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Approaches to teaching race in elementary social studies: A case study of preservice teachers



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ABSTRACT

This interpretative case study examined the beliefs and practices of eight preservice elementary teachers as they learned to teach race in social studies. Using critical race theory as the lens, the researcher analyzed interview, observation, classroom artifact, and teacher preparation course data. The results showed that there was a division between those teachers who saw their role as working against racial prejudice (tolerance-oriented) and those who were working against racial inequity (equity-oriented). In practice, the teachers used three approaches to race-related topics in their classroom: avoiding, diminishing, and embracing. Furthermore, the teachers expressed the importance of courses on urban education, social studies methods, and student teaching in preparing them to teach about race. This study highlights the need for increased attention to teaching about race in teacher preparation programs.

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Introduction

There is evidence that children detect racial differences at a relatively young age and that discussions about race are common in the early elementary grades (Brown & Brown, 2011; Tatum, 1997). By elementary school, children are beginning to understand discrimination and racism (Tatum, 1997). Race continues to be a significant factor in determining inequity in the nation's political, economic, justice, and educational systems. As Banks and Nguyen (2008) argued,

Race is used to both define and divide Americans ... Racialization has worked through U.S. institutions and policies—including citizenship formation—in powerful ways and has significantly influenced who can become a citizen and has defined the rights and protections designated to each racial group. (p. 139)

As such, it is crucial that elementary teachers help students understand both the individual prejudice and the systemic discrimination that occurs in society.

In general, race is rarely addressed in social studies classrooms (Howard, 2003, 2004; Ladson-Billings, 2003; Tyson, 2003), and many teachers resist seeing the institutional aspects to racism (Sleeter, 2001, 2005). In the elementary classroom, teachers may be reluctant to engage their students in discussions about race (Bolgatz, 2005a), because they believe that teaching their students about race is developmentally or morally inappropriate, and they have a desire to protect the perceived innocence of children (James, 2008). Moreover, teachers may take a “colorblind” stance in their discussions of race or avoid discussing race altogether. Yet, as Epstein (2009) argued, “teachers who avoid race talk in history and humanities

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classrooms mis-educate all American youth not just about their nation's historical legacy, but about their ability to change contemporary society" (p. 5). Conversely, when elementary teachers do help their students make sense of race, it can be a powerful experience where students may begin constructing an understanding of race and inequity (Bolgatz, 2005a). To better understand how elementary teachers learn to teach race in social studies, I examined the developing beliefs and practices of eight self-described culturally relevant preservice teachers. In this study, I asked the following questions: What are the beliefs of preservice elementary teachers related to teaching about race in their social studies lessons? Do their practices align with their beliefs? To what extent does a teacher preparation program that focuses on multiculturalism and urban education influence their race-conscious practices?

Literature review

Much of the work on the teaching of race in social studies has focused on the secondary classroom. Peck and Herriot's (2015) review of research on social studies teachers' beliefs found that "pernicious beliefs about marginalized ethnic minorities are deeply rooted and perhaps difficult to change" (p. 396) among social studies teachers, with teachers of color disproportionately carrying the burden of disrupting racialized stereotypes. In several studies, White students' interpretations of history tended to align with their, usually White, teachers, while students of color interpreted historical events in ways that aligned with their own racial experiences (Almarza & Fehn, 1998; Epstein, 1998, 2000, 2009). Furthermore, White teachers often taught a White version of history and employed colorblind historical lenses (Chandler, 2009). In several other studies, culturally relevant courses appeared to have a positive impact on students, particularly on their development of a critical understanding of race in past and present events (Bolgatz, 2005b; Castro, 2014; Castro, Hawkman, & Diaz, 2015; Epstein, Mayorga, & Nelson, 2011; Howard, 2004; Martell, 2013). However, despite teachers' best attempts at culturally relevant pedagogy, students from some racial or ethnic groups may only have their histories presented during a select few units (Martell, 2013) or teachers may over-simplify culture, such as presenting it through music and food, without examining larger historical and sociopolitical contexts (King & Brown, 2014).

While there is a growing body of work examining race in the social studies classroom, only a handful of studies examine it at the elementary level. Bolgatz (2005a) found that when an elementary teacher engaged in discussions about race during her history lessons, the students developed a more sophisticated understanding of race. Epstein (2009) found that elementary teachers generally believed it was important to teach about race, but they also sent mixed messages about race and institutional racism in their classrooms. In a study comparing an urban-focused cohort with a more traditional cohort of preservice elementary education teachers, Castro, Field, Bauml, and Morowski (2012) found that the traditional cohort

favored responsible citizenship as the purpose of social studies, [while] members of the urban cohort tended to align more with cultural citizenship, which centers more on cultural sharing and story-telling ... members of the urban cohort were more attuned to multicultural curriculum. (p. 103)

In their study, Smith and Crowley (2015) found that one preservice elementary teacher exhibited an ambivalence toward the role of race in social inequity and her beliefs changed little by the end of the methods course. However, she used "her distance from, and lack of complicity in, the [race-related] historical event to suggest that she can easily address the topic [of race] as a teacher" (p. 24). In a large-scale random sample survey, Ellington, Leming, and Schug (2006) found that more than 6 in 10 elementary teachers reported that racial inequity should be a significant emphasis in social studies. Yet, in practice, it is unclear if most elementary teachers are successful in teaching about racial inequity.

Across these studies, it appears that elementary teachers may sometimes hold two dissonant ideas; they believe it is important to teach their students about racial inequity, but they are concerned about the impact it, as a possibly controversial topic, will have on their classroom. Along these lines, some recent research is shedding light on the possibly positive role that teacher preparation programs can have in being starting places for developing race-conscious elementary teachers who make race and inequity a regular component of their teaching. However, more work is needed to help us understand how elementary teachers develop their understanding of the teaching of race.

Theoretical framework

In this study, I used critical race theory (CRT; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Tate, 1997) as the lens. When applying CRT to studies of teaching, Howard and Navarro (in press) argued that the analysis should focus on how teachers:

1. Make race and race history part of the curriculum, and fight for its maintenance in it.
2. Teach race as a structural and systemic construct with material, differential outcomes that are institutionally embedded not reducible to identities.
3. Work to understand and teach race not as a personal crusade but as a sociohistorical construct through which we are all (unequally) produced. (p. 9)

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