

White Power and Privilege: Barriers to Culturally Responsive Teaching

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Abstract

Many in the United States of America perceived the election of the first African American president as an indication that the nation had finally achieved racial equality. Two African American teacher educators argue that the nation continues to function from a long-established paradigm of white power and privilege and as such, the need persists to enlighten future teachers about the existence of white privilege, its roots, functions, and social affects. In this essay, the authors share their efforts to sensitize teachers to the presences white power and its accompanying privileges, all with an aim of building transformative teachers.

Keywords: *White power, white privilege, inclusive excellence, transformative teachers*

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Introduction

The 2008 election in the United States of America (U.S.A.) brought Barack Obama to the presidency. The election also led to the audacity of many to hope that racial equality had finally been achieved. Unfortunately, equal educational opportunity for all students remains an elusive goal in the U.S.A. Such a goal is impeded by beliefs and practices that reflect white power and privilege.

This paper presents the view of two African American female scholars who approached teacher training by assisting future teachers, of European ancestry, in examining white power and privilege as barriers to culturally responsive teaching. We had the responsibility of preparing teachers for 21st century culturally diverse classrooms. Having been educated under a K-12 system with human and material resources that often negated our sense of belonging, we felt that our experiences could assist future teachers in understanding the impact of white power and privilege on educational experiences.

This paper presents actions we took in our courses to facilitate the process of nurturing pre-service teachers in examining white power, white privilege, and their place within this system. We use Lynch's (2009) definition of whiteness which links the term "to a number of political and social strategies in American racial discourse. These strategies keep those identified as white at the center of racial discourse and political power, while masking the processes that make this possible" (Conclusion, para. 1).

The Impact of Diversity on the Teaching Force

Cushner, McClelland, and Safford (2009) indicate there is "a considerable discrepancy between the make-up of the student population in most schools and that of the 21st century teacher workforce. Data indicate that "approximately 88% to 90% of teachers in the U.S.A. are of European American ancestry and from the middle class" (p. 18). At the same time changing demographic projections suggest that by the year "2040, children of color will comprise more than half the children in classrooms" (p. 18). Yet, merely having human diversity in the educational settings does not ensure inclusive attitudes. We desire to scaffold pre-service teachers as they develop the capacity to become culturally competence teachers who create classrooms that are inclusive and affirming. During these educational times of accountability through testing and rapidly changing schools, it is important that teachers effectively address issues of diversity. To accomplish this objective, an awareness of the power and privilege associated with "whiteness" must be taken into consideration.

National agencies that accredit teacher education programs, in the U.S.A., require future teachers to obtain the knowledge and skills needed to effectively teach diverse students of all background. Often training programs have sought to achieve this objective through a single course on multicultural education, which of course is wholly inadequate. Brandon (2003) feels that "substantive equality in U.S.A. schools has not been achieved through the use of this strategy" (p. 33). What is required, one

key to educators becoming culturally responsive and practicing inclusive excellence, is the ability to recognize white power and privilege in all its forms. We faced this situation as we considered how to prepare European American students to become culturally responsive teachers.

The challenge of creating *inclusive excellence* and becoming culturally responsive is extensive, yet well defined. Williams, Berger, and McClendon (2005) define inclusive excellence as an attention to the cultural differences learners bring to the educational experience and that enhances the entire academy. The American Association of Colleges and Universities (Williams et al., 2005) identified four elements that comprised the definition of inclusive excellence.

1. A focus on student intellectual and social development;
2. A purposeful development and utilization of organizational resources to enhance student learning;
3. Attention to the cultural differences learners brings to the educational experience and that enhance the enterprise;
4. And a welcoming community that engages all of its diversity in the service of student and organizational learning. (p. vi)

Cultural responsiveness, on the other hand, is defined as “the extent to which research and practice in instruction and assessment take into consideration the cognitive, linguistic, and social assets of an individual (such as epistemologies, world views, and learning, teaching, and communication styles) that are culturally determined and shape the ways in which individuals learn and make sense of their experiences” (Klingner & Solano-Flores, 2007, p. 231). Actualizing these elements requires that educators first recognize how public education in the U.S.A. functions to make losers of some students—those who are most frequently students of color and impoverished. Only when white educators recognize and “reject” this long-standing function of public education will they attempt to resist and change it. Moreover, educators must recognize their own role in an education system that perpetuates social inequities through the passive action of merely being “white” and not recognizing the privileges that accompany this status. DeSherbinin (2004) recognizes the disconnect that occurs when “faculties that are overwhelmingly ‘white’ are expected to be effective teachers and mentors for students of color who hail from ethnic or socioeconomic backgrounds unfamiliar to middle class white academics” (para. 1). This situation can lead to instances in which students’ prior knowledge and experiences that are rooted in their culture are not taken into consideration in the instructional process.

Theory of White Power and Privilege

Race is a socially constructed phenomenon; therefore one is incorrect to speak of the “white” race or the African race (Crawford, 2008). White privilege is the “invisible” power afforded to persons based on skin color. Case (2007) defines white privilege as “unearned advantages and benefits, often invisible to the dominant group, afforded to whites within a system of institutional racial oppression” (p. 231). Endres

and Gould (2009) argue that “whiteness involves the use of strategic rhetoric that has an implicit investment in maintaining the status quo, specifically power and privilege in their current manifestation” (p. 431). While this privilege is often invisible to those who benefit from it, it is seen all too clearly by those who do not benefit from it (Provenzo, 2009). The persistence of white privilege within the educational setting allows all systems to function to serve and benefit students and their families who share an apparent European ancestry as well as a middle class experience.

McIntosh’s (1989) article on white privilege first explored this issue in terms accessible to a broad audience. Her work focused on the social implications of white privilege, and was used by others such as Olson (2002), to discuss white privilege within the public schools of the U. S.A. As a white female, Olson lists the following indicators of white privilege observed in selected K-12 schools in the U.S.A:

- When I visit their schools, my children know that school staff members will reserve judgment about my economic class, my level of education, and my reason for being in the school until I make them known.
- Whatever topic my children choose to study, they are confident that they will find materials that link people of their race to the accomplishments in those areas.
- When my children talk about celebrations, holidays or family observances in show-and-tell or in other informal exchanges at school, they know that their teachers will have experienced similar events and will be able to reinforce their stories.
- The color of my children’s skin causes most adults in school offices, classrooms and hallways to have neutral or positive assumptions about them.
- My children know that the vast majority of adults in their schools will be of their same racial background, even in classrooms where many or most of their fellow students are of races different from theirs.
- I am confident that policy decisions that affect my children’s school experience will be made by state and local bodies dominated by people who understand our racial history and culture.

An exploration of selected items, in Olson’s list, illustrates how white power and privilege severely impedes teachers from being culturally responsive and by extension, achieving inclusive excellence. Item 2 for example, reveals that the parameters of assigned topics often preclude the exploration of the accomplishments of non-whites or historic perspectives from diverse populations. Thus, the perception that white males are the primary heroes, scientists, and political figures worthy of study persists. Likewise, an examination of Item 6, often indicates an especially strong indication of white privilege. A white female student, in one of our teacher education courses, related the school policy at her high school that permitted white students to leave the campus during lunch, but prohibited African American students from doing so. The policy was instituted in the belief that African American students would engage in criminal actions. Equally disturbing are policy decisions that are

enforced differently for white students and African American students. Thus, students with nearly identical disciplinary records, often receive markedly different punishments for the same infractions, depending upon their racial identity. Whites may receive short school suspensions, while African American students may be expelled (Townsend, 2000).

In the same way, Applebaum (2003) asked students in her university course to identify how white privilege worked on their campus. Applebaum indicated that “not only do some students fail to appreciate the systemic nature of dominant group privilege, they also do not see how the oppression of people of color systematically sustains and makes possible dominant group privilege” (White Privilege Introduced, para. 3). In order for these students to be culturally responsive and effective teachers, such thinking must be reframed.

Roots of White Privilege

Shome (2000), suggests that “whiteness is not just about bodies and skin color, but rather more about the discursive practices” (p. 108) that sustains a belief in its supremacy. White power and privilege has a strong foundation within the legal, political, and educational systems of the U.S.A. For example, Calvin Coolidge, former president of the United States argued vigorously that Nordic deteriorates when mixed with other races (Eugenics: The Distilled Essence of the Anti-Life Mentality, n.d.). The Constitution of the United States established white supremacy, in 1789, by giving whites extra votes, including congressional seats awarded on the basis of the number of slaves held (What Does It Mean to be White, n.d.). Ironically, each enslaved individual was counted as 3/5 of a human being and as such, a slave could not vote (South Arkansas Community College, 2009).

The nation’s first immigration law passed by Congress in 1790 specifically dictated that “any alien, being a free white person, who shall have resided within the limits and under the jurisdiction of the United States for the term of two years, may be admitted to become a citizen thereof” (United States Naturalization laws, 2010). Many states followed suit and established their own laws that negatively impacted individuals who were not white. For example, in 1891, the state of Tennessee established separate but equal railroad accommodations for travelers who were not white. In 1911, the state of Nebraska established the fact that marriages were void if between a “white person” and an “other.” In 1930, the state of Alabama established that it was unlawful for a negro and a “white” person to play together (What does it Mean to be White, n.d.). The legacy of these clearly abiding beliefs in racial superiority is visible both nationally and throughout the global community. A paradigm shift is required if inclusive excellence and culturally responsive teaching is to be achieved for use in culturally diverse 21st century classrooms. As the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision dismantled segregated schools, communities began restructuring schools to specifically include children of African American ethnicity. Education became a tool used by many African American families to move up the economic class ladder and improve academic and vocational outcomes for their children. Ironically, as schools became integrated and enrollment

of student from underrepresented ethnic and linguistic groups increased in historically white schools districts, “so did their enrollment in self-contained programs for students who were allegedly mildly mentally retarded” (Turnbull, Turnbull, & Wehmeyer, 2010, p. 70). In effect special education programs intended to assist students with legitimate special educational needs warranting special educational interventions became a means by which to stigmatize poor students, linguistically diverse, and non-white students. Thus, public schools, in the U.S.A., quickly became internally re-segregated. This practice has long-term educational and life outcome ramifications that impact students and their communities.

Just as the nation actively and mindfully established a nation on the pillar of white supremacy, President Thomas Jefferson established the perception that the nation would be a *meritocracy* (Bergh, 1907). This notion posits that anyone through hard work and educational attainment may rise to positions in the society that afford him wealth and power. This was a deeply flawed concept as articulated by Jefferson, for it was limited to free white males.

In his own racial awakening, Robert Jensen (1998), a white professor of journalism wrote:

I know I did not get where I am by merit alone. I benefited from, among other things, white privilege. That doesn't mean that I don't deserve my job, or that if I weren't white I would never have gotten the job. It means simply that all through my life, I have soaked up benefits from being white. I grew up in fertile farm country taken by force from non-white indigenous people. I was educated in a well-funded, virtually all white public school system in which I learned that white people like me made this country great. There I was also taught a variety of skills, including how to take standardized tests written by and for white people.

This belief in meritocracy persists today and allows many to ascribe all failure of poor students, and those from certain ethnic groups, as their own responsibility, thereby relieving society and the public education system of any shared responsibility. The U.S.A. however, has a deeply ingrained preoccupation with *race* that makes it difficult to explore these issues using other terminology or from other paradigms. In truth, issues concerning ethnic identity have characterized the relationship between members of Western European ethnic groups and other ethnic groups. Not unexpectedly, this dilemma of ethnic relationships has impacted the field of education. Gorski (2003) feels that an understanding of the social inequities in schools with the accompanying inequities of educational outcomes for students from selected ethnic groups must be viewed as a symptom of institutional racism which is “a force that is driven almost exclusively by the powers and privileges of whiteness” (p. 28). One of the essential outcomes of public education in the U.S.A. must be better academic achievement by all students. This challenge is compounded by the national obsession with accountability that sees testing as a panacea for educational problems

Dismantling White Power and Privilege

The U.S.A. truly needs educators who effectively respond to diverse students and their communities. We believe that too often white teachers become teachers of diverse students not out of a desire to do so, but rather by default. We have found that many students in our teacher education programs overwhelmingly desire to teach in schools and classrooms like those from which they came---predominately white and middle or upper middle class. These are places in which diversity is lacking or ignored for the most part until some special observance is required, such as Black History Month, El Cinco de Mayo Day (Olson, 2002). Many European American educators, who find themselves in classrooms with ethnic and social-economic diversity, often appear to be afraid of their students, their students' parents, and the surrounding communities. These teachers leave for "better" employment in outer ring suburbs at the first opportunity. Outer ring suburbs are areas in many U.S.A. major population centers that are physically the most distance from the cities' centers. Historically, population movement and employment opportunities crept from the urban centers first to near-by surrounding suburbs (the inner ring suburbs), and continued expanding to the out laying areas surrounding major cities. Currently, these outlying suburbs tend to have the higher property values, higher family income levels and as such, the best funded and best equipped public schools. Lastly, schools in these communities tend to have higher teacher salaries. The desire among many teachers is naturally to obtain employment in such a setting, and this contributes to high teacher attrition in the schools that most need the best and most stable teacher workforce (Graziano, 2005).

Culturally responsive teaching requires teachers to see both a variety of people and a community of people within their classrooms. In this model, teachers strive to create an environment of inclusive excellence where diversity is an important component of the classroom experience. Culturally responsive teachers desire that as many students as possible have the opportunity to discuss their prior knowledge, establish friendships and mentoring relationships, and experience success.

Political and legal imperatives, shifting demographics, persistent societal inequalities, and workforce imperatives require a focus on diversity. In light of these trends, culturally responsive teaching requires that diversity is valued as an important part of the classroom experience. In culturally responsive classrooms, all students' voices and experiences have opportunities to be heard, and friendship and mentoring relationships are encouraged. In our efforts to assist pre-service teachers in dismantling white power and privilege, we often share our personal stories; both those related to the educational systems and our family and life experiences. Additionally, we identify specific readings and selected media designed to stimulate critical thinking about white power and privilege. Through ongoing discussion we foster reflection and understanding. We have learned that creating a classroom space for open-frank discussion is challenging.

Henze, Lucas, and Scott (1998) feel that "one of the difficulties facing schools in their efforts to promote positive relations is that teachers themselves are often

reluctant to openly discuss white power, racism, and white privilege with colleagues” (p. 188). Attempts to discuss issues in which race and white privilege are deeply embedded often feels as if one is walking on *egg shells*. Without open, deeply thoughtful discussions, we cannot as educators or a nation, effectively move beyond our imperfect history. These discussions are a solid step on the egg shells of denial and ignorance many students harbor.

Transformative Action

The process of transformation involves multisteps. Gurin, Dey, Hurtado, and Gurin (2002) concluded that “helping faculty develop a pedagogy that makes the most of diverse perspectives and students’ backgrounds in their classrooms can foster active thinking, intellectual engagement, and democratic participation” (Implication for practice, para. 1). Reflection is central to moving our students to confront their white privilege, while also “aiding them to celebrate and appreciate social group differences, to use culturally mediated instruction, and to teach all children for high academic success” (Brandon, 2003, p. 43). Many of our students do not see or understand the systemic nature of white privilege and power. They do not see how white privilege has benefited them in any significant way. They seem to think that if individuals of any ethnic group work hard, they should be able to achieve the American Dream. Applebaum believes that this “resistance to acknowledging complicity in sustaining systems of oppression and lack of understanding, often become intertwined and work to maintain the invisibility that is sine qua non of white privilege” (White Privilege introduced, para. 4). This supposition is supported by the work of Hacker (1992) who found that his white students shared that perception. Yet, when asked if they had to live the balance of their lives as a Black person in the U.S.A. what they wanted as compensation, most expressed a desire for financial remuneration of at least 1 million dollars. Such a request reveals a deep understanding of the disadvantage of being an African American in this nation in terms of the persistent financial disparities between whites and African Americans. These disparities persist even for African Americans with college and advanced degrees.

The process of transformation involves a multistep process. We believe it begins when future teachers can recognize the personal impact of diversity. This self-examination assists future teachers in recognizing that white power and privilege exists and in examining how they can assist schools in dismantling the impact of social injustice on children and families. We accomplish this transformation by sharing our stories that describes our interactions in a society that focuses on race and class. We use our experiences as a means to encourage future teachers to reflect and explore the personal impact of diversity. The catalyst for examining and uncovering the impact of white power and privilege are real-life experiences the authors share with their students. Our struggles under an education system based on white privilege, with its goal of ensuring that the majority of students who experience academic success with the potential for quality secondary education are chiefly white middle and upper class students, means we share stories of being told to enroll in home economic classes “so you will be prepared to be domestic servants”; or attending schools with inadequate text books and laboratory equipment.

We assign reflective writing assignments that require students to examine the development of their own ethnic identity. Akintunde (2006) believes that “confrontation is an essential element of any class that seeks to deconstruct white racist ideology” (p. 36). We expose students to transformative literature, media, and other materials that invite confrontation and examination of how white power and privilege has been perpetuated through the written and spoken word. We require students to participate in service learning opportunities in classrooms and agencies that serve a culturally diverse population. As a part of the service learning, we assign journal writing as a means for future teachers to reflect on the contribution of the service learning experience to their transformation.

What aid the authors to remain steadfast in their endeavors are the small victories evident when some of our students actually “get it.” That is the first small step—a step that must be supported by other professors who teach these students and by subject matter taught in other teacher education courses. It is also the knowledge that diverse students, in the U.S.A., may actually have better educational opportunities than previously possible because of our effort to aid in training teachers who respect them and believe in their potential.

As we mentioned previously, in our university classrooms, the majority of the students are students of European ancestry, often steeped in the American culture of white power and privilege. We take varied actions to nurture and prepare these students for the vital work of teaching in the nation’s schools. Whether our students develop careers teaching in the predominately, white middle class schools with which they are so familiar or should they venture to one of the many poor schools that overwhelmingly serve “minority” students, future teachers need the skills and knowledge that permit them to create learning communities marked by their cultural responsiveness and academic excellence. Chief among our actions is establishing an environment that enables students to examine their own beliefs, their white American culture and the un-sanitized American history that forms a great part of the null curriculum.

One of our first actions is to have students take the Racial Awareness Quiz (Center for the Study of White American Culture, 1999). The object of the quiz “is to raise awareness of assumptions shaped by an Eurocentric system of education that people have formed about white culture in the United States” (p. 1). The quiz is an eye-opener for our students. Using their prior knowledge, students respond to questions by answering as if the descriptions are of individuals from ethnic minority groups. On the contrary, the questions address the historical behavior of Americans from European ancestry. We follow with a reflective discussion of their answers, their rationale, and the reasons for their assumptions.

When given the space in which to articulate their true beliefs students may find their beliefs are not the same as those of their parents or the tenets of their religion. This has become pronounced with regard to issues of sexual orientation. For many of our students homosexuality is not viewed as negatively as it once was.

Further exploration however, does indicate they hold many of the beliefs that have come to be accepted precepts of the dominant white American culture. For example, the current political discourse repeatedly chants a desire to return the nation to the values of the founders. Expressively, it is the desire to have little or no federal government oversight of businesses and individuals' lives-- accompanied by a mantra to cut taxes. Repeated, the notion of a nation founded on freedom and Christian values and strong families filled media outlets.

Students believe these stated values and associate them with this nation more than other nations. Yet, when we examine the concept of "freedom" within the context of the nation's founding it becomes evident that freedom was not available to African Americans, Native Americans and other persons of color. Freedom was a long sought elusive prize for these groups. The paradox of a nation holding itself up to the entire world as a paragon of freedom given that the Constitution explicitly pronounced African Americans as 3/5th of a human being, creates a dissonance for many of our students.

Equally unbalancing for many students is the recognition that a nation that prides itself on strong family values, does little, compared to other industrialized nations to support and sustain families. This is especially true for children of poverty. Education, the so-called great social equalizer, is funded inequitably by a system begun in colonial time that relies on local property taxes to generate school revenues. The result is inadequate education for poor students with the reproduction of existing social class status. The U.S.A. has the highest rate of children living in poverty of any industrialized country in the world. Research on these issues is mandatory and generates much discussion and analysis. Additionally, students must complete a service learning experience in an agency that services persons with low social economic status, who not coincidentally are most often African Americans.

A central theme in educational circles is the quality of the curriculum and this is a topic explored in our classes. Specifically we focus on American history and when we do, students indicate they have some course that purports to educate them on the history of their nation in nearly every year of their school experience. It is within the context of this topic that the concept of the null curriculum becomes apropos. The null curriculum posits students are taught by the action of excluding something from the curriculum (Provenzo, 2009). Two glaring examples are Indian Schools and the Middle Passage.

In the first instance students learn for the first time that Indian Schools existed to "break the Indian" by forced assimilation. They learned of the Trail of Tears which forced many Indians to leave their homes and move to other areas of the country with many dying on the long journey. Our students are disproportionately upper middle class, who attended high quality public and private schools prior to their entry into the university. Yet, as traditional age students of 18 or 19 years, this truth of the Indian Schools or forced removal of Indians from their own homes, is the first time they learn of such events. Why do textbooks omit this horrific chapter on the genocide

against Native Americans? Students often compare these historic events with the German's final solution for Jews, and determine the Indian Schools, and forced removal of Indians, are each a part of the null curriculum because the nation wants to perpetuate the myth of its being a nation above all others.

Likewise, the in-depth study of the Middle Passage from the first person narrative as captured by events aboard the Amistad brings to life the real story of the stolen lives of enslaved Africans and their inhuman treatment. In many history courses students learn of Martin Luther King and touch on the civil rights movement without the context of the full text related to slavery. Again, for the first in their lives the students learn more of their national history, which is too often, conveniently omitted.

A final revelation, one that seriously questions another treasured belief---the U.S.A. is a nation that holds deep the rule of law, comes during a study of the organized terrorist against African Americans during a period that roughly covered the late 1800s to the 1960s. This was a time of lynching and mob rule, frequently under the approving eye of local law enforcement officials. This is a topic not often seen in history text, yet it is just as much part of American history as are the achievements of Jefferson.

We often conclude our course discussions with a viewing of the DVD "What Makes Me White?"(Sands, n.d.). This video is a personal reflection of the aspects of the U.S.A. society that the producer perceived contributed to white power and privilege. We have students critically examine the premise of the production to indicate whether or not they agree with the author.

All of the previously mentioned lessons are learned using video clips, first person narratives, archival photos, and contemporary essays. Students have multiple opportunities to author reaction papers and additional time is given for class discussions. Taken as a whole, students have a context for the ongoing disadvantages and life outcomes visited upon persons of color. These historic realities make clear the white power and privilege embedded within the Constitution and the minds of many white American. According to Giroux and Bourdieu, as cited by Provenzo (2009), the nation continues to use schools as sites in which the culture of the dominant society is learned. Often what is taught is a certain cultural capital, specifically, certain forms of knowledge, language practices, values, and modes of style are legitimated and privileged over others, thus ensuring the reproduction of the status quo.

Conclusions

The process and purpose of education in the 21st century has not deviated much from its historical context. The U.S.A. expects education to duplicate previous successes using the same recipe (e.g., education, better workforce, and better jobs) to prepare an educated citizenry for the 21st century. However cultural, demographic, economical, scientific and political forces are demanding a new direction. The educational system

in the U.S.A. faces many challenges in an effort to prepare youth to lead and safeguard the nation's future viability in a global community. The system needs culturally responsive teachers who can use inclusive excellence to ensure that students are able to effectively recognize and address difficult and complex global concerns. Culturally responsive teachers want all students to have equal opportunities for success. To achieve this goal, teachers of European ancestry must confront issues of white power and privilege in order to become transformative teachers who operate using equity pedagogy. Our goal is to create transformative teachers for 21st century classrooms who can dismantle white power and privilege through a paradigm shift. Such teachers send messages of respect, goodwill, and empowerment to all students. In this manner, transformative teachers honor the core value of education which includes diversity and inclusion.

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International Journal of Educational Policies

ISSN: 1307-3842

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