

White Privilege

Perceptions of Pre-Service Teachers

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Introduction

In the last two decades the make-up of United States population has changed significantly. Non-White population is on the rise. While almost every town and city may have seen this shift, the concentration of this migration is still mostly in urban areas and in some suburban locations. This demographic change is also visible in the increasingly diverse student population in public school settings around the country.

It is estimated that, by 2050, ethnic minority children will make up the majority of most U.S. public school classrooms, and in some cities this change has already taken place (Gollnick & Chinn, 2013). In contrast, this reality does not reflect the ethnic background of the teachers in the classrooms. The vast majority of the teachers, 87%, are White females (Gollnick & Chinn, 2013).

Most teacher preparation institutions have taken notes on the demographic changes in the population. To address these changes, most teacher preparation institutions require some form of multicultural education coursework for their teacher candidates. The coursework is typically aimed at providing all teacher candidates with knowledge, information, and strategies for teaching children from diverse ethnic background.

This multicultural education coursework also usually addresses various issues dealing with race, gender, class, religion, and diverse perspectives stemming from a plethora of worldviews, experiences, and life styles. However, these issues cannot be discussed in an eloquent manner without

mentioning racism, classism, sexism, and homophobia (Tatum, 1992).

Racism is an important issue that must be addressed in any multicultural education course because, not only is this topic an integral part of U.S. history, but it remains an ongoing problem today. We are all aware that just because there are laws on the books that are aimed at combating racism, and despite the fact that we have elected and reelected our first Black President, racism is far from being eradicated from our society.

At the same time when talking about racism in a multicultural education course, one must address the issue of “White Privilege,” as it is very much intertwined with racism. Discussing one without the other would be futile. However, one might ask “What is White Privilege?” The meaning of White Privilege, according to many experts on this issue, refers to unearned advantages enjoyed consciously or subconsciously by people of White skin.

Peggy McIntosh (1989), one of the leading experts on this issue, defined it as “invisible package of unearned assets.” Similarly, according to Tim Wise (2014), “White privilege refers to any advantage, opportunity, benefit, head start, or general protection from negative societal mistreatment which persons deemed White will typically enjoy, but which others will generally not enjoy.”

Teaching about Diversity

As a multiculturalist, I strongly believe that students from all academic majors must be exposed to a multicultural education course in order for them to be prepared to work in diverse settings. It is close to impossible these days to find a working environment that consists of a solely homogeneous workforce or clientele. This is increasingly becoming true for

the teaching profession. Teachers must be prepared to effectively work with students from diverse backgrounds. Pre-service teachers must be aware that racism and White Privilege still exist in contemporary society.

I have been teaching a multicultural education course at a public university for the last 12 years. Students in this course have always been predominantly (99%) female and White. Occasionally, there have been one or two African-American or Latino students and sometimes I will have a few White male students. Though the topic of this course includes many sensitive issues like prejudice, discrimination, racism, sexism, religion, and homosexuality—the reactions of students both via student evaluations and through informal reflections have always been mostly positive. Many have commented that this course was one of the most valuable and eye-opening experience of their college life.

For many, having grown up in an all-White community and having gone to all-White schools, college was the first environment where they truly encountered students from different ethnic backgrounds. One White student reflected on his experience in the college newspaper, expressing that the multicultural education course was one of the most enjoyable classes he had taken.

Introduction to White Privilege

During the first few years of teaching a multicultural education course, I introduced the concept of White Privilege as it came up as a small part of a chapter in the assigned textbook that was dedicated to covering the topic of “Ethnicity & Race.” This concept of White Privilege was a completely new phenomenon for the vast majority of my students. They were all

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familiar with the concept of racism from their previous study of the Civil Rights Movement and the history of slavery in the U.S. The awareness of racism came from their history curricula at the middle and high school levels.

As an Asian-American instructor for a multicultural education course, I was unsure of how to introduce the concept of White Privilege to a predominantly White group of students. Therefore, I would rely mostly on what was being addressed in the small section of the textbook chapter. I supplemented the chapter with a part of Peggy McIntosh's 1989 article "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack." Students were given the list of 26 privileges cited in the article and were asked if they agreed or disagreed with the items on the list.

Reactions to the List of White Privileges

The majority of the students did not initially share any thoughts on McIntosh's list of White Privileges. This may have been because the items on the list were completely new to them or because they were unsure of what to say or how to react. However, a few of the students pointed to some of the items from the list and said that these items were not true! Some of these items and the students' comments were as follows:

ITEM: *I can choose blemish cover or bandages in "flesh" color and have these more or less matched my skin.*

STUDENTS' COMMENTS: The students often argue that, these days, one can buy bandages of different colors.

ITEM: *I can easily buy posters, post-cards, picture books, greeting cards, dolls, toys and children's magazines featuring people of my race.*

STUDENTS' COMMENTS: Students used a similar argument as the one noted above, that there are magazines for African-American and Hispanic-American readers.

ITEM: *I am never asked to speak for all the people of my racial group.*

STUDENTS' COMMENTS: Many students strongly felt that typically it is the Whites who have to speak for the entire group. They believe that any time there is a news about racism or discrimination against a minority, it is the White students who have to clarify that not all Whites commit such acts.

ITEM: *I can go into a music shop and*

count on finding the music of my race represented, into a supermarket and find the staple foods which fit with my cultural traditions, into a hairdresser's shop and find someone who can cut my hair.

STUDENTS' COMMENTS: According to the students, the argument for this being true for all races is that in modern America, almost every food stores carries food items for different ethnic customers, and there are many hairdressing shops that cater to the needs of diverse ethnic groups.

ITEM: *I can go shopping alone most of the time, pretty well assured that I will not be followed or harassed.*

STUDENTS' COMMENTS: The reactions to this item were particularly interesting. Many of the female students said that during their high school years, when they had gone for shopping with their friends, they had the similar experiences, and therefore, this is not just an exclusive experience for minority groups only.

The above reactions clearly demonstrate student resistance to the concept of White Privilege and students' unwillingness to accept that they may have benefited from privileges granted to them as a result of, or in response to, their White status. The sources of resistance of my students were similar to those described by Tatum (1992), who eloquently identified two categories of resistance: Taboo Topic and The Myth of the Meritocracy.

For my students, White Privilege is a taboo topic because it is completely new or unknown to them, and therefore it is safer to avoid the topic because of fear of the unknown. Similar to Tatum's findings, my students also have a belief in a meritocracy, that "the United States is a just society" (Tatum, 1992). Therefore, they believe, McIntosh's list of privileges cannot be true in a just society like the U.S.

The most interesting point about the students' reactions to McIntosh's list is that students were so adamant to resist those five of the 26 items from the list that they missed or overlooked the 21 remaining items for which they had no comments or reactions.

Developing an Understanding of White Privilege

The resistance from my students about White Privilege did not surprise me for several reasons. Most of my students grew up in White communities, attended all White schools, and teachers in their K-12 settings may never have discussed the concept of White Privilege. The concept

may not have been in the curriculum, and teachers and students alike probably never realized that they were themselves enjoying White Privilege.

The biggest source of resistance for my students came from what Tatum (1992) called "The Myth of the Meritocracy." Students strongly argued that they were taught to be fair, that in order to achieve they were to work hard like their parents did, and that everyone was given the same opportunities to achieve and be treated equally. Students vehemently argued that their and their parents' successes in life were the results of their hard work. These arguments clearly reflect what Wildman (2000) has stated, "...achievements by members of the privilege group are viewed as meritorious and the result of individual effort, rather than as privileged." My students' points of view portray a strong reluctance to even acknowledge the existence of "White Privilege."

After my initial struggle to introduce the concept of "White Privilege" I started to search for other ways to supplement the topic in addition to using the section in the textbook and McIntosh's White Privilege list. I came to realize that McIntosh's original essay was published in 1989, long before most of my students began their formal education. Then I came across Robert Jensen's two articles: "White Privilege Shapes the U.S." and "More Thoughts on Why the System of White Privilege Is Wrong." I focused on the first one. The second one was used to demonstrate to my students the kind of responses Jensen received from many based on his first article. Both of these two articles were written 10 years after Peggy McIntosh's.

The purposes of using Jensen's articles were twofold. One was to help my students understand that what McIntosh wrote about "White Privilege" is not indicative of isolated experiences expressed by one White woman, but that other Whites also had similar experiences. The second purpose was to expand on the topic through other eyes and to get students' reflections on a variety of perspectives.

When I had used McIntosh's list of White Privileges, I asked students to share their thoughts in a large group discussions. Later, I realized that it was difficult for many to openly express their true feelings. I assigned the Jensen's article as a voluntary homework to my students and they were asked to anonymously write a one-page reflection. This was done with the hope that students would express

their genuine feelings without the threat of censure.

Reflections on White Privilege

Asking students to write a reflection paper anonymously on Jensen's article was an eye-opening experience for me. It provided me with an opportunity to pick into the thoughts of my students on the concept of "White Privilege." As mentioned previously, while using McIntosh's list of privileges, I asked students to share their thoughts in a large group, but hardly anyone did. However, when asked to write an anonymous reflection paper, all students shared their thoughts, even the students who had hardly participated in class discussions. Making the assignment voluntary did not reduce the number of responses from students.

On the other hand, anonymity provided an opportunity for all to express their opinion freely without having to defend their responses openly. These reflections can be categorized into two groups. One group of students, after reading Jensen's article, expressed their acceptance to the idea of "White Privilege." I call these responses the "Acceptance Group." However, this group consisted of very few students. Nevertheless, I felt good, at least, that I was able to help some of the White students to acknowledge the existence of "White Privilege" in today's society.

In contrast, the second group, which included most of the students, was unable to recognize the existence of "White Privilege." I identify this group as the "Denial Group." Over the course of four years, from spring of 2010 through fall of 2012, I have asked about 240 students to write the voluntary reflection paper on Jensen's article. Out of these about 85%, or 204 students, were in the Denial Group and the remaining 15%, or 36 students, were in the Acceptance Group. In the following paragraphs I will discuss the opinions expressed by these two groups.

The Acceptance Group

The reflections from the first group indicated that these students were surprised to know that "White Privilege" exists because they believed in a meritocracy. These students fall under the Acceptance Group. Some of their comments were:

I didn't really understand the entire scope of White Privilege until reading this article.

I was astounded to learn that White

Privilege still exists and is part of our everyday lives.

I never looked at myself and thought I was privileged to be White.

Before I read the article I was not so sure that White people really had a different privilege over everyone else. I thought that things have come a long way after slavery.

I have never really thought about having any sort of privilege for being White, but after reading this article I think I can say that I have.

Until we had talked about White Privilege in class and I got a chance to read the article, I had never known what White Privilege was.

I never thought about this idea of "White Privilege" before, until we started talking about it in class. The article brought more attention to the whole idea or concept.

Some students in this group not only acknowledged the existence of "White Privilege" but also reflected on their own personal experiences with privilege in life. One such student stated,

Growing up where I came from, other races were few and far between in my schools. I was never really around other cultures to know the difference, but after my sister married a man of color, I witnessed reactions from my parents toward the people from other races.

Another student reflected on her experiences from middle and high schools. The student stated,

It was not until I came to college that I started to acknowledge my ignorance of other races. I realized that my opinions were not really my opinions at all, that these were just the opinions of all of the people that I have associated with throughout my schooling. There was a lot of pressure to follow the crowd when you are in middle and high school and you do not realize how wrong it was until you get out of there.

This statement clearly portrays the struggle that many young people have faced or are still facing in middle and high schools in order to fit in with their peers.

The Denial Group

Reactions from the Denial Group were very interesting. Not only did several in the group deny the existence of "White Privilege," but they insisted that it is the non-White who has the privilege in society and not the other way round. In support of their argument they cited such things

as affirmative action, admission, and scholarship criteria used by colleges and universities where non-Whites are given the preference over Whites.

Sometimes they expressed their own personal experiences about how they could not qualify for scholarships, even though their families experienced financial hardship. Among the comments from this group were the following:

I don't really believe in White Privilege because it is not a person's fault if they are White. If you live in a country that is predominantly White, then that is how it is.

I cannot agree when applying for a job or applying to a university or post secondary institution... I more or less feels like White people are being discriminated.

I do agree that White Privilege is still an issue, but I just don't see it as a huge issue like it is portrayed by Jensen. I think we have made significant progress, and that is nothing to be scoffed at.

One particular student seemed to acknowledge the "privilege" but argued that how this privilege would materialize depends on the location where the individual resides. This student's point was that if an individual lives in an area where there is a large minority population, the individual who gets the privilege in that location will certainly be a non-White, while the White will not experience privilege. To support this logic, the student said,

I feel like it also matters where these professors [the author of the article] are teaching. I feel like location is a big part of whether White Privilege exists. In a downtown urban city like Philadelphia, White privilege wouldn't be as high because there is a huge mix of races and the majority would be African Americans and other minorities in urban areas.

Similarly another student said,

Being White, I do not feel that I am given many extra privileges in life... I have had encounters before where I was in a store and the security guard kept a close watch on the Black individuals in the store. I could have easily walked out without paying for something if I was that type of person. In my eyes, that makes the security guard a racist, not that I am privileged due to the color of my skin.

Rather than recognizing the privilege this student benefited from this particular situation, the student blamed the security guard for being racist. The student failed to understand that because of his/her skin color, the security guard did not feel it

was necessary to keep an eye on him/her. Most of the students in the Denial Group accused certain individuals in certain situations for discrimination and racism faced by non-Whites rather than acknowledge the White Privilege from which they benefitted.

Conclusion

From the very inception, the United States has always been a multicultural nation. However, it has become more so with rapid demographic shifts. The so-called homogeneous communities are slowly becoming heterogeneous communities. Educational institutions must also keep up with the changes by addressing issues related to the community of diverse populations. One of the issues, to which educational institutions need to expose the young generations is the concept of White Privilege, and how it has and continues to impact their lives.

Perceptions about White Privilege among my students suggest that they are willing to discuss and even accept this concept. This includes the students who are in the Denial Group. Students in this group challenged only five of the 26 White Privilege items from Peggy McIntosh's

article. The lack of reactions or comments about the remaining 21 items from the list indicate that, deep inside, these students acknowledge them to be true.

We are all aware that if one does not have any prior knowledge about a particular topic, it is a common human tendency for one to remain silent. These students were no exception to this rule. Students' silence on the 20 or more items stems from their lack of knowledge on the concept of White Privilege.

Many students expressed their appreciation at the end of the semester for being introduced to the topic of White Privilege. Not a single student over the years ever made any negative comments about this topic in the formal "faculty evaluations." Many, in fact, expressed a wish that their high school teachers would have exposed them to the concept of White Privilege.

Pre-service teachers' perceptions on White Privilege imply the importance of addressing this topic by all teacher educators within their education programs. In addition to exposing pre-service teachers to the concept of White Privilege, it is also important to discuss the methodologies for teaching this concept. Pre-service teachers can use these methodologies with their fu-

ture students to teach the concept of White Privilege in an age-appropriate manner.

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