Experiencing a Safe Classroom: A Critical Phenomenological Study of Graduate Teaching Assistants in Counselor Education who Teach Diversity and Social Justice Courses

by

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A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty of
Auburn University
In partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

Auburn, Alabama
May 3, 2024

Keywords: GTAs, Counselor Education, safe classrooms, diversity and social justice classes, critical phenomenology

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Acknowledgements

As I write this I am 8 months pregnant with my first child, William. I think about what a marathon pregnancy has been, just like this dissertation has felt. I could not have gotten to this point without the people in my life who supported me. First, I want to thank my parents. You gave me all you could in the way you knew how—you planted seeds with your hard work that enabled me to go to school and get to where I am now. If she were still here, I would thank my great-grandmother, who always told me, "Go as far as you can go with your education." She was the first person to suggest that getting a PhD was even a possibility for me. She always believed in me.

Next, I would like to thank Dr. Yulanda Tyre who saw me when I was a recovering pessimist at way too young of an age and who constantly reminds me to dream and strive. I would never have considered applying to a PhD program without your encouragement. I survived the ups and downs of this process with your constant words of encouragement and belief in me. It has forged a friendship that I know will last for many years to come.

To Dr. Nancy Thacker-Darrow—we started this process together even though life circumstances and opportunities made it so we couldn't finish it together. You were a role model to me not only as a PhD student but also as a White person willing to have the hard conversations about diversity, equity, and inclusion. You taught me to be collaborative, goal-minded, and strategic in order to impact lasting change. Most of all, you taught me to be reflective and to always be listening and growing.

To Dr. Carney—we did it. Thank you for stepping in to be my chair for my dissertation when you were already juggling so much. You have pushed me in ways I needed and helped me

consider life beyond this dissertation. It is what has gotten me to the finish line, even if I did need some nudging from time to time.

Finally, I want to thank my husband, Jesse Guffin. In a world where men "jokingly" asked you, "How does it make you feel that your wife is getting a PhD?" I am lucky to have married a man who answered, "Fantastic!" You have been there for me in so many ways. Thank you for all the cooked meals, the washed laundry, and the nudges of accountability when I needed it. Thank you for believing in me when I doubted myself. As we take on this next adventure of raising a child together, I could not have a better partner in life to face it.

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Abstract

The classroom is a gathering of individuals with diverse backgrounds and perspectives. When course content focuses on diversity and social justice content, discussions can invite dialogue with the potential to damage perceptions of psychological safety in the classroom. As Counselor Education programs continue to emphasize diversity, equity, and inclusion educators must navigate critical dialogue and ensure classroom safety. This research sought to understand the experiences of GTAs (graduate teaching assistants) in Counselor Education who created safe classroom environments while teaching content focused on diversity and social justice. Using a critical phenomenological framework of qualitative inquiry, the research found that GTAs felt confident to create safe classrooms when they received sufficient training and support for teaching diversity and social justice content. When GTAs felt confident to create safe classrooms they acted as involved instructors that practiced self-awareness, maintained boundaries around classroom discussions, and navigated nuanced moments of conflict. GTAs reported using self-disclosure of personal experiences as a tool for creating feelings of classroom safety and using classroom discussions as a measurement for cohesion and learning. Special attention should be paid to support GTAs who hold marginalized identities and who may experience microaggressions while teaching. Findings from this research may be used to inform how doctoral students and GTAs in Counselor Education are trained to educate counselors-in-training on diversity and social justice content.

Chapter 1: Introduction and Literature Review

Classrooms are microcosms of society, where each class creates a unique makeup of individuals from diverse backgrounds and perspectives (Sue et al., 2009). Even the smallest class size creates a public space that reflects the outside world of politics (Harless, 2018; Mitra, 2020). This meeting of minds creates a delicate environment for both students and teachers who must navigate the critical moments of public discourse (Brigley Thompson, 2020). Critical moments emerge when classroom discussions elicit commentary that threaten the psychological safety of students in the classroom (Buskist et al., 2018; Harless, 2018). These comments express rhetoric that may perpetuate marginalization or reinforce internalized oppression in minoritized students (Brigley Thompson, 2020; Harless, 2018; Toraiwa, 2009). If critical moments are left unaddressed, teachers risk nonverbally endorsing the harmful rhetoric; and if teachers address critical moments, they risk negative student evaluations or even lawsuits from disgruntled students (Brigley Thompson, 2020). Teachers encounter these moments and navigate them as an "ethical demand" with potential risk to their careers (Boatright-Horowitz & Soeung, 2009; Brigley Thompson, 2020, p. 399; Osei-Kofi, 2012). Additionally, as polarization has increased in both society and classrooms, teachers may be more likely to encounter these risks and critical moments when they are responsible for teaching courses on diversity and social justice (Clancy & Bauer, 2018; Mitra, 2020; Sue et al., 2009).

Higher education has increasingly integrated considerations of diversity into curriculum (Harless, 2018). While programs in the social sciences and humanities, such as feminism studies, have historically had a concentration of content related to diversity (Toraiwa, 2009; Weitz, 2010), programs like agriculture science have started integrating content on diversity as well (Drape et al., 2019, Tindell et al., 2016). Autoethnographic contributions have shared teachers'

personal successes with teaching diversity content as well as warnings of caution surrounding critical moments (Toraiwa, 2009; Weitz, 2010). Further, almost all the literature described critical moments in higher education in the context of classroom discussions (Holley & Steiner, 2005; Tindell et al., 2016; Toraiwa, 2009; Ulmer et al., 2016; Weitz, 2010).

Classroom discussions are commonly used tools of student engagement (Fritschner, 2000). Classroom discussions prompt students to use dialogue and critical thinking skills (Clancy & Bauer, 2018; Fink, 2013). Simultaneously, classroom discussions can be unpredictable based on what students say (Brigley Thompson, 2020; Harless, 2018). The unpredictable nature of classroom discussion opens the possibility for critical moments to occur (Harless, 2018). The outcome of critical moments in classroom discussion is often determined by how the teacher manages the classroom during the event (Brigley Thompson, 2020; Holley & Steiner, 2005; Weitz, 2010). Students have reported that they feel safer in the classroom when the teacher models constructive engagement and sets boundaries (Holley & Steiner, 2005). However, teachers may feel less empowered to set boundaries for classroom discussion when they do not have tenure and student evaluations are heavily considered for advancement (Boatright-Horowitz & Soeung, 2009; Osei-Kofi, 2012).

Previous literature has reported that students can sometimes write scathing reviews of their teachers on student evaluations, particularly when they feel uncomfortable with diversity and social justice content (Boatright-Horowitz & Soeung, 2009; Osei-Kofi, 2012). Some scholars have gone so far as to state that negative student evaluations are assured if the course emphasizes diversity and social justice content (Boatright-Horowitz & Soeung, 2009). Despite these warnings, student evaluations are still a key part of tenure reviews (Kulik, 2001). This creates a dynamic in which teachers must also consider students as customers to please (Osei-Kofi, 2012).

The dynamics created by student evaluations may make managing the classroom a more difficult task (Boatright-Horowitz & Soeung, 2009; Osei-Kofi, 2012). Dynamics of power are persistent in classrooms, including dynamics of power based on marginalization (Adams et al., 2022; Basow et al., 2013; Madden, 2016; Toraiwa, 2009). Student evaluations and teacher experiences with classroom management can be drastically different based on how students react to the teacher's held identities (Arbuckle & Williams, 2003; Basow et al., 2013; Fan et al., 2019; Smith & Hawkins, 2011). Students may seek to undermine teachers from minoritized groups (Toraiwa, 2009). As a result, these teachers experience more classroom disruptions and even hostility from students (Toraiwa, 2009; Weitz, 2010).

Further, graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) also encounter greater demands for classroom management (Luo et al., 2000; Madden, 2016). GTAs may experience these difficulties with classroom management compounded by negative student reactions to their held identities (Luo et al., 2000). Even so, GTAs are often responsible for teaching course content in their departments (Shahjahan, 2008; Tindell et al., 2016). GTAs also use their experiences as opportunities to develop teaching and classroom management skills prior to seeking faculty positions (Madden, 2016).

Doctoral programs in Counselor Education also seek to prepare students for future roles as faculty (Baltrinic et al., 2016; Lamar & Helm, 2018). Both faculty and GTAs in Counselor Education are encouraged to integrate diversity and social justice content into required courses, as governing bodies in the counseling profession have increased emphasis on advocacy (Ratts et al., 2016). The Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Programs (CACREP) requires doctoral students to demonstrate competency in advocacy, and it encourages counselor education faculty to engage in advocacy as part of their role (2016). As the emphasis on diversity

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and social justice content continues to increase in counselor education, doctoral students will need to develop skills to manage critical moments that will inevitably arise.

While the experiences of teaching diversity content in higher education have been previously studied (Brigley Thompson, 2020; Buskist et al., 2018; Harless, 2018; Ulmer et al., 2016; Weitz, 2010), less research has been done to understand the lived experiences of graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) in Counselor Education who incorporate these topics in the classroom. The purpose of this study is to understand the experiences of GTAs in Counselor Education creating and maintaining safe classrooms when teaching courses focused on diversity and social justice. Understanding these experiences of GTAs in Counselor Education will help programs train doctoral students to manage classroom dynamics when they facilitate classroom discussions about diversity and social justice.

Challenges to Facilitating Critical Classroom Dialogue

Classroom discussions sometimes produce "precarious moments" which require the instructor to make an ethical decision about how to proceed to restore a safe classroom environment (Brigley Thompson, 2020). There can be added challenges for the instructor when students experience heightened emotions and when the precarious moment may cause harm to those from minoritized groups (Brigley Thompson, 2020). Students may express opinions that are considered offensive or may be expressed in an offensive manner (Weitz, 2010). When the precarious moment emerges among members of a similar group, or among two different marginalized groups, additional nuance can make deciding how to proceed more challenging (Toraiwa, 2009). For example, one student reflected on their experience as a White woman in a class with an instructor who was a Black woman (Toraiwa, 2009). The student described an instance in which she and other White women in the class accused the teacher of being sexist to

remove power from the instructor, which the student admitted was fueled by racism toward the instructor (Toraiwa, 2009). Instructors themselves may feel unsafe in the classroom or that their authority is undermined when students attempt to employ power dynamics, particularly if they fear student retaliation through student evaluations, being sued, or not being supported by their institution for confronting demeaning language (Weitz, 2010).

To maintain credibility, educators must present information in such a way that does not suggest political bias (Mitra, 2020). However, a byproduct of increasing polarization has created an environment in which information that does not support generally held beliefs by dominant culture is disregarded as politically motivated and manipulative (Mitra, 2020). Topics related to diversity and social justice can invoke controversial input in the classroom, which may exacerbate the challenge for educators to manage classroom dynamics. Previous research shows that conversations around topics of diversity and social justice are known to prompt feelings of guilt and shame within students from privileged groups and open opportunities to further harm students from marginalized groups (Holley & Steiner, 2005; Shahjahan, 2008). This dynamic can create challenges for educators who are tasked with creating and maintaining a safe learning environment (Chan et al., 2018; Holley & Steiner, 2005; Shahjahan, 2008).

Impacts of Student Evaluations on Teaching Diversity Content

The increasing demand of maintaining a safe environment for a diverse classroom may be additionally challenging when importance is given to student evaluations. While research has shown that many students desire an incorporation of diversity and social justice in curriculum, the response to its implementation is not always positive (Boatright-Horowitz & Soeung, 2009; Funge et al., 2020). In response to multicultural education, researchers have noted that some students have taken to course evaluations to express their dissatisfaction with course content and

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educators (Boatright-Horowitz & Soeung, 2009; Tindell et al., 2016). This indirect way of expressing discontent may be unexpected and damaging to the instructor's record. Because of this, the classroom can take on a dynamic resembling a customer and service provider in which the instructor feels a need to satisfy the student (Osei-Kofi, 2012).

In addition to creating a customer-service provider dynamic, evaluation fails to consider the ways in which instructors are scrutinized by students through the lenses of race and gender (Osei-Kofi, 2012). Researchers have debated in the literature about the existence of gender or racial bias in student evaluations (Adams et al., 2021; Araguete et al., 2017; Basow et al., 2013; Fan et al., 2019; Park & Dooris, 2020; Smith & Hawkins, 2011; Zipser et al., 2021). While the sample sizes of these studies have been large, most of the literature has been limited in generalizability because the sample focused on student evaluations within one institution or one department within a single institution (Adams et al., 2021; Fan et al., 2019; Park & Dooris, 2020; Smith & Hawkins, 2011; Zipser et al., 2021). Research has suggested that gender bias appears in student evaluations more frequently in natural science classrooms than in humanities, and that racial bias may decrease with increased diversity in the student body (Basow, 1995; Fan et al., 2019). Additionally, some research looked only at overall scores from student evaluations (Smith & Hawkins, 2011; Zipser et al., 2021), while other researchers focused on specific questions, open-ended questions, and learning outcomes (Adams et al., 2021; Basow et al., 2013; Park & Dooris, 2020). Quantitative measures have shown mixed results. Two quantitative studies found no indication of racial or gender bias against teachers in overall scores from student evaluations (Park & Dooris, 2020; Zipser et al., 2021), while another found that Black teachers received lower overall scores on student evaluations when they taught in a predominantly White institution (Smith & Hawkins, 2011).

Qualitative data and experimental research appear to demonstrate consistent bias toward instructors based on race and gender (Arbuckle & Williams, 2003; Fan et al., 2019). When overall scores found either no bias or a preference for female instructors, results from open-ended questions showed that students largely evaluated women higher when they were nurturing versus men who were rated higher based on perceived confidence and knowledgeability (Fan et al., 2019). When other factors were controlled for, such as style of teaching, results upheld a gender bias toward the teacher (Arbuckle & Williams, 2003). An experimental design asked psychology students to watch a video of a stick figure lecturing and found that teaching evaluations were higher when the students were told the stick figure was a man versus a woman (Arbuckle & Williams, 2003). These results suggest that some survey-based quantitative findings may not be sufficient alone to capture the presence of gender and racial biases toward instructors.

The presence of gender and racial biases may compound with previous research that suggests teachers are evaluated poorly when they teach diversity and social justice content, particularly in predominantly White institutions (Boatright-Horowitz & Soeung, 2009; Nast, 1999; Osei-Kofi, 2012). Discussing diversity and social justice in the classroom has even been referenced as "the kiss of death," regarding student evaluations (Nast, 1999; p. 105). Boatright-Horowitz & Soeung suggested that teaching content on diversity and social justice can have negative impacts on a teacher's career because of student retaliation via evaluations (2009). Based on these findings, when teachers hold marginalized identities and teach diversity and social justice the impact on student evaluations and career outlook may be twofold.

Creating Safe Classrooms for Critical Discussions

While the disadvantages to teachers who hold marginalized identities and teach diversity and social justice content has been acknowledged, signs of hope have emerged showing that

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students desire integration of this content into curriculum (Finkel, 2018; Vargas, 1999). To facilitate conversations in classrooms about diversity and social justice, classrooms must be considered safe spaces to voice thoughts and opinions. The classroom has been described as a space where students must share a space with others they might not otherwise interact with (Brigley Thompson, 2020). Judith Butler captures the classroom's inherent risk that results from sometimes unwilling cohabitation in society when she writes, "We are bound to those we do not know, and even those we did not choose, could never have chosen, and that these obligations are precontractual," (Butler, 2012, p. 140). As a result of this cohabitation, individuals sometimes unwillingly encounter moments that demand their response (Brigley Thompson, 2020). Since classrooms can never be made safe in the sense of freedom from this cohabitation, classrooms can be made safer when participants can expect boundaries to be implemented in the classroom (Harless, 2018, p. 335). Ideally, instructors facilitate boundaries in the classroom to make it a safe space for classroom discussion.

The term "safe space" is rooted in two different phenomena that are often conflated with each other (Harless, 2018). Harless notes that one version of a safe space is the safety-from environment which refers to a history of designated spaces for minoritized groups to gather that were separate or even secret from dominant society, which provided safety from physical and psychological harm (2018). The other version of a safe space is the safety-to environment which stems from group therapy established after World War II for veterans, in which participants were expected to maintain respect toward fellow group members (Harless, 2018). Harless rejects the idea that classrooms can ever be a safety-from environment, in which students are free from exposure to offensive statements (2018). Instead, Harless embraces the idea of creating a safety-

to classroom in which there are rules of engagement and offensive statements are addressed in a way that respects the dignity of the speaker (2018).

Safety in the classroom refers to psychological safety among instructors and other students (Holley & Steiner, 2005). Other researchers have used the term "dignity safety" which refers to a student's right to enter a classroom expecting that they will be treated as having equal social worth compared to their peers (Callan, 2016; p. 331). Psychological or dignity safety can be threatened by students or instructors using demeaning language that denigrates others in the classroom (Harless, 2018). The research has included autoethnographic reports on instructors' personal successes facilitating these types of classroom environments (Bukist et al., 2018; Toraiwa, 2009; Ulmer et al., 2016). Some have concurred with Harless that the classroom cannot be totally safe, but that the instructor can help create a safety-to environment (Brigley Thompson, 2020; Weitz, 2010).

Teacher Characteristics in Safe and Unsafe Classrooms

In safe classrooms, teachers help students to navigate the precariousness of the classroom (Brigley Thompson, 2020; Buskist et al., 2018; Holley & Steiner, 2005; Toraiwa, 2009). Teachers often serve as models for students of how to engage in constructive classroom dialogue (Brigley Thompson, 2020; Gutierrez & Gutierrez, 2019; Holley & Steiner, 2005; Toraiwa, 2009). Teachers contribute to a safe classroom when they demonstrate openness to discussions about diversity and social justice, share their own personal biases, and are respectful of students with differing views (Holley & Steiner, 2005). Additionally, teachers set boundaries in the classroom to help students practice mindfulness when emotions are heightened during class discussion (Weitz, 2010). At times this requires a teacher to use an authoritative approach by enforcing boundaries around engagement in the classroom (Weitz, 2010).

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Aside from modeling and boundary setting, teachers tend to create safe classrooms when they encourage students to share their perspectives, engage students' viewpoints with curiosity, and practice nonjudgment (Buskist, et al., 2018; Holley & Steiner, 2005; Weitz, 2010). Classrooms become safer when teachers intentionally address statements that are considered derogatory toward individuals or groups of people in the classroom by using curiosity to fully understand the student's statement, asking questions that encourage critical thinking, and inviting additional perspectives from the classroom into the conversation (Buskist et al., 2018; Weitz, 2010). In these moments, teachers utilize modeling and boundary setting strategies when addressing derogatory statements in the classroom (Toraiwa, 2009). This would also include enforcing boundaries around how other students engage the student who has made a derogatory statement so as not to perpetuate degradation in the classroom (Weitz, 2010).

Just as teachers can shape a safer classroom, teachers can contribute to an unsafe environment within the classroom as well. Teachers are characterized as "unsafe" when they shut down discussions about diversity and social justice (Holley & Steiner, 2005). These teachers may also rely heavily on lectures, fail to engage students in discussion, and either criticize or ignore student comments (Holley & Steiner, 2005). Teachers may be considered unsafe in classrooms when they do not use inclusive language and do not use students' preferred pronouns (Pierre, 2017).

Student Characteristics in Safe and Unsafe Classrooms

Students also contribute to a safe classroom environment (Holley & Steiner, 2005). Students co-construct boundaries with teachers in the classroom (Ulmer et al., 2016). Students enforce boundaries while maintaining nonjudgmental attitudes toward their fellow students

(Holley & Steiner, 2005). Additionally, they ask probing questions that prompt critical thinking (Holley & Steiner, 2005).

In unsafe classrooms, students either do not participate in classroom discussions or they become agitated by discussions (Holley & Steiner, 2005). Students may make attempts to satisfy the instructor as opposed to collaborative discussions with their peers, leading to a competitive environment (Holley & Steiner, 2005). Additionally, students contribute to an unsafe classroom when they are resistant to efforts of creating boundaries in the classroom (Weitz, 2010).

Characteristics of the Physical and Emotional Environment in Safe and Unsafe Classrooms

Safe classrooms have been described in terms of both the physical and emotional environment (Buskist et al., 2018; Holley & Steiner, 2005; Toraiwa, 2009; Ulmer et al., 2016; Weitz, 2010). A common physical description of safe classrooms described seating as a roundtable or with chairs circled that included the instructor in the group (Holley & Steiner, 2005; Ulmer et al., 2016). Classrooms feel safer when students and the instructor can see each other easily (Holley & Steiner, 2005; Ulmer et al., 2016). The emotional environment of a safe classroom is differentiated from a therapy group via use of boundaries (Toraiwa, 2009). Boundaries might include establishing classroom norms around self-disclosure in the classroom and determining what level of disclosure is appropriate (Toraiwa, 2009).

Physical environments of unsafe classrooms may have row seating for lecture style lessons (Holley & Steiner, 2005). The inability to see the reactions of other students may contribute to a feeling of unease during classroom discussion (Holley & Steiner, 2005). Additionally, emotional boundaries may be blurred and create an unsafe emotional environment when students treat classroom discussion like a therapy group (Toraiwa, 2009).

Considerations of Intersectionality for Classroom Dynamics

Classrooms were considered safer by students when there were ground rules or a classroom social contract established at the outset for when conversations about diversity or social justice emerged (Garcia et al., 2019; Weitz, 2010). Part of establishing ground rules is the awareness of intersectionality in the classroom and how that can directly impact dynamics. Intersectionality can be a critical element of overall classroom dynamics and add additional nuance (Chan et al., 2018; Toraiwa, 2009). Intersectionality considers the interacting influences of the multiple identities held by individuals, such as class, race, and gender (Alvarez-Hernandez, 2020). Instructors who teach from an intersectionality framework can "enhance their students' critical thinking skills about multiculturalism," (Chan et al., 2018; p. 66). However, research on specifically how instructors can effectively address intersectionality in the classroom remains scant (Chan et al., 2018). Previous literature expounded on the ways in which researchers might effectively incorporate intersectionality in studies of psychology that may also apply to instructors (Cole, 2009). Cole (2009, p. 171) poses three important questions to consider: "First, who is included within this category? Second, what role does inequality play? Third, where are there similarities?" These questions facilitate understanding of intergroup diversity, power differentials, and what commonalities exist across peoples. While the intended audience is researchers, these questions can be helpful for instructors to consider as well. For example, awareness of the demographic makeup of a classroom, such as race, class, and gender, may provide useful insight for instructors of courses that include topics of diversity and social justice. Understanding how individuals within a group, such as race, may experience different areas of inequity based on gender, age, class, or ability adds depth to understanding a classroom makeup.

Classroom Discussions to Facilitate Learning & Counselor Development

When teachers consider the diverse makeup of the classroom and take steps to facilitate a safer environment, classroom discussion can be a valuable tool for student engagement and learning by engaging students as active learners (Bauer & Clancy, 2018; Fink, 2013). In line with the Affective Domain of Bloom's Taxonomy, classroom discussions may play a role in students responding to and receiving phenomenon before internalizing the values of diversity and social justice (Nelson et al., 2020). Classroom discussion also creates opportunities for students to be challenged and to grow in knowledge and understanding (Holley & Steiner, 2005). However, previous research has explored the nuance of guiding classroom discussion for the purpose of education while moderating the sharing of personal anecdotes. Research suggests that discouraging students from sharing their personal experience may sacrifice important contributions that would be beneficial for learning, while recognizing that personal anecdotes may enable some students to perpetuate discrimination (Shahjahan, 2008; Holley & Steiner, 2005). Moderating these discussions requires teachers to enact an authoritative approach to create boundaries (Toraiwa, 2009). However, previous research has shown that teachers who are women may be punished in student evaluations for using authoritative teaching, and even more so when the teacher is a graduate teaching assistant (Adams et al., 2021).

Experiences of Graduate Teaching Assistants

Although teaching assistants provide valuable services to their institutions, very little research has been done to understand the experiences of graduate teaching assistants inside the classroom. Graduate teaching assistants are often assigned to teach course material involving topics of diversity and social justice (Shahjahan, 2008; Madden, 2016; Tindell et al., 2016). Teaching assistants have reported similar challenges inside the classroom as faculty members,

but perceived power differentials by students can create compounding effects for teaching assistants.

Like previous findings among faculty, graduate teaching assistants have also received negative feedback on course evaluations after discussing diversity and social justice (Tindell et al., 2016). There is a dearth of research on the perceptions of graduate teaching assistants on teaching diversity and social justice in classrooms. However, the literature that does exist suggests that GTAs may feel fearful of engaging in critical conversations even if they believe it is right to do so (Madden, 2016). Graduate teaching assistants may want to facilitate dialogue on diversity and social justice but feel they lack skills necessary to do so effectively, or otherwise may feel pressured to avoid discussion of students' lived experiences in favor of focusing solely on course reading assignments (Madden, 2016; Shajahan, 2008). Additionally, GTAs who described themselves as uncomfortable with conflict reported increased difficulties in facilitating classroom discussions about diversity and social justice (Madden, 2016).

While some GTAs reported feeling ill equipped to facilitate conversations (Madden, 2016), others witnessed positive learning experiences with their students (Shahjahan, 2008; Tindell et al., 2016). Graduate teaching assistants have found ways to persist in promoting learning about diversity and social justice by including current social movements as topics and identifying intersectionality within the class (Tindell et al., 2016). Course content that adapted to conversations brought up in student dialogue within the classroom also led to enriched discussion and students expanding their viewpoints (Tindell et al., 2016). These experiences suggest that content on diversity and social justice can be taught effectively by GTAs and that it may not necessarily lead to a negative outcome.

Experiences of Graduate Teaching Assistants from Minoritized Groups

While some GTAs have experienced positive experiences with teaching diversity and social justice content, additional literature has emphasized the importance of understanding the experiences of GTAs who hold marginalized identities (Tindel et al., 2016). Luo et al. (2000) found that teaching assistants who were women or international faced more challenges from students. American graduate teaching assistants were more likely to encounter problematic student behaviors like arriving late for class, talking while the instructor was teaching, or packing up before the end of class; while international graduate teaching assistants were more likely to encounter students contradicting them during lecture, being outwardly disruptive, or making offensive comments to the instructor (Luo et al., 2000).

Scholars have demonstrated similar findings, noting that female graduate teaching assistants experienced marked differences in treatment by students as compared to male GTAs (Luo et al., 2000; MacNell et al., 2015; Madden, 2014). Luo et al. (2000) found that female GTAs were more likely to have students who did not complete assignments, were frequently absent, dominated discussions, and overtly challenged the GTA's authority. Madden (2014) renewed attention on the experiences of graduate teaching assistants through the lens of decolonial feminism which critically analyzes power differentials. Madden found that graduate teaching assistants who were men were almost immediately perceived as an authority figure while those who were women or international were not. Female graduate teaching assistants also received harsher feedback from students when they did not react in nurturing or forgiving ways to students who did not meet requirements; this was found to be even more present for women of color who were graduate teaching assistants (Madden, 2014). Further, MacNell et al. (2015) looked at student evaluations of a GTA who taught an online course and found that even when

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grades and comments were controlled, students rated the instructor higher when they believed it was a male compared to when they believed it was female.

In addition to being challenged and evaluated more severely, GTAs who hold minoritized identities may be perceived by students as having an agenda to advocate for their own groups (Tindell et al., 2016; Borden et al., 2018). As one GTA noted (Tindell et al., 2016), "For a Black woman to state that racism is still very prevalent and that male privilege exists, is viewed as no more than a personal complaint born out of frustration from a perceived, but non-existent disadvantage," (p. 163). This may create additional challenges when GTAs must teach on content that directly impacts them and that may be disregarded by students. Alternatively, GTAs who hold minoritized identities may be seen as unreliable or biased because of their held identities (Mitra, 2020).

Requirements & Emphasis on Diversity and Social Justice in Counselor Education

Against the backdrop of literature demonstrating the challenges of teaching diversity and social justice content, advances in the counseling field have emphasized the importance of conceptualizing mental health within a cultural and social justice framework (Ratts et al., 2016). The Association for Multicultural Counseling and Development published the Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies (MSJCC) set forth a guiding framework for positioning mental health within a diverse population in 2015 (Ratts et al., 2016). Within these guidelines, emphasis is placed on recognizing the intersectionality of race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, spirituality, and disability/temporarily abled status (Ratts et al., 2016). Ratts et al. acknowledge the importance of seeing client concerns as situated within an intersectionality of identities as well as forms of privilege and oppression that the client may experience (2016). The 2015 Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies also

produced the Multicultural and Social Justice Praxis as a model for counselors to incorporate these principles into their practice within the framework of intersectionality (Ratts et al., 2016). In response to this call to action, counselor educators are simultaneously tasked with preparing counseling trainees to fulfill this imperative.

Along with the standards set in the MSJCC, the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) sets the expectation that counselor education faculty will be engaged in advocacy as part of their role (2016). CACREP sets further standards that masters level and doctoral level students demonstrate competency in advocacy (2016). In 2009 CACREP defined advocacy as actions that "promote individual human worth, dignity, and potential; and oppose or work to change policies and procedures, systemic barriers, long-standing traditions, and preconceived notions that stifle human development (p. 59). Accredited programs require counseling students at both the masters and doctoral level to take courses in diversity and social justice to develop awareness but increasing literature has made the case to incorporate diversity and social justice into all aspects of the counselor education program (CACREP, 2016; Celinska & Swazo, 2016; Stadler et al., 2006). With the push to weave topics of diversity and social justice into all classes, there may be an increase in classroom discussions surrounding these topics.

Training Doctoral Students in Counselor Education

Doctoral students in Counselor Education must show demonstrated competency in teaching and advocacy as part of their matriculation (CACREP, 2016). One way that doctoral students may develop these skills is through GTA assignments. However, Madden (2014) found that GTAs reported a perceived lack of support and investment in their teaching development. This finding reiterates Luo et al.'s (2000) report that many graduate teaching assistants knew

little about what their teaching duties and responsibilities were. GTAs may also value critical pedagogy that emphasizes diversity and social justice, but without sufficient training may feel limited or unable to implement it in the classroom (Madden 2014). To continue developing counselor educators with competency to teach diversity and social justice content and to address critical moments that result, it will be important to understand the current experiences of GTAs in Counselor Education who are engaged with this content.

Significance of the Study

There is currently no clear explanation in the literature of what constitutes a safe classroom or how it may be recreated and taught to doctoral students in Counselor Education. This gap may leave GTAs to discern their own methods while simultaneously navigating power differentials and intersectionality in the classroom. Deeper understanding of the experiences of GTAs in Counselor Education creating safe classrooms when teaching courses focused on diversity and social justice may offer insight into the needs of doctoral students to prepare for faculty roles. With this information, Counselor Education programs may develop focused content that addresses these needs. In addition, understanding these experiences may contribute to a body of literature that lays a foundation for identifying safe classrooms and relevant strategies for replicating them.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of GTAs in Counselor Education creating a safe classroom when teaching diversity and social justice focused courses. Previous literature suggests that GTAs may encounter challenges when teaching diversity and social justice content compounded by differing student reactions to their held identities (Madden, 2014; Tindell et al., 2016). However, there have been no previous studies that specifically explore the

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experiences of GTAs in Counselor Education who teach this content. Therefore, this study sought to explore these experiences.

Research Questions

The following question guided this critical phenomenological inquiry:

1. What do GTAs in Counselor Education experience when creating and maintaining safe classrooms when teaching courses focused on diversity and social justice?

Chapter 2: Methodology

Qualitative Methodology

The literature demonstrates that quantitative and qualitative inquiry offer different perspectives on the experiences of teachers in the higher education classroom, while nuance is often revealed in qualitative data. Qualitative inquiry maintains that subjective forms of data collection identify aspects of the human experience that cannot be captured in quantitative measures (Jovanovic, 2011; Schwandt, 2015; Stake, 2010). For this study, qualitative inquiry lends itself to understanding the lived experiences of GTAs in Counselor Education creating and maintaining safe classrooms when teaching courses focused on diversity and social justice. A qualitative approach may capture potential nuances that inform understanding of both common and unique experiences. By offering rich descriptions of the phenomenon, qualitative inquiry provides additional insight into human perception and meaning making that form another dimension of reality (Jovanovic, 2011; Stake, 2010; Wertz, 2014). The purpose of this study was to explore what GTAs in Counselor Education experience when creating a safe classroom to teach diversity and social justice focused courses. Through a critical realist lens of qualitative inquiry, the research may also reveal potential causal mechanisms of these experiences (Fryer, 2022).

Critical Realism as a Philosophical Commitment

Adherents to critical realism as a philosophical commitment believe that qualitative research can, and should, identify causal mechanisms of phenomena (Fryer, 2022). Based on this premise, the current research will seek to identify causal mechanisms of GTA experiences with creating safe classrooms when teaching diversity and social justice content. According to critical realism, causal mechanisms are one part of a multipronged conceptualization of reality (Bhaskar,

1979). Ontologically, reality exists as an interaction between the real, the actual, and the empirical (Bhaskar, 1979). Causal mechanisms are situated within the real, referenced also as social structures in human sciences (Gorski, 2013). Causal mechanisms, or social structures, are viewed as tendencies and not as universal laws that can predict the future (Bhaskar, 1979). Epistemologically, they cannot be fully observed by the researcher, but they can be "detected through their effects," (Willig, 1999, p. 45). Subsequently, the actual encompasses all events that occur because of these social structures, which may or may not be experienced by an individual (Bhaskar, 1979; Gorski, 2013). Finally, the empirical describes what the individual experiences (Bhaskar, 1979). The interaction of these dimensions can explain differing experiences of GTAs who teach diversity and social justice content, acknowledging that social determinants of these experiences may exist regardless of whether they are experienced by the individual (Bhaskar, 1979).

Phenomenology Integrated with Critical Realism

Likewise, phenomenology seeks to understand multiple individuals' descriptions of reality focused on a specific phenomenon, making it congruent with a critical realist philosophical assumption for this study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Aligning with a critical realist philosophical assumption, this study will seek to identify potential causal mechanisms that GTAs in Counselor Education associate with their experiences of creating and maintaining a safe classroom when teaching courses focused on diversity and social justice. Phenomenology as a research method looks at the lived experiences of multiple individuals who have experienced a similar phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Based on these accounts, the researcher summarizes the experiences of the phenomenon with a description of the essence (van Manen, 1990) and how the phenomenon was experienced (Moustakas, 1994). The guiding assumptions

of this study align with phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty who posited that understanding phenomena is limited by focusing only on the empirical (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1962). Merleau-Ponty's consideration of phenomenology agrees with Bhaskar's critical realist ontology according to the view that individual experiences of reality are influenced by a larger social context (Bhaskar, 1979; Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1962).

Phenomenology has been previously utilized as a research method with a critical realist philosophical assumption (Budd et al., 2010; Hood, 2016; Willig, 1999). Phenomenology is harmonious with a critical realist ontology and epistemology based on a shared "apprehension of the relationship of parts and wholes," (Budd, 2012, p. 76). In other words, phenomenology focuses on the lived experience while adding a critical realist ontology and epistemology enhances the researcher's understanding by adding structural context (Hood, 2016). This combination also considers the tension that exists between individual agency and the influence of social structures on decision making; and it maintains that they must be considered together (Budd, 2012). Based on a critical realist ontology, phenomenology informs the empirical domain of reality, while also acknowledging that the actual and real domains exist (Budd, 2012). Because of this simultaneous existence, individuals have free will; but it is inevitably shaped by the presence of social structures (Bhaskar, 1979). Therefore, the experiences of GTAs who create safe classrooms in diversity and social justice focused courses should be explored with phenomenological research that examines experiences guided by a critical realist ontology and epistemology which conceptualize the social structures that may impact those experiences (Budd et al., 2010; Hood, 2016; Willig, 1999).

Theoretical Foundations

To position the data in context and identify causal mechanisms, a theory of safe classrooms is needed to ground the findings. This study explored the experiences of GTAs in Counselor Education when creating a safe classroom while teaching diversity and social justice focused courses. While there is currently no explicitly stated theory of a safe classroom, common descriptions in the literature will inform descriptions of a safe classroom. These descriptions have characterized safe classrooms as ones in which the teacher sets and enforces boundaries around classroom engagement (Brigley Thompson, 2020; Buskist et al., 2018; Holley & Steiner, 2005; Toraiwa, 2009). Additionally, teachers model expectations for student engagement and emotional regulation while demonstrating respectful curiosity toward students with differing views (Brigley Thompson, 2020; Gutierrez & Gutierrez, 2019; Holley & Steiner, 2005; Toraiwa, 2009).

Procedures

Participant Selection

Participants were selected based on their status as a current GTA in counselor education who teach or have taught diversity and multicultural focused course. Snowball sampling was used along with purposeful, maximum variation sampling as it is possible in order to gain a breadth of perspectives (Etikan et al., 2016). By purposefully seeking diversity in participant selection, the experiences of GTAs in counselor education who teach diversity and social justice content will be better understood by allowing the researcher to identify commonalities in experiences across groups while gaining multiple vantage points of the effects of potential causal mechanisms (Willig, 1999). Additionally, purposeful sampling allowed the researcher to ensure the representation of minoritized groups that may otherwise not be captured in random sampling

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(Etikan et al., 2016). Participants were excluded if they had less than one semester of teaching experience as a GTA. The total number of participants interviewed was eight persons to achieve thematic saturation (Baker & Edwards, 2012; Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). Thematic saturation was achieved when interviews no longer produced novel insights and identified themes became repetitive (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022).

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Race/Ethnicity	Gender Identity	Age	Region
Black or African American (2)	Female (8)	25-34 (5)	South (8)
Hispanic/Latinx (1)		35-49 (3)	
Arab (1)			
White (4)			

Note. (n=8)

<center>**Data Collection**</center>

Demographic Questionnaire

Initial data collection began with using a Qualtrics survey designed for purposeful sampling. The survey collected information related to race, gender, sexual orientation, region, and whether the participant has taught a diversity and social justice focused course in a Counselor Education program. The survey was distributed through an email disseminated by the GTA supervisor of a Counselor Education program. Because responses were initiated by using a link to the Qualtrics survey, the GTA supervisor did not have the ability to see who responded. Some participants reported that their race or ethnicity was not represented in the demographic questionnaire. A report of the demographics as self-described by the participants is represented in Table 1.

Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted via Zoom with for 60 to 90 minutes to seek saturation in the research data (Baker & Edwards, 2012). The semi-structured format allowed for use of a guided script that includes flexibility for asking follow-up questions to participant responses (Josselson, 2013) (See Appendix C). By using this structure, participants could provide rich descriptions of their experiences as it relates to the research question (Josselson, 2013). Interviews began with an open-ended question about the participants' experiences teaching a course focused on diversity and social justice content, followed by eight additional questions. The literature guided the development of interview questions, which has suggested that classroom safety is often positioned within the context of classroom discussions (Holley & Steiner, 2005; Tindell et al., 2016; Toraiwa, 2009; Ulmer et al., 2016; Weitz, 2010). Through the lens of a critical phenomenological study, additional questions were developed to ask participants about potential causal mechanisms they believe influenced their experiences with facilitating safe classrooms (Fryer, 2022). These interviews were transcribed to undergo coding guided with a critical realist framework (Fryer, 2022).

Data Analysis

Data collected from participant interviews was analyzed via thematic analysis using a critical realist framework (Fryer, 2022). Thematic analysis is a commonly used method in qualitative research (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019; Fryer, 2022). Thematic analysis using a critical realist framework is differentiated from Braun and Clarke's (2006) reflexive thematic analysis, which is rooted in philosophical constructivism and is one of the most cited frameworks. While both frameworks share an emphasis on the value of qualitative data, they diverge in how the data is presented (Fryer, 2022). Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2019) model of

thematic analysis seek to present "interpretive stories about the data," (2019, p. 594). Contrastingly, a critical realist model posits that research should both explore participants' experiences and produce hypotheses of causal mechanisms based on those experiences via retroductive reasoning (Fryer, 2022).

To provide descriptions of Counselor Education GTAs' experiences creating safe classrooms in diversity and social justice focused classes and hypotheses of causal mechanisms, the researcher used coding as part of thematic analysis (Fryer, 2022). The practice of coding stems from positivistic thematic analysis and seeks to identify commonalities between participant responses with labels that are interpreted by the researcher (Boyatzis, 1998). These labels are categorized into themes (Boyatzis, 1998). According to a critical realist analysis, coding begins with a descriptive coding in which the researcher seeks to describe the participants' experiences (Fryer, 2022; Saldana, 2021). For this study, transcripts were coded in the first round one at a time. After this initial round of coding, the researcher used a second round of coding across transcripts using causation coding to identify potential causal mechanisms that became themes (Fryer, 2022; Saldana, 2021).

For presentation of the data, Fryer's (2022) critical realist thematic analysis renames Bhaskar's initial descriptions of the real, actual, and empirical as experiences, events, and causes. Experiences represent the GTAs' perceptions of their experiences creating a safe classroom when teaching diversity and social justice focused courses, while events refer to general events that are referenced by the participants (Fryer, 2022). Subsequently, causes refer to the causal mechanisms of the events that the GTAs experience and perceive (Fryer, 2022). Experiences were be represented by the data, events were be represented in codes, and causes were

represented in themes (Fryer, 2022). All participants are referenced by pseudynoms that were either selected by the participant or assigned by the researcher.

Trustworthiness & Credibility

Qualitative research guided by a critical realist paradigm claims inherent subjectivity in research since "the way we perceive facts, particularly in the social realm, depends partly upon our beliefs and expectations," (Bunge, 1993, p. 231). Because of this, the researcher seeks to increase validity of the findings through triangulation of the data and reflexivity practices (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Schwandt, 2015). By providing rich description of the participant experiences that include "interconnected details," readers can decide on generalization of the findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Stake, 2010, p. 49). Therefore, the auditor sought to verify the codebook and identified themes for "consistency of meaning," or, using critical realist terminology, to eliminate alternative causes of events and experiences (Madill et al., 2000; p. 4; Smith & Johnston, 2014). Reflexivity was achieved by recording reflections during the coding process to document emerging thoughts and bracket perceptions about the research from my own experiences of the phenomenon (Ortlipp, 2008).

Auditor

Qualitative researchers increase reliability in the findings when an outside reader reviews the procedures and collected data in the study (Schwandt, 2015). For this study, Matt Gonzales who is a doctoral student Counselor Education with training in qualitative inquiry served as the auditor to determine trustworthiness. To demonstrate dependability of the research, the auditor had access to the collected data and the identified codes to compare their own coding to (Schwandt, 2015).

Member Checking

Member checking was conducted with participants to allow them the opportunity to confirm the findings of the researcher (Scwandt, 2015). For this study, participants were provided with descriptions of the identified themes and given the opportunity to offer feedback to the interpretations. Member checking allowed participants to confirm both the descriptions of their experiences and the identified potential causal mechanisms. This added a layer of triangulation of the data, and allow participants the opportunity to eliminate alternative potential causal mechanisms (Smith & Johnston, 2014). Two out of eight participants responded to a request for feedback. The participants who responded did not have any feedback for changes.

Researcher Subjectivity

My previous experiences as the researcher both overlap and diverge from the phenomenon being studied. While I have previously held the role as a GTA in Counselor Education, I did not teach courses focused on diversity and social justice. However, I have been part of classroom discussions focused on diversity and social justice as a doctoral student and have witnessed critical moments in the classroom as part of these discussions. This has led to my own experiences of a safe and unsafe classroom environment through the lens of a student. As I engaged in this research I reflected on my previous experiences to bracket my experience from that of the participants (Schwandt, 2015). I also bracketed my experiences from the standpoint of a White, Christian, cis-gender, able-bodied woman and how this might impact my perceptions of a safe or unsafe classroom. I engaged with the research with the assumption that students and instructors privileged and marginalized identities impact experiences of creating a safe classroom when discussing diversity and social justice content.

Chapter 3: Results

The interviews conducted in this research revealed the lived experiences of GTAs in Counselor Education who facilitate safe classrooms while teaching courses focused on diversity and social justice. The GTAs interviewed described contributing factors to their confidence as an instructor and how they balanced an awareness of self and their students to build the culture of a safe classroom. In alignment with an integrated framework of phenomenology and critical realism, the following themes are presented as causal mechanisms of their experiences (Fryer, 2022; Saldana, 2021). Table 2 outlines an overview of each theme (see Appendix D). These themes included 1) Training Impacted Instructor Confidence 2) Peer Support Impacted Instructor Confidence 3) Use of Personal Experience as a Teaching Strategy Created Safe Classrooms 4) Experiences of Minoritized Instructors Involved an Additional Emotional Toll 5) Navigating Nuanced Experiences with Classroom Safety Required an Involved Instructor 6) Classroom Discussions Were Measurements of Learning & Cohesion and 7) Self-Awareness and Awareness of Audience Influenced Decision Making.

Discussion of Themes

Training Impacted Instructor Confidence

Participants emphasized the relevance of their training in their ability to create a safe classroom more than any other identified theme. Training was a reference point for how participants conducted their classes as GTAs. Some participants reported that they received no training prior to becoming the sole instructor of a course focused on diversity and social justice. Further, some participants who did not receive training described teaching their first class during the year of 2020, which coincided with COVID-19 and racial tensions following the murder of George Floyd. Beth described her experience during this time and how she coped with the lack of training by relying on skills she gained from other professional experiences.

I think that when we came on board, it was a lot of chaos. It was a lot of racial conflict.

So a lot of that. So imagine us going teaching this class right in this slap-middle of racial

conflict. And for mostly everybody, it was their first time teaching. And so while it was

the student, well, I started teaching at [my school], actually the same time I started

teaching at [another school], but I also worked in foster care, and I worked in trauma, and

I've worked in all of these other settings. So I've taught about, I've taught foster parents

about trauma, and I've taught them about interracial adoption. So I had a lot of experience

about what it's like to talk to people and they're uncomfortable.

Participants who felt they did not receive sufficient training shared how it also led to feeling less

confident when they began teaching the course. Elise echoed this when discussing teaching

experiences while having had insufficient training.

So the first time I taught it, it was pretty general training of like, this is the course

content, this is the information that you need to…talk about. And then we were kind of

sent on our way. And I think as a department they realized like, that's not the very best

way of engaging and training students.

She suggested that GTAs be given the opportunity to shadow a more experienced instructor

before being assigned as the primary instructor for a class focused on diversity and social justice.

Other participants received training intensives to prepare for teaching a class focused on

diversity and social justice. This training addressed specific scenarios instructors might

encounter, such as when a student was focused on creating disruption by using inciteful

language. Kaia reflected on her experience of a training intensive:

And the beginning of like the fall semester, I do remember there being a training

specifically about…here are types of students you may encounter and here are strategies

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to combat those students. Like a fire starter, like someone who might just kind of want to see the world burn. And you can like, if they're asking you very like somewhat outlandish questions, kind of tasking them with maybe this is something that you can figure out yourself and bring into the classroom. So I do recall there being like specific strategies to deal with types of problematic students.

Lily described how her training specifically prepared her to teach a class focused on diversity and social justice. "It wasn't so much pedagological training, it was more, I suppose I had some training in how to work with multiculturalism and social justice more within the context of a counselor." Heather elaborated on how her training prepared her to manage student reactions in a diversity and social justice focused course as well as how the training prompted her to develop her teaching philosophy and identity while teaching the course:

Well, I started teaching the diversity course literally my first semester of my doc program. So first day of school and I had had an orientation, so we did an orientation where a professor, a really established professor gave us a two-hour training on working with students. And so I had some general information about what kind of classroom procedures I should use for, and like looking out for different kinds of students. So like looking out for the fire starters. So the person who just wants to burn down everything and doesn't really want to create any learning or do any learning, they're just kind of angry. And so I had that. And then a lot of it was self-exploration, like what kind of teacher I wanted to be, what kind of instructor I wanted to be, until I had my teaching practicum and teaching internship.

As participants recalled memories about their training, they simultaneously described the impact that peer support had on their teaching experience. From this, the following theme emerged.

Peer Support Impacted Instructor Confidence

Having peer support helped GTAs feel more confident about their ability to facilitate a safe classroom environment. Peer support came from informal communications between the GTAs as well as structured meetings between GTAs teaching the same class facilitated by a faculty member. Maria described a positive experience receiving peer support:

> The peer support was valuable, very valuable. Receiving that peer support and having other instructors. And then even sharing, maybe not thinking about what are the areas like... We think about, how are we feeling, teaching this course and how am I showing up and how am I presenting in the classroom? But we don't think about, What are my successes in the classroom? And when you have to share that with a peer, it brings out the positive. It's like, Okay, well, maybe I need to do some more of this. And then so just that exchange I think was the biggest support.

Participants described how peer support gave them teaching strategies for facilitating a safe classroom. Sara reflected on the positive impact talking to more experienced GTAs had on her confidence:

> And maybe something I forgot about is when I first got here, and the feedback I received while I was learning how to teach this specific class came from older students in the program, so students who were a year or two or three ahead of me, that very first semester, their feedback was critical and their support and the way they've done things

helped put the pieces together for this specific location. 'Cause the location was new for me.

Additionally, peer support helped Sara to navigate the classroom environment in a region that she was new to.

Beth described a different experience with receiving peer support. Beth's opportunities for peer support came primarily from structured GTA meetings facilitated by a faculty member. She described how large, structured meetings did not provide enough support:

> I guess the support was offered, but I don't think I ever really had support. I navigated it using my counseling skills, using the skills I already had. Nobody checked in like I checked in with these students who was receiving this difficult information. Right? It would've been nice to receive that same courtesy because having a GTA meeting is just not good enough enough... Having a GTA meeting is not good enough, is not good enough. You have them 'cause you got so many people and everybody is not able to share. You get what I'm saying? Or people feel uncomfortable sharing.

Beth's perspective suggests that having smaller groups or individual check-ins might provide more valuable opportunities for support. This also may allow for support and learning to occur through more direct peer relationships. Elise described how forming relationships with other GTAs allowed her to examine her own biases as a white woman.

> But if we as coworkers, colleagues, friends, professionals can create a space and then my, and have maybe someone who's further along in their journey or their development or their teaching experience, say, Hey, I'm a white individual and I've done this gives other white individuals permission to be like, Hey, me too. And then not only seeing that, but then being able to create connections and relationships with people of color who are in

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the profession, who are also teaching the content and asking them questions and building

that relationship, not only, again, models for our students, what we hope that they will do.

Peer support allowed participants to form relationships with fellow GTAs who represented

diverse backgrounds. Building these relationships was also a source of modeling for their

students how they might interact with diverse classmates.

Use of Personal Experience as a Teaching Strategy Created Safe Classrooms

Participants used modeling and self-disclosure about their personal experiences to teach

students how to co-facilitate a safe classroom environment. While participants utilized many

teaching strategies in addition to these, modeling and self-disclosure were reported most often

and associated with positive outcomes for creating a safe classroom environment. Heather

recounted how using her own experience opened classroom dialogue about student experiences.

So when it felt safe to have discussions, I think it was mostly when I was utilizing humor,

so we would kind of talk about something or putting things... Which I did a lot putting

things within the context of my own experience, and so when I would talk about a racial

identity theory or racial identity development theory, I would talk about my own racial

identity development. And then pose a question based off of the context of their own

development in that way, and so I think that that transparency and me sharing about my

own journey with the topic was helpful.

Samantha shared a similar experience of using self-disclosure and modeling cultural humility:

I really tried to be genuine about my own placement in society. That I am a person with a

privileged background. This is... These are the identities that I hold. Look, at the end of

the day, that's what our... Those are the identities I hold. But I'm never, whether I have a

PhD in Physics, if I have... And I'm teaching a physics class, whether I am this amazing author, I'm never going to have all the knowledge necessary in the world.

Participants described that the classroom felt safer for respectful discussion when they normalized not having all the answers about diversity and social justice.

Notably, two participants who identified as Black women described another dimension of modeling and self-disclosure. They described how their identities were made relevant at a primarily white institution. Beth reflected on reactions she received from students:

So I didn't feel safe to talk or open up because my instructor was Black. And again, that's typically put on a course evaluations or different things like that, and then you also maybe hear at the end, "Yeah, I thought the class just focused on really just making white people look bad."

Kaia also described cognizance of her identity when students who attempted to participate in class discussions made offensive statements.

And a part of me had to be like, here she is trying here she is terrified of saying the wrong thing. Like a lot of white students are in these kinds of classes and here she is participating. There is a way that I need to try and honor that. So that kind of speaks to some of the…gymnastics that I was talking about.

When students made statements that revealed racial biases, Kaia described it as an emotional toll that she paid to maintain empathy for the student while managing her own reactions. These contrasting experiences led to the emergence of another theme.

Experiences of Minoritized Instructors Involved an Additional Emotional Toll

Some participants who held minoritized racial identities described ways that they tried to facilitate a safe classroom environment at a primarily white institution. Beth described how she maintained a positive regard toward her students who expressed biased views.

> I realized in that moment that there are people that want to know the truth. They just don't know. They have been told these things. And I know that the way you do that, and I learned this a long time ago, the way you really able to speak to people is that you first got to show them that you care, right? The Maya Angelou quote, they've said, hey, I mean, like, you got to show people you care before you can really do anything else above all else. So my approach is, let me show these freshmen, mostly all freshmen, let me show these students that I care about them and let's take this approach.

While Beth strived to maintain a positive regard toward all her students, she also described exhaustion that came from always having to be the "better person" in the face of microaggressions from students. Maria further described the exhaustion that came from teaching a diversity and social justice course while holding a minoritized identity:

> It can really take on an emotional toll to absorb being a woman of color. And all three of us, now that I think about it, me being Latina, the other one, I wanna say she identifies in the Asian-American community, and the other one was Black. Just really expressing, this is difficult showing up and there's a lot of resistance, and I'm not from here, and I'm absorbing all of this information. And even maybe they had experiences with students that were a little bit more blunt or a little bit more direct with their discontent or disagreement with the topic. It's very difficult emotionally to teach a course like that and it takes a lot out of an individual.

Maria expressed how oppressive it felt when students refused to acknowledge the existence of racism. Beth further expressed Maria's sentiment of how taxing it was for an individual to teach a diversity and social justice course.

> I can tell you as an instructor of color who teaches those classes…I will absolutely say, and I'm going to be confident in this, it don't matter what race you are, you need training before you go in. Some of us naturally can do it, but it tears some, I mean, and I've seen it do it personally…from other GTAs sharing with me what it does to them.

Beth described how the challenges of teaching the course had negative emotional impacts on her fellow GTAs regardless of their race. While many participants like Beth described negative classroom encounters, some dynamics with students were reported as being more nuanced.

Navigating Nuanced Experiences with Classroom Safety Required an Involved Instructor

Participants described how facilitating a safe classroom environment became nuanced when addressing critical moments. Participants took active roles in managing nuanced situations. Many participants described efforts to acknowledge the effort and growth of students in the classroom, even when they did not use correct terminology. However, some participants were forced to manage critical moments when students tried to overcorrect their peers in a way that was not appropriate to the moment or not scaffolded to their development. Heather described one such moment in which a student critiqued another student's class presentation:

> And at the very end of the presentation, they asked if any of the other students had any questions, and one student spoke up and said, "I don't really have a question, but I have a critique," and immediately went into critiquing how basically the student's presentation was from a white-washed perspective. And so I think what was unsafe about that was while the student was potentially technically correct about their assessment of the

student, of the student's presentation from a classroom environment standpoint, it wasn't the right context, or the right time. And so I think that me shutting it down faster, may have been more helpful because she had other critiques that went along with it after that, and so... Yeah, that was pretty unsafe. The student started crying and one of the students that was giving the presentation started crying.

Elise described how other nuanced experiences could be positive opportunities for embracing the varied experiences that students have had:

I had one student of color say, I've never really experienced racism, I don't know if that's just the environment I grew up in, but being able to create a space where they could share that experience was also very rewarding, but I also think it added to the conversations for everybody of recognizing, even people of color have very different experiences when we're talking about race and when we're talking about culture, and when we're talking about religion and gender, sexual orientation, and so it's okay to have a very wide spectrum of these experiences.

Sara also described how maintaining curiosity toward her students allowed for nuance in the classroom. In response to student resistance, she recalled:

I'm curious, I wanna understand how they got there, whether I, maybe, didn't explain things properly or maybe if the information I'm presenting is not complete, so it might be missing a perspective that I don't know about. So just keeping an open mind that what I'm saying in class is not the end-all be-all, no matter how much I personally believe it, and this is, I'm here for it, and this is how I view the world, and there's gonna be people who don't view things that way.

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As most of the nuanced experiences that participants described revolved around classroom discussions, this became the next theme.

Classroom Discussions Were Measurements of Learning & Cohesion

When asked what made the classroom feel safe, most participants described classroom safety when there was respectful classroom discussion. Respectful classroom discussion involved students showing cultural humility. Notably, participants frequently described safe classroom discussion in the context of students being broken up into small groups before rejoining for class discussion. Participants reported less student engagement when they approached classroom discussion as a whole class. Beth described her experience of when classroom safety was achieved:

When it felt safe, conversations was deep. Conversations, discussions would be in depth, they didn't wanna stop talking. When I walk around the room, when it feels safe, people were sharing their stories, people from both sides. When it felt safe, you can hear another person saying, "Well, you know what? My grandmama still use this word or my grand daddy still... Or I didn't really know, I went to school with all white people." When it feels safe, people start to feel comfortable and more vulnerable about telling their story, 'cause technically…they didn't know. They just didn't know what they didn't know.

Elise also described classroom safety when students were in small groups:

I also did a lot of small discussion, so breaking the students up in smaller groups where maybe they felt more comfortable sharing and they all, each week they had to rotate groups, and in that experience, it seemed not only did we become more cohesive as a group within the classroom, but we became more comfortable as a whole, sharing our

thoughts and opinions, even if they differed, or even if someone was struggling to

understand an experience of another student, there was a lot more openness to engage.

Small group discussions made students comfortable enough to engage with each other, which

had a positive impact on the overall feeling of classroom safety.

Sara described a different perspective of classroom safety and discussions. Sara shared

how viewing classroom discussions as a measurement of classroom safety can hinder the

instructor's openness to curiosity and assessing student learning. She reflected,

> I think we're interpreting or putting labels onto the silence when it comes to saying that it
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> might not have been safe, or it might have been safe. So, I don't know if it was safe for
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> students or unsafe to speak up, maybe it was more about they lacked their readiness, I
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> didn't create or I didn't give them enough tools yet.

Sara's perspective offered an alternative way to understand the role of classroom discussion.

Rather than being a measurement of safety, the quality of classroom discussion might more

accurately describe the presence of student learning and cohesion. To determine this, participants

concentrated on an awareness of their audience and of themselves.

Self-Awareness and Awareness of Audience Influenced Decision Making

Participants heavily focused on self-awareness and awareness of their audience makeup

to decide how to conduct class. Participants often reported noticing the racial makeup of the

classroom and the instructor's awareness of body language. Sara recollected nonverbal

communication she observed:

> So there's different levels of feedback, like the student who denies what is being shared,
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> so let's say I share a statistic or I talk about an experience. And I can tell the student is

receiving this very negatively, again, be that verbal or non-verbal, they push back their chair, they raise their hand, they say something.

Participants paid attention to students' body language and used it to gauge their level of rapport with students as well as learning outcomes. Many participants shared that the level of rapport they had with students impacted learning outcomes. They described how learning outcomes were achieved only when students felt safe to share how they received the information—something that required well established rapport.

Noticing body language also prompted participants to be aware of their own reactions in the classroom. Heather described how reflecting on her own racial identity helped her to consider other perspectives on how content was presented in the classroom:

And so I'm just really frank with them and having those really frank discussions. And so while I think that's helpful, I think that there's still more that needs to happen there. And yeah…some of the content probably was pretty whitewashed, and so I need to reexamine how I would present that information.

Kaia elaborated on how self-awareness of her positionality impacted the classroom. She mitigated this by using transparency:

If people like try to be neutral, I guess when they teach the class that I'm just, I'm too much of a transparent person. I'm not really good at that. So what I try to do is say, this is me. This is where I stand. Understand that this may be impacting the way I teach that course, but this is my personal, these are the concepts that I need you to know. If you have your way of thinking about it, that you feel like is different, that's fine. Understand these concepts and be able to talk through where you stand versus what the concept is that I'm teaching you.

Kaia made a point to acknowledge that her positionality as well as the students' positionality would show up in the classroom during discussions. Modeling self-awareness and transparency provided an example for students to practice their own self-awareness in the classroom. In addition, it helped her to pace content in a way that was scaffolded for her particular audience.

Maria described how scaffolding content based on the audience helped students to make connections between concepts that felt safer and concepts that felt more challenging. She noted that her students felt more comfortable discussing privilege and oppression in the context of classism and ableism. This allowed her to scaffold content to help students understand the same principles related to racism. Maria described how using scaffolded examples of these experiences helped students to be more receptive to content:

And I think for some students, that's where it clicks. It's like, Okay, I'm not bad because I have money, I'm not bad 'cause someone's paying for my tuition and I'm wearing Lululemon and have Starbucks every day. And then that opened up the platform for another student talking about the situation living in the dorms, where some of them were inaccessible. Or some of them, they were changing the bus routes and they had to walk to the bus route in the rain from their dorm. And I'm like, "Okay, so there's privilege for those of you living in front of a dorm. That's one less thing you have to worry about. All you have to do is put your backpack on and you get to focus on class."

She also described barriers to students using scaffolded examples they could relate to:

For that person that's worrying about transportation or getting wet in the rain or being late to class and all that stress and anxiety, that's a barrier. That's a barrier to learning. Depending where they're at financially, they may or may not be able to afford the car. So they make it and tuition covers and they get the scholarships because they may be a

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minority, but do they have the funds to really have the car and have that privilege of

getting to class without having to worry about any of this stuff? And I think about how

that affects and stresses students that have to think about how they're gonna get to class

or their grades being affected or how their instructors could review them and what

advantages they may or may not have, so explaining privilege in the sense of, This is an

advantage that you have. Whether you asked for it, whether you were born into it,

whether you acquired it later through education, money, love, opportunity, yeah.

By relating concepts of privilege and barriers to relative experiences of her audience, Maria was

able to build rapport with the students and continue introducing more content related to diversity

and social justice.

Chapter 4: Discussion

The purpose of this study was to understand what doctoral level graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) in Counselor Education may experience when creating and maintaining safe classrooms while teaching courses focused on diversity and social justice. As Counselor Education programs continue to emphasize cultural competency and humility, GTAs must receive training that prepares them to be faculty members that support this emphasis (CACREP, 2016; Ratts et al., 2016). While previous research in other fields described teaching experiences of GTAs when teaching diversity and social justice focused courses (Madden, 2014; Shahjahan, 2008; Tindell et al., 2016), this did not specifically extend to Counselor Education. This study aimed to fill the gap by highlighting the experiences of GTAs in Counselor Education and how they facilitated safe classrooms for teaching diversity and social justice content. Through a critical phenomonelogical lens, the researcher sought to examine how participants described their experiences and the causes that they attributed to them.

To understand these experiences, semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants. The format of semi-structured interviews allowed participants to describe their experiences and to expand on what they considered most salient to those experiences. Within the critical phenomenological framework, direct quotes were used in the findings to give voice to the participants' experiences. Identified themes were presented as the causal mechanisms that participants ascribed to their experiences. By using this framework, the causal mechanisms can become actionable items for Counselor Education programs to address when training future GTAs.

Previous research largely focused on the experiences of faculty members who taught diversity and social justice content. Frequently the research described ways in which faculty

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members themselves faced challenges when teaching this content, offering anecdotes about their own attempts to navigate classroom incivility and teach emotional regulation skills (Buskist, et al., 2018; Toraiwa, 2009; Weitz, 2010). Considering that there has been little research on how GTAs are trained to teach similar content, this may suggest that faculty members have been unable to train GTAs in areas that they themselves felt unprepared for or were actively navigating. Pressure to receive positive student evaluations and whether faculty members receive institutional support when students have negative reactions may further impact the extent to which GTAs are trained to engage in diversity and social justice content with students (Boatright-Horowitz & Soeung, 2009; Tindell et al., 2016). Despite this, findings of the present research suggest that training GTAs specifically to teach diversity and social justice content has an impact on the level of confidence they feel when teaching.

The extent of training that GTAs received prior to their first teaching assignment varied, but it was identified as a large contributing factor to the quality of teaching experiences that participants had. When prior training was limited, participants relied on their other professional experiences in counseling to inform their teaching skills. While previous experience was helpful to navigate student reactions to the content, participants reported feeling confident in their ability to handle student reactions when they received a training intensive focused on preparing GTAs to respond to different student reactions. Participants found it helpful when their training prepared them for handling students who were intentionally disruptive and unwilling to meaningfully engage in diversity or social justice focused content. However, training did not always translate to positive reactions from students toward the GTAs. GTAs who held minoritized racial identities reported a greater emotional toll and increased intensity of reactions from students compared to White GTAs that participated in this study.

Prior research chronicled the experiences of instructors who held marginalized racial identities and who taught diversity and social justice content. (Boatright-Horowitz & Soeung, 2009; Osei-Kofi, 2012; Tindell et al., 2016). Participants in this study who held marginalized racial identities described an emotional toll that was paid in order to maintain positive regard toward students who expressed discriminatory views. In addition to managing the classroom, participants had to manage their own reactions to harmful rhetoric when it occurred. This added an additional task for these GTAs to attend to in addition to monitoring other students' reactions, facilitating constructive dialogue, and managing the reactions of the speaker in response to correction. These participants described how having peer support from other GTAs teaching similar content was helpful, particularly when other GTAs also held marginalized racial identities and could relate to these experiences.

Most participants, including those who identified as white, shared how important it was to have peer support while teaching diversity and social justice content. This finding was similar to research that focused on the experiences of faculty who taught diversity and social justice content but was not described in the literature regarding GTAs (Brown, et al., 2023). Peer support provided opportunities for GTAs to collaborate and receive validation for their emotional experiences while teaching diversity and social justice content. Emotional experiences were not always something to hide from students, however. These internal experiences were also harnessed to create classroom safety.

Self-disclosure was also identified as critical to the teaching process and encouraging student dialogue. Participants used self-disclosure to acknowledge their own personal biases and to make space for students to also practice self-awareness. One interpretation of these findings is that self-disclosure functioned for different purposes when the GTA was white versus when they

held a marginalized racial identity. White participants described how the use of self-disclosure helped to ease tensions when the class was made up of primarily white students. In these instances, the GTA modeled how to lower defenses and acknowledge personal biases. While GTAs who held marginalized identities used self-disclosure for similar reasons, they also may have used self-disclosure as a means to appear non-threatening to students. This became particularly relevant when these GTAs received evaluations from students claiming that the class was anti-white. Receiving these evaluations suggests that students may attribute bias regarding race to GTAs who hold marginalized identities. This could create an additional challenge for GTAs who must build rapport with students in order to foster classroom engagement.

Once GTAs were able to establish rapport with students, classroom discussions became indicators of student learning and engagement. While previous research positioned classroom discussion as an indicator of safety (Buskist et al., 2018; Harless, 2018; Holley & Steiner, 2005; Shahjahan, 2008) one participant in this study described this language as defeatist. Viewing classroom discussion as an indicator of skill development rather than the presence of safety may prompt GTAs to consider if they have equipped students with language and skills to engage in constructive dialogue about diversity and social justice. By doing so, GTAs may be able to scaffold content to include further modeling and meta discussions about how to engage in classroom dialogue. The findings from this study also suggest that as classroom dialogue increases, the emergence of nuanced experiences requiring an involved instructor to navigate them may increase.

Prior research described instances of deliberate classroom incivility from students (Holley & Steiner, 2005; Luo et al., 2000; Toraiwa, 2009). It was anticipated that findings from this research would reveal similar instances. However, most of the participants described critical

moments of classroom dialogue as being more nuanced. GTAs in this study described how they navigated moments when they perceived students who used harmful rhetoric as attempting to engage in classroom dialogue in good faith. However, these students may have had limited experience with diversity and social justice content and did not realize when they were using problematic language. Additionally, some students tried to hold their fellow students accountable for their language, but they did so in a way that was derogatory and not scaffolded to the other students' development. This was consistent with prior research that described instances when students with shared interests in promoting diversity and inclusion resorted to degradation when they disagreed on how to achieve it (Toraiwa, 2009; Weitz, 2010).

In summary, the GTAs who participated in this study described several components of their experience and considerations that they made to create safe classrooms for teaching diversity and social justice content. Receiving specialized training for teaching diversity and social justice content helped GTAs feel more confident in navigating student reactions. Opportunities for peer support gave GTAs validation for their experiences and equipped them with further strategies to engage students. GTAs who held marginalized racial identities used peer support to debrief after experiencing an additional emotional toll when students were resistant to acknowledge forms of oppression. They also experienced additional emotional burdens when they managed their own reactions to students who used harmful rhetoric while attempting to engage in good faith. As students felt more comfortable participating in classroom discussions, GTAs were more likely to encounter critical moments when students attempted to hold other students accountable in derogatory ways. GTAs then focused on classroom attunement to manage reactions and correct the ways students engaged. By doing so, they restored the classroom to being a respectful environment.

Limitations of the Study

As in most qualitative studies, a default limitation of this study is the researcher's subjectivity. Since qualitative research requires the researcher to collect, analyze, and interpret the data it is important to mitigate the impact of the researcher's subjectivity (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Schwandt, 2015). While the use of an auditor and member checking were utilized for this purpose, my own experience as a former GTA may have influenced me to be sympathetic in my interpretation of participant experiences. Additionally, while member checking was used, not all participants responded to my request for feedback. However, those who did verified that the identified themes accurately represented their experiences.

Further, all of the participants in this study were GTAs at the same institution in the southern region of the United States. The findings from this research may not represent the experiences of GTAs at other institutions or in other regions. The purpose of qualitative research is also not to infer generalizability, but this may also be considered a limitation to the applicability of the research (Flamez et al, 2017).

Implications for Counselor Education

As Counselor Education programs continue to emphasize diversity and inclusion, faculty members must be prepared to educate and train students to engage with diversity and social justice content. Doctoral programs in Counselor Education are the funnels to which these faculty members originate with the expectation that they have been trained to be the trainer (CACREP, 2016). Counselor Education programs must ensure that they are providing doctoral students with strategies and skills to manage classroom incivility when they teach diversity and social justice content. Programs can offer specialized training in this area coupled with opportunities to receive peer support in order to increase doctoral students' confidence to teach the content.

Counselor Education programs should also demonstrate understanding and support for the additional toll that teaching this content has on instructors who hold marginalized identities. This would require programs to develop safe lines of communication that are non-punitive, such as anonymized surveys for GTAs to share experiences. Additionally, programs should offer resources to GTAs who may want access to counseling or opportunities to debrief about their experiences teaching diversity and social justice content. Programs should consider if these elements are also established to support present faculty members who teach diversity and social justice content. Ensuring that faculty members are trained and supported could create a byproduct of doctoral students feeling supported by their faculty and feeling prepared to teach this content when they progress to a faculty role.

Simultaneously, Counselor Education programs should integrate opportunities to teach students how to co-create safe classrooms with their instructors. This may include ensuring that students are familiar with the Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies and CACREP standards that inform the counseling profession. Counselor Education programs can help students to understand how engaging with diversity and social justice content in constructive ways align with the development of counselor identity and demonstrates competency in advocacy.

Further, teaching students about the concepts of safety-to versus safety-from classrooms can help adjust student expectations for classroom engagement (Harless, 2018). When students enter the classroom with an understanding of the public nature of the classroom paired with an expectation that the instructor will help maintain a respectful environment, they may be more likely to engage with diversity and social justice content. This may also be an opportunity to introduce students to the concept of scaffolding content and how it may present differently for

students who come from diverse backgrounds and experiences with diversity and social justice content. This may help students to feel empowered to co-create classroom boundaries with the instructor and to increase trust in the instructor to enforce them.

Recommendations for Further Research

The findings from this research present opportunities to further expand the understanding of how instructors in Counselor Education can facilitate safe classrooms while teaching diversity and social justice content. While this research focused on the experiences of GTAs in Counselor Education, previous research suggests that there may be unique challenges that untenured faculty in Counselor Education experience when teaching diversity and social justice content (Boatright-Horowitz & Soeung, 2009; Osei-Kofi, 2012; Tindell et al., 2016). Specifically, considerations about the use of student evaluations and examining the potential for an unintended customer service dynamic may be more salient for this group. Additional studies might examine the experiences of untenured faculty versus tenured faculty in Counselor Education to glean new insight into how programs may support the professional call for increased competency in diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Further studies may also create a narrower focus on understanding the experiences of GTAs, faculty members, and students when engaging with diversity and social justice content. For example, further research may provide more in-depth understanding to the experiences of instructors and students who hold marginalized identities when this content is taught. Important information might also be gained from focusing on student experiences in classes focused on diversity and social justice content. Research in this area may better inform how students and instructors can manage expectations of each other and co-create safe learning environments.

Conclusion

GTAs in Counselor Education are in an important stage of professional development as they prepare to become faculty members. Teaching courses help them to improve teaching and classroom management skills. However, not all teaching experiences are created equally. When GTAs are responsible for teaching classes with diversity and social justice content they may face unique challenges in classroom management. Managing classroom incivility may become a more likely experience. Counselor Education programs need to be prepared to train and support GTAs to manage student reactions to diversity and social justice content, with particular acknowledgement of additional emotional burdens that may be experienced by GTAs who hold marginalized racial identities. As the counseling profession continues to emphasize the importance of diversity, equity, and inclusion, it is depending on Counselor Education programs to supply instructors who are prepared to teach these values to future counselors-in-training.

Chapter 5: Manuscript

Abstract

The classroom is a gathering of individuals with diverse backgrounds and perspectives. When course content focuses on diversity and social justice content, discussions can invite dialogue with the potential to damage perceptions of psychological safety in the classroom. As Counselor Education programs continue to emphasize diversity, equity, and inclusion educators must navigate critical dialogue and ensure classroom safety. This research sought to understand the experiences of GTAs (graduate teaching assistants) in Counselor Education who created safe classroom environments while teaching content focused on diversity and social justice. Using a critical phenomenological framework of qualitative inquiry, the research found that GTAs felt confident to create safe classrooms when they received sufficient training and support for teaching diversity and social justice content. When GTAs felt confident to create safe classrooms they acted as involved instructors that practiced self-awareness, maintained boundaries around classroom discussions, and navigated nuanced moments of conflict. GTAs reported using self-disclosure of personal experiences as a tool for creating feelings of classroom safety and using classroom discussions as a measurement for cohesion and learning. Special attention should be paid to support GTAs who hold marginalized identities and who may experience microaggressions while teaching. Findings from this research may be used to inform how doctoral students and GTAs in Counselor Education are trained to educate counselors-in-training on diversity and social justice content.

Introduction

Classrooms are microcosms of society, where each class creates a unique makeup of individuals from diverse backgrounds and perspectives (Sue et al., 2009). Even the smallest class

size creates a public space that reflects the outside world of politics (Harless, 2018; Mitra, 2020). This meeting of minds creates a delicate environment for both students and teachers who must navigate the critical moments of public discourse (Brigley Thompson, 2020). Critical moments emerge when classroom discussions elicit commentary that threatens the psychological safety of students in the classroom (Buskist et al., 2018; Harless, 2018). These comments express rhetoric that may perpetuate marginalization or reinforce internalized oppression in minoritized students (Brigley Thompson, 2020; Harless, 2018; Toraiwa, 2009). If critical moments are left unaddressed, teachers risk nonverbally endorsing the harmful rhetoric; and if teachers address critical moments, they risk negative student evaluations or even lawsuits from disgruntled students (Brigley Thompson, 2020). Teachers encounter these moments and navigate them as an "ethical demand" with potential risk to their careers (Boatright-Horowitz & Soeung, 2009; Brigley Thompson, 2020, p. 399; Osei-Kofi, 2012). Additionally, as polarization has increased in both society and classrooms, teachers may be more likely to encounter these risks and critical moments when they are responsible for teaching courses on diversity and social justice (Clancy & Bauer, 2018; Mitra, 2020; Sue et al., 2009).

Higher education has increasingly integrated considerations of diversity into curriculum (Harless, 2018). While programs in the social sciences and humanities, such as feminism studies, have historically had a concentration of content related to diversity (Toraiwa, 2009; Weitz, 2010), programs like agriculture science have started integrating content on diversity as well (Drape et al., 2019, Tindell et al., 2016). Autoethnographic contributions have shared teachers' personal successes with teaching diversity content as well as warnings of caution surrounding critical moments (Toraiwa, 2009; Weitz, 2010). Further, almost all the literature described critical

moments in higher education in the context of classroom discussions (Holley & Steiner, 2005; Tindell et al., 2016; Toraiwa, 2009; Ulmer et al., 2016; Weitz, 2010).

Classroom discussions are commonly used tools of student engagement (Fritschner, 2000). Classroom discussions prompt students to use dialogue and critical thinking skills (Clancy & Bauer, 2018; Fink, 2013). Simultaneously, classroom discussions can be unpredictable based on what students say (Brigley Thompson, 2020; Harless, 2018). The unpredictable nature of classroom discussion opens the possibility for critical moments to occur (Harless, 2018). The outcome of critical moments in classroom discussion is often determined by how the teacher manages the classroom during the event (Brigley Thompson, 2020; Holley & Steiner, 2005; Weitz, 2010). Students have reported that they feel safer in the classroom when the teacher models constructive engagement and sets boundaries (Holley & Steiner, 2005). However, teachers may feel less empowered to set boundaries for classroom discussion when they do not have tenure, and student evaluations are heavily considered for advancement (Boatright-Horowitz & Soeung, 2009; Osei-Kofi, 2012).

Previous literature has reported that students can sometimes write scathing reviews of their teachers on student evaluations, particularly when they feel uncomfortable with diversity and social justice content (Boatright-Horowitz & Soeung, 2009; Osei-Kofi, 2012). Some scholars have gone so far as to state that negative student evaluations are assured if the course emphasizes diversity and social justice content (Boatright-Horowitz & Soeung, 2009). Despite these warnings, student evaluations are still a key part of tenure reviews (Kulik, 2001). This creates a dynamic in which teachers must also consider students as customers to please (Osei-Kofi, 2012).

The dynamics created by student evaluations may make managing the classroom a more difficult task (Boatright-Horowitz & Soeung, 2009; Osei-Kofi, 2012). Power dynamics are

persistent in classrooms, including dynamics of power based on marginalization (Adams et al., 2022; Basow et al., 2013; Madden, 2014; Toraiwa, 2009). Student evaluations and teacher experiences with classroom management can be drastically different based on how students react to the teacher's held identities (Arbuckle & Williams, 2003; Basow et al., 2013; Fan et al., 2019; Smith & Hawkins, 2011). Students may seek to undermine teachers from minoritized groups (Toraiwa, 2009). As a result, these teachers experience more classroom disruptions and even hostility from students (Toraiwa, 2009; Weitz, 2010).

Further, graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) also encounter greater demands for classroom management (Luo et al., 2000; Madden, 2014). GTAs may experience these difficulties with classroom management compounded by negative student reactions to their held identities (Luo et al., 2000). Even so, GTAs are often responsible for teaching course content in their departments (Shahjahan, 2008; Tindell et al., 2016). GTAs also use their experiences as opportunities to develop teaching and classroom management skills prior to seeking faculty positions (Madden, 2014).

Doctoral programs in Counselor Education also seek to prepare students for future roles as faculty (Baltrinic et al., 2016; Lamar & Helm, 2018). Both faculty and GTAs in Counselor Education are encouraged to integrate diversity and social justice content into required courses, as governing bodies in the counseling profession have increased emphasis on advocacy (Ratts et al., 2016). The Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Programs (CACREP) requires doctoral students to demonstrate competency in advocacy, and it encourages counselor education faculty to engage in advocacy as part of their role (2016). As the emphasis on diversity and social justice content continues to increase in counselor education, doctoral students will need to develop skills to manage critical moments that will inevitably arise.

While the experiences of teaching diversity content in higher education have been previously studied (Brigley Thompson, 2020; Buskist et al., 2018; Harless, 2018; Ulmer et al., 2016; Weitz, 2010), less research has been done to understand the lived experiences of graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) in Counselor Education who incorporate these topics in the classroom. The purpose of this study is to understand the experiences of GTAs in Counselor Education creating and maintaining safe classrooms when teaching courses focused on diversity and social justice. Understanding these experiences of GTAs in Counselor Education will help programs train doctoral students to manage classroom dynamics when they facilitate classroom discussions about diversity and social justice.

For this reason, this study sought to answer the following research question:

1.   What do GTAs in Counselor Education experience when creating and maintaining safe classrooms when teaching courses focused on diversity and social justice?

Philosophical Assumptions and Theoretical Foundations

The literature demonstrates that quantitative and qualitative inquiry offer different perspectives on the experiences of teachers in the higher education classroom, while nuance is often revealed in qualitative data. Qualitative inquiry maintains that subjective forms of data collection identify aspects of the human experience that cannot be captured in quantitative measures (Jovanovic, 2011; Schwandt, 2015; Stake, 2010). For this study, qualitative inquiry lends itself to understanding the lived experiences of GTAs in Counselor Education creating and maintaining safe classrooms when teaching courses focused on diversity and social justice. A qualitative approach may capture potential nuances that inform understanding of both common and unique experiences. By offering rich descriptions of the phenomenon, qualitative inquiry

provides additional insight into human perception and meaning making that form another dimension of reality (Jovanovic, 2011; Stake, 2010; Wertz, 2014).

Through a critical realist lens of qualitative inquiry, the research may also reveal potential causal mechanisms of these experiences (Fryer, 2022). Adherents to critical realism as a philosophical commitment believe that qualitative research can, and should, identify causal mechanisms of phenomena (Fryer, 2022). Based on this premise, this research sought to identify causal mechanisms of GTA experiences with creating safe classrooms when teaching diversity and social justice content. Ontologically, reality exists as an interaction between the real, the actual, and the empirical (Bhaskar, 1979). Causal mechanisms are situated within the real, referenced also as social structures in human sciences (Gorski, 2013). Causal mechanisms, or social structures, are viewed as tendencies and not as universal laws that can predict the future (Bhaskar, 1979). Epistemologically, they cannot be fully observed by the researcher, but they can be "detected through their effects," (Willig, 1999, p. 45). Subsequently, the actual encompasses all events that occur because of these social structures, which may or may not be experienced by an individual (Bhaskar, 1979; Gorski, 2013). Finally, the empirical describes what the individual experiences (Bhaskar, 1979). The interaction of these dimensions can explain differing experiences of GTAs who teach diversity and social justice content, acknowledging that social determinants of these experiences may exist regardless of whether they are experienced by the individual (Bhaskar, 1979).

Likewise, phenomenology seeks to understand multiple individuals' descriptions of reality focused on a specific phenomenon, making it congruent with a critical realist philosophical assumption for this study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Phenomenology as a research method looks at the lived experiences of multiple individuals who have experienced a similar

phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Based on these accounts, the researcher summarizes the experiences of the phenomenon with a description of the essence (van Manen, 1990) and how the phenomenon was experienced (Moustakas, 1994). Phenomenology is harmonious with a critical realist ontology and epistemology based on a shared "apprehension of the relationship of parts and wholes," (Budd, 2012, p. 76). In other words, phenomenology focuses on the lived experience while adding a critical realist ontology and epistemology enhances the researcher's understanding by adding structural context (Hood, 2016).

To position the data in context and identify causal mechanisms, a theory of safe classrooms was needed to ground the findings. This study explored the experiences of GTAs in Counselor Education when creating a safe classroom while teaching diversity and social justice focused courses. While there is currently no explicitly stated theory of a safe classroom, common descriptions in the literature informed descriptions of a safe classroom. These descriptions have characterized safe classrooms as ones in which the teacher sets and enforces boundaries around classroom engagement (Brigley Thompson, 2020; Buskist et al., 2018; Holley & Steiner, 2005; Toraiwa, 2009). Additionally, teachers model expectations for student engagement and emotional regulation while demonstrating respectful curiosity toward students with differing views (Brigley Thompson, 2020; Gutierrez & Gutierrez, 2019; Holley & Steiner, 2005; Toraiwa, 2009).

Procedure

Participants were selected based on their status as a current GTA in counselor education who teach or have taught diversity and multicultural focused course. Snowball sampling was used along with purposeful, maximum variation sampling as it was possible in order to gain a breadth of perspectives (Etikan et al., 2016). By purposefully seeking diversity in participant selection, the experiences of GTAs in counselor education who teach diversity and social justice

content will be better understood by allowing the researcher to identify commonalities in experiences across groups while gaining multiple vantage points of the effects of potential causal mechanisms (Willig, 1999). Additionally, purposeful sampling allowed the researcher to ensure representation of minoritized groups that may otherwise not be captured in random sampling (Etikan et al., 2016). Participants were excluded if they had less than one semester of teaching experience as a GTA. The total number of participants interviewed was eight persons to achieve thematic saturation (Baker & Edwards, 2012; Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). Thematic saturation was achieved when interviews no longer produced novel insights and identified themes became repetitive (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022).

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Race/Ethnicity	Gender Identity	Age	Region
Black or African American (2)	Female (8)	25-34 (5)	South (8)
Hispanic/Latinx (1)		35-49 (3)	
Arab (1)			
White (4)			

Note. (n=8)

Data Collection and Analysis

Initial data collection began with using a Qualtrics survey designed for purposeful sampling. The survey collected information related to race, gender, sexual orientation, region, and whether the participant has taught a diversity and social justice focused course in a Counselor Education program. The survey was distributed through an email disseminated by the GTA supervisor of a Counselor Education program. Because responses were initiated by using a

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link to the Qualtrics survey, the GTA supervisor did not have the ability to see who responded. Some participants reported that their race or ethnicity was not represented in the demographic questionnaire. A report of the demographics as self-described by the participants is represented in Table 1.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted via Zoom with for 60 to 90 minutes to seek saturation in the research data (Baker & Edwards, 2012). The semi-structured format allowed for use of a guided script that includes flexibility for asking follow-up questions to participant responses (Josselson, 2013). By using this structure, participants could provide rich descriptions of their experiences as it related to the research question (Josselson, 2013). These interviews were transcribed to undergo coding guided with a critical realist framework (Fryer, 2022). All participants are referenced by pseudonyms that were either selected by the participant or assigned by the researcher.

Data collected from participant interviews was analyzed via thematic analysis using a critical realist framework (Fryer, 2022). Thematic analysis is a commonly used method in qualitative research (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019; Fryer, 2022). Thematic analysis using a critical realist framework is differentiated from Braun and Clarke's (2006) reflexive thematic analysis, which is rooted in philosophical constructivism and is one of the most cited frameworks. While both frameworks share an emphasis on the value of qualitative data, they diverge in how the data is presented (Fryer, 2022). Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2019) model of thematic analysis seek to present "interpretive stories about the data," (2019, p. 594). Contrastingly, a critical realist model posits that research should both explore participants' experiences and produce hypotheses of causal mechanisms based on those experiences via retroductive reasoning (Fryer, 2022).

To provide descriptions of Counselor Education GTAs' experiences creating safe classrooms in diversity and social justice focused classes and hypotheses of causal mechanisms the research used coding as part of thematic analysis (Fryer, 2022). The practice of coding stems from positivistic thematic analysis and seeks to identify commonalities between participant responses with labels that are interpreted by the researcher (Boyatzis, 1998). These labels are categorized into themes (Boyatzis, 1998). According to a critical realist analysis, coding begins with a descriptive coding in which the researcher seeks to describe the participants' experiences (Fryer, 2022; Saldana, 2021). For this study, transcripts were coded in the first round one at a time. After this initial round of coding, the researcher uses a second round of coding across transcripts using causation coding to identify potential causal mechanisms that became themes (Fryer, 2022; Saldana, 2021).

For presentation of the data, Fryer's (2022) critical realist thematic analysis renames Bhaskar's initial descriptions of the real, actual, and empirical as experiences, events, and causes. Experiences represent the GTAs' perceptions of their experiences creating a safe classroom when teaching diversity and social justice focused courses, while events refer to general events that are referenced by the participants (Fryer, 2022). Subsequently, causes refer to the causal mechanisms of the events that the GTAs experience and perceive (Fryer, 2022). Experiences were be represented by the data, events were be represented in codes, and causes were represented in themes (Fryer, 2022).

Trustworthiness & Credibility

Qualitative research guided by a critical realist paradigm claims inherent subjectivity in research since "the way we perceive facts, particularly in the social realm, depends partly upon our beliefs and expectations," (Bunge, 1993, p. 231). Because of this, the researcher seeks to

increase validity of the findings through triangulation of the data and reflexivity practices

(Creswell & Poth, 2018; Schwandt, 2015). By providing rich description of the participant

experiences that include "interconnected details," readers can decide on generalization of the

findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Stake, 2010, p. 49). Therefore, the auditor sought to verify the

codebook and identified themes for "consistency of meaning," or, using critical realist

terminology, to eliminate alternative causes of events and experiences (Madill et al., 2000; p. 4;

Smith & Johnston, 2014). Reflexivity was achieved by using reflections during the coding

process to bracket perceptions about the data from my own experiences of the phenomenon

(Ortlipp, 2008). This was followed by having an auditor who had access to the collected data and

the identified codes to compare their own coding to (Schwandt, 2015).

Findings

The following themes emerged from the critical phenomenological analysis of the

reported experiences of eight GTAs: 1) Training impacted instructor confidence 2) Peer support

impacted instructor confidence 3) Use of personal experience as a teaching strategy created safe

classrooms 4) Experiences of minoritized instructors involved an additional emotional toll 5)

Navigating nuanced experiences with classroom safety required an involved instructor 6)

Classroom discussions were measurements of learning and cohesion 7) Self-awareness and

awareness of audience influenced decision making. Table 2 outlines an overview of each theme

(see Appendix D).

Training Impacted Instructor Confidence

Participants emphasized the relevance of their training in their ability to create a safe

classroom more than any other identified theme. Training was a reference point for how

participants conducted their classes as GTAs. Some participants reported that they received no

training prior to becoming the sole instructor of a course focused on diversity and social justice.

Further, some participants who did not receive training described teaching their first class during the year of 2020, which coincided with COVID-19 and racial tensions following the murder of George Floyd. Beth described her experience during this time and how she coped with the lack of training by relying on skills she gained from other professional experiences.

> I think that when we came on board, it was a lot of chaos. It was a lot of racial conflict. So a lot of that. So imagine us going teaching this class right in this slap-middle of racial conflict. And for mostly everybody, it was their first time teaching. And so while it was the student, well, I started teaching at [my school], actually the same time I started teaching at [another school], but I also worked in foster care, and I worked in trauma, and I've worked in all of these other settings. So I've taught about, I've taught foster parents about trauma, and I've taught them about interracial adoption. So I had a lot of experience about what it's like to talk to people and they're uncomfortable.

Participants who felt they did not receive sufficient training shared how it also led to feeling less confident when they began teaching the course. Elise echoed this when discussing teaching experiences while having had insufficient training.

> So the first time I taught it, it was pretty general training of like, this is the course content, this is the information that you need to…talk about. And then we were kind of sent on our way. And I think as a department they realized like, that's not the very best way of engaging and training students

She suggested that GTAs be given the opportunity to shadow a more experienced instructor before being assigned as the primary instructor for a class focused on diversity and social justice.

> Other participants received training intensives to prepare for teaching a class focused on diversity and social justice. This training addressed specific scenarios instructors might

encounter, such as when a student was focused on creating disruption by using inciteful language. Kaia reflected on her experience of a training intensive:

And the beginning of like the fall semester, I do remember there being a training specifically about…here are types of students you may encounter and here are strategies to combat those students. Like a fire starter, like someone who might just kind of want to see the world burn. And you can like, if they're asking you very like somewhat outlandish questions, kind of tasking them with maybe this is something that you can figure out yourself and bring into the classroom. So I do recall there being like specific strategies to deal with types of problematic students.

Lily described how her training specifically prepared her to teach a class focused on diversity and social justice. "It wasn't so much pedagological training, it was more, I suppose I had some training in how to work with multiculturalism and social justice more within the context of a counselor." Heather elaborated on how her training prepared her to manage student reactions in a diversity and social justice focused course:

Well, I started teaching the diversity course literally my first semester of my doc program. So first day of school and I had had an orientation, so we did an orientation where a professor, a really established professor gave us a two-hour training on working with students. And so I had some general information about what kind of classroom procedures I should use for, and like looking out for different kinds of students. So like looking out for the fire starters. So the person who just wants to burn down everything and doesn't really want to create any learning or do any learning, they're just kind of angry. And so I had that. And then a lot of it was self-exploration, like what kind of

teacher I wanted to be, what kind of instructor I wanted to be, until I had my teaching

practicum and teaching internship.

Heather described how the training prompted her to develop her teaching philosophy and identity

while teaching the course.

As participants recalled memories about their training, they simultaneously described the

impact that peer support had on their teaching experience. From this, the following theme

emerged.

Peer Support Impacted Instructor Confidence

Having peer support helped GTAs feel more confident about their ability to facilitate a

safe classroom environment. Peer support came from informal communications between the

GTAs as well as structured meetings between GTAs teaching the same class facilitated by a

faculty member. Maria described a positive experience receiving peer support:

The peer support was valuable, very valuable. Receiving that peer support and having

other instructors. And then even sharing, maybe not thinking about what are the areas

like... We think about, how are we feeling, teaching this course and how am I showing up

and how am I presenting in the classroom? But we don't think about, What are my

successes in the classroom? And when you have to share that with a peer, it brings out the

positive. It's like, Okay, well, maybe I need to do some more of this. And then so just that

exchange I think was the biggest support.

Participants described how peer support gave them teaching strategies for facilitating a safe

classroom. Sara reflected on the positive impact talking to more experienced GTAs had on her

confidence:

And maybe something I forgot about is when I first got here, and the feedback I received while I was learning how to teach this specific class came from older students in the program, so students who were a year or two or three ahead of me, that very first semester, their feedback was critical and their support and the way they've done things helped put the pieces together for this specific location. 'cause the location was new for me.

Additionally, peer support helped Sara to navigate the classroom environment in a region that she was new to.

Beth described a different experience with receiving peer support. Beth's opportunities for peer support came primarily from structured GTA meetings facilitated by a faculty member. She described how large, structured meetings did not provide enough support:

I guess the support was offered, but I don't think I ever really had support. I navigated it using my counseling skills, using the skills I already had. Nobody checked in like I checked in with these students who was receiving this difficult information. Right? It would've been nice to receive that same courtesy because having a GTA meeting is just not good enough enough... Having a GTA meeting is not good enough, is not good enough. You have them 'cause you got so many people and everybody is not able to share. You get what I'm saying? Or people feel uncomfortable sharing.

Beth's perspective suggests that having smaller groups or individual check-ins might provide more valuable opportunities for support. This also may allow for support and learning to occur through more direct peer relationships. Elise described how forming relationships with other GTAs allowed her to examine her own biases as a white woman.

But if we as coworkers, colleagues, friends, professionals can create a space and then my,

and have maybe someone who's further along in their journey or their development or

their teaching experience, say, Hey, I'm a white individual and I've done this gives other

white individuals permission to be like, Hey, me too. And then not only seeing that, but

then being able to create connections and relationships with people of color who are in

the profession, who are also teaching the content and asking them questions and building

that relationship, not only, again, models for our students, what we hope that they will do.

Peer support allowed participants to form relationships with fellow GTAs who represented

diverse backgrounds. Building these relationships was also a source of modeling for their

students how they might interact with diverse classmates.

Using Personal Experience as a Teaching Strategy to Create Safe Classrooms

Participants used modeling and self-disclosure about their personal experiences to teach

students how to co-facilitate a safe classroom environment. While participants utilized many

teaching strategies in addition to these, modeling and self-disclosure were reported most often

and associated with positive outcomes for creating a safe classroom environment. Heather

recounted how using her own experience opened classroom dialogue about student experiences.

So when it felt safe to have discussions, I think it was mostly when I was utilizing humor,

so we would kind of talk about something or putting things... Which I did a lot putting

things within the context of my own experience, and so when I would talk about a racial

identity theory or racial identity development theory, I would talk about my own racial

identity development. And then pose a question based off of the context of their own

development in that way, and so I think that that transparency and me sharing about my

own journey with the topic was helpful.

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Samantha shared a similar experience of using self-disclosure and modeling cultural humility:

> I really tried to be genuine about my own placement in society. That I am a person with a privileged background. This is... These are the identities that I hold. Look, at the end of the day, that's what our... Those are the identities I hold. But I'm never, whether I have a PhD in Physics, if I have... And I'm teaching a physics class, whether I am this amazing author, I'm never going to have all the knowledge necessary in the world.

Participants described that the classroom felt safer for respectful discussion when they normalized not having all the answers about diversity and social justice.

Notably, two participants who identified as Black women described another dimension of modeling and self-disclosure. They described how their identities were made relevant at a primarily white institution. Beth reflected on reactions she received from students:

> So I didn't feel safe to talk or open up because my instructor was Black. And again, that's typically put on a course evaluations or different things like that, and then you also maybe hear at the end, "Yeah, I thought the class just focused on really just making white people look bad."

Kaia also described cognizance of her identity when students who attempted to participate in class discussions made offensive statements.

> And a part of me had to be like, here she is trying here she is terrified of saying the wrong thing. Like a lot of white students are in these kinds of classes and here she is participating. There is a way that I need to try and honor that. So that kind of speaks to some of the…gymnastics that I was talking about.

When students made statements that revealed racial biases, Kaia described it as an emotional toll that she paid to maintain empathy for the student while managing her own reactions. These contrasting experiences led to the emergence of another theme.

Experiences of Minoritized Instructors Involved Additional Emotional Toll

Some participants who held minoritized racial identities described ways that they tried to facilitate a safe classroom environment at a primarily white institution. Beth described how she maintained a positive regard toward her students who expressed biased views.

> I realized in that moment that there are people that want to know the truth. They just don't know. They have been told these things. And I know that the way you do that, and I learned this a long time ago, the way you really able to speak to people is that you first got to show them that you care, right? The Maya Angelou quote, they've said, hey, I mean, like, you got to show people you care before you can really do anything else above all else. So my approach is, let me show these freshmen, mostly all freshmen, let me show these students that I care about them and let's take this approach.

While Beth strived to maintain a positive regard toward all her students, she also described exhaustion that came from always having to be the "better person" in the face of microaggressions from students. Maria further described the exhaustion that came from teaching a diversity and social justice course while holding a minoritized identity:

> It can really take on an emotional toll to absorb being a woman of color. And all three of us, now that I think about it, me being Latina, the other one, I wanna say she identifies in the Asian-American community, and the other one was Black. Just really expressing, this is difficult showing up and there's a lot of resistance, and I'm not from here, and I'm absorbing all of this information. And even maybe they had experiences with students

that were a little bit more blunt or a little bit more direct with their discontent or

disagreement with the topic. It's very difficult emotionally to teach a course like that and

it takes a lot out of an individual.

Maria expressed how oppressive it felt when students refused to acknowledge the existence of

racism. Beth further expressed Maria's sentiment of how taxing it was for an individual to teach

a diversity and social justice course.

I can tell you as an instructor of color who teaches those classes…I will absolutely say,

and I'm going to be confident in this, it don't matter what race you are, you need training

before you go in. Some of us naturally can do it, but it tears some, I mean, and I've seen

it do it personally…from other GTAs sharing with me what it does to them.

Beth described how the challenges of teaching the course had negative emotional impacts on her

fellow GTAs regardless of their race. While many participants like Beth described negative

classroom encounters , some dynamics with students were reported as being more nuanced.

Navigating Nuanced Experiences with Classroom Safety Required Involved Instructor

Participants described how facilitating a safe classroom environment became nuanced

when addressing critical moments. Participants took active roles in managing nuanced situations.

Many participants described efforts to acknowledge the effort and growth of students in the

classroom, even when they did not use correct terminology. However, some participants were

forced to manage critical moments when students tried to overcorrect their peers in a way that

was not appropriate to the moment or not scaffolded to their development. Heather described one

such moment in which a student critiqued another student's class presentation:

And at the very end of the presentation, they asked if any of the other students had any

questions, and one student spoke up and said, "I don't really have a question, but I have a

critique," and immediately went into critiquing how basically the student's presentation was from a white-washed perspective. And so I think what was unsafe about that was while the student was potentially technically correct about their assessment of the student, of the student's presentation from a classroom environment standpoint, it wasn't the right context, or the right time. And so I think that me shutting it down faster, may have been more helpful because she had other critiques that went along with it after that, and so... Yeah, that was pretty unsafe. The student started crying and one of the students that was giving the presentation started crying.

Elise described how other nuanced experiences could be positive opportunities for embracing the varied experiences that students have had:

I had one student of color say, I've never really experienced racism, I don't know if that's just the environment I grew up in, but being able to create a space where they could share that experience was also very rewarding, but I also think it added to the conversations for everybody of recognizing, even people of color have very different experiences when we're talking about race and when we're talking about culture, and when we're talking about religion and gender, sexual orientation, and so it's okay to have a very wide spectrum of these experiences.

Sara also described how maintaining curiosity toward her students allowed for nuance in the classroom. In response to student resistance, she recalled:

I'm curious, I wanna understand how they got there, whether I, maybe, didn't explain things properly or maybe if the information I'm presenting is not complete, so it might be missing a perspective that I don't know about. So just keeping an open mind that what I'm saying in class is not the end-all be-all, no matter how much I personally believe it, and

this is, I'm here for it, and this is how I view the world, and there's gonna be people who don't view things that way.

As most of the nuanced experiences that participants described revolved around classroom discussions, this became the next theme.

Classroom Discussions Were Measurements of Learning & Cohesion

When asked what made the classroom feel safe, most participants described classroom safety when there was respectful classroom discussion. Respectful classroom discussion involved students showing cultural humility. Notably, participants frequently described safe classroom discussion in the context of students being broken up into small groups before rejoining for class discussion. Participants reported less student engagement when they approached classroom discussion as a whole class. Beth described her experience of when classroom safety was achieved:

When it felt safe, conversations was deep. Conversations, discussions would be in depth, they didn't wanna stop talking. When I walk around the room, when it feels safe, people were sharing their stories, people from both sides. When it felt safe, you can hear another person saying, "Well, you know what? My grandmama still use this word or my grand daddy still... Or I didn't really know, I went to school with all white people." When it feels safe, people start to feel comfortable and more vulnerable about telling their story, 'cause technically…they didn't know. They just didn't know what they didn't know.

Elise also described classroom safety when students were in small groups:

I also did a lot of small discussion, so breaking the students up in smaller groups where maybe they felt more comfortable sharing and they all, each week they had to rotate groups, and in that experience, it seemed not only did we become more cohesive as a

group within the classroom, but we became more comfortable as a whole, sharing our

thoughts and opinions, even if they differed, or even if someone was struggling to

understand an experience of another student, there was a lot more openness to engage.

Small group discussions made students comfortable enough to engage with each other, which

had a positive impact on the overall feeling of classroom safety.

Sara described a different perspective of classroom safety and discussions. Sara shared

how viewing classroom discussions as a measurement of classroom safety can hinder the

instructor's openness to curiosity and assessing student learning. She reflected,

I think we're interpreting or putting labels onto the silence when it comes to saying that it

might not have been safe, or it might have been safe. So, I don't know if it was safe for

students or unsafe to speak up, maybe it was more about they lacked their readiness, I

didn't create or I didn't give them enough tools yet.

Sara's perspective offered an alternative way to understand the role of classroom discussion.

Rather than being a measurement of safety, the quality of classroom discussion might more

accurately describe the presence of student learning and cohesion. To determine this, participants

concentrated on an awareness of their audience and of themselves.

Self-Awareness and Awareness of Audience Influenced Decision Making

Participants heavily focused on self-awareness and awareness of their audience makeup

to decide how to conduct class. Participants often reported noticing the racial makeup of the

classroom and the instructor's awareness of body language. Sara recollected nonverbal

communication she observed:

So there's different levels of feedback, like the student who denies what is being shared,

so let's say I share a statistic or I talk about an experience. And I can tell the student is

receiving this very negatively, again, be that verbal or non-verbal, they push back their chair, they raise their hand, they say something.

Participants paid attention to students' body language and used it to gauge their level of rapport with students as well as learning outcomes. Many participants shared that the level of rapport they had with students impacted learning outcomes. They described how learning outcomes were achieved only when students felt safe to share how they received the information—something that required well established rapport.

Noticing body language also prompted participants to be aware of their own reactions in the classroom. Heather described how reflecting on her own racial identity helped her to consider other perspectives on how content was presented in the classroom:

And so I'm just really frank with them and having those really frank discussions. And so while I think that's helpful, I think that there's still more that needs to happen there. And yeah…some of the content probably was pretty whitewashed, and so I need to reexamine how I would present that information.

Kaia elaborated on how self-awareness of her positionality impacted the classroom. She mitigated this by using transparency:

If people like try to be neutral, I guess when they teach the class that I'm just, I'm too much of a transparent person. I'm not really good at that. So what I try to do is say, this is me. This is where I stand. Understand that this may be impacting the way I teach that course, but this is my personal, these are the concepts that I need you to know. If you have your way of thinking about it, that you feel like is different, that's fine. Understand these concepts and be able to talk through where you stand versus what the concept is that I'm teaching you.

Kaia made a point to acknowledge that her positionality as well as the students' positionality would show up in the classroom during discussions. Modeling self-awareness and transparency provided an example for students to practice their own self-awareness in the classroom. In addition, it helped her to pace content in a way that was scaffolded for her particular audience.

Maria described how scaffolding content based on the audience helped students to make connections between concepts that felt safer and concepts that felt more challenging. She noted that her students felt more comfortable discussing privilege and oppression in the context of classism and ableism. This allowed her to scaffold content to help students understand the same principles related to racism. Maria described how using scaffolded examples of these experiences helped students to be more receptive to content:

> And I think for some students, that's where it clicks. It's like, Okay, I'm not bad because I have money, I'm not bad 'cause someone's paying for my tuition and I'm wearing Lululemon and have Starbucks every day. And then that opened up the platform for another student talking about the situation living in the dorms, where some of them were inaccessible. Or some of them, they were changing the bus routes and they had to walk to the bus route in the rain from their dorm. And I'm like, "Okay, so there's privilege for those of you living in front of a dorm. That's one less thing you have to worry about. All you have to do is put your backpack on and you get to focus on class."

She also described barriers to students using scaffolded examples they could relate to:

> For that person that's worrying about transportation or getting wet in the rain or being late to class and all that stress and anxiety, that's a barrier. That's a barrier to learning. Depending where they're at financially, they may or may not be able to afford the car. So they make it and tuition covers and they get the scholarships because they may be a

minority, but do they have the funds to really have the car and have that privilege of

getting to class without having to worry about any of this stuff? And I think about how

that affects and stresses students that have to think about how they're gonna get to class or

their grades being affected or how their instructors could review them and what

advantages they may or may not have, so explaining privilege in the sense of, This is an

advantage that you have. Whether you asked for it, whether you were born into it,

whether you acquired it later through education, money, love, opportunity, yeah.

By relating concepts of privilege and barriers to relative experiences of her audience, Maria was

able to build rapport with the students and continue introducing more content related to diversity

and social justice.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to understand what doctoral level graduate teaching

assistants (GTAs) in Counselor Education may experience when creating and maintaining safe

classrooms while teaching courses focused on diversity and social justice. As Counselor

Education programs continue to emphasize cultural competency and humility, GTAs must

receive training that prepares them to be faculty members that support this emphasis (CACREP,

2016; Ratts et al., 2016). While previous research in other fields described teaching experiences

of GTAs when teaching diversity and social justice focused courses (Madden, 2014; Shahjahan,

2008; Tindell et al., 2016), this did not specifically extend to Counselor Education. This study

aimed to fill the gap by highlighting the experiences of GTAs in Counselor Education and how

they facilitated safe classrooms for teaching diversity and social justice content. Through a

critical phenomenological lens, the researcher sought to examine how participants described their

experiences and the causes that they attributed to them.

To understand these experiences, semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants. The format of semi-structured interviews allowed participants to describe their experiences and to expand on what they considered most salient to those experiences. Within the critical phenomenological framework, direct quotes were used in the findings to give voice to the participants' experiences. Identified themes were presented as the causal mechanisms that participants ascribed to their experiences. By using this framework, the causal mechanisms can become actionable items for Counselor Education programs to address when training future GTAs.

Previous research largely focused on the experiences of faculty members who taught diversity and social justice content. Frequently the research described ways in which faculty members themselves faced challenges when teaching this content, offering anecdotes about their own attempts to navigate classroom incivility and teach emotional regulation skills (Buskist, et al., 2018; Toraiwa, 2009; Weitz, 2010). Considering that there has been little research on how GTAs are trained to teach similar content, this may suggest that faculty members have been unable to train GTAs in areas that they themselves felt unprepared for or were actively navigating. Pressure to receive positive student evaluations and whether faculty members receive institutional support when students have negative reactions may further impact the extent to which GTAs are trained to engage in diversity and social justice content with students (Boatright-Horowitz & Soeung, 2009; Tindell et al., 2016). Despite this, findings of the present research suggest that training GTAs specifically to teach diversity and social justice content has an impact on the level of confidence they feel when teaching.

The extent of training that GTAs received prior to their first teaching assignment varied, but it was identified as a large contributing factor to the quality of teaching experiences that

participants had. When prior training was limited, participants relied on their other professional experiences in counseling to inform their teaching skills. While previous experience was helpful to navigate student reactions to the content, participants reported feeling confident in their ability to handle student reactions when they received a training intensive focused on preparing GTAs to respond to different student reactions. Participants found it helpful when their training prepared them for handling students who were intentionally disruptive and unwilling to meaningfully engage in diversity or social justice focused content. However, training did not always translate to positive reactions from students toward the GTAs. GTAs who held minoritized racial identities reported a greater emotional toll and increased intensity of reactions from students compared to White GTAs that participated in this study.

Prior research chronicled the experiences of instructors who held marginalized racial identities and who taught diversity and social justice content. (Boatright-Horowitz & Soeung, 2009; Osei-Kofi, 2012; Tindell et al., 2016). Participants in this study who held marginalized racial identities described an emotional toll that was paid in order to maintain positive regard toward students who expressed discriminatory views. In addition to managing the classroom, participants had to manage their own reactions to harmful rhetoric when it occurred. This added an additional task for these GTAs to attend to in addition to monitoring other students' reactions, facilitating constructive dialogue, and managing the reactions of the speaker in response to correction. These participants described how having peer support from other GTAs teaching similar content was helpful, particularly when other GTAs also held marginalized racial identities and could relate to these experiences.

Most participants, including those who identified as white, shared how important it was to have peer support while teaching diversity and social justice content. This finding was similar

to research that focused on the experiences of faculty who taught diversity and social justice content but was not described in the literature regarding GTAs (Brown, et al., 2023). Peer support provided opportunities for GTAs to collaborate and receive validation for their emotional experiences while teaching diversity and social justice content. Emotional experiences were not always something to hide from students, however. These internal experiences were also harnessed to create classroom safety.

Self-disclosure was also identified as critical to the teaching process and encouraging student dialogue. Participants used self-disclosure to acknowledge their own personal biases and to make space for students to also practice self-awareness. One interpretation of these findings is that self-disclosure functioned for different purposes when the GTA was white versus when they held a marginalized racial identity. White participants described how the use of self-disclosure helped to ease tensions when the class was made up of primarily white students. In these instances, the GTA modeled how to lower defenses and acknowledge personal biases. While GTAs who held marginalized identities used self-disclosure for similar reasons, they also may have used self-disclosure as a means to appear non-threatening to students. This became particularly relevant when these GTAs received evaluations from students claiming that the class was anti-white. Receiving these evaluations suggests that students may attribute bias regarding race to GTAs who hold marginalized identities. This could create an additional challenge for GTAs who must build rapport with students in order to foster classroom engagement.

Once GTAs were able to establish rapport with students, classroom discussions became indicators of student learning and engagement. While previous research positioned classroom discussion as an indicator of safety, one participant in this study described this language as defeatist. Viewing classroom discussion as an indicator of skill development rather than the

presence of safety may prompt GTAs to consider if they have equipped students with language and skills to engage in constructive dialogue about diversity and social justice. By doing so, GTAs may be able to scaffold content to include further modeling and meta discussions about how to engage in classroom dialogue. The findings from this study also suggest that as classroom dialogue increases, the emergence of nuanced experiences requiring an involved instructor to navigate them may increase.

Prior research described instances of deliberate classroom incivility from students (Holley & Steiner, 2005; Luo et al., 2000; Toraiwa, 2009). It was anticipated that findings from this research would reveal similar instances. However, most of the participants described critical moments of classroom dialogue as being more nuanced. GTAs in this study described how they navigated moments when they perceived students who used harmful rhetoric as attempting to engage in classroom dialogue in good faith. However, these students may have had limited experience with diversity and social justice content and did not realize when they were using problematic language. Additionally, some students tried to hold their fellow students accountable for their language, but they did so in a way that was derogatory and not scaffolded to the other students' development. This was consistent with prior research that described instances when students with shared interests in promoting diversity and inclusion resorted to degradation when they disagreed on how to achieve it (Toraiwa, 2009; Weitz, 2010).

In summary, the GTAs who participated in this study described several components of their experience and considerations that they made to create safe classrooms for teaching diversity and social justice content. Receiving specialized training for teaching diversity and social justice content helped GTAs feel more confident in navigating student reactions. Opportunities for peer support gave GTAs validation for their experiences and equipped them

with further strategies to engage students. GTAs who held marginalized racial identities used peer support to debrief after experiencing an additional emotional toll when students were resistant to acknowledge forms of oppression. They also experienced additional emotional burdens when they managed their own reactions to students who used harmful rhetoric while attempting to engage in good faith. As students felt more comfortable participating in classroom discussions, GTAs were more likely to encounter critical moments when students attempted to hold other students accountable in derogatory ways. GTAs then focused on classroom attunement to manage reactions and correct the ways students engaged. By doing so, they restored the classroom to being a respectful environment.

Limitations of the Study

As in most qualitative studies, a default limitation of this study is the researcher's subjectivity. Since qualitative research requires the researcher to collect, analyze, and interpret the data it is important to mitigate the impact of the researcher's subjectivity (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Schwandt, 2015). While the use of an auditor and member checking were utilized for this purpose, my own experience as a former GTA may have influenced me to be sympathetic in my interpretation of participant experiences. Additionally, while member checking was used not all participants responded to my request for feedback. However, those who did verified that the identified themes accurately represented their experiences.

Further, all of the participants in this study were GTAs at the same institution in the southern region of the United States. The findings from this research may not represent the experiences of GTAs at other institutions or in other regions. The purpose of qualitative research is also not to infer generalizability, but this may also be considered a limitation to the applicability of the research (Flamez et al, 2017).

Implications for Counselor Education

As Counselor Education programs continue to emphasize diversity and inclusion, faculty members must be prepared to educate and train students to engage with diversity and social justice content. Doctoral programs in Counselor Education are the funnels to which these faculty members originate with the expectation that they have been trained to be the trainer (CACREP, 2016). Counselor Education programs must ensure that they are providing doctoral students with strategies and skills to manage classroom incivility when they teach diversity and social justice content. Programs can offer specialized training in this area coupled with opportunities to receive peer support in order to increase doctoral students' confidence to teach the content.

Counselor Education programs should also demonstrate understanding and support for the additional toll that teaching this content has on instructors who hold marginalized identities. This would require programs to develop safe lines of communication that are non-punitive, such as anonymized surveys for GTAs to share experiences. Additionally, programs should offer resources to GTAs who may want access to counseling or opportunities to debrief about their experiences teaching diversity and social justice content. Programs should consider if these elements are also established to support present faculty members who teach diversity and social justice content. Ensuring that faculty members are trained and supported could create a byproduct of doctoral students feeling supported by their faculty and feeling prepared to teach this content when they progress to a faculty role.

Simultaneously, Counselor Education programs should integrate opportunities to teach students how to co-create safe classrooms with their instructors. This may include ensuring that students are familiar with the Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies and CACREP standards that inform the counseling profession. Counselor Education programs can

help students to understand how engaging with diversity and social justice content in constructive ways align with the development of counselor identity and demonstrates competency in advocacy.

Further, teaching students about the concepts of safety-to versus safety-from classrooms can help adjust student expectations for classroom engagement (Harless, 2018). When students enter the classroom with an understanding of the public nature of the classroom paired with an expectation that the instructor will help maintain a respectful environment they may be more likely to engage with diversity and social justice content. This may also be an opportunity to introduce students to the concept of scaffolding content and how it may present differently for students who come from diverse backgrounds and experiences with diversity and social justice content. This may help students to feel empowered to co-create classroom boundaries with the instructor and to increase trust in the instructor to enforce them.

Recommendations for Further Research

The findings from this research present opportunities to further expand the understanding of how instructors in Counselor Education can facilitate safe classrooms while teaching diversity and social justice content. While this research focused on the experiences of GTAs in Counselor Education, previous research suggests that there may be unique challenges that untenured faculty in Counselor Education experience when teaching diversity and social justice content. Specifically, considerations about the use of student evaluations and examining the potential for an unintended customer service dynamic may be more salient for this group. Additional studies might examine the experiences of untenured faculty versus tenured faculty in Counselor Education to glean new insight into how programs may support the professional call for increased competency in diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Further studies may also create a narrower focus on understanding the experiences of GTAs, faculty members, and students when engaging with diversity and social justice content. For example, further research may provide more in-depth understanding to the experiences of instructors and students who hold marginalized identities when this content is taught. Important information might also be gained from focusing on student experiences in classes focused on diversity and social justice content. Research in this area may better inform how students and instructors can manage expectations of each other and co-create safe learning environments.

Conclusion

GTAs in Counselor Education are in an important stage of professional development as they prepare to become faculty members. Teaching courses help them to improve teaching and classroom management skills. However, not all teaching experiences are created equally. When GTAs are responsible for teaching classes with diversity and social justice content they may face unique challenges in classroom management. Managing classroom incivility may become a more likely experience. Counselor Education programs need to be prepared to train and support GTAs to manage student reactions to diversity and social justice content, with particular acknowledgement of additional emotional burdens that may be experienced by GTAs who hold marginalized racial identities. As the counseling profession continues to emphasize the importance of diversity, equity, and inclusion, it is depending on Counselor Education programs to supply instructors who are prepared to teach these values to future counselors-in-training.

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Informed Consent for Research "*Experiencing a Safe Classroom: A Critical Phenomenological Study of Graduate Teaching Assistants in Counselor Education who Teach Diversity and Social Justice Courses*"

Summary

You are being asked to take part in a research study. This research study is voluntary, meaning you do not have to take part in it. The procedures, risks, and benefits are fully described further in the consent form. The purpose of this study is to understand how graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) in Counselor Education experience creating safe classrooms when teaching courses focused on diversity and social justice. There will be a 60–90-minute video recorded interview via Zoom. You will be asked to complete the initial Qualtrics screening and demographic survey, which includes informed consent documents. You will be asked to participate in a 60–90-minute video interview to share your experiences. The only risk is related to the potential loss of confidentiality. There are no direct benefits to you for participating in this study. The benefit to the researcher is to enhance teaching and preparation for doctoral students in Counselor Education to facilitate safe classrooms that include diversity and social justice content. The alternative is to not participate in this study.

You are invited to participate in a research study to understand experiences of graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) creating safe classrooms when teaching diversity and social justice courses. The question guiding this study is: How do GTAs in Counselor Education experience creating and maintaining safe classrooms when teaching courses focused on diversity and social justice? The study is being conducted by Jennifer Guffin, principal investigator, under the direction of Dr. Jamie Carney, Dissertation Chair, in Auburn University's Department of Special Education, Rehabilitation and Counseling. You are invited to participate because you are 1) 18+ years of age, 2) have taught a diversity and social justice focused course as a GTA, and 3) have already taught as a GTA at least one semester.

What will be involved if you participate? If you decide to participate in this research study, you will be asked to complete a demographic questionnaire and one, 60-90 minute recorded individual interview via Zoom. A semi-structured interview guide will be used to inquire about your experiences creating a safe classroom when teaching diversity and social justice focused courses. Your audio recording will be transcribed and analyzed. Your confidential data will be stored securely in Box and destroyed August 2026, which is 3 years from the date of project completion (i.e., August 2023). Your total time commitment will be approximately 90 minutes.

Are there any risks or discomforts? The risks associated with participating in this study are minimal but related to breach of confidentiality. To minimize this risk, we will store all identifiable information in an Auburn University electronic Box account, which is HIPAA compliant. Additionally, you will begiven the opportunity to select a pseudonym for the purposes of data collection, analysis, and reporting. All video recorded interviews will be deleted immediately following transcription.

Are there any benefits to yourself or others? There is no direct participant benefit. If you participate in this study, you can expect to contribute knowledge that enhances teaching and preparation for doctoral students in Counselor Education to facilitate safe classrooms that include diversity and social justice content.

Will you receive compensation for participating? To thank you for your time, the researchers will offer the first 15 participants a $25 Amazon gift card via email with completion of the interview.

Are there any costs? If you decide to participate, there are no costs associated with your participation. If you change your mind about participating, you can withdraw at any time during the study. Your participation is completely voluntary. If you choose to withdraw, your data can be withdrawn as long as it is identifiable. Your decision about whether or not to participate or to stop participating will not jeopardize any future relations with Auburn University.

Your privacy will be protected. Any information obtained in connection with this study will remain confidential. Information obtained through your participation may be published in a professional journal or book and presented at a professional conference. Pseudonyms will be used to protect confidentiality. For your privacy, the researchers will request that you be in a private space for the interview to avoid being overheard.

If you have questions about this study, please contact Jennifer Guffin at jcp0099@auburn.edu. A copy of this consent document will be given to you to keep.

If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Auburn University Office of Research Compliance or the Institutional Review Board by phone (334)-844-5966 or e-mail at IRBadmin@auburn.edu or IRBChair@auburn.edu.

HAVING READ THE INFORMATION PROVIDED, YOU MUST DECIDE WHETHER OR NOT YOU WISH TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS RESEARCH STUDY. BY CLICKING ACCEPT, YOU INDICATE YOUR WILLINGNESS TO PARTICIPATE.

- o Accept
- o Decline

--- PAGE BREAK --- Continues only with "ACCEPT" response

Q1. What is your age?
- o Under 18
- o 18-24
- o 25-34
- o 35-49
- o 50-64
- o 65+

--- PAGE BREAK --- Survey ends if "Under 18" response is selected

Q2. Are you a doctoral student in Counselor Education?
- o Yes
- o No

--- PAGE BREAK --- Continues only with "YES" response

Q3. Have you held the role of a GTA in Counselor Education? If so, how long?
- o Less than 1 semester
- o At least 1 semester
- o I have not held the role of a GTA in Counselor Education.

--- PAGE BREAK --- Continues only with "More than 1 semester" response

Q4. As a GTA in Counselor Education, have you taught content or courses focused on diversity or social justice?
- o Yes
- o No

--- PAGE BREAK --- Continues only with "Yes" response

Q5. What was the title of the course(s) you taught?
- o Open-ended field

--- PAGE BREAK ---

Q6. What is your gender identity?
- o Male
- o Female
- o Non-binary/third gender
- o Prefer not to say

--- PAGE BREAK ---

Q7. What is your racial identity?
- o Black or African American
- o White
- o Asian
- o Indigenous American or Alaska Native
- o Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander

--- PAGE BREAK ---

Q8. Which region represents the location of your affiliated institution?
- o Northeast
- o South

- o Western
- o Midwest

--- PAGE BREAK ---

Q9. Name
- o Open response field

--- PAGE BREAK ---

Q10. Email Address
- o Open response field

Appendix B

<u>Recruitment Email</u>
Research Study entitled
**"Experiencing a Safe Classroom: A Critical Phenomenological Study of Graduate
Teaching Assistants in Counselor Education who Teach Diversity and Social Justice
Courses"**

Hello,

My name is Jennifer Guffin and I am a doctoral candidate in the Counselor Education program
within the Department of Special Education, Rehabilitation, and Counseling at Auburn
University. As part of my dissertation, I am seeking participants for my study focused on the
experiences of graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) in Counselor Education maintaining safe
classrooms when teaching courses focused on diversity and social justice. The purpose of this
study is to explore how GTAs in Counselor Education experience creating a safe classroom
when teaching diversity and social justice courses. I am completing this study under the direction
of my faculty supervisor, Dr. Jamie Carney.

You are invited to participate if you meet the following selection criteria: 1) 18+ years of age, 2)
have taught a diversity and social justice focused course as a GTA, and 3) have already taught as
a GTA at least one semester.

This study will contribute to the researcher's efforts to help inform students and faculty enhance
Counselor Education. Participants will assist in contributing to the literature on best practices to
support doctoral students in counseling programs prepare to teach diversity and social justice
content as faculty.

If you decide to participate in this research study, you will be asked to complete a demographic
questionnaire, informed consent document, and one audio recorded semi-structured interview via
Zoom. Your total time commitment will be approximately 1.5 hours. Your identity and responses
will be kept confidential. Your personal narrative will be collected and analyzed for themes of
your lived experience. All data collection and transmission will be protected by secure
technology.

Your participation is voluntary. Should you change your mind about participating, you can
withdraw at any time during the study.

My contact information is listed below for your reference if you have any questions or concerns.
Jennifer Guffin, M.Ed., ALC, NCC
Doctoral Candidate Auburn University Department of Special Education, Rehabilitation, and
Counseling
Email: jcp0099@auburn.edu
Please distribute and share with others who may be interested in participating in this study.

Best,
Jennifer Guffin

Appendix C

Interview Protocol

Opening Script: "I am conducting a study on the experiences of GTAs in Counselor Education creating a safe classroom when teaching courses focused on diversity and social justice. At any time, you would like to discontinue this interview you can. This information will be used to complete research for my dissertation and will last approximately 60 to 90 minutes. This interview will be recorded, and you can select or be assigned a pseudonym. The information contained in this interview is confidential and measures will be taken to ensure any information you share is not identifiable to you in the analysis process. Do you have any questions?

Prompt: Tell me about your experience teaching a diversity and social justice focused course.

Additional Questions:

1. What was classroom discussion like when you taught the course?

2. What was happening in the classroom when it felt safe or unsafe to have discussions?

3. What kind of reactions did you receive from students when you taught diversity or social justice content?

4. What factors do you think contributed to the reactions you received from students?

5. What factors do you think contributed to your methods of creating and maintaining a safe classroom?

6. What training did you receive that prepared you to teach a diversity and social justice course?

7. What support did you receive while teaching a diversity and social justice course?

8. How do you feel about your ability to teach diversity and social justice focused courses in the future or as a faculty member?

Appendix D

Table 2

Description of Themes

Theme	Description	Participant Quote
Training Impacted Instructor Confidence	The extent of training that GTAs received on how to teach diversity and social justice content and manage student reactions impacted how confident they felt when teaching.	"I think that when we came on board, it was a lot of chaos. It was a lot of racial conflict. So a lot of that. So imagine us going teaching this class right in this slap-middle of racial conflict. And for mostly everybody, it was their first time teaching." - Beth
Peer Support Impacted Instructor Confidence	When GTAs had peer support and opportunities to debrief with their peers they felt more confident in their role as the instructor.	"We think about, how are we feeling, teaching this course and how am I showing up and how am I presenting in the classroom? But we don't think about, What are my successes in the classroom? And when you have to share that with a peer, it brings out the positive." - Maria
Use of Personal Experience as a Teaching Strategy Created Safe Classrooms	GTAs used self-disclosure about their own learning experiences to model safe discussions about diversity and social justice in the classroom.	"I did a lot putting things within the context of my own experience, and so when I would talk about a racial identity theory or racial identity development theory, I would talk about my own racial identity development." - Heather
Experiences of Minoritized Instructors Involved an Additional Emotional Toll	GTAs who held minoritized identities had to manage classroom dynamics and their own emotional reactions to microaggressions and resistance from students in the classroom.	"It can really take on an emotional toll to absorb being a woman of color. And all three of us, now that I think about it, me being Latina, the other one, I wanna say she identifies in the Asian-American

		community, and the other one was Black. Just really expressing, this is difficult showing up and there's a lot of resistance, and I'm not from here, and I'm absorbing all of this information." - Maria
Navigating Nuanced Experiences with Classroom Safety Required an Involved Instructor	GTAs had to use intentional decision making on how to resolve nuanced moments of classroom conflict while teaching diversity and social justice content.	"And so I think what was unsafe about that was while the student was potentially technically correct about their assessment of the student, of the student's presentation from a classroom environment standpoint, it wasn't the right context, or the right time. And so I think that me shutting it down faster, may have been more helpful…" - Heather
Classroom Discussions Were Measurements of Learning & Cohesion	GTAs gauged students' abilities to converse about diversity and social justice, and how safe the classroom felt, based on discussions.	"I don't know if it was safe for students or unsafe to speak up, maybe it was more about they lacked their readiness, I didn't create or I didn't give them enough tools yet." - Sara
Self-Awareness and Awareness of Audience Influenced Decision Making	GTAs evaluated their own thoughts and actions, as well as the body language of students, to determine the next course of action to teach diversity and social justice content.	"So there's different levels of feedback, like the student who denies what is being shared, so let's say I share a statistic or I talk about an experience. And I can tell the student is receiving this very negatively, again, be that verbal or non-verbal, they push back their chair, they raise their hand, they say something." - Sara