

Dr. Heather B. Hill Promotes Community Building in the Classroom

Dr. Heather B. Hill describes herself as an “introvert/extrovert.” The introvert side of her personality brings on feelings of trepidation when she enters a classroom for the first time. “Every semester I carry a little bit of, ‘Oh boy, here we go.’ You’re meeting a whole new group of people. You have to immediately figure out how to form authentic connections with them,” she explained.

This fall begins Hill’s second school year as an assistant professor of Educational Psychology with the Department of Curriculum and Foundations. She will teach Life Cycle: Development and Learning (EDU 803) in the Department of Doctoral Studies in the fall semester and Psychology of Education (EDB 302) and Introduction to Education (EDB 242) in spring of 2021.

Her style of instruction does not call for her to be the center of attention in a classroom filled with future teachers. “For me, I don’t like to do a lot of lecturing,” Hill said. Instead there is lots of discussion and community-building based on the constructivist approach she takes to teaching

“Constructivist theory is the idea that teaching and learning is a process where everyone is constructing knowledge together,” she said.

Prior to coming to CSU, Hill was an assistant professor in the Department of Education at Ithaca College in New York. She also has taught language arts in public and Christian middle schools in Columbus. Hill was a volleyball coach at the latter. The importance of teamwork and community building that she learned as a coach is something she instills in the teachers-in-training she instructs at Cleveland State University.

“I value community building more than anything,” she explained. “I really want them to practice engaging in hard conversations and working collaboratively. Those things matter the most to me.”



Hill replaced Dr. Jeremy Genovese, who retired last year as associate professor of Educational Psychology. Hill said the subject answers, “How do people learn? What motivates people to learn? How do we use psychology to inform how we create a classroom experience? How we build a relationship with students?”

Through educational psychology, she also wants students to understand how gender, race and class influence how we learn and how we teach.

“According to research, the dominant view is teaching is apolitical, that it’s neutral and that your identity has nothing to do with anything. We know it has everything to do with teaching and how you connect with people,” she said.

Hill, a married mother of two daughters, first became interested in educational psychology while pursuing her doctorate at The Ohio State University.

“A lot of people say that research is like ‘me

search.’ Generally, your line of inquiry is somehow situated in your lived experiences. In fact, as qualitative researchers, your experiences offer resources for noticing and making meaning of interactions others would ignore, devalue or overlook. And so, my research, at least in terms of my dissertation, has focused primarily on Black girl literacies, writing inside and outside school.”

Hill finds that too often teachers assume they have to coerce African-American students to read and write. Her Black, female research participants were avid readers who wrote fan fiction that require lots of writing and rewriting and providing feedback to other readers and writers online.

“In reality, these girls were doing what they needed to do to get the grade, but there is so much they could have experienced if their teacher had been aware or even assumed they were already doing this kind of work,” she said.

“In terms of psychology, my research is about how girls are making sense of the world, how they are coming to see themselves in relationship to others, self-efficacy and self-esteem. I’m not just necessarily looking at issues of cognition or trying to diagnose Black girls or Black boys, which sometimes is the approach in psychological perspectives. There is always the assumption there is something wrong with Black kids and we need to figure out what the gap is in their way of thinking and doing something,” she explained.

In her courses, she urges her students not to fear African-American students and “not to view them as bodies that have to be managed and silenced and policed.”

Hill notes that African-American youth bring rich experiences to schools that are not always recognized by teachers. She wants educators to see, “What we can learn from Black youth on how we can design classrooms that are engaging, more nurturing, more fun.”

Some of her interest in educational psychology stems from her own experiences as a student at Hawken School, a predominately white private

school in the affluent suburb of Gates Mills. Being one of a few African-American students at the school, she had feelings of being both hyper-visible and invisible. “Outside of school, I was writing poetry. I was reading. I never got the feeling teachers cared or even presumed that was occurring.”

The East Cleveland native admits that while at Hawken she walked the halls of the school with shame about her working-class background and the fact that her father was a drug addict. “For me, it was trying to figure out how to negotiate what parts of me can I tell and not tell,” said Hill, who graduated in 2001.

Still, she is grateful for her experience at Hawken. “I see a lot of my work as bridging the divide,” she said.

“I am free and transparent in sharing my stories to let [students] know my family didn’t reflect a traditional environment,” she said, as she exhibits the extrovert in her personality.

She challenges her pre-service teachers to value what she brings to the courses she teaches. “Value my mother and even my father. Value our community and don’t regard us through a deficit lens,” she explained.

She wants her students to “really think about how they will engage students and love on students and see past all the stereotypes that come with being poor or the working poor.”

Hill has the respect of Dr. Adam Voight, who teaches the Social Context of Urban Education (EDB 241), a companion course to Hill’s EDB 242. They were co-instructors last spring for Rotation I in the CREATE program for first-semester education majors.

“She has been a tremendous addition to the Rotation 1 team, bringing a fresh perspective on teacher training and a brilliant ability to critically analyze issues in class, the scholarly literature and the larger world of education. In addition to being a talented scholar and teacher, she’s just a great person, too,” Voight said.