I remember it well. It was another warm sunny day in Los Angeles and I was in a hot, crowded, 4th grade classroom. I was a freshman at Occidental College and trying to get comfortable, wedged into a child-sized desk. My job was to observe the learning that was taking place, and to help the teacher in whatever way she wanted.

The class was a far cry from what I thought teaching and learning should be; students off task and the teacher stretched thin responding to competing demands for her attention. She seemed overworked. After 40 hours in this field placement, I had learned one thing: I DID NOT want to become a teacher.

How then did I end up a teacher OF teachers at the University of St. Thomas? Fortunately, I had a change of heart during my last year of college. Soon to graduate with a degree in Diplomacy and World Affairs and Economics, I contemplated my post-graduation options. Join the CIA or become a teacher?

Memories of helping friends after school with homework during elementary and middle school and giving free sports lessons during summer months flashed through my mind. I saw the pattern. I liked teaching. And learning. But I had no intention of becoming a mediocre teacher; I wanted excellence. Even back then I felt a moral responsibility to the students who would someday appear in my classes. They deserved a teacher who would effectively stimulate their learning. So I followed the advice of a career counselor and applied to Stanford University’s Teacher Education Program. And before I knew it I was in northern California living a dream. I was learning how to become a social studies teacher from some of the best in the field. Part of my desire to teach with excellence included a personal pact. While studying at Stanford, I had promised myself that I would avoid becoming a tired, burned out teacher by asking myself every five years if I were still teaching with enthusiasm and effectiveness. After ten years of teaching high school social studies, I kept that promise. My pace of professional learning had slowed so I decided to pursue a Ph.D. in Curriculum and Instruction at the University of Minnesota because I wanted to learn more about the teaching profession. It was the best decision I could have made. It led me to St. Thomas where I get work with our next generation of teachers.
While a Ph.D. student, I stumbled upon a question that sparked my research agenda. I was supervising teacher candidates by observing and evaluating their teaching in junior and senior high schools. The structure governing my position, however, worked against my aim, which was to serve as a resource for the teacher candidates and help them develop their budding practices. I wanted them to think analytically about what they did in the classroom and consequent effects on student learning. Unfortunately, many were hesitant to follow my advice and take the risks I thought were needed to propel their teaching practices forward because we barely knew each other. I wondered, “What can I do to cultivate more trust between the teacher candidates and me to enhance their learning?” Thus began my interest in cultivating relationships with the teacher candidates and help them develop their moral goodness.

The first independent research project I did used a theoretical framework called Ethical Care, developed by prolific scholar Nel Noddings, to better understand how I was cultivating relationships with the teacher candidates. This interest in the moral terrain of teacher-student relationships spurred my dissertation research that later became the book, Making the Moment Matter: Care Theory for Teacher Learning. In the book I illustrate challenges that can arise when using an ethic of care to guide one’s practice. I also demonstrate what I call a “pedagogy of care” to give an inside look into my practice as a teacher educator. But why research my own practice? A conversation among teacher educators internationally helps me answer this question. The argument follows that those who teach people how to teach have a moral responsibility to study their own practices. One methodology for doing so is self-study, what I have used to carry out most of my research. Adherents of self-study argue that teacher educators must know their own practices well because HOW they teach is part of the curriculum in teacher preparation programs. Unlike teaching in other professions, like law and medicine, for example, teacher educators must simultaneously teach about and practice teaching. On the contrary, when law professors teach about law, they are not practicing law. Likewise, when doctors teach about medicine they are not practicing medicine. Teacher educator practice, however, represents a unique form of teaching in that it serves as a means and an end in its teacher preparation. My research strives to better understand teacher educator practice, my own and others’, in an effort to improve the quality of teacher preparation across the United States.

More recent projects of mine on teacher educator practice respond to a national conversation on educational reform about the performance gap between students of color and their white counterparts. In one study I researched an exemplary white teacher educator’s practice to identify the strategies she used to keep her mostly white students engaged when studying topics that challenge them to wrestle with concepts like white privilege. It is well documented that white students in teacher education classes often shut down or become defensive when asked to consider how they may unknowingly benefit from being white in the United States and how this might play out in their practices when teaching students of color. I found that this exemplary teacher educator maintains the involvement of her mostly white students by building caring relationships with and among her students. She also carefully scaffolds course content and assignments. For example, she uses film to help her students grasp, on an emotional level, real life stories to learn about the human toll of immigrant life before she challenges them to look at how systems of power and oppression play out in people’s lives and schools. My hope is that other teacher educators can incorporate this research into their own practices to better prepare teachers for all students in P-12 schools.

In another study, I researched my own practice to understand how self-study helped me to improve the learning environment by honoring the students and their cultural backgrounds. In philosophical terms, the research helps me better understand my own whiteness and how it played a part in the experience for students in this J-Term class. In practical terms, self-study positioned me to change course midstream to improve the learning environment by HONORING THE STUDENTS AND THEIR CULTURAL BACKGROUNDS. In philosophical terms, the research helps me BETTER UNDERSTAND MY WHITENESS and how it played a part in the experience for students in this J-Term class.

The University of St. Thomas’ mission of social justice and cultural diversity supports my work. It helps me promote the development of morally just leaders who will work to make schools more inclusive for all.

1 This class was offered as part of the Collaborative Urban Educator (CUE) program, a joint partnership between the Minnesota Legislative and the University of St. Thomas, among other teacher preparation programs in the Twin Cities Metro Area. The purpose of CUE is to prepare teachers in high need licensure areas who commit to serving in urban Minneapolis/St. Paul for five years. In my non-CUE classes at the University of St. Thomas, roughly 90% of the students have been white.

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