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## The unexamined Whiteness of teaching: how White teachers maintain and enact dominant racial ideologies

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While much research that explores the role of race in education focuses on children of color, this article explores an aspect of the predominately White teaching force that educates them. This article explores findings from a qualitative study that posed questions about the ways in which White pre-service teachers' life-experiences influenced understandings of race and difference, and how these pre-service teachers negotiated the challenges a critical multicultural education course offered those beliefs. In keeping with the tenet of critical race theory that racism is an inherent and normalized aspect of American society, the author found that through previous life-experiences, the participants gained hegemonic understandings about race and difference. Participants responded to challenges to these understandings by relying on a set of 'tools of Whiteness' designed to protect and maintain dominant and stereotypical understandings of race – tools that were emotional, ideological, and performative. This phenomenon is typically referred to as *resistance* in the literature on White teachers and multicultural education. The author contends, however, that these tools are not simply a passive *resistance* to but much more of an active *protection* of the incoming hegemonic stories and White supremacy and therefore require analysis to better understand when and how these tools are strategically used. Understanding how these tools of Whiteness protect dominant and stereotypical understandings of race can advise teacher education programs how to better organize to transform the ideologies of White teachers.

**Keywords:** race; racism; Whiteness; teacher education; student teachers; White supremacy; tools of Whiteness studies; elementary education; Critical Race Theory; critical whiteness

### Introduction

Statistics on the racial composition of teachers in the US are startling – 90% of the K-12 teaching force is White (National Collaborative on Diversity of the Teaching Force 2004); almost half of the schools in the US do not have a single teacher of color on staff, therefore many students will graduate from high school having been taught only by Whites (Jordon-Irvine 2003). The immediate future will not be very different because 80% to 93% of all current teacher education students are White females (Cochran-Smith 2004), and they are being instructed by a teacher education profession that is itself 88% White (Ladson-Billings 2001).

This demographic imperative (Banks 1996; Cochran-Smith 2004) implores us to look deeply at Whiteness and its relationship to teaching, particularly as classrooms are increasingly filled with children of color. The sheer number of White people in the teaching field in a country marked by racial inequality has implications for the role

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White teachers play in creating patterns of racial achievement and opportunity. This research asks: how do White preservice teachers conceptualize race and difference and what role do these conceptualizations play in maintaining existing racial hierarchies? The following section contextualizes these questions by reviewing theoretical frameworks that examine systems of inequality.

### **Why race?**

To better understand how White teachers construct identities of people different from themselves, this study centers on the role of race. As Du Bois (1997), Woodson (2006), Omi and Winant (1986), and the scholars in the field of critical race theory (Ladson-Billings and Tate 1995; Lynn 1999), note race is a key organizing category for inequality because of the permanence of racial ideology and White supremacy in American society (Omi and Winant 1986, 63). Critical race theory (CRT) posits that racism is a normal, inherent feature of American society. As evidenced by the ways in which the pre-service teachers explained their life experiences, it is clear that racism is 'endemic and deeply ingrained in American life' to the extent that it should be seen as the major condition that must be analyzed, in conjunction with other forms of oppression, to understand inequality (Ladson-Billings and Tate 1995). This study names and exposes the discourses of the participants that are seemingly 'race-neutral' or 'color-blind' in keeping with the goals of CRT (Lynn 1999; Stovall 2006).

In situating race as the organizing principle of domination (Ladson-Billings and Tate 1995; Omi and Winant 1986; Stovall 2006), it is critical to name that the system of domination that the preservice teachers are maintaining is White supremacy (Jenson 2005). As Lynn warns, 'To ignore this reality is to belie the history of this nation entirely' (1999, 622). Within this system, Whiteness is the ideology and way of being in the world that is used to maintain White supremacy. Bush (2004) argues that Whiteness 'reveals the ways in which Whites benefit from a variety of institutional and social arrangements that often appear (to Whites) to have nothing to do with race' (15). Of course, this system of inequity has everything to do with race, as an analysis of the founding of this republic on the land of the Native-Americans with the labor of African-Americans reveals (Jenson 2005).

Whiteness is operationalized in a variety of ways. The participants, often unaware that they had a racial identity, were able to deny their place in the racial hierarchy through the use of power erasure (Kincheloe and Steinberg 1997), in which Whiteness remains masked from everyday consciousness, allowing them to be blind not only to their own privileges but also to their group membership. And in a White supremacist society, many of the privileges that flow to Whites are invisible, unearned, and not consciously acknowledged (Howard 1999; Jensen 2005). The findings of this study argue that these privileges, ideologies and stereotypes reinforce institutional hierarchies and the larger system of White supremacy. Leonardo (2004) challenges discussions of privilege that frame it as if Whites are passively handed advantages in an 'invisible knapsack' (McIntosh 1990) rather than uncovering how Whites actively oppress people of color throughout the world. As Leonardo explains this process: '[Whites] set up a system that benefits the group, mystify the system, remove the agents of actions from discourse, and when interrogated about it, stifle the discussion with inane comments about the "reality" of the charges being made' (148). The White teachers in this study are part of this mystified system, and it is the very ways in which they respond to interrogations about it, that ultimately work to maintain it.

### **The response from teacher education**

Many teacher educators understand the connection between race and the readiness of teachers to build socio-political consciousness and cultural competence (Ladson-Billings 2001; Howard 1999; Tatum 1999; Derman-Sparks and Phillips 1997). Leaders in the fields of urban education contend that it is crucial for White teachers to be able to critically examine this social positionality as it intersects with those of their students. Ladson-Billings (2001, 81) contends:

Typically, White, middle-class prospective teachers have little to no understanding of their own culture. Notions of Whiteness are taken for granted. They rarely are interrogated. But being White is not merely about biology. It is about choosing a system of privilege and power.

Ladson-Billings' comment begs the question: how do White, middle class, prospective teachers make the transition from being unaware of their culture to a critical understanding of the role of culture, power, and oppression? The literature in the field of culturally relevant teacher education argues that it is imperative that White teachers develop this awareness, or critical consciousness, around issues of race, privilege, power, and oppression in order to be successful with students from diverse settings (Ayers et al. 1998; Cochran-Smith 2004; Jordan-Irvine 2003; Sleeter and McLaren 1995). The life experiences and positionality of many White teachers often make it challenging for them to understand the relevance of teaching from the culturally relevant perspective called for by the literature on successful teaching of students of color (Ladson-Billings 2001; Cochran-Smith 2004; Jordan-Irvine 2003). Some teacher education programs (Cochran-Smith 2004; Ladson-Billings 2001; Jordan-Irvine 2003) attempt to address this need by providing prospective teachers with courses designed to help them analyze their own belief systems and personal experiences, discover how these strategies influence the way they see their students, and re-envision the role of a teacher in an urban classroom.

There is an underlying assumption in this literature on race and teacher education that helping teachers, particularly White teachers, to develop cultural competence and socio-political consciousness will help them to become better educators. By challenging teachers' stereotypical constructions of urban students, the belief is that they will develop greater capacity to identify and empathize with their students. This will allow them to develop relationships with their students based on 'authentic caring' (Valenzuela 1999), a caring that will allow students to care about school in return (Noddings 1992; Valenzuela 1999). Further, this ability to identify and relate to students will assist teachers in creating curriculum that is relevant to students' lives and interests (Ladson-Billings 1994).

Many teacher educators work hard to develop this racialized critical consciousness through courses such as multicultural education and some have documented the growth made by students. However, there are multiple accounts of reported resistance to these courses and concepts by White pre-service teachers. To better understand these issues, I explored how pre-service teachers' life experiences socialize them into particular understandings of race and difference, and I identified how these teachers negotiated these understandings when their ideologies were challenged through a course on multicultural education that called into question their beliefs about race and privilege.

## Methods

To explore the research questions, I studied eight White, female, pre-service teachers in their twenties who were enrolled in a course on multicultural education during their last semester of a childhood teacher education program at a university located in New York City. The course was intended to help teachers begin exploring their own racial identity and class privilege, their assumptions about students of color, and their developing understandings of the role of teachers in urban schools. I interviewed participants to learn how they see themselves, their students, and their teaching. I also used transcripts of class sessions and prior written assignments from the multicultural course in a retroactive analysis to understand the ways in which the participants grappled with the course themes. I used grounded theory method (Glaser and Strauss 1967) to analyze the data, an approach that ensures that the theory fits the phenomenon studied, that it does not include any forced elements, and that it is most usable because it comes directly from the data themselves.

After hearing the findings of this study, people often ask how I was able to obtain the very personal data that the pre-service teachers shared. As a White woman working with only White students in this study, I believe my participants felt safe to open up and reveal some of their previously unspoken beliefs about race and difference. Throughout the multicultural course, the students engaged in a variety of assignments that encouraged them to reflect on their own life experiences and activities that caused them to question their beliefs. The contradictions exposed between the course materials and their previous understandings caused the participants a great deal of confusion and discomfort which, when voiced, was ripe with data pertinent to this study.

## Findings: the maintenance and enactment of dominant racial ideologies

### *Life experiences*

The participants entered the course with life experiences that influenced the ways in which they made sense of race and difference. Their identity markers of religion, class, and ethnic affiliations, influenced their sense of themselves and others. They had a variety of early experiences with diversity, and how they made sense of these incidents played a key role in shaping how they currently comprehend difference, particularly between themselves and their students.

### *Religious identity*

Participants used their religious identities not only to evade discussing their racial identity but also to deny the role of race in oppression. This tool was used to avoid identifying with the dominant race responsible for racial discrimination. Diane, for example, responded to a reading by Gary Howard about the concept of White privilege demonstrating this use of religion:

Like everybody is judged in some kind of way. Like I've had experiences where I've been judged because I'm Jewish, I mean on the surface I'm White, yes – I've had people say very negative remarks to me because I'm Jewish. So I feel like he's [Howard] making this a color issue when there is so much more to it than color. I think that made me mad too, because I know that I've experienced that too, and I'm not African-American.

Diane's identification as a minority, one who has experienced negative remarks because of her religious affiliation, caused her to minimize the idea of racial discrimination and, in particular, to deny her identification as a member of the dominant racial group. She conceded that she is White, although she saw this as a surface identity. This minority identification served to shape her misunderstanding of how oppression impacts people of color because if she were able to persevere as a minority, then others should be able to as well.

### *White ethnic identity*

Participants often used not only religion but also their White ethnic backgrounds to create a hegemonic story about how people of color should be able to pick themselves up by their bootstraps. Dawn called upon her Italian family's immigration experience to justify her resentment towards people of color:

Like when my dad came here to America, he had a lot of struggle. He started working when he was 10-years-old, and he didn't know a word of English. He pulled himself up and he worked hard. He doesn't now go back to the people who wouldn't give him a job – and those were the non-White people! He had to go through his family – and his family lived in a very small apartment in Brooklyn, couldn't afford a thing and, you know, he got over it. And he is over it now.

Dawn described her father's experience of the American dream: he came here with nothing, worked hard, and made it. The implication is clear – if he could make it, anyone can. She used her family's Italian immigration story as the normative experience upon which all people should model success. Such a view upholds the dominant ideology of people of color as lazy and victims of their circumstances and helps teachers such as Dawn to perpetuate the myth of American meritocracy. She continued to connect the dots between her family's experiences and how that affected her thinking about people of color:

This is where I am feeling a little bit nervous. Like maybe I'm almost being a little bit racist because you just want to say sometimes [shouting]: 'Get over it! Like get over it! It's 2005, get over it! You know, move on!' So what you're Black, so what I'm White – if I get better grades in school – maybe I worked harder. You know, if I get a job, maybe I deserved it! Why does it always have to be like, [whiny voice]: 'Well, they're the minority, let's give it to them'. I'm done with that, it's time to start a new life.

While she did wonder if she was being 'a little bit racist', she believed that the American meritocracy was working fine – she deserved what she has because she worked harder – until affirmative action came along and society started distributing resources to minorities – presumably resources that should belong to her.

### *Hierarchical relationships*

Although the participants reported little interaction with peers or teachers of color while they were growing up, they did recount experiences with people of color who worked in their homes. The participants' earliest relationships with people of color, then, were hierarchical in nature, setting up the association that people of color are there to serve or work for White people. For Allison, the fact that her family hired

nannies of color was seen as evidence of her parents' 'open mindedness about other races and ethnicities when it came to opening their hearts and their homes'.

My grandmother had help, my great aunts always had someone in the house and it was always... someone who was like African-American and like I look back and say is this wrong? But like *all* of the individuals that... like worked for my family for years and years and years and became part of the family and we treated them like – although – we didn't treat them like – well – they were there and they would serve us and they would help out and do the dishes but it was like... it was just that was the way it was.

In this characterization, there is an absence of the history of people of color, particularly African-Americans who worked – both unpaid and unpaid – caring for White children. Although Allison states that 'her family never treated them that way', would she have described slave-owners as 'open-minded' in 'opening their homes' to enslaved wet-nurses who raised their children?

The participants' understandings of themselves and others had been shaped by multiple factors. Through their life experiences, they gained a wealth of information from dominant points of views about the world around them that socialized them to hold problematic understandings about people of color and themselves. The next section on hegemonic understandings explores how the participants created particular stories based on these facets of their life experiences.

### *Hegemonic understandings*

Through their life experiences and their interactions with individuals of other races, the participants gained and maintained hegemonic understandings of the world concerning race. The term 'hegemonic understandings' refers to the participants' internalized ways of making meaning about how society is organized. By using particular racial ideologies, they shared multiple stories that justify their fear of people of color, urban communities, and students. These stories often positioned Whites as victims of racism and stereotypes while simultaneously reproducing assumptions and misconceptions about people of color, particularly African-Americans.

### *Fear*

Fear was by far the most prevalent hegemonic story shared. The participants expressed a sense of anxiety in situations with people of color, largely based on stereotypes from their earlier experiences and influences from their family and the media. This anxiety was escalated to a sense of terror in the few situations in which they found themselves to be the only White people. With only a few exceptions, all of their stories involved African-Americans as dangerous criminals who violated the participants' sense of safety. Diane described the high school in the town next to her predominately White community:

We always knew that was the high school that was always in trouble. That was the high school that had really big Black football players... I mean my friends in general didn't want to go to their school for sports events because it was a little scary. Scary like their attitude and stuff was different – seemed to be different than ours – and their behaviors and stuff seemed to be different then ours, so we avoided it... I think that you are always going to have those feelings.



In this example, Diane relied on a number of common generalizations about Black teens based on her sense of how they were different from her friends and therefore dangerous. She continued:

If I'm walking home and there is a big group of Black guys walking towards me – I'm probably going to cross the street. I don't know if it's the same if it was a group of White guys. Like it would depend on their attitudes and things like that and how they are dressed... I mean I guess we assume that if a guy is dressed in a suit or whatever that they must be perfectly fine whereas if they are wearing big jeans then they are not fine. You know? It's more professional I guess. Because you always hear about baggy jeans and hoodlums and then you think, 'well – he must be!'

Here, Diane's childhood conceptualization of African-American teenagers has carried into her adult understandings of Black men. Her fear remained based in her construction of different as dangerous as these are the markers she used to make her stereotypical judgments. Of particular interest was her use of pronouns to create a sense of collusion with her ideas. For example, she said, 'I think *you* are always going to have those feelings' and 'I mean *we* assume that if a guy is dressed'. These pronouns allowed her to avoid taking ownership over these stereotypes and to position herself within a broader White collective that presumably shared her stance.

As future teachers, do these constructions of people of color impact their understandings of their students? In describing her concerns about teaching in her classroom placement at an urban elementary school with predominately students of color, Diane shared:

That some of them are a lot bigger than me. Like some of the toughness of some of the boys I guess. Some of the boys are like tough! And that's scary for me. [I'm scared that] a fight would break out in class I guess... like either they would come at me, or that I couldn't stop it. I mean I'm a small person and like I'm in a third grade classroom and some of the boys are the same height as me. It's intimidating.

Diane, who stated that she would cross the street when a group of African-American men shared the sidewalk with her, made clear that this fear did not leave her at the classroom door. Her hegemonic understandings of Black men as violent and criminal shaped her understandings and fears of eight-year-old children from whom she may not be able to defend herself in an anticipated attack.

### *Deficit construction of urban schools, students, and families*

A second group of hegemonic understandings – deficit construction of urban schools, students, and families – functioned to explain why the participants should not or could not teach in urban or public schools. They called upon problematic stories to describe these schools and listed all of the difficulties they perceived they would face if they worked there.

Because of their fears of people of color, the participants avoided the communities in which people of color live. Most had grown up in ways organized to keep themselves surrounded by other Whites and, for the most part, they had successfully avoided spending time in communities different from their own. Their student teaching placements, in which they spent time in schools throughout New York City, were often their first experiences in communities of color. Amanda sought reassurance about traveling to Harlem for a job interview. She asked:



Is it safe for me to take the subway to 116th street and walk to 120th? I am unfamiliar with the area, and before I tell my mom and she passes out, I need to reassure her. Can't say that I am not concerned either, but let me know honestly.

Amanda was seeking validation for her fear of visiting a Black community. By referencing her mother, she was able to situate herself in a broader community that shared her fears rather than taking full ownership about her anxiety about walking four blocks in an 'unfamiliar area'. Despite the fact that Amanda had previously expressed anger about the racism in her family, here she uncritically accepted her mother's fear in order to validate her own.

### *Whites as victims*

In a third type of hegemonic story, Whites as victims, participants attempted to show the ways in which they themselves, rather than people of color, were the real victims of racism. When asked for examples of racism that they had seen or heard, the participants typically shared stories in which White people had been verbally or physically attacked by people of color. One such story stemmed from the sense that Whites are being taken advantage of as a result of affirmative action. Dawn, for example, had an intense and angry response to the concept of White privilege:

Every time [Gary Howard] said the word *privilege*; that just drove me crazy. Like today – I'm White, so that means I have to pay full tuition. I don't get it. I mean when we go to college we have to check off what race you are and I hate to say it but if you are African-American or Hispanic – you get looked at first. I mean this really pisses me off. We don't have privilege anymore – they do. And they keep going back to saying [whining] 'well – we had a bad life in the past'. You weren't around then – ya know!

Dawn drew on the dominant narrative of reverse racism to explain why she was victimized by affirmative action, claiming that people of color are actually more privileged than White people. She did not veil the anger she felt about this loss of privilege and made clear she felt that any past injustice others might have faced has no impact on present circumstances.

Influenced by their life experiences, participants either created or bought into mainstream hegemonic stories to conceptualize themselves, their students, and urban schools. Because these stories are so tightly interwoven into who they are, participants were highly committed to maintaining these understandings. In the next section, I examine what happened when these hegemonic understandings were challenged.

### *Tools of Whiteness*

With hegemonic understandings of fear, deficiency and White victimhood as starting points, the participants entered a course on multicultural education designed to interrogate their understandings about race. The course provided an introduction to the foundations of multicultural, culturally relevant education focused on the concepts of oppression and privilege. As students negotiated the challenges presented by reflecting upon their prior knowledge about race and difference, they called upon a variety of 'tools of Whiteness' in an effort to maintain their prior hegemonic understandings. Tools allow a job to be done more effectively or efficiently; tools of Whiteness facilitate in the job of maintaining and supporting hegemonic stories and dominant

ideologies of race, which in turn, uphold structures of White supremacy. In an attempt to preserve their hegemonic understandings, participants used these tools to deny, evade, subvert, or avoid the issues raised. Students' negative reactions to multicultural education are typically referred to as *resistance* in the literature on White teachers and multicultural education. I contend, however, that these tools are not simply a passive resistance to but much more of an active protection of their hegemonic stories and White supremacy. The participants relied on three types of tools to protect their stories: emotional, ideological, and performative.

### *Emotional tools of Whiteness*

Emotional tools are tools based upon participants' feelings. The course evoked a variety of emotional responses serving to obfuscate the concepts being introduced. Emotional tools appeared at first to be hasty reactions to the course. Upon analysis, however, they were in keeping with participants' hegemonic stories and can therefore be seen more as a tool of protection than as a simple emotional response.

*'I never owned a slave'.* A prevalent emotional tool was 'I never owned a slave'. This tool represented the anger and defensiveness that preservice teachers felt when they were confronted with concepts of racism. A key text in the course was Howard's *We can't teach what we don't know*. The book introduced concepts such as White privilege, racial identity development, and strategies for White teachers in multiracial schools. The participants had an angry emotional response to this reading. Dawn shared:

Throughout the book I felt uneasy about how [Howard] kept repeating that being White was a privilege and that we are a race that always needs to be dominant... I felt very, very angry because I felt like he was trying to make us feel guilty and I think there is where I got angry and my emotions started to jump in. I felt anger, because I never owned a slave or took away or whatever, so why should I be blamed for it now?

The emotional tool of 'I never owned a slave' was used to protect her hegemonic understanding of Whites as victims when challenged with the notion that Whites might indeed be the dominant race when looking at societal inequality. She also equated the analysis of race as a personal attack. Using 'I never owned a slave' served to negate Howard's argument and the contents of the book.

*'Stop trying to make me feel guilty'.* Another emotional tool used was that of 'stop trying to make me feel guilty'. Much of the literature on anti-racism (Howard 1999; Kailin 1999) explores how White people often react with guilt when they first learn about racism and the role that Whites have played in perpetuating inequality. In contrast, these novice teachers recognized that they were supposed to feel guilty and reacted against it by pleading 'not guilty'. Because feeling guilty would be an admission of responsibility, they explicitly denied this emotion to protect their own innocence in the cycle of racism. Diane, for example, asserted, 'Being White is what I was born with. So you know, I'm not going to feel guilty about being White'. Upon reflection, she was able to admit to some guilt, but she used another tool, the ideological tool, 'everyone is oppressed somehow', to deflect responsibility:

I felt like he was contradicting himself because he was saying: 'I'm not saying you should feel guilty' – but every chapter was about like what we did to the Indians or done that to the African-Americans. So yeah! It's going to make me feel guilty. But I think that there is always a group that is going to dominate another group of people. You know whether it's Whites over African-Americans or Indians over whoever.

Diane deflected feeling guilty – or accepting responsibility – by negating the role of race. By using 'stop trying to make me feel guilty', she disconnected Whites from dominance by offering other possibilities of dominant groups, although she could not name any. Not unlike the 'I never owned a slave' tool, 'stop trying to make me feel guilty' reinforces the idea that learning about historic racism is a personal attack against White people.

### *Ideological tools of Whiteness*

Ideological tools used by the participants were beliefs to which they subscribed to protect their hegemonic stories. By raising dominant claims about the state of race relations, participants were able to avoid exploring theories presented in the course. Ideological tools such as 'now that things are equal' or 'I don't even see color' are mainstream understandings about race that the participants shared. Other tools, such as 'It's out of my control' and 'I can't relate', are claims that the participants made about their personal inability or unwillingness to work with students of color or to take an active anti-racist stance in their classrooms.

*'Now that things are equal'*. By claiming that the US made progress on race relations, participants either were able to dismiss the importance or negate the existence of racism. The 'Now that things are equal' tool implied that people of color are 'playing the race card' by complaining about something that does not exist, particularly in light of their hegemonic understanding of Whites as victims of racism. As Dawn stated in a conversation in which someone brought up the concept of reparations:

Like there were laws made and Ruby Bridges came along and she changed everything and you know there was that teacher that said 'let's make a change'... And now we are all going into the classroom we are going to make things a little more better because we are becoming educated in what to do in the classroom, so I don't really think we have to say the words 'I'm sorry'.

The implication of Dawn's statement is that now that things are 'more better', the need for continued anti-racist work is unnecessary as people of color have more power in society and are subsequently victimizing Whites. The tool of 'now that things are equal' protected her hegemonic story of White innocence in racism and her understanding that people of color are undeservingly taking what rightfully belongs to Whites through affirmative action.

*'It's personal not political'*. A very popular ideological tool in use by the participants was 'it's personal not political'. The participants entered the course believing racism to be personal ignorance and discrimination rather than an institutionalized practice serving to maintain White supremacy. This belief maintained their anti-affirmative action stance because if institutional racism does not exist, there would be no need for an institutional response to racism. In addition, assignment of the label *racist* only to

overtly racist individuals such as members of the Klu Klux Klan functioned to disassociate themselves from the taint of racism. They therefore maintained their position of innocence of racism because *they* did not make racist comments, had never personally discriminated against anyone and ‘had never owned a slave’. Because the participants maintained that racism is ‘mean words’, their ensuing anti-racism strategy was to not be name-callers. This response demonstrates how the tool ‘it’s personal not political’ serves to remove the focus from the mechanisms of racism that are most damaging to people of color.

Diane, who used ‘it’s personal not political’, believed racism results in low self-esteem and the tendency to stereotype among people of color:

They [African-Americans] won’t have very good feelings about themselves if they’re always told, you know, like ‘they’re bad’ or whatever so they don’t try to – or maybe they try even harder to prove everybody wrong... I mean, I talked about the idea of a group of like Black – I mean African-American kids – walking down the street, like if I were to cross the street would they think that it’s because like, I was just crossing the street, or you know to purposely walk away from them? So would they assume the worst about me even if maybe that wasn’t my first thought.

Diane’s response was intriguing on a number of levels. She located the suffering of racism within the psyche of people of color, negating the existence of structural or material oppression. She attributed African-Americans’ work ethic to their low self-esteem, blaming people of color for their resulting positions by ignoring structural barriers they may face. Diane had previously admitted that she crosses the street because she is scared of sharing the sidewalk with African-American men. Now she claimed that perhaps she is innocently ‘just crossing the street’, but, because of their tendency to make assumptions, African-Americans might think she is a racist as a result. This tool maintained her hegemonic story because Diane, the White woman, became the victim of her own racism.

*‘Out of my control’*. The ideological tool ‘out of my control’ was used when participants reflected on multiple societal issues and expressed a feeling of being overwhelmed. Allison used this tool to express her ‘frustration’ that course authors called upon teachers to incorporate multiculturalism into their classrooms. She created the story that because an individual cannot change everything in society, to try to change anything is a worthless endeavor – even things that she actually does have control over in her own classroom. She used ‘out of my control’ to justify teaching a traditional, ethnocentric curriculum:

I kept feeling like that weight on my shoulders, like I’m stepping into a classroom, and if I work in the city it will be multicultural, and he [Howard] kept saying you have to know yourself. Well, that’s a lot of pressure in a way! We have enough anxiety as it is going into this classroom, and then, like to tell us ‘you have to do this, this, this and this, and by the way, you need to be aware of the cultures in your classroom, too’. Like I think that makes me even more anxious, upset and frustrated. And like now I have one more thing to worry about.

Because the participants perceived their presence in urban schools to be altruistic and helpful, they did not appreciate hearing that they might have to do special preparation to work in these under-resourced environments. Allison was indignant that she might be expected to know herself or her students when she was already anxious

enough about teaching in urban schools that she previously identified as ‘scary’. Because of all the ‘pressure’, she employed ‘out of my control’, a powerful ideological tool that maintains White supremacy because it justifies inaction on multiple levels.

*‘Just be nice’.* The tool of treating others well or ‘just be nice’ served to create an individual response to institutional and societal issues. In keeping with their use of the tool ‘it’s personal not political’, participants’ response to racism was often to rely on adages that had been passed down through their families. Like ‘out of my control’, this tool invalidated the need for anti-racist action or multicultural education because, as long as they acted as good people, they could maintain their position of innocence in the cycle of racism. Participants often mentioned their family’s philosophies to explain their perspectives on racism. Kim, for example, attributed her use of this tool to her father: ‘It is something that my dad always taught me, you treat people the way you want to be treated. And it’s not that I never felt threatened by anyone, but I just wanted to be a nice person’. Other participants also explained that they treat people how they want to be treated, or as Dawn put it, ‘If you’re nice to me, then I’m nice to you’. Nikki told how she planned to use this tool in her classroom:

But like, you can only do so much... so like just going into the classroom with an open heart and an open mind, and being ready to absorb everything from all these different backgrounds and all these different children – and be able to share yours – that should be enough.

Nikki used this tool to negate the need for multicultural preparation when teaching in diverse environments. There is no need to learn about culturally relevant pedagogy, English-language acquisition strategies or any of the other skills being taught in this course because it ‘should be enough’ to have an ‘open mind’. In this way, the tool of ‘just be nice’ functioned to uphold White supremacy by perpetuating White teachers’ ineffectiveness in urban communities of color. It maintained White innocence while keeping the focus of urban educational failure on students rather than on their own willful lack of preparation to teach in communities unfamiliar to them.

*‘I can’t relate’.* Another ideological tool of Whiteness in evidence in the participants’ reflections was the tool of ‘I can’t relate’. Many of the participants stated that they found it difficult to relate to people, particularly students, who were different and who faced struggles different from their own. They made this assertion to justify why they thought they would be ‘ineffective’ teaching urban students and why they should ‘not take jobs in urban schools’. In so doing, they released the need to consider that perhaps their aforementioned intense fear of students of color and urban communities might be the real reason that they did not want to take a position in such a school. This tool allowed them to appear noble, rather than cowardly or racist, in their decision not to teach in urban settings as Diane demonstrated:

Well, I was scared that I wasn’t going to be able to relate to them. Like unfortunately, they have lived through things that I don’t even want to have to imagine and those things I just don’t know anything about. And I think it’s so important to get to know the child and understand them, so if I don’t understand them, or understand where they are coming from, then how am I going to be able to teach them if I can’t relate to them?

Diane, who previously had described how ‘tough’ third grade boys intimidated her, here noted that she was unable to relate to their home lives. The differences between her life and the lives of urban students caused her to believe that she could not teach them, and she continued to rely on assumptions and stereotypes in making career choices. The use of the ‘I can’t relate tool’ was consistent with her hegemonic story about fear of difference and people of color

### *Performative tools of Whiteness*

Having justified their actions based on their feelings and beliefs, the participants behaved in ways consistent with their hegemonic understandings. Performative tools were the behaviors in which participants engaged to protect their beliefs based on their ideological tools or hegemonic understandings.

‘*Shh*’. Remaining silent about issues of race was the purpose of ‘shh’, a common performative tool. Prior to the course, they had never been in conversations with other people about the experience of being White and they were reticent and uncomfortable discussing issues of race. Karen described how talk about race was silenced in her childhood:

The whole idea of race was something thought about, like there might have been a joke or a comment, but it was never discussed. It was something you shouldn’t say out loud because you never know how someone might take it. So I think that’s how you think but you don’t say in my family.

Karen explained how she reacted if her family or friends made racist comments:

As long as they are my friends, I would say something. I’m not much of a conflict person, so I’d either ignore them, walk away and not say anything. I’ve never heard anyone say anything randomly who I didn’t know. Because I don’t think they would feel comfortable. Like I said, all of my friends are White, so I don’t think they would say anything in front of anyone else ‘cause they know something might happen.

Karen initially contended that she would say something, but then she used ‘shh’ and listed three examples of what she probably would be more likely do. The performative tool of ‘shh’ learned during her childhood allowed racism to go unchecked in her presence.

‘*I just want to help them*’. Another prevalent performative tool of Whiteness, glorified in Hollywood films such as *Freedom writers* and *Dangerous minds*, is ‘I just want to help them’. The participants’ first relationships with people of color were hierarchical in nature. From their nannies and housekeepers to their involvement in charitable activities, participants positioned themselves as wealthier and higher status, in contrast to people of color whom they constructed as poorer and needy. The participants continued to see themselves as ‘good people’ for working with people of color, thus maintaining this hierarchical balance of power in which they were the givers and people of color were the recipients.

While most of the participants used multiple tools to defend why they did not want to teach in urban public schools, Nikki used the tool of ‘I just want to help them’ to explain why she preferred to teach there.

I feel like if I'm really devoted to this, I want to help the people who need more help... I feel better helping everyday public school kids. Where there is, you know, a lot of problems going on in the home, with friends, inside, disabilities affect them. There are just so many problems that like I would want to help fix. Or help be supportive on. In private schools you don't have to deal with that as much.

Through the use of the tool 'I just want to help them', Nikki assigned a list of deficiencies to 'everyday' public school children. She 'feels better helping' them because it reaffirmed her identity as a good, charitable person, one of the main purposes of this tool. The question remains what specific skills and strategies she would bring to 'fix' these public schools. Because she believed the problems public school children face are based in their homes, a concomitant belief was that love was the only thing needed:

A lot of these kids in public schools don't get the love and that aspect at home. A lot of the social aspects at home. I am a very open person, I like hug my students and I love them, and I feel like some of them really need to be hugged because they don't get it at home. Some of their parents are like in jail, or their brother is raising them or something while he works like 10 other jobs, you know what I mean?

In a previous interview, Nikki had stated that she did not see racism as a current issue, that she did not want to address historical racism in her classroom, and that she resented being asked to do multicultural preparation for this setting. Because she positioned herself as a loving 'helper', she would be doing enough simply by being there and providing these 'poor children' with the hugs that their incarcerated parents were unable to give them.

The tool of 'I just want to help them' maintains the cycle of racism by releasing the need for the participants to learn skills that address culture and racism in the classroom because they were doing enough by simply going to these communities that 'need' their help. In addition, because the perception was that the problems the students faced were situated solely in their presumably problematic home lives, rather than in institutional racism, there would be no need for teachers to examine the ways in which race may be playing a role in students' lives or their own complicity in the cycle of racism. This allowed participants to continue to construct people of color as deficient and to place the blame of educational failure on communities of color rather than on the institutions that are inequitably serving them.

*'I would kiss a minority'*. The tool of 'I would kiss a minority' was used by the participants both to sexualize people of color and also to prove that they were not racist. Several of the participants raised questions about their lack of friendships with people of color. Amanda, however, took this questioning to an extreme, believing that the ultimate act of anti-racism would be to venture into sexual relations with people of color, particularly African-Americans. Sexualizing racism and anti-racism through the 'I would kiss a minority' tool is closely linked to the ideological tool of 'it's personal not political' because it assumes that personal interactions are a sufficient response to racism. Amanda interrupted a discussion about stereotypes to share a story with me in which she had recently attended a party and had decided, 'while I'm here, I'm going to kiss a Black guy! Like that's my goal' because she 'just wants to see what it's like to kiss a Black person'. During the night she approached an African-American man, kissed him, and told him, 'it feels the same as kissing a White guy'. When I asked her



what she thought might be different, she shared a biological theory she had heard that posited that Blacks and Whites had different smells and even different species assignments.

Of all the participants, Amanda had been the most adamant in her desire to teach African-American students. Through course materials and assignments, she had been the most committed to readings and assignments that could better prepare her to work with Black communities, voluntarily reading *Dreamkeepers* by Gloria Ladson-Billings and articles by Asa Hilliard. Lurking beneath her desire to work with Black children however, were unquestioned theories about biological racial differences. She concluded her story by stating with pride: 'I would not have done it if it weren't for this class. My mind wouldn't have been mind sparked in this way'. Through the use of the tool 'I would kiss a minority', Amanda believed that this interracial sexual 'intimacy' was a sign of her growing knowledge and personal action in the area of multicultural education. With a lack of places to turn based on her life experiences, Amanda sought inappropriate avenues to explore her emerging theories about race and difference.

### **Implications for teacher education**

As members of an educational community in which urban school failure has become an accepted norm, teacher education programs cannot continue business as usual, graduating students who are at best ill equipped and at worst damaging for children of color. Teacher education must take seriously the negative impact that Whiteness can have on teachers' understanding of children of color and urban schools. White teachers are often entering the profession with a lifetime of hegemonic reinforcement to see students of color and their communities as dangerous and at fault for the educational challenges they face.

Some argue that the urgency for teachers who can best serve students of color is so great that teacher education should move away from working to transform White teachers belief system and move to finding innovative ways to recruit more teachers of color into the profession (Sleeter 2008). Programs such as 'Grow your own' in Chicago are starting up across the country as an attempt to prepare community members to become teachers in neighborhood schools. Finding ways to prepare parents, paraprofessionals and students from 'hard to staff' communities as teachers has become the focus of several teacher education programs (Villegas 2008).

As more traditional schools of education are likely to continue to accept vast numbers of White students, however, they have a critical responsibility to address and transform these understandings as a fundamental part of preparing teachers for any setting, but particularly ones where they will be responsible for the education of children of color. Given that participants' hegemonic understandings were either unchallenged or resisted challenge for over 20 years, it is unlikely that one semester of isolated multicultural education will produce lasting results as they remain within environments that reinforce their preconceived understanding. Schools of education must make a commitment to transform themselves in order to interrupt the hegemonic understandings of pre-service teachers by implementing strategies, programs, and reforms with this objective. A variety of forms of critical teacher education, such as multicultural education, social justice education, critical pedagogy, culturally relevant education, etc, center their efforts to challenge White student teachers to examine their racial biographies and hegemonic beliefs.

A crucial starting point for reform is that forms of critical education must be integrated across the curriculum. These types of critical education, such as social justice education, are both fields as well as processes. An independent course on critical multicultural education or the like needs to remain a mandatory part of the teacher education course load so students can be introduced to the field while having a place to critically examine who they are and how that impacts how they think about who they will teach. However, because the spectrum of critical concepts is so broad and because students' hegemonic understandings are so deeply rooted, inquiry into issues of race, class, gender, sexuality, and religious diversity should not be corralled solely into this one course in one semester. Rather, opportunities for both self-reflection and instruction about historical oppression and current educational inequity should be provided throughout the entire teacher education experience. Methods courses, for example, should help student teachers design lessons and units that build upon emerging understandings of critical education. Of course, asking all professors to address issues of equity in their courses also requires professional development opportunities for faculty. Successful teaching experiences in urban public schools should become mandatory qualifications for any new faculty hires.

### **Diversifying teacher education**

A priority must be made to increase the number of teacher educators of color, and an effort also must be made to recruit more pre-service teachers of color, including but not exclusive to beginning in high schools in the communities that have been labeled *hard to staff*. While it is critical to increase the representation of people of color in teacher education, however a sheer increase in numbers is by itself insufficient. People of color are equally capable of using the tools of Whiteness, so recruitment must focus on bringing in people of color who are committed to equity and social justice in urban schools. Aside from the unequivocal need for increased representation and all that comes with it, another benefit is that by bringing the voices of people of color into teacher education programs, the typical White female pre-service teacher would have an opportunity to interact with and learn from people different from themselves.

### **Involving the larger community**

Teacher education must provide opportunities for the larger community to participate in the preparation of teachers. Key stakeholders in urban education and leaders in the field of multicultural education – including classroom teachers, parents, community leaders, educational activists, researchers, K-12 students and others – should have a role in teacher education. By participating as in-class guest speakers, mentors, or panel participants or offering sites for field trips, key stakeholders can help pre-service students understand multiple perspectives on urban education and can disrupt hegemonic stories by building empathy and new understandings. By developing relationships early, student teachers can begin to build networks of support to draw upon as they enter the profession.

### **Student teaching as sites for critical inquiry**

Student teaching placements in urban schools should become opportunities for multicultural inquiry. These sites typically are used only to learn to teach lessons, but

they should also be used to develop relationships with children and families that can challenge pre-service teachers' stereotypes. This approach would necessitate having university supervisors who are themselves comfortable and effective in urban settings and who also see the goal of anti-racism development as a part of their job responsibility. Because student teachers often fulfill placements in a variety of schools (resourced, under-resourced, diverse, segregated), guided inquiry into the ways in which children are differently served in these placements could allow students to observe educational inequity first hand, potentially serving to shift blame from children and families to the school systems that provide differently for children of color.

### Critical alumni support

Ongoing support for graduates who enter the teaching profession should become a built-in component of teacher education programs. As graduates enter the profession, they are bombarded by dominant messages from schools, teachers, and the media reinforcing the idea that urban children of color and their families do not care about education. The first year of teaching is a tremendous struggle for many people, particularly teachers who are working in communities vastly different from their own. Teacher education should play a role in supporting its graduates to navigate this experience with an explicit focus on resisting the tendency to return to hegemonic understandings under the pressure of first-year teaching. Through ongoing critical inquiry groups (Duncan-Andrade 2005; Picower 2007) that encourage dialogue, debriefing, reading, and curriculum planning that offer general support, alumni can create a network that provides an alternative analysis of the challenges they face in the classroom.

By incorporating strategies that interrogate hegemonic understandings concerning race, teacher education programs can attempt to challenge them from multiple angles, repeatedly and continuously throughout their teacher preparation. The traditional model of depending on one semester in one course to interrupt a lifetime of White supremacist reinforcement is woefully insufficient in the attempt to prepare White educators to teach in urban settings. With the likelihood of the teaching force remaining overwhelmingly White, examining and interrupting the Whiteness of teaching remains one of the most vital tasks for those concerned with improving educational opportunities and outcomes for students of color.

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