

“What Is It That I Don’t Know”

Learning with White Teachers in Anti-Racist Education

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Introduction

Gary Howard (2006) starts his book, *We Can't Teach What We Don't Know: White Teachers, Multiracial Schools*, with some revealing statistics about U.S. school demographics. He indicates that the population of students of color in the United States reached 30% in 1990, 40% in 2002, and will continue to increase throughout the 21st century. At the same time, he says, 90% of public school teachers are White, a figure that will remain high and possibly grow in the next few decades. In addition, about 40% of U.S. schools have no teachers of color in their classrooms (p. 4). Howard sums up: “For the foreseeable future, the vast majority of teachers will be White, while the student population will grow increasingly diverse” (p. 4).

It wasn't hard for the students in my graduate class (a social foundations of education class with a focus on anti-racist education) to recognize these demographic realities. After all, an overwhelming majority of them, practicing teachers in local public schools, are White, and according to them, their students are becoming increasingly non-White. It was also not difficult for them to share the sense of urgency in Howard's question: How can White teachers more effectively teach diverse students, especially students of color who are often caught on the negative end of the achievement gap?

However, that is as far they could go with Howard's analysis. My students stumbled to accept the central message in his book. According to Howard, to successfully teach diverse students, White teachers must develop a healthy White racial identity, one

that challenges White privilege and the systemic oppression of racial minorities under White domination. My students greeted this message with sheer resistance.

In this article, I will share my reflections on this difficult learning journey. I will first describe the difficulties and resistance my students demonstrated in understanding Howard in particular and anti-racist education in general. Then, I will share my attempt to understand such student difficulty and resistance through an analysis of the social and educational contexts that situate and confine my students. Finally, I will discuss the pedagogical efforts I made to help my students learn in anti-racist education. I'll emphasize an autobiographical examination we adopted which, I believe, has great potential to assist students/teachers to grow.

“What Is It That I Don’t Know?” Difficulties and Resistance in Learning about Anti-racist Education

A few words on place and demographics may be necessary. The university where I teach is a typical U.S. Midwestern state college with a sizeable teacher education program. My graduate students are predominantly White, female, and lower middle class, and the majority of them teach in public schools located in small rural and suburban towns.

Original reactions to Howard's book from these students showed a high-level of emotional stress, some confusion, lots of frustration, and incredible defensiveness. “It wasn't a pleasant read,” some students declared. Obviously they had not expected to read such critical scholarship, especially on “controversial” race-related issues.

The race talk simply made them uncomfortable, let alone Howard's focus on critical White self-examination. Some commented that the book represents just another “White bashing” and part of “minority people's constant complaints.” Even though reminded repeatedly that the

author is a White man, some students still believed the book reflects a larger minority-initiated racial conspiracy of “political correctness” which blames Whites only and favors minorities.

Entangled with these negative emotions and attitudes, the students demonstrated other pedagogical misconceptions. The concept of “culturally relevant pedagogy” was a tough sell for these White teachers. Many of them genuinely wondered why they have to teach differently to different kids. They felt their professional ability and credentials were under attack. They claimed they had already learned much about what to teach and how to teach. They indicated they know their teaching subjects well and they constantly work to improve their knowledge base through graduate work and professional development. They said they had learned a lot about child psychology, human learning process, teaching strategies, and classroom management.

Plus, they stressed that they have a passion for education and a love for children and that they strive to make a difference in all children's lives. Those are the personal qualities they were proud of talking about, repeatedly, in the class. In addition, they claimed to support the ideals of educational equality and fairness, even though they tended not to speak about them.

When pushed to elaborate on what educational equality and fairness entail, they said it means that teachers have to treat every child equally: teaching everyone the same material in the same way. One student spoke well for all of them: “I don't see color; I see children.” You could hardly cast any doubts about the positive values, beliefs, and strong personal conviction and character these teachers demonstrated. You can easily identify the honesty and logic inherent in their questions: “What is it that I don't know about teaching? And what is it that I don't know about teaching minority kids?”

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A positivistic notion of education was salient in my students' thinking as there was little to no contextualized understanding of teaching. A socio-cultural analysis of education was particularly missing. Differences in human learning and education based on race, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, etc. were not emphasized in their preparation to become better teachers. This positivistic understanding of teaching and learning was further entwined with deeply-entrenched beliefs of meritocracy and color-blindness.

Together this powerful combination made Howard's central argument extremely foreign and hostile for these students. According to Howard, for Whites to become effective multicultural teachers, culturally relevant and socially competent, they must become racially educated; they must understand the larger racial histories, struggles, injustices, and the role Whites play in them; and they must further understand issues such as White dominance, White privilege, and White racism and how these realities have underlined the entrenched value systems and conceptual framework which directly or indirectly influence their philosophy and practice as teachers.

Understanding Student Difficulty and Resistance A Contextual Analysis

A starting point for us to help students learn on the difficult journey of anti-racist education is to understand the causes of their difficulties and resistance. Multiple factors make student learning difficult and contribute to their psychological resistance to anti-racism. It must be recognized that many of these factors exist and function outside of students' personal lives and thus students have little control over them. A critical contextual analysis of these factors is therefore needed.

The Social Context: Racism and White Denial in the Age of Obama

My class coincided with the historic presidential campaign and election in 2008. These extraordinary events provided us with a unique social background against which we launched our learning. One issue that emerged prominently from this background was race. The election of Barack Obama as the nation's first racial-minority president signaled, for many people, the end of an era. Charges of racism suddenly reached a new level of unpopularity.

In fact, many White folks were ready to declare the struggle against racism over. On

election eve, former New York City mayor Rudy Giuliani noted: "We've achieved history tonight and we've moved beyond . . . the whole idea of race and racial separation and unfairness." The day after Obama's 2008 victory, a *Wall Street Journal* editorial commented: "One promise of his victory is that perhaps we put to rest the myth of racism as a barrier to achievement in this splendid country." In another *Washington Post* article, columnist Richard Cohen said: "It is not just that he [Obama] is post-racial; so is the nation he is generationally primed to lead. . . . We have overcome."

Anti-racist educator Tim Wise (2009) would equate the above conclusion that the victory of one person of color signifies a victory over racism aimed at nearly 90 million as lunacy. As he pointed out, what White America has apparently missed, despite all the Black History Month celebrations, is that there have always been individually successful persons of color and that the triumph of individuals of color cannot, in itself, serve as proof of widespread systemic change (p. 29).

The outrageous claim of the death of racism reflects the historically entrenched White denial of racism and institutionalized racial inequalities. The *Wall Street Journal's* charge of racism as myth certainly reflects public opinion. A 2008 Gallup poll indicates: (a) more than three in four Whites say that Blacks have just as good a chance as Whites to get any job for which they are qualified; (b) 80% of Whites say Blacks have just as good a chance as Whites to get a good education; and (c) 85% of Whites claim Blacks have just as good a chance to get any housing they can afford. In addition, according to a survey conducted by CNN, only one in nine Whites believe racial discrimination against Blacks is still a very serious problem at all.

This present-day White denial is just a continuation of a historical pattern. According to Wise (2009), in 1963 roughly two-thirds of Whites told Gallup pollsters that Blacks were treated equally in White communities. In 1962, nearly 90% of Whites said Black children were treated equally in terms of educational opportunity. Going back in history even further, in the 1930s, few Whites saw racism and the oppression of Black people as a major concern. Even at the height of overt White supremacist rule, during the 1890s, when massive White violence against post-emancipation Blacks reached its zenith, White newspapers all around the South still proclaimed how well Whites and Blacks got along.

It is pretty clear that "at no point in

American history have Whites, by and large, believed that folks of color were getting a raw deal" (Wise, 2009, p. 34). Then it is not surprising that we continue to experience White rejection of racism as whining, as "playing the race card." Such rejection was well demonstrated in my class, indicated by the comments my White students made, such as: "Haven't we heard enough [about racism and minority struggles]?" "We will never move forward unless we stop these race talks"; and "We already have a Black president. If he could make it, everyone can!"

On the other hand, unfortunately, Obama's own tendency to de-emphasize racism and on-going social injustices feeds the mainstream White denial. During his campaigns, he consciously and carefully catered to the White public's desire not to talk about race. When he had to talk about it, he chose to gloss over the ongoing present-day racial inequities and promote a narrative of meritocracy and colorblindness, a narrative he knew was much preferred by White folks.

For example, when forced to address race in the wake of White America's collective denouncement over remarks of his former pastor, Jeremiah Wright, Obama talked about how the historic legacy of racism had shaped the contours of racial inequity and had fed the Black anger expressed by Wright.

By speaking in terms of past injuries and the lingering grievances generated by the same, Obama deftly managed to speak about racism without forcing white folks to confront just how real and how present-day the problem is. (Wise, 2009, p. 36)

Consider another example. On Father's Day, 2008, in a Black church in Chicago, Obama delivered some harsh criticism to Black families and Black fathers especially. Embracing a long-established tradition of social thought that says Black families are largely responsible for their own troubles, Obama urged his own people to get self-salvation through strong values and hard work. Of course, he was adding to the stereotypes about negligent Black fathers, stereotypes that have little basis in reality.

Research by Boston College scholar Rebekah Levine Coley has revealed a complex view of the causes of absenteeism among Black fathers: far from being irresponsible, it is the failure to live up to expectations to provide for their families due to the severe lack of economic and educational opportunities that drives poor

Black men into despair and away from their families. In addition, as shocking as it is, Coley found that Black fathers not living at home are actually more likely to keep in contact with their children than fathers of any other ethnic or racial group (cited in Dyson, 2008, p. 38).

Obama's rebuff of Black fathers and his firm insistence on personal responsibility might have been calculated to win over socially conservative Whites who were turned off by criticisms of persistent White racism, such as those voiced by the Rev. Wright. His rebuke may have scored politically for him, but it certainly didn't and won't help solve the real problems plaguing the Black community, such as huge unemployment, racist mortgage practices, weakened childcare support, and lack of training programs for blue-collar workers (Dyson, 2008, p. 38).

Obama's political ascent may represent the rising power of minorities; however, it reflects much more the power of Whiteness. Given the fact that systemic racial discrimination and profound inequity of opportunity continue to mark the lives of persons of color (Tatum, 2003; Wise, 2009), Obama's success certainly does not signify the death of White racism as a personal or institutional phenomenon.

Rather, it may well signal the intensifying of a more subtle form of racism, "racism 2.0," as Tim Wise (2009) terms it, which "allows for and even celebrates the achievements of individual persons of color, but only because those individuals generally are seen as different from a less appealing, even pathological Black or Brown rule" (p. 9).

From this perspective we may conclude that 43 percent of Whites voted for Obama in 2008 not because they genuinely accepted his Blackness or looked beyond race altogether, but because he successfully eased White fears and transcended his still-problematic Blackness. Remember how regularly "transcending race" and "moving beyond race" was used to describe Obama during the 2008 campaign? These expressions are basically saying he is different from most Black folks.

He certainly looks not as Black as most blacks. He speaks standard English with even more eloquence than many Whites. He holds degrees from the finest and also most White institutions. Most importantly, he avoids discussing race and racism as Whites often do and when he has to discuss them he takes a typical White view—seeing racism in historical terms and calling for personal responsibility to address the

ongoing institutionalized racial problems. His presence and his ideas don't represent a threat to White America's way of life. He makes White America quite comfortable. Therefore White America has accepted him, on its own established terms.

Of course, White America's acceptance of Obama is still very vulnerable. Take notice of the general unease and anxiety White America shows towards Obama as President! Since day one into his presidency, he has had to deal with unprecedented, and unfair, pressure to deliver on his promises. The fact that he was forced by White America to declare, repeatedly, that he is a Christian, not a Muslim, speaks to the deeply-embedded White distrust of Black people and White racism in general. Then, there were the ugly Tea Party protests and the "birther" nonsense manufactured by Donald Trump. Let's be honest: many of these oppositions to Obama's presidency are racially charged. Racism is well and alive; the very racism his election and re-election helped little to end.

Race talk in the age of Obama is certainly more unpopular than ever before. The norm of Whiteness his campaigns and elections helped to uphold gains strength every day and the efforts of minorities and their White allies to challenge White privilege are increasingly difficult. My classes showed the high-level nervousness, frustration, and defensiveness of the racial majority about breaking normality and entering into an unknown terrain. Like much of the majority public, these White teachers were even squeamish about describing themselves in racial or ethnic terms.

Early in the semester, I used a simple exercise Beverly Tatum (2003) introduced. I asked my students to complete the sentence "I am-----" with as many adjective descriptors as possible. Not surprisingly, my White students overwhelmingly chose not to use "White" or "Caucasian" in their own description of themselves, while the few minorities in the class all began their sentences with "I am Black" or "I am Asian." Minorities, who appear phenotypically "Black" or "Yellow" or "Brown," enjoy neither the privilege nor the inclination to play around such race issues. In contrast to their White counterparts, minorities experience race and racism every day.

You are fingered, inescapably tagged—boxed in not by the form [such as a Census form or a class survey], but by collective presumptions and cultural prejudgments—about beauty, criminality, intelligence, manners, articulateness, merit, health, and contagion. That is

larger meaning of a social construction, after all: it has walls. (Williams, 2010, p. 9)

Race and racism are increasingly denigrated, and a new "innocence" of self-identification seems to push us toward an official narrative that glosses over and downplays the significance of racial differences. A discourse of equality-sounding "we are all alike" takes charge. But such a "we are all alike" message is essentially transferrable to "we are all alike, like me." It conveys an entrenched desire not to change the firmly established racial hierarchy with Whiteness as its standard and framework. This is the larger social context in which we attempt to learn about critical concepts in anti-racist education.

The Educational Context NCLB and the Denigration of Critical Education

What about the educational world these teachers are most intimately connected to? It is equally antithetical to anti-racist education. A revealing example about this counterproductive culture in current schools is manifested in how "multicultural education" is conceptualized and practiced by teachers.

In our early class meetings students were asked to talk about their understanding of multicultural education. In response, they described multicultural education as teaching "multiple cultures or ethnic differences." Some of them were genuinely puzzled why we wanted to discuss gender, class, and sexual orientation; most were certainly unprepared for the study of historical dominance of Whites and their systematic subjugation of minorities.

When asked to give examples of their specific teachings in multicultural education, they all came up with things such as celebrating ethnic holidays, showcasing famous people from a minority racial group, or exhibiting unique cultural forms or life styles involving food and arts.

James Banks (1999) would categorize this dominant approach to multicultural education in American schools as a "contributions approach" or "heroes and holidays approach." It is not an empty approach, of course. It does emphasize teaching ethnic differences and cultural tolerance which are indeed important lessons for every American child.

However, this is a fundamentally inadequate approach. While celebrating inclusion and stressing sensitivity training, it fails to adequately analyze unequal power relationships in society and leaves

structural injustices unchallenged. In addition, it is an essentialist model which defines cultural identities in static and fixed terms, failing to grasp the dynamic, complex, and changing nature of ethnic/racial/cultural identity.

Moreover, it tends to focus only on making students aware of the racial or cultural others, not touching upon who they are as gendered, classed, and raced persons. This directly speaks to the need for White self-examination that Howard highlights in his book as so necessary for meaningful anti-racist education, yet it is something so resented and so resisted by my students.

The simplistic, inadequate, and potentially misleading multicultural education practices readily found in American schools are perhaps a by-product of a high-speed accountability race, marked by tough academic standards, high-stakes testing, and punitive school choice mechanisms aimed towards the privatization of public education. This accountability movement owes its rising to the landmark Bush legislation, *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB), a bill the Obama administration has moved very slowly to reform.

Under the auspices of NCLB, education is increasingly defined in economic terms. Schooling is viewed as a business and students as consumers. Business principles reign supreme: efficiency and cost-benefit analysis becomes the rule; consumer choice and free competition are the norms. While radical voucher plans are promoted by right-wing Republicans, charter schools are hailed by Democrats.

Obama has repeatedly asked states to remove caps on charter schools, pushing charters as the solution to help impoverished children and make declining schools work. The judging of school success, of course, relies on standardized tests based on uniform academic standards. To pass the tests and meet the standards, schools fall prey to a teaching-to-the-test mania. In addition to the competition-driven choice programs, virtue-centered character education is pushed to restore traditional morality in schools, imposing discipline, order, and a religiously-inspired work ethic on students.

This school reform agenda has been under serious challenge by thoughtful critics since its origin (see Apple, 2001; Nichols & Berliner, 2007; Noddings, 2007 for example). One of the major problems of the reform movement is its individualist orientation. Freeman (2005) points out that NCLB keeps school reform a largely

idiosyncratic process separated from wider social and environmental contexts. While suggesting that educational improvement can be effectively pursued independent of external material realities and emphasizing academic competition among schools and individual students, policymakers seriously ignore the social conditions of schooling and disregard the close correlation between school outcomes and social problems such as poverty and racism.

Freeman (2005) argues that as colorblindness permeates educational policies, the salience of race, along with other critical issues of ethnicity, social class, gender, religion, language diversity, etc, is rendered invisible. This leads to a fundamental problem of the current school reform, namely, the marginalization of the pursuit of social justice and educational equality.

Such uncritical education now prevailing in the public schools naturally leaves its impact on teacher education at colleges and universities. Consistent with the positivist understanding of teaching and learning dominating the school reform agenda, a job-preparation orientation permeates teacher education programs. Courses designed for pre-service and practicing teachers are overwhelmingly focused on "content methods" or "teaching strategies."

No wonder teacher candidates come to view teacher education largely in terms of skills development and techniques training. These programs do little to engage students in critical reflections on racism and other social oppressions and structural problems. Actually the dominant teacher education culture has created such backlash that it makes what we try to teach in critical multicultural education look so very odd.

I have had students who asked why a book emphasizing race issues has to be read by teachers. Some other students wondered why a critical discussion on 9/11 or the psychology of war is necessary for those who simply want to teach math, science, or language arts. Coming from elementary and secondary schools where their daily lives are swamped with teaching to the test, teachers don't often find, and don't expect to find, a much different atmosphere in their teacher certification or degree program courses, which mostly teach them about schools as they are, not as they should or might be.

As for the busy teachers in my classes, after a day of exhaustive teaching, they often come to me intellectually drained, certainly not in a mood to think out of the box and tackle critical and "unpleasant" issues such as race.

Driven by a job-preparation orientation and competition for students, teacher education programs are radically reforming themselves. Across the nation social foundations of education courses, courses designed to help teachers conduct critical social analysis and cultural studies, are increasingly being marginalized. Fewer and fewer programs offer independent courses in philosophy of education, history of education, multicultural education, or other courses that are not subject-based or practically oriented.

The limited number of classes remaining in social foundations constitute a survival crisis, struggling to avoid the increasing danger of being completely eliminated. In fact, traditional schools of education are under siege, facing the competition of "alternative paths to teaching." According to an April, 2010 *New York Times* story, the rising popularity of alternative certification programs is precisely due to their grounding in practical training, presumably in contrast to traditional schools of education that are "mired in theory."

Offering a quicker path for people who don't have to study education in college to become teachers, and allowing them to begin teaching without substantial coursework in non-practical subjects, these alternative programs threaten to make education schools lose their franchise. Such programs, not surprisingly, have received approval and support from stakeholders and policy makers such as Obama's Secretary of Education Arne Duncan and even some of our own education academics.

At an appearance at Teachers College Columbia in 2009, Duncan charged: "Many, if not most, of the nation's 1,450 schools, colleges, and departments of education are doing a mediocre job of preparing teachers for the realities of the 21st-century classroom." To supplement Duncan's unfounded charge, David Steiner, Dean of the Graduate School of Education at Hunter College, City University of New York, criticized required course readings at a number of elite education schools, claiming that colleges still devote too much class time to "abstract notions about 'the role of school in democracy'" and to "the view by some that schools exist to perpetuate a social hierarchy" (Foderaro, 2010, p. 19).

Learning about Race and Racism An Autobiographic Exploration

Needless to say, it is a great challenge to engage students/teachers in meaningful

and critical learning about multicultural education, especially issues of race and racism, within such a counterproductive, even reactionary, social and educational environment. In this last section, I will discuss my pedagogical efforts to make the impossible possible. I will focus on the use of autobiography in my teaching.

I started with engaging students in reading autobiographies. In several early classes I emphasized this method (see Wang & Yu, 2006, for a reflection on this effort). I had students read autobiographic works that depict the lived experiences of individuals who took on the task of fighting for social justice and equality and their struggles and triumphs with racism, sexism, classism, and other oppressions.

My intention was to engage students with their own identity-searching as persons and educators. I particularly hoped to examine the self situated in social context and help students understand how personal identity is constructed socially, culturally, economically, and politically. The reading of influential autobiographic works such as those by Maya Angelou (1991) and Paula Rothenberg (2000) indeed opened my students' eyes, and their minds to some extent.

However, one challenge in engaging students with reading autobiography is that many students refused to read selected autobiographic works in a way that would interrogate their own identities. Even though they could come to agreement with the central messages the authors address, including those of anti-racism, anti-sexism, and anti-classism, the experiences students read about remain largely irrelevant to their own personal lives.

They were reading other people's stories, not their own. They often found the social contexts and life events which situated those authors were not equivalent with their own. They sometimes doubted the motives of those authors and their potential political agendas, especially when they read works by minority authors and those with strong political/ideological leanings. Thus, there is still a considerable gap of understanding and an emotional disconnect.

In addition, the students' reading and understanding of the assigned autobiographies turned out to be very selective. Students tended to identify with the authors on some messages but reject others. This was demonstrated by my students' reading of Maya Angelou. Despite the resistance of some students, overall the class's reaction to Angelou was quite positive. Most of the students (female, White, and lower middle

class) were moved by her story. During the class discussion, they showed their heartfelt sympathies with her sufferings and their admiration for her strengths and ultimate success. They saw being poor and being a woman as the two largest barriers in Angelou's life journey and they were inspired by the fact that she triumphantly overcame both and achieved a fulfilling life.

Here, issues of gender and class loomed large. A humble woman struggling against sexism and poverty, Angelou was identified and accepted as one of them; her life was celebrated and admired. She became their role model. Angelou's messages of dedication, hard work, faith, and perseverance found strong repercussions in my students.

Evidently my students learned a lot from Angelou, but they also missed something obvious and important. They didn't—or refused to—see color. They didn't—or refused to—see race. Yet, we know that Angelou being a woman and being poor are inextricably tied to her being Black. Being Black is an integral part of her identity. Race relations constituted the determining background of her personal struggle and White racism was essential in causing her suffering.

Denying this critical context inevitably caused a partial and problematic understanding of her story. My students' reading of Angelou echoes Christine Sleeter's (2005) findings about how White teachers construct race generally. Descendants of European immigrants, White teachers could easily draw on their own family histories to understand how social mobility has been and is achieved in North America. They themselves have attained upward mobility by earning college degrees and becoming professional teachers. Therefore, both family and personal experiences seem to clearly justify individual dedication and hard work, a message my students accepted from Angelou, also a message at the core of the colorblind approach to race relations.

In response to the above challenges related to students reading autobiography, I began to emphasize the need for students to write their own autobiographies as a supplement to reading other autobiographical works. In addition to encouraging students' self-reflection during class discussions, in which I asked them to find connections between their lives and the lives they read about, I assigned an autobiographical paper as their final project. I asked students to write about their own life journeys. I especially encouraged them to

reflect on personal experience of encountering racial differences and how they have become conscious of their own racial identity in the context of understanding racial others.

To help students understand their identity development, I asked them to make reference to theories of White identity development introduced by Tatum (2003) and Howard (2006) and encouraged them to take a critical look into their own racial growth and becoming.

Another emphasis was that I encouraged them to reflect on the intersections of race, gender, and class as they were experienced and lived during their own life journey. The point here was for them to see and comprehend the interrelatedness of oppression and the complexity of identity politics. Understanding their own often-oppressed gender and class identities as women and members of the lower middle class, they began to become cognizant of the subordination of other minorities due to race and their own resistance to recognizing White privilege and dominance.

Most importantly, writing autobiography provided these students with a sense of agency. It helped them realize they are the owner of their own lives and they have a choice and a voice. Continuing reflection of their choices and speaking for their voices is important. Writing autobiography represents a "working from within" (Pinar, 1994) approach, which is key for meaningful multicultural education, and for particularly anti-racist education.

We must analyze and challenge our own perceptions, attitudes, and understandings as social beings who are gendered, raced, and classed. With such critical reflection, we can possibly work to improve our skills as anti-racist and transformative educators.

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