­

**Portfolio II: Professional Update and Reflections Essay**

Kia R. Felder Williams

Dr. Joy Banks, Dr. Anya Evmenova, Dr. Megan Call-Cummings

George Mason University

January 2023

**PROFESSIONAL UPDATE AND REFLECTIONS**

Comprehensive feedback received from Portfolio I (November 2022) was invaluable. Direction from the committee included strong recommendation to narrow research interests from domains of interest to specific goals. Other feedback encouraged a pairing a depth with the breadth of information that had been acquired; to enhance the skill of transitioning from a consumer to curator of knowledge. These thoughtful remarks instigated personal reflection, that led to a more clearly identifiable and streamlined research foci. Since receiving this counsel, considerable time has been spent in personal reflection, resulting in an evolution of academic, research and professional goals, and a redefinition of personal and professional engagement.

 In Portfolio I, a visual and verbal representation of research interests was presented. This representation clearly defined a broad cadre of interests; however, it failed to clearly and concisely outline my academic, research, and professional goals. A very short time that has elapsed between portfolios, but that has not adversely impacted the hours exhausted in personal reflection. This time of purposeful reflection has been beneficial, and has contributed to a more definitive academic and research focus. The redefined academic focus will be devoted to researching culturally adapted social, emotional, and behavioral interventions as disruptors to disproportional placement in special education.

As stated in the Knowledge Discussion essay in Portfolio I, I view social ills and research problems through a critical lens. As an African American, female, and elder in the Christian church, my epistemology, ontology, and axiology, inform my research interests and research. I view race as a social construct created to stratify humanity, thus creating a world of advantaged/disadvantage, access/barriers along racial lines. Critical race theory and disability critical race theory provide me with a powerful tool to view longstanding educational inequities for students of color.

The overrepresentation of students of color in special education, without access to appropriate intervention or culturally sensitive assessment, is alarming and unsettling. In summary, my research focus is identifying and researching the functional relationship between culturally adapted SE/B interventions and reduction of non-preferred behaviors (e.g., hitting, classroom disruptions resulting in physical harm). As a result of Portfolio I discussion and reflection, the focus on culturally adapted interventions will now be the subject of a systematic review and independent study (EDUC 897) in the Spring of 2023 and possible pilot study.

**Evolution of Academic Goals**

First, my academic goal includes being immersed in doctoral courses that prepare me to research and assess the quantity, implementation, and efficacy of culturally responsive behavioral interventions, and acquire the tools to create or adapt a culturally-responsive behavioral intervention for diverse students with disabilities (SWD). This is aligned to my interests to center the personhood (of the researched) and to work to dismantle harmful systems. Embedded in critical theory, with a dis/crit lens, my goal is to research the impact biases in procedures and personnel that exist in the Response to Intervention (RtI) process.

**Evolution of Professional and Research Goals**

Secondly, my professional goal is to affiliate with career organizations, service organizations, and learning communities that align with diverse perspectives and amplify voices of racially and culturally diverse researchers and the researched. Particular alignment with professional learning communities that have a vested interest in culturally responsive pedagogy, culturally responsive teacher preparation, the development of culturally sensitive practices, and anti-racist research and research methodologies are of major interest.

Since Portfolio I, I have researched organizations and methodologies that align with my interests and have re-committed myself to anti-racist research methods. First exposed to anti-racist research methodologies by Dr. Meagan Call-Cummings, I have since renewed my commitment to this line of research by revisiting the Spring 2022 workshop materials: *How to Be an Anti-Racist Researcher*, working through the researcher Action Plan created by Dr. Giovanni P. Dazzo, and revisiting a talk by Dr. Toya J. Frank on Critical Race Theory entitled “*Some of Us Want the Smoke: An Overview of CRT and It’s Role in K-12 Education and Academics*”. I have also explored ways to support others who are committed to anti-racist research and to align with researchers who share the same theoretical framework, view of societal problems and research questions as I do.

My commitment to this methodology entails knowing what anti-racist research is and is not, and taking concrete steps as an anti-racist researcher, navigating constraints and locating possibilities within research in a K-12 and higher education space. With that commitment, I am committed to: (1) shifting research practices to be inclusive, (2) non-oppressive, and (3) explicitly anti-racist. As a researcher, I have a moral obligation to interrogate my research goals, methods, and dissemination strategies and to resist, disrupt, and dismantle white supremacy in the context of academia and research (https://cehd.gmu.edu/faculty-and-research/anti-racist-research-methods/workshops/). While attending these workshops, I learned that anti-racism is an active and conscious effort to work against aspects of racism. With that determination, several intentions arise: (1) De-centers whiteness as the primary or majority view, (2) Reframes research questions: from “what is wrong with people?” to “what is wrong with structures and systems?”, (3) Acknowledges harms perpetuated through research and dismantles how they occur across methods, dissemination/publication, etc., (4) Knowing that racism can be perpetuated in research institutionally or (inter)personally - by commission or omission - in any phase or aspect of the research, (5) Consciously considers how to build trust between researchers and communities of color. Attending the series of workshops and watching the recordings resonated with my identity and the relationship I wish to have with those I conduct research on, for, and with (Call-Cummings, 2022)

Finally, to address bias in assessment and identification, my goal is to research academic and behavioral interventions used in the RtI process for cultural responsiveness and efficacy with culturally and racially diverse SWD.

**Interests and Professional Community Influence**

 My understanding of my professional community’s architecture is still developing. I have the privilege of taking Participatory Action Research this semester. My goal is to again work with #BlackBoyJoy, a collective of parents of Black boys with Autism formed during my Narrative Inquiry course. With this group, I plan to help them establish community relationships that are meaningful to them.

In addition to actively engaging in my professional community in service (e.g., PhD in Education Student Organization, PESO), I successfully completed EDRS 823, EDSE 841, and EDSE 885 last fall. These three courses, with very distinct learning objectives, extended my thinking in many ways. I learned about a new (to me) research method and designed and implemented a robust single subject research study on a behavioral intervention for 4 students with Autism, completed a systematic review on paraprofessional-implemented behavioral interventions for students grade K-12, and co-wrote a $600,000 3-year grant to address the motivation, recruitment, and retention of special education teachers of color.

 EDRS 823 directly informed my practice as a researcher. The approach to research that single subject/single case design (SSCD) offers, answers the issue I have with assessments and scales that are not normed for diverse populations. Those very assessments are used to make determinations of diagnosis and dis/ability. However, in SSCD, the researched is their own control and a determination is made on whether the variable that is manipulated has a functional relation with that variable and impact on the subject. The single subject/case design course was so impactful. I was able to see the immediacy of the implemented intervention on behavior where the researched is their own control. It was a powerful study that make lasting impact on an elementary school struggling with dangerous behaviors. This course and study allowed me to make a positive impact in the lives of these 4 students, equip and empower their teachers with behavior tools and strategies, and even made a positive impact on the behavior of their non-disabled peers. I learned how to operationalize definitions of behavior and continue to use the skill almost daily.

 EDSE 841 allowed me to research and conduct a systematic review on an area of interest. I chose paraprofessional-implemented behavioral interventions. As a school-based practitioner and budding researcher, I have first-hand experience of how the pandemic has exacerbated resources, and can see how paraprofessionals are stretched and now assuming responsibilities once exclusively performed by special educators. I was, therefore, interested in the quantity, descriptions, training, and efficacy of paraprofessional-implemented behavioral interventions for SWD. This systematic review had implications that informed other areas of interest for me and raised questions regarding the representation of students of color in special education. This course also helped me develop a new skill set to conceptualize a review, research literature, code, perform analysis, and provide results and implications from a given research question. Not to mention calculating effect sizes and Tau-U! I gained skill that I will utilize again this semester in my independent study overseen by Dr. Evmenova.

 Finally EDSE 885 was a grant writing course. I worked with a doctoral colleague to write a $600,000 grant to research perceptions of special education teachers of color, in an intra-COVID world, to identify their motivation to remain educators. From collaboration, to budgeting, I acquired rich skills. I look forward to opportunities for grant writing and being responsible for funding my research interests.

[Word Count: 1547]

**References**

George Mason University (2022, February 1). How to Become an Anti-Racist Researcher.

CEHD Anti-Racist Research. Retrieved February 4, 2023, from

https://cehd.gmu.edu/faculty-and-research/anti-racist-research-methods/workshops/