates held a strong belief in a prevailing level of allowable disrespect towards individuals outside of the majority race, sexual orientation, religion, etc. Participants mentioned the state course of study and laws that have been enacted within the state designed to halt teachings that serve to counter discriminating narratives or celebrate differing cultural norms. They have observed, for example, how the state has supported the omission of certain books by notable non-Caucasian, gay, non-Christian authors as they believe these texts punish individuals living today for the "past actions committed by members of the same race or sex" (Alabama State Board of Education Resolution Declaring the Preservation of Intellectual Freedom and Non-Discrimination in Alabama's Public Schools, 2023, para. 5).

The participants further believed that this move by the state perpetuates the belief that the experiences of those from outside the majority have no merit in the classroom. Targeting books, such as *The Bluest Eye*, *The Hate U Give*, *George*, etc., while allowing books such as *Gone with the Wind*, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, etc., perpetuate the sense of superiority and support intolerance of marginalized groups.

The second theme of Bullying as a Societal Norm emerged as participants discussed how they have witnessed the mistreatment of students during their practicum and internships. All of them stated most incidents observed originated on social media. They also unanimously reported that schools refused to become involved in situations that were said to have taken place outside of the educational environment. The participants stated that while the incidents may have originated through social media, they watched students engage in cyberbullying while on school grounds. Since they were not legally employed or were newly employed, by the schools there was a unified reticence in speaking out, particularly as they observed more veteran teachers remain quiet.

Parents of bullied students were sent away from the schools with no hope of any type of recourse for the constant abuse endured by their children. Sadly, one participant reported that a student from their school committed suicide because of the persistent bullying that was endured.

Misinformation and Uncertainty were the final overlapping themes that emerged. The participants believed a lot of the stereotypical thinking and treatment of marginalized groups is rooted in the perpetual dissemination of misinformation received. They also agreed they were uncertain of their roles in changing the dynamics in their schools. Participants reported hearing veteran teachers make comments about students that made them "inwardly outraged". They also reported how these behaviors were allowed "to go unchecked" by administrators.

When asked how witnessing unchecked biases of veteran cooperating teachers make them feel, some responded with, "It made me want to make sure I advocate for students when I have my own classroom". Others responded with, "It made me sad because there was nothing I could say or do at the time." Though they overwhelmingly felt a sense of disappointment, they all believe that colleges of education could help new teachers build the confidence to stop injustices as they encounter them.

III. CONCLUSION AND FUTURE WORK

This action research case study was conducted to determine the effectiveness of vignettes as simulations when embedded in undergraduate methods and graduate foundations courses. The results of the initial study concluded that the participants' levels of confidence in approaching complex topics in the classroom increased as a result of the knowledge received through the simulations. Some acknowledged that without having participated in the study, they would have mishandled similar situations as they more than likely would have overreacted.

The participants were pleased to have had the opportunity to converse with peers regarding their opinions on five vignettes. They stated that the discussion sharpened their thinking and helped them see varying perspectives on how to best address difficult or controversial issues. Each participant stated they believe it would be beneficial to colleges of education to embed these types of simulations within teacher prep courses to provide candidates with an insight into some of the social-emotional aspects of teaching and learning.

As these vignettes were piloted with this inaugural group of students, future plans are to embed opportunities for all students enrolled in my undergraduate methods and graduate-level foundations courses to critically assess their ideologies on complexities in the classroom. While I understand this action research case study contains limited data (due to sample size) on the long-term effects of preparing teachers to address critical conversations, the plan is to continue the case as a longitudinal study. I believe that providing candidates with elements of reality, through simulation, will enhance their abilities to teach to the holistic needs of the child.

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