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Pushback and possibility: Using a threshold concept of race in social studies teacher education

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ABSTRACT

The authors illuminate the process of preservice teacher learning about race through a narrativized case study of Michelle, a White elementary teacher. Michelle displayed elements of White resistance to race but also a desire to engage in teaching about race. When race is viewed as a threshold concept (Meyer & Land, 2006), Michelle's struggles with race highlight important considerations for teacher education.

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Introduction

What began as an inquiry into the ways in which White preservice elementary teachers make sense of issues of race and education ultimately evolved into a broader, more self-reflexive look at how we, as teacher educators, position our students in classes and how that positioning may influence the educative process. The structure of the inquiry itself changed, too, as we delved into the work; a broad case study with multiple participants quickly became a single, more narratively focused account of a single participant with the intention of gaining an understanding of a richer set of personal and professional experiences. We engaged in a process that, as Goodley (1996) says, “remind[s] us of the lives that exist behind a label” (p. 334). Our story of Michelle¹ demonstrates how a label obscured more than it revealed and, ultimately, threatened to close off the teaching and learning environment. Consequently, the work we present here does not represent our original, empirical endeavor but rather highlights the rich but unexpected findings that arose naturally through the inquiry process, findings that speak to both the experiences of preservice teachers and of teacher educators themselves.

Review of literature

Over the past three decades, several academic projects have sought to address the deleterious effects of the demographic divide (Cochran-Smith, Davis & Fries, 2004) between the largely White² teaching force and the growing proportion of students of color in US schools. Scholars of multicultural education (Banks, 2007; Gay, 1994), critical race theory (DeCuir &

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² In this paper, we choose to capitalize the terms White and Whiteness following the lead of many other scholars in Critical Whiteness Studies (e.g. Marx, 2006; Sleeter, 2008). When quoting scholars who do not capitalize the terms (e.g. Mills, 1997; Leonardo, 2009), we preserve their original capitalization choices.

Dixson, 2004; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995), and culturally relevant pedagogy (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Nieto, 2000) have called for changes in education policy, curriculum, teaching practices, and teacher attitudes as they relate to the school experiences of children of color. A fourth intellectual project, Critical Whiteness Studies (henceforth, CWS), also aims at disrupting racist school practices. Research in CWS seeks to identify the overt and covert ways in which White skin grants certain privileges denied to individuals of color (Harris, 1993; Lipsitz, 1995; McIntosh, 1989) in an effort to develop greater race-consciousness in teachers and to disrupt institutional racism within US schools (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1998; Leonardo, 2002).

Although much scholarship addresses the impact of Whiteness on education (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1998; Leonardo, 2009) there is still a need for more empirical work that analyzes the experiences of White teachers as they begin to interrogate their own racial identities (Bell, 2002; Marx, 2006; Picower, 2009). Leonardo (2009) notes that while Whites' structural position "is informed by and depends upon a *fundamentally superficial grasp* of its history and evolution," (p. 110) this position does not preclude Whites from developing an awareness of that privilege. In keeping with Leonardo (2009), we approach this as a pedagogical task of teacher education. Furthermore, we feel that addressing these issues is particularly important in social studies teacher preparation. The field of social studies education has not consistently centered race as an analytical framework (Chandler & McKnight, 2012; Howard, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 2003b; Tyson, 2003). The paucity of attention to race in this discipline is unfortunate given that the emphasis on citizenship education (Parker, 2003; Westheimer & Kahne, 2004) in the social studies necessitates an investigation into the racialized nature of citizenship in the US (Ladson-Billings, 2003a). More so than any other content area, social studies educators encounter curricula rife with opportunities to discuss historical and contemporary racism, a task they cannot undertake without an awareness of the implications of their own White racial identities.

The intent of this study is to add to the ongoing conversation related to Whiteness as a normalized, oppressive racial system and its implications for the field of education (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1998; Leonardo, 2009; Sleeter, 2008). In this project, we draw theoretically from CWS and from the notion of a *threshold concept* (Meyer & Land, 2005), and used a narrativized case study methodology (Reissman, 2008) to investigate the experiences of Michelle, a preservice elementary social studies teacher, as she participated in structured conversations about the implications of race, racism, Whiteness, and her personal racial identity as she prepared to enter the teaching profession. To guide this study, we posed the following research questions:

- How does a White, preservice elementary social studies teacher make sense of discussions of race in relation to her career as a teacher?
- As teacher educators, what can we learn from her responses as we plan future conversations around these issues?

Critical whiteness studies

Before moving onward, it is important to understand some of the founding principles of CWS and how those principles have been used to guide research in the field of education. CWS begins with the premise that race constitutes a socially-constructed and historically-fluid category of difference that has been recruited to justify the domination and subordination of people of color by those who possess White racial identities (Omi & Winant, 1994). Much of the initial work in CWS demonstrated the workings of Whiteness by displaying how European ethnic groups attained White racial identification over time in the US (Ignatiev, 1994; Roediger, 1991) and by detailing how privileges accrued to individuals positioned as White (Harris, 1993; Lipsitz, 1995). These analyses laid the groundwork for future investigations of Whiteness both as a racial identification and as a form of social power that normalized particular ways of being and constructed barriers for those outside of the White racial group (Leonardo, 2009; Mills, 1997).

Rather than thinking of Whiteness as a commonsense racial category or as being synonymous with White people, CWS understands Whiteness as a set of power relations in society (Mills, 1997). One of the most powerful aspects of Whiteness is its normalizing function and its seeming invisibility to those who benefit from its existence (Frankenberg, 1993; Giroux, 1997). Thompson (1999) refers to Whiteness as a "normalized condition of racelessness, every other 'race' being treated as a departure from that condition" and "the assumed backdrop against which all other meaning takes shape" (p. 149). Building from this premise, CWS research generally operates from the standpoint that making Whiteness and its practices visible plays an important role in dislodging White-dominated power structures (Thompson, 1999; Wiegman, 1999). CWS seeks to detail these oppressive practices so that they can then be reconfigured in antiracist ways. As Leonardo (2009) suggests, "Whiteness becomes the center of critique *and transformation*" (p. 91, italics added). Throughout CWS research, this technique is repeated: identifying harmful White practices and norms with the goal of dislodging those practices and replacing them with antiracist approaches.

Within education, one of the primary research arcs of CWS has been to identify – and disrupt – the unexamined racial identities of White teachers (Bell, 2002; Marx, 2006). This scholarship seeks to make Whiteness visible during teacher education so that White teachers can understand the impact of their collective racial ignorance on both individuals and institutions. Within the context of the aforementioned demographic divide, this recognition becomes crucial as White teachers will likely work in classrooms with significant diversity. Without a critical understanding of their own racial identities, White teachers can commit myriad aggressions upon students of color. Lawrence and Tatum (1997) note, "When White teachers fail to acknowledge their own racial identity, this lack of acknowledgment becomes a barrier for understanding and connecting with the developmental needs of children of color" (p. 163). Engaging White teachers in

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