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Critical Race Theory and the Whiteness of Teacher Education

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Abstract

This article uses three tenets of critical race theory to critique the common pattern of teacher education focusing on preparing predominantly White cohorts of teacher candidates for racially and ethnically diverse students. The tenet of interest convergence asks how White interests are served through incremental steps. The tenet of color blindness prompts asking how structures that seem neutral, such as teacher testing, reinforce Whiteness and White interests. The tenet of experiential knowledge prompts asking whose voices are being heard. The article argues that much about teacher education can be changed, offering suggestions that derive from these tenets.

Keywords

race, identity, racism, whiteness, teacher education, urban education, critical race theory

The Problem

Although teacher education programs today commonly announce an orientation toward social justice and preparation for culturally responsive teaching, the great majority continue to turn out roughly 80% White cohorts of teachers even though White students are less than half of the K-12 population (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). For example, in 2012, the U.S. teaching

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force was about 82% White. Of prospective teachers enrolled in traditional programs, 74% were White; of those enrolled in university-based alternative programs, 65% were White, and in nonuniversity-based alternative programs, 59% were White. White students complete university programs at considerably higher rates than students of color, so these enrollment statistics actually result in only incremental growth in the proportion of teachers of color in the workforce (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). In general, teacher education programs attempt to prepare their predominantly White cohorts to teach racially and ethnically diverse students through a course or two (often a foundation course) on multicultural education, culturally responsive pedagogy, teaching English language learners, or social justice teaching.

Although some White teacher candidates do persist in learning to become strong teachers of racially and ethnically diverse students (e.g., Jupp & Slattery, 2012; Ullucci, 2011), the literature also continues to report White resistance to (Crowley & Smith, 2015) and fatigue from (Flynn, 2015) talking about and working with race. Furthermore, it appears that the continued production of a predominantly White teaching force in programs that have added multicultural or social justice content, who then teach in schools that emphasize raising test scores, does not significantly alter the deficit lens teachers use to understand their students.

For example, as part of an unpublished study, I surveyed teachers in two large urban school districts in the U.S. Southwest (Sleeter, n.d.). About 40% of the teachers and about 80% of the students were of color. The survey asked about various aspects of culturally responsive pedagogy; 1,275 teachers responded. When asked whether they considered themselves familiar with the concept of culturally responsive pedagogy, 95% indicated that they were; only 5% indicated that they were not. In an optional comments box, several teachers noted that they had learned about culturally responsive pedagogy at the university in either their credential or MA program. Yet when asked how they interpreted low achievement of some (or many) of their students, they most often selected factors related to the students or their homes: attendance and participation (81%), poverty (79%), student motivation (66%), families and communities (52%), and students' home language (30%). To a lesser degree, teachers selected school and school-policy-related factors as explaining low student achievement: inadequate resources (48%), institutional structure (24%), and administration and leadership (18%). Of optional written comments, testing (such as pressure to teach to the test) was the main policy-related factor. Chosen far less as explaining low student achievement were teaching-related factors: cultural match/relevancy (33%) and poor teaching (8%). It appears that although most teachers believed that they knew what culturally responsive pedagogy is, most attributed their students' academic

difficulties to factors within the student and family rather than to pedagogical factors under educators' control. What most teachers had learned about culturally responsive pedagogy was not sufficiently potent to disrupt deficit theorizing about students, particularly in schools under pressure to raise student test scores.

The question I address is why a gap persists between what teacher education programs say they are doing and the continued production of a great majority of White teachers who in large numbers are not equipped to offer the racially/ethnically diverse students in schools a strong and culturally responsive education.

Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Teacher Education

CRT offers conceptual tools for interrogating how race and racism have been institutionalized and are maintained. As such, it provides a helpful lens for analyzing the Whiteness of teacher education and conceptualizing how it might be addressed. Although race has been undertheorized in education in general, Milner, Pearman, and McGee (2013) show that "race is grossly under-theorized in teacher education" (p. 339).

A core premise of CRT is that racism is endemic, institutional, and systematic; racism is not an aberration but rather a fundamental way of organizing society (Bell, 1987; Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001). This means that the continued production of teachers, large proportions of whom are not well equipped to teach racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse students well, is not an aberration. Rather, it is a product of racist systems designed to meet White needs (Rogers-Ard, Knaus, Epstein, & Mayfield, 2013). Three tenets of CRT are particularly helpful for this analysis: interest convergence, challenges to claims of neutrality and color blindness, and experiential knowledge.

Interest Convergence

In his analysis of who actually benefited from school desegregation and affirmative action policies, Bell (1987) argued that Whites advance interests of people of color only when they converge with and advance White interests. Milner et al. (2013) regard interest convergence as "pivotal in underscoring the past and present inequities in education and the larger maintenance of privilege" (p. 343) mainly because White people fear that systemic changes will threaten them in personal ways (such as loss of status or control) and gains of people of color mean losses for Whites. I will suggest three areas in which interest convergence appears to operate: the racial composition of the teacher education faculty, the content of multicultural teacher

education courses, and the relationship between teacher education programs and the university.

Teacher education faculty (including adjunct faculty) in 2007 were about 78% White (Milner et al., 2013). This fact has huge ramifications for what happens in teacher education programs, including how curriculum is designed and what is taught; how students are recruited and selected; how new faculty members—and who those new faculty members are—are recruited, hired, and supported; how urgently a program works to address race and ethnicity; and the extent to which faculty members who work with race are supported. For example, an analysis of 416 early childhood teacher preparation programs found that the more diverse the full-time faculty, the more likely the coursework would focus on working with children and families from culturally diverse backgrounds. Conversely, the less diverse the faculty, the less likely the coursework would have such a focus (Lin, Maxwell, Able-Boone, & Zimmer, 2009). It is very difficult to shift the center of gravity of a program in which the center is defined by White interests, and any proposed change must align with White interests to gain support.

Curricular content of teacher education programs tends to reflect White sensibilities. Virtually every program now includes coursework related to racial, cultural, and/or language diversity. But in most programs, that coursework takes the form of one or two separate courses, with the rest of the program giving only minimal attention to race, ethnicity, and culture (King & Butler, 2015). Milner et al. (2013) note Dixson's observation that "the curriculum of teacher education mirrors, in many ways, the P-12 curriculum in that it is Eurocentric and White dominated" (p. 346). (I am reminded of the time I pointed out that a specific program's emphasis on preparation for teaching English learners completely omitted preparation for teaching non-immigrant students of color. I was asked if I could recommend one or two readings that could be added.) This general pattern of separating diversity work from the rest of the program also characterizes teacher education research (Cochran-Smith et al., 2014).

Even the multicultural education coursework itself is often weak. In an analysis of multicultural teacher education course syllabi, Gorski (2009) found more than half to stress celebration of difference rather than systemic inequalities; only 29% of the syllabi explored issues of oppression, racism, and systemic power relationships. Gorski observed that "Although most of the syllabi did not appear to be designed to prepare teachers to practice authentic multicultural education, they did appear designed to meet this NCATE [National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education] standard [Teaching with Multicultural Competence]" (p. 317). Coming from a different angle, Cochran-Smith and colleagues' review of research on teacher

preparation for diversity finds similar limitations. Although most such research purports to identify powerful approaches to teaching for diversity within the context of single courses, most of the approaches that are studied are not particularly new or innovative, and most studies do not report "the profound shift in perspective that many researchers consider fundamental to becoming equity-minded/socially just teachers" (Cochran-Smith et al., 2014, p. 116). These research findings do not mean that such coursework is irrelevant or poorly constructed. Rather, bracketing "diversity" off into a separate course limits how teacher preparation programs are holistically designed to prepare teachers for the diverse students in schools.

When teaching race-related content, there is evidence that teacher educators tend to focus on the emotional needs of White students rather than those of students of color (Matias, 2016). Warren and Hotchkins (2015) report two studies in which although the professors' intentions about preparing teachers for students of color may have been laudable, their assumptions about what students of color need led them to promote "false empathy" that was relatively comfortable for White teacher candidates but did not substantially challenge their beliefs and their ability to relate to children and families of color. Conversely, when faculty members (particularly faculty members of color) challenge White students to grapple with racial issues, students often express their anger in course evaluations, which are then used to undermine and discredit the faculty members rather than the hegemony of Whiteness within which faculty evaluation occurs (Evans-Winters & Hoff, 2011).

Relationships between teacher education programs and the wider university tend, in many universities, to maintain the production of large numbers of White teacher candidates. In his analysis of the relationship between teacher education and the university, Labaree (2008) wrote that as normal schools were folded into universities, those who prepare teachers have become professors in a context that devalues their work. For example, tenure requirements encourage publication more than working with and in schools. Given the relatively low status of teacher education research, teacher education professors learn to produce promotion and tenure portfolios that are acceptable to colleagues in other fields. Despite their low status, however, teacher education programs serve the wider university: They serve large numbers of students in relatively low-cost programs, generating university revenue, and they provide support to other programs such as English by offering graduates a career path. I have had conversations with teacher education faculty members on numerous campuses that began with comments about the distance between teacher education professors and children/youth in the schools. When I suggested spending more time in schools and communities, I have been reminded that the university does not reward faculty

members for doing so. When I have suggested selecting much smaller cohorts of prospective teachers who have been intentionally recruited and selected for their relevance to racially and ethnically diverse K-12 students, I have been told that the college cannot reduce student enrollment as doing so would reduce its budget and its course offerings.

In short, by asking how White interests are served through incremental "add-on" steps many programs take, the CRT tenet of interest convergence reveals how the racial composition of teacher education faculty, the content of teacher education curricula, and the relationships between teacher education and the rest of the university tend to maintain the status quo, even while accommodating smaller changes such as hiring a professor of color or adding a course.

Challenge to Claims of Neutrality, Color Blindness, and Meritocracy

CRT challenges claims of neutrality, color blindness, and meritocracy in policies and practices shaped around the dominant ideology (Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001). The dominant ideology attributes people's widely different levels of success within a system of competitive individualism to talent and effort and racial disparities to those factors plus lingering effects of historical racism. CRT in contrast holds that claims of neutrality and color blindness mask White privilege and power. I will suggest three areas this tenet helps to unpack: color-blind conceptions of effective teaching and teachers, testing required for teacher certification, and the university-based structure of teacher education.

Policies such as state teacher certification and accreditation requirements are presented as impartial and neutral, applied to all individuals equally without regard to race or other demographic identities, and based on notions of teacher quality. Although all states speak to "diversity" in their accreditation standards, in most states, the diversity requirements are ambiguous (Akiba, Cockrell, Simmons, Han, & Agarwal, 2010). Color-blind conceptions of quality teaching, by failing to account for ways race matters in education, support the continued Whiteness of teacher education. For example, in their analysis of advertising for Teach for America (TFA), Milner and Howard (2013) point out that the notion of seeking the "best and the brightest" teacher candidates has led TFA to target elite institutions in which enrollment of students of color is disproportionately low.

State certification policies specify what teachers should know in disciplinary content areas, often reinforcing Eurocentric knowledge. For example, in California, Perez Huber, Johnson, and Kohli (2006) analyzed the California

Subject Examination for Teachers (CSET). In social studies, they found only limited reference to U.S. racial and ethnic minorities, and none to U.S. Latinos. Teachers could qualify for a social studies credential without any content knowledge from ethnic studies. In addition, Kohli (2013) reported that teacher candidates with a degree in ethnic studies found it difficult to pass the CSET. The effect of these certification requirements is to maintain a Eurocentric focus in the curriculum, while discouraging prospective teacher candidates of color.

Tests required for teacher certification, although not necessarily measuring good teaching itself, contribute to keeping the teaching profession disproportionately White (Rogers-Ard, Knaus, Epstein, & Mayfield, 2013). Tests purport to ensure that teachers who are certified are of high quality, but research studies find teacher testing to reinforce White dominance. Based on an analysis of pass rates on Praxis I and Praxis II used in 28 states at the time of the research, Nettles, Scatton, Steinberg, and Tyler (2011) found

> very large score gaps between African American and White teacher candidates on selected Praxis I and selected Praxis II tests. The overall gaps, however, between African American and White test-takers on Praxis I appeared to be as large as the gaps that are commonly observed on the SAT and GRE. (p. 47)

Goldhaber and Hansen (2010) took this analysis further by statistically comparing the interaction between Black students' average achievement scores, teacher race, and teacher candidates' scores on the Praxis. They found that Black students achieved better with a Black teacher who failed the Praxis than the same students would achieve with a White teacher who passed it. In other words, tests such as Praxis tend to favor White teacher candidates *at the expense of* Black children. In addition, Angrist and Guryan (2008) found increased teacher certification testing to have no effect on teacher quality, but the costs of testing discouraged otherwise qualified teacher candidates.

The tenet of color blindness also prompts us to ask how programmatic structures and processes that seem neutral help to maintain a pool of teacher candidates that is predominantly White. Earlier, I noted that a higher proportion of teacher candidates in university-based programs are White than in nonuniversity-based programs (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). Teacher education programs embedded within the university tend to be structured in ways that cater to undergraduate students, something that becomes clear when one studies programs designed specifically to recruit and prepare teachers of color (Sleeter, Neal, & Kumashiro, 2014). For example, such programs usually design course schedules for students who can attend class Monday through Friday during the day. The student teaching semester is usually designed for

full-time students who do not need to hold a job (Rogers-Ard et al., 2013). Many large teacher education programs, particularly those that used to be normal schools, are located in rural rather than urban areas, resulting in most fieldwork in taking place predominantly White schools.

Thus, CRT helps to expose various ways in which processes and structures of teacher education that purport to be color blind in fact serve to perpetuate Whiteness in teacher education. State policies, tests to enter and/or exit teacher education, and the design of programs that presume full-time students on a university campus all work to maintain Whiteness.

Experiential Knowledge

CRT values counterstories by people of color that call into question majoritarian stories (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). As dominant ideologies and knowledge systems based on White worldviews deny or mask racism, CRT theorists assume that those who understand racism best are not its perpetrators but rather those who are routinely victimized by it. I will use the tenet of experiential knowledge to reveal experiences of students of color in predominantly White teacher preparation programs, and ask whose voices are heard and whose are routinely unheard.

Several researchers have gathered counterstories from teacher candidates of color in predominantly White programs. Amos (2016) interviewed four teacher candidates of color; Bower-Phipps, Homa, Albaladejo, Johnson, and Cruz (2013) cooperative inquiry project included three prospective teachers of color; Irizarry (2011) gathered narratives from five Puerto Rican teacher candidates; and Gomez, Rodriguez, and Agosto (2008) gathered life histories from two Latino/a teacher candidates. Several common themes surfaced. The teacher candidates described wanting to go into teaching primarily to serve communities like where they grew up. They saw themselves as having insights about what students in their communities needed and believed that they could be good role models. However, they all faced similar challenges in their predominantly White teacher preparation programs. Several mentioned that the curriculum and field placements were not relevant to preparing teachers for their communities but that most of the professors seemed unaware of this problem. Struggling with isolation and being seen as "Other," most of these teacher candidates learned not to speak out; they learned to keep a low profile. Several described the White teacher candidates as naive but as having the collective power to shape discourse in the teacher education classroom. Some also mentioned keeping quiet because they did not feel their White professor would be receptive to their ideas or because they did not want to be singled out as the minority "expert." In Amos's (2016) study, the

professor was a person of color who worked directly with concepts of racism and diversity, but as they watched their White peers prey on her, the students of color grew fearful for their own safety. Significantly, these counterstories mirror the CRT analysis of teacher education above.

The tenet of experiential knowledge suggests asking who gets to define quality teaching and appropriate teacher education. Although policymakers have tried to define what it means to be "highly qualified" and although teacher education programs routinely use a conception of quality teacher/teaching to evaluate their teacher candidates, not everyone's voice is sought or listened to. For example, Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) have graduated 50% of Black teachers with bachelor's degrees (Irvine & Fenwick, 2011), and they currently produce 16% of the nation's Black teacher candidates (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). As such, HBCUs play a crucial role in teacher preparation and have considerable expertise in the preparation of Black teachers (Irvine & Fenwick, 2011). However, as they produce only 2% of all teacher candidates (U.S. Department of Education, 2016), their voices tend to be ignored in discussions of the reform of teaching and teacher education (Dilworth, 2012).

Finally, those who depend on teachers the most—K-12 students—are rarely asked what matters to them. Garcia, Agbemakplido, Abdela, Lopez, and Registe (2006) interviewed four urban high school students for their perspectives. The authors found that the students valued teachers who could cultivate safe, respectful, culturally sensitive, and responsive learning communities and who could establish relationships with students' families and communities. These qualities echo findings by Ladson-Billings (1994) and Irizarry and Raible (2011), who studied teachers whom Black and Latino parents had nominated as exemplary in working with their own children. It is significant that a teacher's ability to establish relationships with students' families and communities, and to establish a culturally responsive learning community, were valued by students and parents of color but are rarely central to mainstream definitions of quality teaching.[1]

Implications

I began by asking why a gap persists between what teacher education programs purport doing and the continued production of mainly White teachers who by and large are not well equipped to offer racially/ethnically diverse students (now the majority) a strong and culturally responsive education. Using CRT, I identified various structures and processes that perpetuate Whiteness but are so normalized that they are usually taken for granted.

Teacher education programs can confront and address Whiteness. For example, Ukpokodu (2014), after describing the troubled history of the University of Missouri at Kansas City, examines its "turning point" to intentionally improve its university–school partnerships, and strengthen its pipeline for students of color to enroll in the university and its urban-focused teacher preparation program. Bartow and colleagues (2014) share the history and framework of the Grow Your Own Teachers initiative in Illinois, a partnership involving several community organizations and Northeastern Illinois University to develop a pipeline into teaching for paraprofessionals and parents from communities of color who are committed to teaching in their communities' schools. Zygmunt and Clark (2015), based on their work at Ball State University, show how a teacher education program can be substantially restructured through sustained engagement with the local community. These examples illustrate possibility.

Milner's (2008) theory of disruptive movement in teacher education offers a useful tool for those who see racism as a system that is deeply embedded but not immutable. Milner argues that we can extrapolate several core principles from social movements to the work of transforming teacher education. First, as in any social movement, activists must establish a common agenda and vision. Applied to teacher education, this means that social justice–minded teacher educators and collaborators develop enough conceptual convergence that despite differences, they can work as a unified collective. Second, social movement work takes account of contextual issues, realities, and resources. There is no one formula; local work is necessary. Third, movements connect "pro-action, re-action, and prediction" (Milner, 2008, p. 340) using evidence of impacts of past practices and trends to make a case for changes for the future. Fourth, as in any social movement, the primary concern is with collective rather than individual benefits; individuals cannot opt out simply because they do not personally see themselves as implicated. Fifth, movements involve persistent long-term work. Addressing racism in teacher education is a process of systemic and cultural change rather than a short-term "fixing" of a problem.

Although social justice teacher educators may find this theory helpful, in many programs, such people find themselves in the minority. Changing who sits at the table is partly a hiring issue, but it is also a matter of who one collaborates with. Activist teacher educators can also broaden the range of voices at the table through collaboration with members of communities of color (including teachers of color in local schools) who are not in the academy. Community collaboration requires confronting the ideology of professionalism, which can restrict who gets to make programmatic decisions. For a program to prepare teachers who can work well with racially diverse

students, Sleeter and Montecinos (1999) recommend that teacher educators, including social justice–minded professionals, recognize limitations to their own professional knowledge. Developing a long-term partnership between communities of color (members of which have often learned to distrust White professional educators) and teacher educators requires ongoing work in several areas. Questions of who is to benefit from collaboration, how needs are prioritized, what can be changed, and the tendency of university members to assume authority must be directly confronted. Logistics such as when, where, and how often to meet and who sets the agenda must be negotiated. Participants must grapple with how to understand and work through conflict. As relationships are forged between teacher education faculty committed to addressing racism and community members and teachers of color, meaningful alternative practices can be constructed, as Zygmunt and Clark (2015) illustrate, without waiting for the whole faculty to come on board.

To assist in the process of engaging White faculty, Milner's (2007) framework to guide researchers in their work with race can be adapted. The framework consists of four parts: (a) examining one's own racial and cultural background and identity and how that might affect one's experiences and perspectives; (b) considering the racial and cultural backgrounds and identities of "the researched" (or of students for whom one is preparing teachers) and how one's own beliefs and convictions interact and may conflict with theirs; (c) engaged reflection and representation in which teacher educators and community members think through together "what is happening in a particular research [or school] community, with race and culture placed at the core" (p. 396); and (d) shifting from self to system by learning to focus on how race structures community and school experiences and how racial barriers can be reduced or eliminated.

Conclusion

Programs that directly confront the Whiteness of teacher education will continue to contend with problematic policies such as testing and funding and relationships with the larger university. Such policies were not designed to diversify who teaches or to ensure that teachers can form strong pedagogical relationships with students of color. However, I believe that much about teacher education can be changed if race is confronted directly.

CRT helps us push beyond superficial analyses of disconnects between teacher education and the diverse students in the schools. Using the tenets of interest convergence, the myth of neutrality and color blindness, and experiential knowledge, I have teased out various ways in which Whiteness is deeply embedded in systems of teacher education. But CRT also suggests

ways forward. By using insights from social movements, collaborating with communities to broaden the range of voices at the table, and engaging White faculty members in situating themselves within rather than outside an analysis of race, Whiteness can be constructively confronted.

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Note

1. In New Zealand, a large-scale teacher professional development program, Te Kotahitanga, was based on a profile of effective teaching that grew directly from Maori student narratives about schooling. Research on Te Kotahitanga confirmed the centrality of teacher–student relationships to improved indigenous student learning (Bishop, Ladwig, & Berryman, 2014).

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