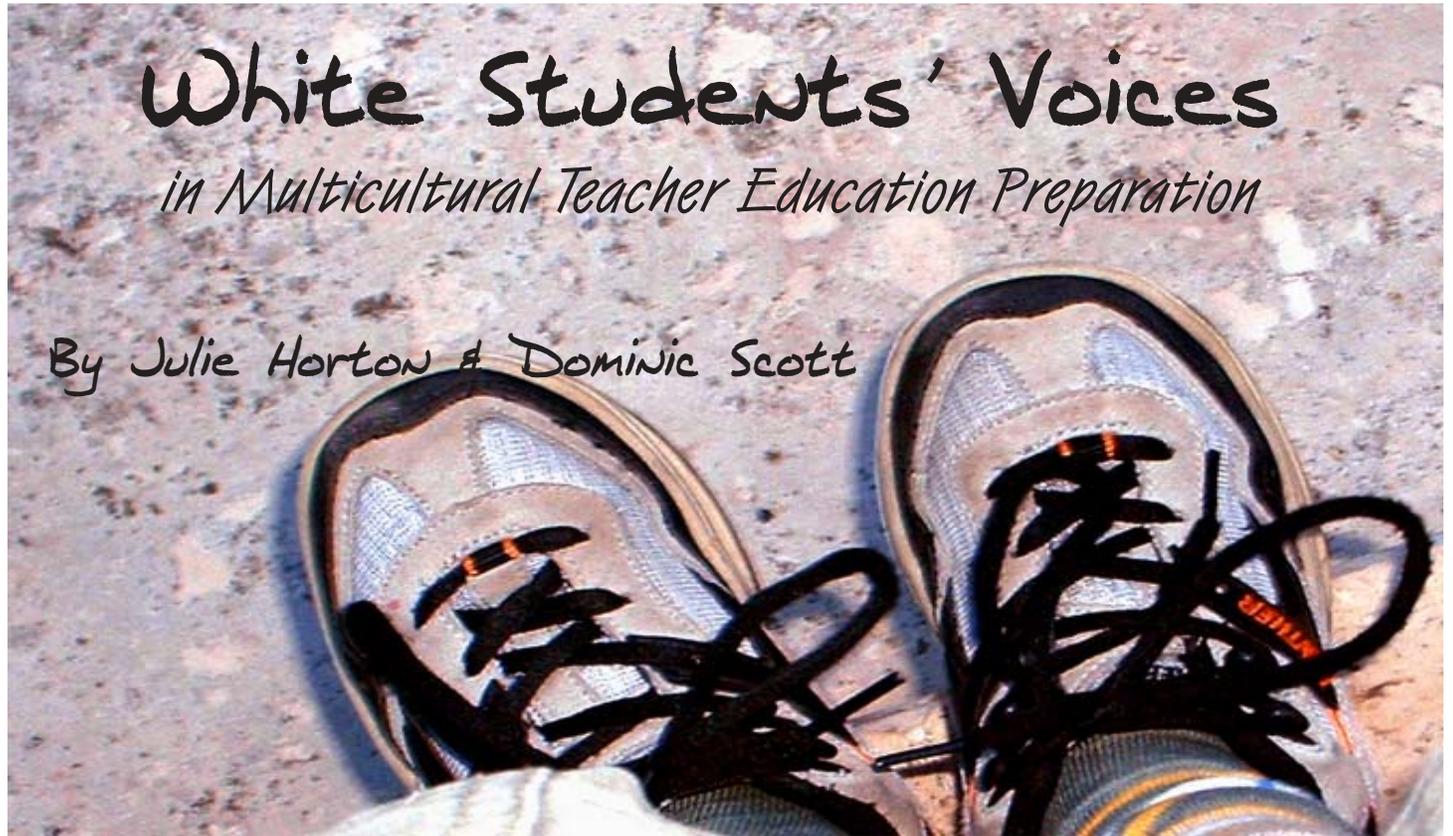


# White Students' Voices

## *in Multicultural Teacher Education Preparation*

By Julie Horton & Dominic Scott



While multicultural education remains a work in progress, many of the cornerstones are already in place. Racism, classism, sexism, equity, and social justice issues feature as generative themes (Freire, 1970), which underpin this educational project. One area of research in multicultural teacher education that this article investigates is the way in which White students have sought to make meaning of their own Whiteness in the midst of a plethora of claims regarding the pervasiveness and immutability of racism in America.

Indeed, stressing the culpability of White society in the political, social, and economic disenfranchisement of minorities is likely to have the opposite effect from the one intended, and drive White students into a defensive mode where they may become open to simplistic answers to complex issues.

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The researchers, two White doctoral candidates, became interested in this topic while assisting their professor in teaching a multicultural education class. While the majority of students in the class were Latino/Latina, the White preservice teachers became the focus of our study because, nationally, the majority of teachers are White (National Center for Education Statistics, 2001).

bell hooks (1990) challenges us to “investigate and justify all aspects of White culture from a standpoint of ‘difference’” (p. 55). We were intrigued by the uniqueness of the situation in which White students were a minority in the critical spotlight of a multicultural classroom.

How would the few White students, in a classroom consisting primarily of Hispanics, react to critiques of hegemony, White racism, and White privilege? Would they defend these practices as symbols of their own identity, or would they examine them in the light of a developing authentic White identity based on an awareness that “to be White does not have to mean that one is a racist” (Smith, 1999, p. 176)?

Would their minority position within the classroom create conditions favorable to a rearticulation of their Whiteness in a positive, radicalized way, or would it leave them with “no critical lens, vocabulary, or social imagery, through which they can see themselves as actors in creating an oppo-

sitional space to fight for equality and social justice” (Giroux, 1999, p. 234).

A third possibility was that, confronted with the raw facts of White racism, White students would abandon the task of redefining Whiteness in new ways, and simply learn the language of political correctness and “talk the talk” of multicultural awareness without “walking the walk.”

We were aware of the possibility that multicultural education may have an alienating effect on White students if it is presented from a simplistic didactic perspective in a confrontational style that vilifies Whiteness. If students do not feel a sense of inclusion in and ownership of the multicultural education class, they may withdraw from the classroom discourse, with the ensuing erosion of “common vocabularies and common hopes” (Rorty, 1989, p. 86).

Multicultural teacher educators strive to address the needs of all students in an educational environment that is witnessing increasing diversity in the classroom while continuing to attract a majority of its teachers from middle-class, European-American backgrounds. At the same time, many of our preservice teachers grew up in the 1980s, a “period of intolerance for dialogue” regarding diversity (O’Donnell, 1998, p. 58).

As a consequence, many students recoil at the mere mention of multicultural

education. Given these realities, how can White students reconceptualize Whiteness in ways that embrace a consciousness of equity, empowerment, and equality for all?

## Identity

There is a tendency for Whites not to see themselves in racial terms, generating a pervasive silence regarding race in the White community (Tatum, 1997). This "transparency phenomenon" occurs when Whites do not think about norms, behaviors, experiences, or perspectives as being White specific (Lopez, 1996, p. 22).

Gomez (1994) reports that multicultural education is viewed as only about the 'other' and does not include the self. Many students continue to view multicultural education as merely a two part technical adjustment to the curriculum by (a) including contributions of other races and gender (Banks, 1995), and (b) by removing the bias from textbooks (Grant & Koskela, 1986). Furthermore, many public schools continue to "mark the 'Other'" as different and that difference in this context means deficit (Gomez, 1994; Clark & O'Donnell, 1999).

White identity formation is an important factor in developing effective future educators. "If the majority of those teaching (as well as those currently pursuing teacher licensure) are White [80%], paying close attention to the impact of Whiteness on all students achievement (or rather the lack thereof) makes sense" (Clark & O'Donnell, 1999, p. 1). One cannot possibly begin to understand other cultures until one understands one's own self hence the need for identity development (Goodwin, 1994; Banks, 1995; Rodriguez, 1993; Greenman & Kemmel, 1995).

Tatum suggests four models of Whiteness. The first is the actively racist White supremacist. The second consists of those who do not acknowledge Whiteness and choose to ignore the fact that Whiteness affords privilege. The third model is that of the "guilty White." A person in this category is aware of racism and feels shame and embarrassment because of their Whiteness. The last model is that of the "White ally," the actively antiracist White (Tatum, 1999).

Janet Helms (1990) offers six phases of White identity development. They are contact, disintegration, reintegration, pseudo-independence, immersion/emersion and autonomy. Everyone does not pass through all of them, and many times people recycle through them depending on the context. Changing contexts and new events make people rethink their assumptions more deeply.

Each time we think that we have gotten rid of one set of assumptions, along comes another and we have to start working on those. Helms' models of identity have been reconceptualized by Tatum as "habits of mind," or formats for ways of thinking about one's own identity.

Multicultural education at its best supports the development of identity, solidarity, critical thinking and liberatory action. It is used as a tool to educate us and our children to go on to work to make deep and lasting changes in the basic structures of society (Ramsey, 1998).

## Purpose

Although Helms and Tatum have provided us with models and lenses through which to view White identity formation, the researchers were not certain how each of the authors' templates overlapped. We were interested to see if they could be applied to the students in our multicultural education class.

Were our White students easily explained by one or other of these perspectives, or was this process more complex than either author imagined? Finally, was White identity awareness facilitated or impeded by the White students being a minority in the multicultural education classroom? We hoped to understand the process of identity formation among White students in a multicultural setting.

## Methodology

The authors observed students in the classroom, kept personal reflective journals of classroom discussions, and examined the development of students' identification of themselves as raced beings by reading their curreré papers and personal reflective journals. The use of students' curreré papers draws upon the work of Pinar and Grumet (1996). "Curreré focuses on the educational experience of the individual, as reported by the individual" (Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery, & Taubman, 1998, p. 414).

By examining students' currerés, the researchers found nuggets of meaning making of the students experiences born of reflective discourse. An opportunity was provided after several of the classes for students to continue discussing the issues raised in the class as a way of assisting them to make new meaning through reflection and procession of their experiences.

Triangulation was achieved by interviewing the class lecturer and an independent observer in the classroom who had the opportunity both to observe and to interview the students. From these data, case studies were constructed of four White

students, and each are discussed in detail below.

## Individual Cases

### Nancy

Nancy was a middle aged, White, non-traditional student who spent all of her life in a small, rural, ranching community in the Southwest. Before attending college she worked as a bookkeeper on her father's farm. She went to school with Hispanic students and recalled that these students were not allowed to speak Spanish in the school buildings, even though Spanish was taught as a "foreign" language in the local high school!

In her journal and class discussions, Nancy recalled a Hispanic peer who she referred to as "this skinny little waif" whom Nancy wanted to "rescue from society." It seemed ironic that Nancy did not view herself as part of the cycle of oppression but rather a "type of savior" since her family employed many of "those" people even though many of the people Nancy's family employed had historically lived and farmed in the area long before her family had come to the area to give them jobs.

Nancy did not relate this story in any way to the class readings, even though one of the texts was Joel Spring's (1997) *Deculturalization and the Struggle for Equality*. Freire described this type of paternalism as "false generosity" in which the oppressor takes pity on the oppressed (1970). Despite her many years of schooling with Hispanics, Nancy continued to have a superficial understanding of her Whiteness as it related to her peers. She seemed locked into the contact stage described by Helms, in which White privilege remained unacknowledged. Nancy was unaware that the society from which she seemed to want to rescue her Hispanic peer was created and maintained by a privileged White minority, of which she was part.

Nancy's denial of White privilege continued as she expressed resistance to some of the ideas she confronted in the classroom. In her journal she struggled with some of these frustrations:

Why is it our fault we were born White? According to Tatum, all the problems facing each culture or race is because of Whites. They should just take us all out and shoot us! It follows then that if there were no Whites, "they" would have no problems... I'm really sorry that some White people I never knew and never met decided to have slaves. I can't believe that could happen...but it's not my fault...

Again, this position is consistent with the contact stage of identity formation as described by Helms (1990), whereby exposure to a different perspective induces cognitive dissonance, anger and denial. Nancy was refusing to see White privilege in a contemporary context, and was rationalizing it as a random act buried in the past, and for which there could be no remedy.

Her extreme solution, "they should just take us out and shoot us" was so improbable and extreme that it had little credibility. However, it also neatly avoided examination of more practical actions to redress past injustices. Nancy had absolved herself from agency by suggesting improbable "final solutions."

Within a few weeks, however, Nancy began to speak about the need for finding one's own identity as a means of helping other become more assertive. She asserted, "we must find security in our own racial identity and teach our students the same security." In her journal Nancy again affirmed her multicultural awareness in her journal entries; "I may not be able to change the world, but a good place to start will be speaking up and trying to make people rethink their racism."

On the surface, Nancy seemed to have gone from Helms' first level of identity formation, the contact stage, to the sixth level, autonomy, within a matter of weeks. The researchers were perplexed by this and felt that there were two possible explanations. The first was that Nancy had successfully negotiated the six stages of Helms' identity formation, namely, contact, disintegration, reintegration, pseudo independence, immersion/emersion and autonomy in a matter of weeks, by virtue of being in a multicultural education classroom that challenged her dysconscious racism.

The second, and in the researchers view, the more probable explanation, was that she had learned the language of multicultural education and its importance to her professor, and had adopted a politically correct stance in order to survive in a challenging college classroom in which Hispanics were the majority.

### *Rosie*

Rosie was a young, White female student in the elementary education program. Themes that were noted in her journal and papers included the importance of individuals, "truths" taught in public schools are not necessarily the only truth, and the influence of power and privilege. It appeared that Rosie might have entered the class with a firm understanding of the strategies and practices of White racism and the sublimi-

nal power they hold over White students.

Early on in her journal she wrote about the "the ease in which we label people and how hurtful it can be." Rosie went on to say that some of her classmates denied ever being oppressed even though "many are still affected by past oppressions." Rosie was able to see the internalized unconscious racism of her peers while acknowledging the pervasiveness of oppression and its legacy.

Six weeks into the class, Rosie stated that she "does not see the world through a rose colored lens." By this, she explained, we are all different and differences should be acknowledged, not hidden. Rosie also distinguished her own truths from those she was taught and made connections through her own analysis. For example, Rosie observed that, "the Declaration of Independence speaks about freedom for all...all men are equal...but what they really meant was White men."

She continued by questioning the difference between the Nazi concentration camps in World War II and the internment camps for the Japanese in the United States. Rosie believes that, because of the supremacist nature of U.S history, she was "cheated" in her own education. Again, she was conscious of the colonization of the mind that is part of our educational system, and was prepared to interrogate the dominant discourse of Whiteness. This conforms to Helms' disintegration phase, in which over identification with the oppressed is common.

The last month of the semester saw a journal entry that illustrated her struggles to understand power and privilege. Rosie wrote down, "Power +Privilege = Racism" This is a direct quote from Tatum's 1997 book, *Why are all the black kids sitting together in the cafeteria?* During her interview, Rosie talked about how she did not have the words for her feelings until this class. Rosie liked the high expectations for the students, which made her feel like a responsible member of the class; a practice she is using during her student teaching. Rosie seemed to be experiencing Tatum's third model of Whiteness identification in which she became aware of racism and acknowledged her privilege within it.

### *Stacy*

Stacy was also a young, White, female student in her early twenties who was in the elementary teacher education program. Her professor noted that she interacted well with other students and engaged in classroom discussions and responded to questions regarding multiculturalism

throughout the course. What stood out in her interviews and observations was that Stacy never felt any sense of White rage or guilt in the classroom. Rather, she seemed to be open to all the information and did not question or resist it.

Even in her interview, Stacy did not voice any anger or feelings of guilt. Stacy "felt bad" that racism had occurred and is now "aware" of her privilege, but it appeared that this had led to little or no action on her part. Here, Tatum's third model best describes Stacy's position — acknowledgement of racism and White privilege, but no clear strategies for confronting it.

In her interview Stacy reported that "this was the best class" she had ever taken. She really liked the fact that the community created within the classroom was modeled from the constructivist perspective. "A lot of my education classes talk about using constructivism and no one ever uses it."

The multicultural education course provided Stacy with the opportunity to view constructivist practice, but it seemed that it did not transfer to a construction of her own pedagogy. There did not seem to be a progression from Tatum's scheme of the "guilty White" to a more activist anti-racist position.

Stacy felt that she learned more in this class than in any other and that the readings and the videos has "really made [her] more aware." She also felt that she could teach a classroom of diverse students. However, when asked specifically what she learned or what practices she would use in her own classroom, Stacy could not name any.

Stacy did state in her journal that she would, "teach children to learn for themselves because each time they find they can learn on their own, they become more aware of their true identity." At the time of the class this seemed like a profound statement, but when interviewed months later, Stacy was not able to name what type of pedagogy she would use, or how she would construct her own classroom. This seemed to indicate that she was in the Helms' pseudo-independence status, in which she was aware of racism and struggled to become more aware of racial issues.

However, the question remains, what did Stacy actually learn, and did she work through the stages of identity formation or simply accept the information provided by the class as true and therefore to be slavishly emulated?

### *Dana*

Dana was a White female in her twen-

ties who grew up in a ranching community. She admitted that journaling was “not her thing,” although her entries revealed the development of her thinking.

Dana was quick to grapple with the issue of White supremacy. “White people have a painful history. No, we were not slaves, but we as a stereotypic class subjected others to it and deal with the shame and guilt that accompanies that.” Of special significance to her was the realization, at the age of ten, that her grandfather had been a member of the Ku Klux Klan. “Coming from the South, I was shocked to learn that he [her grandfather] was once a member of the Ku Klux Klan. [I was] embarrassed and ashamed as a ten year old who had been taught (through mom and the Christian religion she provided me with) that racism is quite horrible.”

With her mother’s help, Dana processed this new piece of disturbing news in a creative way that led her to distinguish individual actions from group culpability. “Mom never had a problem with me talking to her about it, and I began to see that my grandfather was a good man who made mistakes...There is room for everyone to become more culturally aware, and the shortcomings exhibited by individuals are not to be held against them or the group they represent.” Later, Dana reflected on her upbringing again in a more critical way:

Reflecting on the emotional influences of the past, I admit to being extremely blessed...I was also fortunate to grow up in a rural community, tightly woven with people of similar ranching backgrounds, supporting each other and each family in many respects. I realize that our tight woven circle was often exclusive towards others. Our parents were strong advocates of fair and impartial treatment towards others, yet my friends and I always managed to find fault with those not directly connected to us. From culturally motivated jokes to racial grouping, tolerance may have been taught at home, but other messages depicting cultural differences easily leaked through the cracks.

This critique of her passive racism seemed to have helped her formulate a positive cultural identity grounded in the best traditions of her heritage.

Currently, I am a proud female of European ancestry, who loves her rural heritage and agricultural background. I am excited to learn more about myself and others and better ways to educate people on sensitive subjects. My tolerance for racially, culturally, or gender biased humor

is decreasing rapidly, and will be less tolerated in my home, especially concerning my children.

It appeared that Dana had moved into a state of autonomy, Helms’ sixth status of racial identity development. She was secure in her racial identity, was accepting of diversity and difference, and was keenly interested in learning more about diverse peoples.

Dana seemed to have arrived at this stage of autonomy by herself, long before taking a multicultural education class. Perhaps the class merely help her find the language for her to clarify and give voice to her self-actualization.

## Conclusions

A powerful rationale for focusing on issues of White identity development in multicultural oriented teacher education programs is the reality that 80% of all students in such programs in the U.S. are White (Clark & O’Donnell, 1999). Through multicultural education, preservice teachers are instructed to teach diverse populations in a classroom climate conducive to success for all and free from stereotyping and generalizations.

Consequently, teacher educators must view preservice teachers in the same light. All students come from different backgrounds and have unique histories and experiences. By helping White student teachers develop positive self-identities, teacher educators can provide an essential element in the development of new teachers in multicultural classrooms.

Many preservice teachers resist the painful process of confronting their own prejudices, and this may be attributed to different levels of readiness or differences in personal and intellectual development (Jordan, 1995). Research pertaining to attitudes and the influence of attitudes on behavior show that “attitudes formed through experiences tend to be more thoughtfully developed and stable than those arrive[d] at in other ways” (Deering & Stanutz, 1995, p. 392). Preservice teachers must assess their own backgrounds in order to determine the history of their schooling and their entry beliefs (Jordan, 1995).

In some ways the four preservice teachers represented different stages or statuses of White identity development. Nancy, for example, seemed to be at the contact or initial status of White identity development as outlined by Helms. She consistently avoided any analysis of White supremacy, and parodied thinking about racism by proposing outrageous solutions. Her accommodation to multicultural prac-

tices seemed to consist of helping others “rethink their racism” without ever having to rethink her own.

Rosie, on the other hand, appeared to work through the issues presented in the class. As she became aware of White racism she acknowledged her privileged position within it. Her status was best represented by Tatum’s third stage in which she acknowledged her privileged position. This led her to over identify with the victims of White racism as described by Helms’ disintegration phase of White identity formation.

While Nancy and Rosie were at the early stages of White identity formation, there were differences between them. Nancy seemed to pass from Helms’ contact status to autonomy within a matter of weeks. However, Nancy appeared to have experienced “naive transivity” as described by Freire (1994), in which she saw magical solutions (such as rescuing her Hispanic peer for society), oversimplification of problems (such as shooting all Whites), and by fanciful explanations (such as making everyone else aware of their racism). By contrast, Rosie acknowledged racism as a powerful force in society. She was not afraid to challenge the political correctness of her peers by pointing out that they denied the existence of racism even while they still were subjected to it.

Stacy spoke up in class and did appear to struggle with the ideas presented in the class readings. Her journal entries and currere paper did not reveal any progression through the stages of racial development identity outlined by Helms. As a result, she remained moribund in the confusion of over identification and inaction. She continued to have somewhat simplistic ideas about multicultural education and how it could be implemented in the school setting.

The personal transformations — from contact to autonomy — and internal conflicts — from cognitive dissonance to the struggle for agency — was not apparent in her writings or her conversations. No anger or rage preceded her acceptance of multicultural education, and her classroom contributions were marked by a willingness to accept everything as unassailable truth. Stacy seemed to have had reached the pseudo-independence stage as outlined by Helms, in which she appeared content to be aware of the problem and yet unaware of how to get beyond it.

Finally, Dana seemed to have achieved Helms’ sixth stage of White identity development-autonomy. She was comfortable with her identity and saw it in positive terms. Dana had processed her rage, guilt, and confusion before she went to univer-

sity and used the new language of multiculturalism to give expression to her strong convictions.

The four case studies in this research illustrate the different responses of White preservice teachers to a challenging multicultural environment. For some, providing them with the language of multiculturalism allowed them to articulate previous experiences, while for others the very language of multiculturalism was used to keep at bay the challenges that multicultural educational classes present.

One purpose of multicultural education is to create an environment in which positive White identity formation is not only possible but also a likely occurrence. The challenge for teacher educators is to make available the transforming power of multicultural education for everyone.

The experiences of the four preservice teachers in this study suggest that this transformation is more elusive than previously thought. While Helms' statuses seemed to explain where each of the students were in their identity formation, both Helms' and Tatum's theories seemed to act as descriptors of states of mind rather than processes.

How, for example, Could Nancy be brought to the stage of awareness that Dana had achieved? The researchers felt that the process of transformation that was necessary required more time and deeper reflection than a one-semester course allows. While human transformation cannot be mandated or imposed, multicultural educators need to continually monitor the effects of their best efforts to provide growth opportunities for White preservice teachers as they prepare for active engagement in teaching in a diverse society.

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