

Cultivating Transformative Leadership in P-12 Schools and Classrooms through Critical Teacher Professional Development

Jenice Leilani View
Elizabeth K. DeMulder
Mary Kayler
Stacia M. Stribling
George Mason University

Abstract

A P-12 classroom teacher who chooses to be a transformative leader insists on seeking answers to difficult questions in collaboration with peer educators, administrators, parents, and most importantly, with students regardless of grade level or discipline. It is possible to become such a teacher even years after entering the classroom, and professional development can be the catalyst for this transformation. However, it is through conscious practice with professional peers that teachers can transform themselves into leaders within and outside their classrooms. This paper identifies some of the instructional approaches used in a critical teacher professional development program to cultivate transformative leadership in classroom teachers as they develop critical inquiry using a multicultural lens, promote collaborative inquiry, and foster habits of creativity and imagination. We offer evidence from teachers' work that these instructional approaches positively impact their ability to act as transformative leaders in their classrooms and schools.

It is now widely agreed that teachers are among the most, if not the most, significant factors in children's learning and the linchpins in educational reforms of all kinds (Cochran-Smith & Zeichner, 2005, p. 1).

In our work with inservice P-12 teachers who are studying to earn master's degrees, we take seriously the task of supporting these teachers to develop not only as critical educators in their own classroom settings, but as transformative leaders in their classrooms and school systems. Transformative leadership is, for us, multi-layered. It is rooted in Freire's theoretical description of praxis (1970/1991), a continuous loop of reflection and action. It is leadership that is inherently democratic in that it protects all and fosters fair play and equitable treatment by way of codes and standards that are negotiated either at the foundation of schools and school systems, or through activism. Transformative leadership is consistent with Boyatzis and McKee's (2005) concept of resonant leadership that relies on emotional intelligence and is cultivated through mindfulness, hope, and compassion. P-12 teachers who practice transformative leadership earn the trust of their students (Corrigan & Chapman, 2008) and the respect of their colleagues.

In this paper we share some of the instructional approaches we have used to cultivate our vision of transformative leadership in classroom teachers: (a) fostering

critical inquiry using a multicultural lens, (b) promoting collaborative inquiry, and (c) developing habits of creativity and imagination. Within a description of each instructional approach, we offer evidence from teachers' work that these approaches positively impact their ability to act as transformative leaders in their classrooms and schools. Ultimately, we are interested in how classroom teachers take what they get from a critical professional development program and use it to exercise transformative leadership. Our emphasis here is less on how professional development supports transformative leadership and more on defining what it looks like in practice and the habits of mind and practice that sustain it. Some manifestations of transformative leadership can include: (a) changes in attitudes and classroom practice; (b) action to bridge perceived achievement gaps (racial/ethnic, gender, etc); (c) collaborative instruction across disciplines; (d) teacher-led improvements in parental/community involvement; (e) challenges in and transformations of district assessment methods; (f) actions to support/hold accountable professional colleagues; and (g) exercises in (collective) "power to" rather than (individual) "power over" to make lasting change in schools, school systems, and communities.

On Becoming a Transformative Leader

Many of the published examples of teachers as transformative leaders offer examples of teachers with strong self-identities as critical pedagogues (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Freire, 1970/1991; Michie, 2005; Oakes & Rogers, 2006; Schultz, 2008; Wink, 2005). Communities of pedagogical discourse (Palmer, 1998) and professional learning communities offer inservice teachers some of the supports required to assist in the teaching and learning of transformative practice such as collaborative and iterative inquiry, reflection, subject-matter mastery, and peer critique and accountability. Scholars in the disciplines of history and social studies highlight the work of teachers whose content knowledge sets the stage for democratic practice in the classroom (e.g., Banks, 2007; Brophy & VanSledright, 1997; Thornton, 2004). Yet as Schön (1983) suggests,

Reflection in action is both a consequence and cause of surprise. When a member of a bureaucracy embarks on a course of reflective practice, allowing himself to experience confusion and uncertainty, subjecting his frames and theories to conscious criticism and change, he may increase his capacity to contribute to significant organizational learning, but he also becomes, by the same token, a danger to the stable system of rules and procedures within which he is expected to deliver his technical expertise (p. 328).

Is there evidence that teachers who are not self-identified critical pedagogues can learn to become transformative leaders and continue to exercise that leadership in their classrooms and communities?

We believe there is evidence to support such an evolution. Transformative teacher professional development programs—that is, teacher professional development

efforts that emphasize critical reflection, dialogue, and collaboration (e.g., Brookfield, 1995; Schön, 1983; Wink, 2005)—can support teachers to transform their classrooms into democratic and empowering learning spaces. As teachers develop the skills of critical reflection and as they discover the power of their own voices, they are able to re-envision their roles as critical educators who empower their own students.

Transformative programs offer ongoing professional development that is cross-disciplinary, that combines the wisdom of P-12 classroom teachers along the age-grade spectrum, and that offers experiential learning as well as hands-on practice in art making. Teachers design and implement action research based on their lived experiences. They draw on academic and popular literature to contribute to our collective knowledge of teaching and learning. Teachers in such a program examine macro-level policies and systems, including the cycle of socialization (Harro, 2000), to actively seek openings for making change in schools and at the community level. An important feature of such a program is the intentional communities of support and accountability where teachers can practice these new vocabularies and skills with their peers. Through research opportunities, readings, reflection, dialogue, and collaboration, teachers explore new ideas and different perspectives, addressing fundamental epistemological, cultural, and developmental issues. As they study, reflect, discuss challenges in their own classrooms, and explore their roles as professionals, teachers gain new perspectives on teaching and student learning that lead them to make critical changes in their classrooms (DeMulder, Cricchi, & Sockett, 2001).

We have the privilege of teaching in the Initiatives in Educational Transformation (IET) Master's Degree Program, which is designed around the opportunities described above. This professional development program, specifically designed for practicing teachers, focuses on developing teachers' capacities for reflective practice, school-based inquiry, collaboration, and transformative leadership. The non-traditional structure of the program requires that the teachers, who join in school-based teams, attend eight-hour class days for two 2-week summer sessions, a third summer session of one week, and four days per academic semester during the intervening years. Throughout the program, teachers are required to keep reflective journals about their experiences and evolving ideas about education specifically related to teacher agency, school and societal structures related to race, class and gender, moral professionalism, social justice, and language and culture both implicitly and explicitly embedded in their classrooms. They are also expected to engage in their own action research projects in which they deeply explore areas of their teaching practice in order to better understand and hopefully improve the interactions and learning within their classrooms. Consistent with a learner-centered approach, after each class day, teachers share reflective written feedback on the ways in which they experience the IET curriculum. The success of a program such as this is manifest in the changes in practice that occur outside of the professional development milieu. Here we offer evidence of some of the transformations in critical inquiry, collaboration, creativity and imagination, and classroom practice that teachers experience following participation in our critical teacher professional development program. This evidence was gathered from teachers' reflective written feedback and assignments.

Critical Inquiry Using a Multicultural Lens

The critical inquiry must first begin inside as a teacher explores his or her own identity, socialization (Harro, 2000), assumptions, and social and political role. It is challenging for teachers to transform themselves from traditional educators into critical pedagogues (Bruenig, 2006). One way to scaffold this work is through the use of curricula that help teachers explore their roles in society.

One of the most difficult confrontations in the United States concerns notions of race and racism, particularly in schools. Through the use of an anti-racist curriculum, teachers engage in critical reflection to increase their awareness of race, racism, power, and privilege. In the IET program these strategies include exercises intended to enhance the participants' understanding of the impact that their cultural and racial identity has on their educational and life experiences. For example, in one of these activities teachers were asked to read through the privileges presented in McIntosh's (1989) article, "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack," tallying up those with which they could agree. The other exercise required them to line up as a class and proceed to take steps forward and backward in response to statements about their past experiences, such as "If your ancestors were forced to come to the USA not by choice, take one step back," and, "If you studied the culture of your ancestors in elementary school, take one step forward." In addition, we challenged teachers' preconceived notions about race by viewing a PBS film called *Race: The Power of an Illusion* (Adelman, 2003) and we further explored race and racism by viewing the film *The Color of Fear* (Mun Wah, 1995). Reflection and critical dialogue in small and large groups were important components of each of these curricular activities.

Evidence suggests that many students were inspired by their experiences to make commitments to take action, as John's¹ example illustrates:

Driven home today, for me, is that we need to be patient, but vigilant, with change. Giving things to the underprivileged will not make lasting change in our society. However, opening and changing the minds and thinking of the privileged will. As all of us are responsible for tomorrow's minds today, we must work with our students to open their eyes to our society and all of its faults and benefits. It is my responsibility, above all else to make sure my students leave me with open eyes, open mind, and questioning heart.

The anti-racist curriculum afforded Emma the opportunity to clarify her role in combating racism as well. In response to viewing Mun Wah's (1995) film, *The Color of Fear*, she remarked,

¹ All names are pseudonyms to protect the privacy of the teachers.

Again, it was the film that unsettled and challenged me. I realized for the first time that my role in fighting racism is not to play the missionary...it is not about charity. I had this idea that to join the fight, I had to find a way to bestow some of my White privilege on people of other races. After viewing this film, I realize I can join the fight by using my White privilege to confront people of my own race. I realize now that my primary role will be to confront White racism from within White racism: recognize it, question it, challenge it, and act against it—clearly and consistently.

As a result of her experience, Jessica took immediate action to discuss race and racism with her family. She reported, "...my poor brother-in-law...had to hear me discuss the White male privilege agenda for much of his vacation. Before long I was being called a feminist."

As teachers put their new racialized consciousness into action (Schneidewind, 2005), they begin to support students of color, challenge stereotypes and White privilege, actively confront institutional racism, and continue with their ongoing critical reflection. Engaging with peer educators in these explorations is an extension of the self-reflection that supports transformative teacher leaders, as Beth indicates:

I became more self-confident to speak out for what I believe. I dared to look objectively at my school culture and how the administration shapes that culture. I learned that I could help influence the culture and co-hosted a book talk group to help form camaraderie and give us all a common language.

A second site for critical inquiry is in the teachers' use of curriculum. These choices can be framed by the 23 categories of National Council on Social Studies Curriculum Guidelines for Multicultural Education (1991) that address school environment, policies, curriculum, staffing, staff development, learning styles, identity, critical thinking, student outcomes, cross-cultural communications, pedagogy, etc. However, curricular choices do not, in themselves, indicate transformative leadership. Critical educators often must gain students' trust and demonstrate their equal care and concern for *all* students before engaging in the questioning of deeply entrenched normative assumptions (North, 2007). Even with this trust, Anyon (2005) argues, "developing 'critical consciousness' in people through information, readings, and discussion does not by itself induce them to participate in transgressive politics—although it provides a crucial base of understanding" (p. 141). An empirical study of anti-oppressive education showed that it succeeded in raising awareness more than it affected student action (North, 2007). Yet, a process of critical inquiry—or praxis—is intended to be dynamic and a transformative teacher leader has the courage to co-create curriculum with students.

This is a challenge when teachers perceive limited curricular flexibility (e.g., due to standardized tests or pacing guides) or perceive themselves to lack the imagination

to create new materials. In a professional development seminar on becoming a “subversive” teacher, using the 400th anniversary of the Jamestown settlement as a prompt, teachers in our cohort were asked to design a piece of curriculum that linked a historical event with a contemporary social justice issue, as it would be taught to a gifted and talented class, using multiple perspectives, in a cross-disciplinary manner, and in such a way that students would excel on a standards of learning essay test on the subject. Teachers were all given the same text that included articles, websites, newsletters, and curriculum standards. They were encouraged to form small groups of similar grade level or subject areas to brainstorm ideas, share resources, and create a common lesson plan to adapt to their particular classrooms. Teachers delivered the lesson(s) and then wrote a reflection about their individual experience. This was an extremely difficult assignment for most teachers, especially those who teach early elementary grades and those who do not teach history or social studies. Nevertheless, the evaluations from the seminar suggest that it was a transformative experience, changing teacher perceptions of the abilities of their students, and their own abilities to stretch beyond the limits of standardized instruction and school district standards. Some of the responses teachers shared about the experience:

“I [feel] more empowered with control over my curriculum now, incorporating more cross-curricular material, not feeling constrained...”

“I am not tied into the testing mode as much as I thought...”

“I realize that I can transform any basic assignment into a meaningful exploration of life issues not normally covered in a plain syllabus ...”

“I still struggle with how to simplify complexities of history and culture for third graders to understand, but have freed myself to engage in open-minded inquiry and challenge third graders’ assumptions...”

“Seeing the benefits my kids received after teaching the Jamestown lesson has empowered me to include more lessons like this...”

“I gained knowledge in reference to geography, differentiated instruction, and communicating with students on social affairs...”

A third site for critical inquiry is in examining how to open the classroom for more interaction with parents and the larger community. We create multiple opportunities for teachers to re-envision these relationships in ways that parents and community members can become integral voices in the educational process. Teachers are asked to explore their school communities through a “Community Walk” and later in the program, through a “New View Walk.” Teachers also engage in projects where they intentionally seek out the perspectives of parents and community members in order to develop culturally reciprocal relationships rather than the hierarchical relationships so often found in educational settings (Harry, Kalyanpur, & Day, 1999). After engaging in these

experiences, teachers often express the ways in which their classroom practices are transformed through these interactions. One teacher stated that as a result of deeper thinking:

The first thing I did was made it possible for every parent who wanted to participate to go on any fieldtrip offered. Rather than go by the “first come, first served rule,” I simply ordered an extra bus. On our last field trip we had so many parents that we could have filled an entire bus just with them. Making parents feel a valued part of a school activity goes far in promoting home/school communication.

A fourth site for critical inquiry is in the social action that teachers take outside of their classrooms. Curricular activities that encourage teachers to “speak truth to power” can be a catalyst for social action as they engage teachers in reflection and critical dialogue centered on their teaching lives. One such set of activities involved reading the text *Letters to the Next President* (Glickman & Cosby, 2007) and having extended class discussions around the theme of democratic classrooms and schools: what they should look like, what we currently have, and what we need to make classrooms and schools more democratic. A final activity encouraged each teacher to draft a letter to express his or her own education-related concerns to local stakeholders. Susan, a high school teacher, wrote a letter to her school superintendent. We include key excerpts here:

Dear Superintendent,

... I know that this is a hard time for the school division, but if our focus is solely on money (and how much we don't have) then we will be shortchanging our students. There are issues we face in our schools that I think we can solve together, and the answer isn't just more money...

Teachers in this county need to feel that their input is truly valued by the administration...[in] a relationship in which teachers feel free to speak up about what concerns them, and what solutions they see to our shared problems...

I have implemented my own system [of data-driven decision making], based on unit tests in which questions are tagged by SOL [*Standards of Learning*], that allows me to see at least once a week how my students and I are doing in our progress towards mastering the SOLs. This is much more useful to me because the feedback is more immediate, targeted, and detailed.

If what we truly want is for teachers to use data in decision making, we have to make sure that they have good data, know how to analyze it, and get it in a fashion that is useful to them. If you really want them to buy-in to a district-wide system, then you need to give teachers a chance to have input into that system and to really grapple with the options to find the best system possible. When you simply tell them how it will work, you will not get the best possible results. This is true of any decision you make that has a major impact on how teachers must teach.

Sincerely,
Susan

Susan describes what many teachers in public schools face: inflexible assessment tools lacking the immediacy, tailoring, or detail she needs to teach each student effectively. Were it not for the initiative and creativity in designing her own assessments, Susan might fail to perceive her students' gaps in knowledge in a timely manner. She might forge ahead with a prescribed curriculum while reinforcing students' feelings of inadequacy, and in some jurisdictions, she might be putting her own job at risk should student test scores be a condition of her continued employment. While she seems to accept mastery of the SOLs as a worthy educational goal (rather than challenging their inherent value), Susan is acting as a transformative leader by defining for herself what good data-driven educational decisions look like and by taking charge of the educational process in her classroom.

Similarly, teachers were assigned the task of visiting a range of policymakers and elected officials to learn about and share opinions on education. They went to prearranged meetings at the offices of their legislators, union representatives, and advocacy organizations; teachers prepared a list of questions and proposals in advance of the meetings about issues of professional concern. A representative response reveals insights about this introductory level of social action:

Going to [the legislature] on Wednesday was great. I feel like that was a shift to me. I saw myself as being an agent for change in a very small arena, in my home, my class, and school community. My outlook changed on Wednesday because I used a voice I had not used before. Even though my opinion may not reach the [executive office] it may make its way to a [legislator's] argument.

By embracing their identity as active citizens with an educational agenda, teachers become transformative leaders outside of the classroom to serve students and peer educators within classrooms and schools.

Collaboration

Leadership of our program is not assigned to a single person, but rather is a way of being and interacting in collaboration with others; teachers act as transformative leaders when they nurture relationships with colleagues, administrators, parents, and students in ways that help them shape effective learning environments for all. A teacher education program that supports innovative and collaborative school-based practices is designed so that the classroom teachers also see themselves as part of a larger community of learners, researchers, and policymakers. The fact that teachers enter the program in school teams and work together on coursework, classroom-based and whole-school change research helps to strengthen their role as collaborators. Our multidisciplinary faculty draws on current policy issues and on the most current research on teacher professional development to design an arc of learning for the cohort of educators.

Teaching in this way is much more time-consuming than teaching as a solo professor in a semester-long course. As many as three to five faculty members collaboratively design all course curricula and team teach in the classroom. While we are individually responsible for advising a set of students and maintaining our individual research agendas, all teaching tasks are performed in conjunction with other faculty over the course of the two-year cohort. In effect, we are modeling for our teachers the benefits of collaboration by demonstrating it in our own practice. Our experience is that the outcome seems to lead classroom teachers toward genuine transformation of their own practice and of the learning of P-12 students. The following quote captures one teacher's reflection on the ways in which collaboration with colleagues helped her better meet the needs of her students:

This program has given me the chance to express what I think, to listen to other voices, and reflect on how it affects me, and to reflect on how I teach and how kids learn. I am still opinionated about things, but am more willing to discuss alternatives and find ways of meeting kids' needs in the classroom. I do realize that 'two heads are better than one' and by working with my teammates I have learned more than I expected. Mostly, I think I'm more sensitive to how I can help children who struggle and don't fit the mold. Teaming has given me the support as a teacher that I didn't really have before and it's because of the chances we've had to dialogue. I'm convinced that the more teachers work together and dialogue that positive changes can occur for children.

Creativity and Imagination

While teachers are encouraged to engage students in creative problem solving and are rewarded for imaginative instruction, it is still the rare school that actively supports the use of the arts as a method of teacher self-expression and as a tool for classroom instruction. Yet, a transformative teacher uses visual, language, and performing arts as a way to find his or her voice, to differentiate classroom instruction, and to provide alternative assessments to student learning. In order to encourage the use of the arts, the IET program offers teachers the opportunity to complete assignments, including traditional research projects, using an art form. For example, after completion of a formal case study of a classroom student, a teacher may extract the insights and transform them into a solo performance from the student's perspective, or a collage, or a piece of music. Teachers share these projects and engage in dialogue with their peers as part of the creative process.

In responding to a question about the use of the arts, creativity, imagination, and creative problem solving in their teaching since beginning a critical teacher professional development program, teachers described the impact on their students and on their own growth. A typical response is as follows:

...I have become more creative in delivery of my instruction by allowing my students to complete artistic projects in groups. As for the creative problem

solving piece my students collaborate in teams and feed off each other's strengths. They build each other up by helping their peers to reach for the high standards and forget about their weaknesses.

Impact on P-12 Classroom Practice

Important in the transformative work of teachers is not only what they make visible to their professional peers and authorities, but also the work in individual classrooms (e.g., taking on the bureaucratic educational system and addressing the ways in which teachers combat standardized curriculum constraints). Teachers who are transformative leaders create the setting for students who, in turn, take initiative for their own learning, are fully engaged, help other students have voice, participate in the larger community, etc. These teachers create a sense of community and provide opportunities for students to develop the skills and attitudes needed to work collaboratively in diversely populated classrooms.

A sense of community is fostered in many ways through the design of the IET program; the program includes a cohort structure, a focus on relationship building, and a learner-centered environment. One of the most powerful design features is the requirement that teachers work in school-based teams. In the first year, they share ideas about research on their individual classrooms; by the second year, they are co-creating school change research projects intended to engage student voices and to transform schooling for and with P-12 students. These design features support and encourage teachers to incorporate relationship building and collaborative practices in their own classrooms. In essence, the program supports the notion that by collaborating with others (including parents and community members), a teacher's own practice improves and it impacts P-12 students positively. The following two responses are examples of the ways teachers transform their classrooms through collaborative efforts:

My classroom has become more student-centered, which has helped me become better equipped to meet individual students' needs. This process has been empowered by collaboration between myself and other teachers/colleagues, with my students, and by the students themselves.

In class there were many social problems and conflicts between students. I had class meetings to help students solve their conflicts. It was apparent to me that these students lacked the skills to successfully interact with each other. They needed to be taught how to appreciate each other's differences. I began to build a classroom community.

Teachers typically conclude that the efforts they make to seek out the voices of their students and share power in the classroom crucially transform the learning environment for the better. Transformative leadership, then, is not about wielding authority, but rather is about empowering students to be active participants in a democracy. These teachers' classrooms become spaces that embrace critical inquiry,

creativity and imagination, and collaboration. The following examples from five IET graduates attest to the transformative impact these experiences provoke:

I have learned a lot about being a more effective teacher from the students themselves. I look no further than the first year research paper where I conducted student interviews about making their physical education experiences more productive. What I found most interesting about the interviews were [sic] that the students provided practical answers.... This made an impression on me that if students were given the opportunity to make some classroom decisions that they may take more of an interest in their own learning.

Giving [students] the opportunity to express opinions and to have a say in the learning process impacts the motivation and enthusiasm of the students. The children were permitted to choose their own books each week. They then reported to their classmates on the stories that they had read. The third graders in my group were eager to tell about the stories to their classmates. They were also able to make connections to the stories from their own lives, world events, and other books that they had read. The research team concluded that opportunities to talk about the stories were more motivating than the actual written activities that went along with the books.

Anytime I am doing an activity that I feel is not going well, or could be better, I sit back and ask myself what is wrong here? And then have a discussion with my students on how to fix it. I am not the only one with great ideas and answers.

...My students run all discussions. I have modeled to them how an answer can be defended using opinions and facts. The students were stunned to find that answering with facts makes them more confident in their learning. I now sit back while students answer questions and support their answers with facts! They love taking the discussions into their own hands. When they start to give an opinion, they instantly stop to look through the pages and see if they can defend their opinion.

In math my journey has been focused on observing these students [English Language Learners] and reflecting on how they learn. I listen and talk to them about real world experiences they have had and what their interests are. With this valuable knowledge, I plan activities which help them make connections with what they already know to a new math skill they need to learn.

These teacher reflections provide evidence that learner-centered approaches (Weimer, 2002) not only empower students as learners but also empower teachers to make the learning environment more responsive to student needs. Clearly, this transactional, reciprocal learning dynamic emerges as a result of the teacher's intentional initiative, thus is an excellent example of transformative leadership.

Conclusion

P-12 classroom teachers face enormous challenges to instruct children in content areas, help nurture their social and civic identities, and help prepare them for adult roles. Teachers often perform their work in isolation (Palmer, 1998), yet are expected to produce outcomes that conform to shifting public policies and visions of educational excellence. A teacher who chooses to be a transformative leader, then, is one who refuses isolation and insists on asking and seeking answers to difficult questions in collaboration with peer educators, administrators, parents, and most importantly, with students regardless of grade level or discipline. Such a teacher trusts in the process of thinking about and acting on justice, and is trusted by others to do so with care. These teachers engage in critical inquiry; using a multicultural lens, they promote collaborative inquiry, and develop habits of creativity and imagination. The process of becoming such a teacher is possible, even years after entering the classroom and developing a teaching practice that seems to “work.” Excellent teacher professional development can be the catalyst for this transformation. However, it is through conscious practice with professional peers that teachers can transform themselves into leaders within and outside of their classrooms.

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About the authors



Jenice L. View is Assistant Professor of Initiatives in Educational Transformation (IET), a professional development master's degree program for licensed, practicing K-12 public school teachers. The program is hosted by the Graduate School of Education in the College of Education and Human Development at George Mason University. Her research focuses on the critical teaching and learning of history, critical pedagogy and the arts in teacher professional development, and how the learning of history impacts youth voice and civic engagement. Send email to jview@gmu.edu.



Elizabeth K. DeMulder is Director and Associate Professor of Educational Transformation in the Initiatives in Educational Transformation (IET) master's degree program of the Graduate School of Education in the College of Education and Human Development at George Mason University. Her research concerns the study of interpersonal relationships in educational contexts, risk and protective conditions in children's development and early education, and teacher professional development focusing on critical pedagogy and social justice issues. Send email to edemulde@gmu.edu.



Mary Kayler is an Instructor in the Initiatives in Educational Transformation (IET) master's degree program of the Graduate School of Education in the College of Education and Human Development at George Mason University. Her research focuses on teacher development, critical pedagogy, teaching and learning with technology and community-based virtual gaming. Send email to mkayler@gmu.edu.



Stacia M. Stribling is an Instructor in the Initiatives in Educational Transformation (IET) program, a professional development master's degree program in the College of Education and Human Development at George Mason University. Her research interests include early childhood education, critical literacy, teacher professional development, and multiculturalism. Send email to sslawins@gmu.edu.