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LISA G. STONEMAN, JENNIFER S. MCCLOUD, and KARIN KAERWER

# Reshaping Teacher Education through Anti-Racist Curricula at Roanoke College



If education and equity are inextricably linked, how might colleges and universities advocate for justice and equity within our own systems, as well as within the K-12 system that feeds us? As political and social forces around the world shift, do we have a duty to fight back against oppression and authoritarianism? And if so, how?

Roanoke College is located in the Blue Ridge Mountains of southwest Virginia, in a small city that sits within a mid-sized region known as the Roanoke Valley. The community around us is a mix of suburban, rural, and urban areas. We've seen many trends and shifts throughout our teaching years, but we've never

encountered such an ill wind as the one blowing through all levels of education today.

Viewed from the widest lens, outside of institutions and prescriptive curricula, we see the individual encountering the world and reacting to it, learning from these encounters. But more common lenses for education include the family, the school, the religious institution, and the community at large. We might assume that our schools are filled with students, teachers, and administrators who reflect the make-up of our families, churches, and neighborhoods. We would be wrong.

## The State of Education

Most public education, from its beginnings, has been a representation of the dominant culture. As such, public education drives a message of assimilation within a structure that historically has bestowed an almost divine right of leadership and decision-making on land-owning white males. Historically, women were allowed to learn or teach only under severe constraints. People of color fared much worse, with laws in many states prohibiting literacy

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among non-white peoples. Additionally, many teachers of color who had held highly respected and influential roles in segregated schools, where they provided instructionally rich and culturally relevant education (Siddle-Walker)<sup>1</sup> despite the scant resources provided to them, were demoted or lost their jobs after the 1954 *Brown* ruling (Ladson-Billings, "Landing"). This generational loss of valuable teachers of color is one from which we still need to recover.

Although our country has seen these structures and laws positively evolve over the last century and a half, there are negative demographic truths that persist. Teaching is still predominantly a woman's job, and that woman is white over 80 percent of the time (Ahmad & Boser; Dilworth & Brown; Ladson-Billings, "Culturally"; Nieto; NCES). In a country with nearly equal proportions white and BIPOC, how has the disproportionate percentages of white female teachers been perpetuated? And what does it have to do with higher education?

We became engaged specifically in this conversation in the spring of 2020, just as the coronavirus pandemic was beginning. In the midst of those initial discussions, a former education student, Emily Leimbach, who was then in the midst of her graduate work after several years of teaching, wrote to us with a pointed request. She said that she was "continuing to reflect on how I can do better in my own classroom, support my students, and encourage change on a larger level." But she called us to task as well: "I hope there can be some critical thinking and deep discussion about what Roanoke's education program can do better to address equity, race, and racism in schools."

Our conversations on equity in education had begun quite informally as we sent students home from Roanoke and began emergency online instruction. Inequities among our Roanoke student populations became evident immediately: lack of access to the internet, the need for employment once back at home, and the expectations of family involvement regardless of academic workload. Even more pointed, though, were the issues that our education students who were in the field reported: young students who were home alone and had no food, much less internet access or a computer. Additionally, the nation was embroiled in national conversations about racial injustice and racism following the murder of George Floyd

that summer. So Emily's message came at a time when we could receive it and internalize it with the seriousness it deserved. We weren't doing enough, and we knew it. Now one of our students had called us out. We could do better.

## The Bridges Program

Bridges is a program that partners with local school districts to identify K-12 students of color who want to be teachers, and then mentors them into Roanoke College's education program with the intent of yielding teachers of color for our local region. The three of us, along with Lisa Earp, a faculty member who retired during the initial stages of our planning, met regularly to construct the framework for Bridges. We began to read about and discuss support mechanisms for future teachers of color, culturally relevant pedagogy, and anti-racist education. We attended all of the online workshops on equity and anti-racism that we could manage. We discussed ideas for further study and action.

Our guiding supposition was that the dearth of teachers of color is a representation of the complicity of society and of the education system, in particular, in furthering systemic racism. Under this supposition, we created the two integrated goals of Bridges: (1) the recruitment, retention, and mentorship of students of color who want to be teachers; and (2) curricular and program development related to race and anti-racism across the curriculum. Partners within the program include Roanoke College admissions, our offices of multicultural affairs, scholarship and financial aid, and local school divisions. The relationships with a wide circle of community partners make these goals feasible.

Bridges is two-pronged, with an inward facing piece, led by Jennifer McCloud, and an outward facing one, led by Karin Kaerwer. (Lisa Stoneman focuses on the whole program and assessment.) The internal portion of Bridges includes education department program revision and development, college student mentor recruitment and training, education faculty development, and college-wide faculty development. The external focus includes building and maintaining relationships with partner school divisions, recruitment of high school students, in-school program facilitation, and college campus event planning.

This focus on school partners is paramount. Respecting the needs of the districts, the teachers, and the students shows a genuine interest in collaboration. It signals that our aims are not driven by our desire to recruit prospective students. In return, our school division partners have agreed to provide access to their interested students, offer preferential candidacy for employment within the district for Bridges program completers, provide any necessary student transportation to the college, and collaborate on events held at the schools or college.

We currently have six mentors, the majority of whom identify as people of color. We gathered this group by advertising the Bridges program and holding an informational meeting for interested students. The application process included a written essay, references, and an interview. Once students were chosen for the position, we began building community through a dinner and game night, followed by an all-day training retreat. We then included the students in the planning of our first large speaker event and reception. All of these activities focused on concept building, specifically systemic racism and self-reflection.

## Rooting Our Work in Assessment and Research

As we began our work, we drew on thirty years' worth of literature on the importance of diversifying the teaching profession. The first goal of the Bridges model—recruitment and mentorship of future teachers of color—emerged from established literature that demonstrates that teachers of color improve the academic success and overall social experience for both students of color and white students (Ahmad & Boser; Dilworth & Brown; Ladson-Billings, "Culturally;" Nieto). In order to meet our first goal, we also came to learn that our teacher education program must provide support through peer-networking and mentor programming among other students of color and mentors in the profession (McClain & Perry).

Bridges's second goal of intentional curricular and professional development is also well-supported in the literature. In addition to the diversification of teachers, Dilworth and Brown, Emdin, Ladson-Billings, and Love concur that there is a need for culturally relevant, socially-just pedagogy that takes the reality of students'

lives into account and that addresses racism. Thus, the curriculum and programming development occurring within Bridges relies on Critical Race Theory (CRT), Critical Whiteness Studies (CWS), and Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP) as theoretical and pedagogical frameworks. CRT provides the foundational acknowledgment that race and racism permeate social and institutional structures within the United States, including K-12 and higher education (Matias et. al.). Drawing from CWS scholars such as DiAngelo, Matias et al., Lara-Villanueva, and Picower, we incorporated CWS tenets in order to critically interrogate teacher education curriculum and practices as structural extensions of whiteness (Matias, et. al.).

We knew that we needed to define a paradigmatic term, *whiteness*, in order to establish clarity within conversations about systemic racism and anti-racist pedagogy. We concurred with Frankenburg, who describes whiteness as "a location of structural advantage, of race privilege"—or again, as "a place from which white people look at ourselves, at others, and at society" (1). Furthermore, whiteness is "a set of cultural practices that are usually unmarked and unnamed" (Ibid.). Altogether, then, whiteness signifies an "ideology and way of being in the world that is used to maintain white supremacy" (Picower, *Reading*, 6).

Even as we strategically work to diversify our program and the profession, our current reality is that the majority of education students in our program are white. Therefore, we rely on this literature to integrate CWS and CRP across core course content, as well as to help us provide workshops to students on race, racism, and whiteness. Done relationally, reflectively, and dialogically, our aim is to better prepare future white teachers for working with diverse K-12 populations in anti-racist and socially-just ways (Bennet; DiAngelo & Sensoy).

## Questions for Institutional Self-Reflection

Continued questioning and self-reflection have been integral to program development. Other schools hoping to begin this work may find our structure helpful. Guiding questions include:

- Does your department or institution need a plan for supporting the entrance of students of color into teaching? Not all locales will have the same needs; the location of your institution and your integration within the surrounding community are important considerations.
- Have you considered the barriers that student of color may face when considering a teacher licensure program? These considerations vary by state and may include testing requirements, fees, and social stigma.
- Does your institution provide an opportunity for—or even encourage—faculty self-examination of personal biases? Research suggests that teachers who have reflected on their own biases are better equipped to act outside those biases in the classroom.
- Is an anti-racist curriculum integrated throughout your program? This parameter was one on which we were called out by our student and we began to adjust immediately within our own courses.
- Finally, do you offer campus-wide professional development in anti-racist pedagogies? Such a program is impossible for a single department or division to drive alone. You must engage with your administration at the highest levels to assure that this work occurs, and is taken seriously by the campus. Our education department and the Bridges program is fortunate to have support at the cabinet and student affairs level, including our president; board of trustees; vice president for community, diversity and inclusion; office of multicultural affairs; and other administrators standing behind our efforts.

We at Roanoke College continue to struggle against a tide of political and social challenges to education in our state of Virginia. As we move forward, we are committed to being activists and advocates for democratic education and to incorporating anti-racist practices while still maintaining our program integrity (i.e., ensuring that our graduates attend to the academic and social-emotional needs of all learners).

K-12 curriculum policy may be impacted by the inclusion of marginalized voices such as teachers of color, by the charge from academia to hold those in power accountable, and by the study of racial injustice and systemic racism

within the education classroom. As our students—both graduates of color and white graduates—enter the teaching profession, they are called to shape local and statewide curriculum and anti-racist policies. The Bridges program promises to impact the other campus-wide policies here at Roanoke. We hope, too, that it may be used as a model for other college divisions to explore anti-racist pedagogies. Finally, we hope that the program will strengthen future recruitment and formation of students of color, as they are able to see a more welcoming and just college environment.

## Endnote

1. This essay retains the APA citation style with which it was authored.

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**Direct questions to Melinda Valverde at [melinda.valverde@elca.org](mailto:melinda.valverde@elca.org).**