

White Pre-Service Teachers and “De-privileged Spaces”

By Jennifer Adair

In their classic article, “Culture as Disability,” McDermott and Varenne (1995) retell the fable of the seeing man who, upon finding himself in the “country of the blind” thought he could easily rule it. His efforts were fruitless because he could not make sense of their world. Daily life was set up for the blind to be successful. The seeing man was shocked by the idea that what was considered a privilege (his eyes) in one setting could be his handicap in another. Although McDermott and Varenne used this story to illustrate how culturally determined the notions of “able” and “disabled” are, I believe the seeing man’s arrogance has further application to how teachers and teacher educators can approach White privilege.

The story I tell is my own version of the seeing man (with a gender and race twist). It is about a small group of White pre-service teachers in a mostly Latina(o) teacher education cohort as they began their first semester in the Multicultural Teacher Training (MTT)¹ program at a large public university in the southwest. It is about how Whiteness can become both a handicap and an opportunity instead of a privilege. This process, which I refer to as “de-privileging Whiteness,” pushes White pre-service teachers to re-examine their own perspectives as culturally constructed (Geertz, 1973) and their version of the world as just that, a version.

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The White pre-service teachers I concentrate on were given a reason to see themselves as “White” and to see their own version of the world as one of many. In their early MTT classes, they were misled and ill

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prepared by their own cultural understanding of education, especially when it failed to give them the tools to participate successfully in class. They often made mistakes, putting their “foot in their mouth” so to speak. At the same time, the Latina(o) students were empowered to speak their mind and disagree with the White students, something that is less common in other education classes at the same campus and at other universities in the U.S. (Montecinos, 2004). How this de-privileged space was manifested in the MTT classroom is the focus of this article.

Whiteness and Teacher Preparation

Critical Race theorists and Whiteness Scholars (Delgado, 1997; Ladson-Billings, 2001; Pollack, 2004; Sleeter, 2003; Sleeter & McClaren, 1995; Tatum, 1999; Thompson, 2003) have been pushing teacher educators to look closely at the reproduction of White privilege, which the often quoted Peggy Macintosh (1989) defines as “an invisible package of unearned assets which I can count on cashing in each day, but about which I was meant to remain oblivious” (Maher & Tetreault, 1997; McIntyre 1997; Sleeter, 2001) These sets of privileges are passed from generation to generation, through the family, classrooms and other institutions in society like banks, schools, and the media. (Helms, 1990; King, 1991; Lipsitz, 1998) In her definitive article, *Whiteness as Property*, Cheryl Harris (1993) said “The fundamental precept of Whiteness—the core of its value—is its exclusivity” (p. 1789). In other words, Whiteness as an identity (and a marker of power) is linked to its insistence on being the only version of right, good, and worthy, to the exclusion of other versions of being.

Still, we know very little about the contexts that push White teacher education students to see themselves as racialized, cultural beings. Usually, as Ladson-Billings (2004) recently said, “Most members of the dominant society rarely acknowledge themselves as cultural beings. They have no reason to.” Some argue there is an urgent need to overturn “the normalcy and neutrality of White privilege” (Villenas & Deyhle, 1999) but we have few examples of how this can happen. (See Hytten & Warren, 2003; Marx & Pennington, 2003) If we know that 85% of teachers are White (NCEI, 2005) and students of color are growing at 43%, even 57% in the west, then it seems problematic to graduate White teachers who haven’t thought deeply and critically about the relativism of their own perspective. We need to learn more about the contexts and spaces that can place White students in a situation where Whiteness is not a privilege and know better what happens in such a context.

Contextualization of Whiteness

Being “White,” of course, is a historical idea, best traced in the U.S. to Virginia slave holders in the 17th century who wanted to distinguish slaves from poor Whites to ensure resources and privilege were allotted to “White” or “non-slave” people. Poor Whites, in order to be complicit in the southern economic system that

relied on slavery, were designated as a group separate from slaves. As Harris points out, “‘White’ racial identity marked who was ‘free’ or, at minimum, not a slave. The ideological and rhetorical move from ‘slave’ and ‘free’ to ‘Black’ and ‘White’ as polar constructs marked an important step in the social construction of race” (p. 1718).

Within the critical and socio-historical perspective in this article, two aspects of “White” and “Whiteness” are used. First, “White” is an official racial classification used within the university system in which this research was conducted. When students are identified in this paper as “White” it is because they self-selected the classification, out of the choices offered by the university on their application materials. They identified more with a classification of White than with non-White Hispanic, Asian American, American Indian/Native Alaskan, African-American, International, or other. Second, the terms “White” and “Whiteness” are conceptualized as a socially constructed version of reality that places White, middle class values as normal or common sense. The White students I worked with in the MTT program described themselves as different from their peers in the class and spoke numerous times about being White once the semester began (Adair, 2004).

From my perspective as a White teacher and a teacher educator, I wanted to know how White pre-service teachers did in multicultural teacher education contexts they choose themselves. At the time I began this research I had just left an administrative position working to recruit underrepresented students into the teaching field. I felt (and still do feel) that recruiting teachers of color, bilingual teachers, and teachers from a variety of communities and social classes is important for teaching as a profession and for the changing demographic of students in the U.S. At the same time, I wondered about White students who wanted to teach in multicultural communities but lacked multicultural experience or any idea of what being a minority in the U.S. feels like. I was introduced to the MTT program by a colleague and began looking at the program demographics. And soon, I began interviewing some of the White students who were about to start the program.

I learned early on that each of the White students came to the cohort with differing levels of cultural sensitivity and open-mindedness. Some of them had a few friends in high school who were Latina or African-American. All of them had volunteered in an urban or “disadvantaged” school and each talked about helping lots of different children. Most of them knew that in the southwest, Spanish is quickly outpacing English as the native language of children in public school. One of the White students was bilingual. Another married into a Latino family where Spanish was spoken regularly at home. When we first met, some students wanted to talk about race and described issues at their high schools. Others insisted that they were color-blind and saw “everyone for who they were.” Some had traveled to Mexico and Europe and others had never been out of their home city.

Despite their individual differences and backgrounds, their responses to the MTT learning context were surprisingly uniform. My surprise alerted me to my own Whiteness issues because I had been looking at the White students as indi-

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viduals and had assumed that their reactions to the MTT cohort, and being in the minority, would be individual and depend on their experience and background. Instead, I found that the White students were surprised by the same things. They looked dumbfounded at the same types of questions. They changed their answers and comments as if in sync. It was as if these students were drawing on the same assumptions about participating in class and how valued their ideas would be and all simultaneously (and quite quickly) found those assumptions to be faulty.

Once their operating assumptions failed and they realized they didn't necessarily know how to behave, they turned to the students of color in their cohort for new tools and directions in how to appropriately think and talk about multiculturalism, bilingualism, and teaching diverse sets of children. The process of having assumptions, watching them fail, and having to access peers and colleagues of different cultural and linguistic backgrounds to be successful is the basis for de-privileging Whiteness. Our ability to incorporate such a deprivileging process into teacher education contexts could significantly change how prepared White teachers are to enter communities and cultures different from their own.

Ethnography in Process

This article is based on an ethnographic case study of White pre-service teachers within the MTT program—one that attracts the highest percentage of Latina(o) students and smallest number of White students at a university in the southwest U.S. Initially, I assumed that I could follow each of the pre-service White students and look at what in their own backgrounds had prepared them to be in the cohort. I didn't know any of the students before the semester began and because I was not their teacher, my encounters with them were primarily as a researcher (although I ended up with two of the students in one of my classes later on).

I met with six of the eight White students before the semester began and asked them about joining the cohort and about what in their lives had prepared them for such a multicultural experience. I was first trained as a cultural anthropologist and approached the research with a socio-cultural lens, seeing the White students as individuals in a cultural context. But when the first semester began and the White students were all reacting to the MTT context in more or less the same way, I was stunned and had to redesign my research questions to first document how they were struggling and then try and explain why.

To make sense of what was happening and why the White students were struggling to participate in the cohort, I gathered data through individual and group interviews, participant-observation, video-taped class session, project presentations, and entrance applications. Besides the initial pre-semester interviews I did with six of the eight White students in the cohort, I also was given access to the entrance essays for everyone in the cohort. Once the semester began, I began looking not only at the White students but the entire cohort operating in a classroom setting. I videotaped

and analyzed all of class sessions from the most interactive class in their schedule: “Diversity and Education.” I made notes on every class discussion, writing down when White students spoke and how the class reacted, whether it was with seconds of silence or changing the subject or a follow-up question or supportive looks and/or comments. I noted whether the teacher intervened or not when there was silence. I then went back to video-taped class discussions and tracked how the Latina and Latino student comments were responded to by the cohort. And I used the videos and notes to track any changes in participation by the White students over the semester.

Because I was present at each class, I used breaks and group work time, to continue conversations and ask follow-up questions like “Your comment about poor students failing tests was interesting to me—what did you mean?” or “When you talked about being pulled out to go to bilingual classes, it seemed like you didn’t like it at all. What was that like?” In addition to videotaping class time and having individual interviews with the White students, I also conducted focus group interviews with all of the students in the cohort to get a sense of what they thought about being in the cohort. And I used them to check the White students’ accounts and perspectives about classroom discussions. These students told me that the MTT was different from their other classes at the university. More often than not, the students of color, mostly Latina(o) students, told me that they were grateful—for many of them it was the first time at the university they had felt comfortable talking in class and it was the first time they had had a native Spanish speaker for a professor.

Towards the end of the semester, I compared individual transcripts from the White students’ interviews with what was happening in class. Not only had their answers to simple questions changed from before the semester began, they way they spoke in class had shifted dramatically as well. These changes were in direct connection to the cultural context supported by Latina(o) students and the teacher, herself a bilingual, doctoral student with years of experience as a bilingual elementary education teacher.

It is true, of course, that all of the students experienced some changes and vocalized some shifts in perspective by being in the cohort. But here, I am interested in detailing how the White students collectively shared a deprivileging process by being part of the MTT cohort. Their experiences were not identical but they shared a common reaction that was different from their Latina(o), Asian, and Asian-American, bilingual classmates.

Because this article focuses on the MTT learning context as experienced by the White students of the MTT program, I would like to briefly introduce those students who repeatedly come up in the stories and examples used here. All of the MTT students that I interviewed, except one, remained close to my research, offering feedback and clarifying information throughout the semester. These five students, in particular, became close informants and often confided in me about their concerns, frustration, joy, and fatigue.

Claire was born and raised among five brothers and sisters in a local suburb.

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She is religious and said this “plays a major role” in how she sees the world. From the beginning, she was the most open about race. She attempted to talk about it more than anyone else but she also voiced more stereotypes and “politically incorrect” comments than the other informants.

Alisha was raised in the city. She spoke Spanish fluently, having just returned from a semester abroad in Mexico. She often told me that she was a minority in Mexico and enjoyed the experience. Sometimes the Latina(o) students called her “an exception”—that they couldn’t call her White because she spoke Spanish so well. Others disagreed and said that she still said things that were “weird.” Even as a Spanish speaker, she reacted more similarly to the White students than other bilingual students in the class.

Nancy grew up in the suburbs, is one of two children and was actively involved with her Christian youth group brother. She was the quietest of my informants and politely talked to most students in the class. She kept the same seat throughout the semester. She often told me that she wanted to help students have the type of education she did.

Aaron was one of four males in the MTT cohort I studied. And he considered it his priority to have a solid career to provide for his family. He was outgoing and quickly made friends in the class, especially with the other “guys.”

Tracy grew up in a predominantly White suburb on the East Coast. She was a financial consultant at a Fortune 500 company, but left that profession to become a teacher. Her parents were reluctantly supportive, and she said there were tensions in her family because of her choice to move to the Southwest for the MTT program.

The instructor of the class, Inez, was a mother of two young children and former bilingual teacher. She was born in the U.S., but her parents insisted that she learn Spanish and stay close to her Mexican heritage. She was deliberate in her pedagogy, which centered on classroom discussion primarily led by the students. She encouraged (by her own example) stories and personal experiences.

Since we are about to take a close look at what a “de-privileged space” looks like, I think it is important to point out something about the MTT classroom. This classroom was extraordinary and temporary. The White students were likely privileged in most of their societal interactions—that is why this context is so meaningful. They had assumed their identity as a person and as a teacher was stable and natural. Because of White privilege they enjoyed the illusion that Whiteness was the natural way of being.

The MTT classroom cracked open this privilege to reveal the existence of Whiteness generally and its limitations in preparing them to be good teachers specifically. This situation was voluntary (each student chose the cohort) and temporary (the MTT classroom was only in operation a few hours a week) but still produced some changes. It is also important to add that the MTT context was not hostile and most of the White students enjoyed class and interacted positively with their peers.

They had get-togethers, went to happy hours together, and worked together on class projects. Week after week the White students sat intermingled with their peers. The White students even told me that they felt like they were part of a smaller group within education because when they were in their mainstream classes in the College of Education they would find their MTT classmates and “stick together.” They told me that often they couldn’t believe some of the things the “other students” (non-MTT students) would say about immigrants or Spanish or multicultural education.

In order to describe what such a space looks like and acts like, I focus here on two main characteristics necessary to de-privileging Whiteness in a learning context: the re-organization of cultural capital and the re-distribution of power.

The First Day of Class:A Spanish Lesson

Inez, the Diversity and Education instructor, asked everyone to take out a piece of paper and to pay attention as she began class. She began the lesson in Spanish, without English assistance. The White students laughed nervously. The lesson did not end in five minutes as many members of the class suspected it would. It continued with more Spanish vocabulary words and instruction. Since over half the class spoke Spanish, they were able to follow the instructions. The White students began to shift in their chairs and look around in disbelief. After about fifteen to twenty minutes, the instructor told everyone that there would be a test on the information. She then administered the test and scolded those who were not writing down the words. A few of the non-White students, who did not speak Spanish, looked downward. The instructor continued asking questions and reprimanded the students who did not have answers on their paper.

After the instructor asked the test questions, she led the class in correcting the tests. She called on White students to help answer, only to have them look at her and say they did not understand. Then she asked for volunteers to give the correct answers. Several seconds passed before a student raised her hand to volunteer the answer. As the correction process continued, more Spanish-speaking students volunteered answers and were consequently praised by the instructor. Occasionally the instructor stopped to reprimand another non-Spanish speaking student, with phrases like “Esta estudiante no entiende nada. Es mal estudiante.”²

The reactions of the White students were physically similar. Some giggled and others sunk in their chairs. Their faces turned red. They shrugged to no one in particular, and most, at one time or another, sat back in their chairs and folded their arms. Even the two Spanish-speaking White students had the same body reactions as the other White students, even though they understood the instructions and wrote down the correct answers.

After the lesson was done, Inez led the class in a discussion. It was obvious that Inez was trying to convey a sense of empathy for non-Native English speakers in an English-Only classroom and the White students seemed to understand this once

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Inez asked the question, “How did you react when I began speaking only in Spanish?” The White students were the first to comment. Alisha explained that because she spoke Spanish and knew that some people did not, she “felt weird.” Nancy said she kept thinking about students in traditional English-only classrooms.

The conversation continued with White students dominating the conversation. A few Latina students spoke about feeling stupid because they did not speak Spanish, though they thought they should. Then Tracy admitted that she felt left out and, since she didn’t know Spanish, she tuned out the instructor. Claire said she didn’t understand anything except for “zero” which was what the instructor said she received on her test. She then related through tears, “The only part that I understood was when you said that because I got a zero I wasn’t smart. I’ve never been told that before in my life.” She said that she had intended to teach English Language Learners (ELL) students by using pictures but “even with the pictures [used in the instructor’s lesson], I couldn’t get it.”

A few weeks later, I talked to four of the White students about the lesson. Claire said she was shocked and upset afterwards but was “over it.” Tracy said that it reminded her of a time in college when she had received a paper back with a drop card. She told us that the teacher was giving her a big hint that she didn’t have the right skills for the class and that she should “drop out.” The Spanish lesson made her remember what she felt like then,

Tracy: I kinda got the flashback of Oh My God! This is my drop card. I got to get out of here, I don’t know Spanish. [*Lots of laughing and nodding by rest of group*] This is her telling me.

Claire: This is in Spanish.

Tracy: I’m out. (*laughs*) I’m like, I should drop out of this program. I better switch over, you know. So, I did think, you know, maybe I’m not going to be successful at this. Maybe this is a sign that you know . . .

Judging from the reactions of the whole cohort, the Spanish lesson was shocking and uncomfortable. No one had expected this type of learning context to go on past five minutes, let alone almost an hour, especially on the first day of class. The White students, in particular, were caught off guard. Their feelings were understandable. Before the semester began I asked each of them if being in the minority (racially and linguistically) would be an issue and most replied as Alisha did, “It will take them about a week to get used to me . . .” I had the following exchange with Nancy in an interview a couple of weeks before the semester began.

Nancy: I’ve just grown up in America. Been taught by, you know, American teachers. So, I don’t have the experience of coming and not knowing the language. So, being in a class where I’m trying to learn to teach them . . . I just don’t necessarily understand firsthand that whole experience they are having . . . I’m not like really worried about any of my classes. I think they’re just going to help me understand what I’m doing more.

Interviewer: Do you think there will be any times where you might be uncomfortable? Do you anticipate that?

Nancy: Um . . (laughs)

Interviewer: You haven't . . .

Nancy: I don't . . . well I mean I haven't really thought about that. So I mean there may be a time if it happened, I wouldn't be upset about it but I mean I haven't really thought about anticipating being uncomfortable in my classes.

Re-organization of Cultural Capital

Their belief that they would fit in easily in the cohort and that any tension would be remedied by the other students "getting to know them" turned out to be wrong. They, like most of us, don't know the full weight and power of cultural capital until we are positioned as having less of it than someone else. Bourdieu (1986) describes cultural capital as forms of knowledge, tools, or tastes which are passed along generation to generation through social experiences in the home through parents and their social/cultural/linguistic/class relationships. The attitudes and knowledge passed down from parent to child affect what feels comfortable to a child and what doesn't, especially, Bourdieu argues, when it comes to schooling. The Spanish lesson foreshadowed the value or capital of certain cultural qualities, namely Spanish competency and/or bilingual knowledge. Later lessons and classroom conversations pushed the White students to discard certain types of comments and modify others. These modifications were tricky though and there were a lot of "mistakes."

During a preliminary discussion in class about the merits of bilingual education, the class began discussing the morality of using native languages to teach children in school and their discomfort with making policies that limit civic participation to only English speakers. At first the native Spanish speakers spoke as did some of the international students. Sean, a funny provocative student, said "My Grandma doesn't speak [English] but I don't think she shouldn't vote just because she doesn't speak English . . . I think she doesn't speak English because she gets teased." Many students nodded and agreed.

Michelle then argued that we should all speak Spanish or Navajo or another Native American language. At this point many students in the class agreed, repeating, "Yeah, an Indian language." Then for the first time in the conversation, the White students spoke up. Sarah commented "You don't go to school to learn the capital of New Guinea, that's trivia . . . you go to learn, become a productive member of society, not be on welfare . . . Being bi-lingual gets you better jobs, pays you more." Following Sarah's lead, Claire commented that she did not understand why it was such a big deal in the U.S., because in Europe everyone knew more than one language and they went to school and were taught in many different languages. She noted, "In the business world, they are better because they know a lot more than people who are monolingual. They are more marketable."

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After Claire’s comment about marketability, there was silence. Finally Inez asked a question about how teachers can address multilingual issues in their own classrooms. For the rest of the class discussion, the White students remained quiet, except for one who echoed several of the other students’ comments about the importance of helping children learn both languages. Most importantly, the White students never again brought up marketability or economics when discussing bilingual education in class.

To Bourdieu, this type of stumbling and struggle is to be expected because cultural capital is best learned from parent to child. Developing or collecting cultural capital will never be as successful (or efficient) as being “born with it.” They were trying and experimenting to participate in a way that was appropriate for the class and comfortable to them and had not seen anything wrong with justifying bilingual education with economics whereas many of the other students in the class were offended by the idea that bilingual education was anything but a moral issue. Consequently, when I asked the White students a couple of weeks later why the MTT program was important to them and what they had learned about bilingual education, economics was nowhere to be found in their answers. They all told me they wanted to teach all children and be ready (unlike “the White students in the regular programs”) to help all children learn.

The Cabo San Lucas Story

After the first day of class, Claire, Mario (native Spanish speaker), and I discussed the Spanish lesson and what they thought about it. Claire reiterated her own embarrassment and then talked about how bad she now felt for kids who didn’t understand English in the classroom. Then she related a conversation she had had recently with a friend that seemed to contrast the empathy she expressed in class. She said, “My friend asked me, ‘shouldn’t people who come from Mexico learn English?’ If I went to France, I would have to learn French. And I didn’t have an answer for it.” Mario nodded and didn’t say anything at first. This surprised me since we had just come from a context where Mario’s perspective had been greatly elevated. I thought this would transfer quickly to his ability and confidence to tell Claire what he thought of her commentary on learning English. Instead, he told Claire about his recent vacation in Cabo San Lucas, Mexico, and how glad he was that he knew both languages and could communicate with lots of people.

Throughout the course of the semester, I often thought about this conversation. I was puzzled as to why Mario, after such an empowering (what I saw as empowering) situation in class, did not tell Claire that she wasn’t being fair or that she was racist or that she was thinking like someone who had never experienced being in the linguistic minority. Instead, Mario seemed as though he was merely changing the subject. This puzzled me, but the more I thought about it, the more his choice of stories seemed telling. He had recounted a trip he had recently taken in which his bilingualism had been advantageous. And Claire had responded with a nod

and something to the effect of “I see how that would be good to know both there.” Mario’s response made more sense as the semester continued.

Re-distribution of Power Using Stories

The majority of the class had had personal experience with racism and/or linguistic violence by way of people (teachers, neighbors, peers, employers, educational counselors, etc.) or institutions (banks, schools, health care and financial aid offices), and the class centered on educational disparities and social justice. Many students over the course of the semester shared their own experiences about being pulled from class to go to a classroom that focused on teaching English as a second language (ESL). Other students made comments about educational policy and social justice issues. For example in a presentation about instructional programs for immigrant children, Maria recounted, “I remember when I was in high school. I had Spanish science books to use but now in [city name] where I intern, they have them but only for reference.” She expressed frustration about the lack of Spanish textbooks for students to use, worried that while immigrant children learned English, they lost their knowledge in other subjects.

The Spanish lesson and the Cabo San Lucas story got me thinking about when and where White privilege begins to break down. The presence of stories and storytelling has been a powerful tool to expose racism throughout America’s history. Its use to confront an arguably insensitive comment, as in the case of Claire and Mario, was especially telling. White privilege begins to break down when confronted with experience and with stories. It is hard to ignore experience. Audrey Thompson, a critical race theorist, explained the importance of stories, humor, and talking about difference saying that “Talk about color and difference is an act of resistance to White hegemony.” In fact, many critical race and feminist theorists have pushed for the allowance of and attention to the stories of past and present oppression (See as examples Anzaldúa & Moraga 1981; Mohanty, 1998.) But storytelling is not just about the stories but who gets to tell which stories.

One day, Claire came to me frustrated, ready to blow off some steam. She had been confronted by a member of the group (which was quite unusual). In the beginning of the semester when the topic of “minority” and “language rights” would come up, Claire would talk about traveling through Europe and what she learned there about language and cultural diversity. Although she told me they were sincere attempts to relate to the conversation in class, her experiences were often followed by silence or a change of subject. This particular day, she looked at me frustrated and said, “They told me to stop talking about Europe.” Although it was actually one class member saying this to her, she seemed to believe that more of her classmates were behind the scolding. She was upset by this but stopped bringing it up in class.

About the same time as Claire was trying to talk about Europe in class, some of the other White students were trying to participate in conversations about educational

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equity. One class period, Inez began the class with a documentary film about the impact of Proposition 227 in Los Angeles where schools were being forced to turn away or report undocumented children and families. Alisha was the first to speak, pointing out that the film seemed “anti-blond.” She complained that “everyone in the film who cared about the immigrant students were the non-White people. I felt very offended by that.” No one responded and Inez finally asked the class what they thought about her comment. One other White student said, “Maybe they could have had another person who was White that didn’t argue to give more balance.” Again there was silence.

Inez, the teacher, refocused the class. She explained how it felt to be a native Spanish speaker and how getting pulled out of school and feeling excluded in the school was difficult for her. Lourdes cited one of the boys in the film who said, “I know people don’t want me here.” Lourdes then added, “If I feel that people don’t want me here, imagine what that would be like for a kid. He shouldn’t have to feel like that.” Students began adding their own experiences and others still argued that terms like illegal alien hurt immigrant children. Just as Mario did with Claire, the Latina(o) students and Inez offered personal examples to reject comments they did not agree with. Instead of telling Alisha that that she was missing the point, they offered personal experiences, like *testimonios* (Sommer, 1988).

A few weeks after the Proposition 227 conversation and the merits of bilingual education discussion, there was another class discussion about acquiring new languages. In this conversation, there is a marked difference in who is participating and how. Juana was the first to comment:

Juana: People always ask me and when I was in school too they would ask me what language do I think in? And sometimes I can’t figure it out—depends on the situation.

Inez: Yeah for me sometimes I think in one and sometimes the other depending on the situation.

Inez then begins talking about the idea that there is a critical period for learning languages. Amy then responds:

Amy: So it is just an idea? It hasn’t been proven?

Inez: Yeah but people use it as a reason.

Amy: What do you think about that? My mom always says she is too old—she can’t learn English and it’s like she is just giving up.

Amy’s story is typical of many conversations in class, especially as the White students talked less in class. In fact in this conversation, the White students were virtually silent. Even though the class talked about these issues for over 45 minutes, the only time one of the White students spoke was towards the end when Tracy asked, “Are you talking about learning social language or academic language too?”

In the MTT, stories acted as evidence. They became “rich data” (Villenas &

Deyhle, 1999) for the White students to think about and wrestle with in their own lives. Instead of arguing or confronting the White students, their classmates told lots of personal stories and responded heavily and supportively when told by students of color in the class. Ladson-Billings (1998) points out that stories told by people of color, especially about experiences with institutional or structural racism, provide context to White beliefs of an objective society. In the MTT these types of stories re-distributed power by devaluing certain assumptions about what it means to teach diverse children and instead, valuing stories of experienced racism and struggles with language. Power was distributed through the telling of stories in and outside of class and the White students eventually began to respect this new power structure and moved from telling stories to quoting books and empathizing with the stories of their classmates.

This finding is in line with other studies and writing about ensuring White pre-service teachers learn from their peers, especially those from the same community of the students in their classes (see Ernst-Slavit & Wenger, 2006; Hernandez-Sheets, 2004; Nieto, 1999.) Anthropology-based teacher education programs like Funds of Knowledge (Gonzalez et. al, 2005) and Math in a Cultural Context or MCC (Lipka et. al, 2005) also help teachers gain curriculum knowledge and understanding from the communities in which they teach.

In talking specifically about connecting the minority students' and teachers' experiences to White students' ideas about teaching practice, Lisa Delpit (1995) argues that repositioning minority pre-service teachers as experts is important for all students in teacher preparation courses. She writes,

So it is vitally important that the connections be examined, that the education professor highlight the narratives of the student of color and ask them to serve as resource for bringing to the fore differences in worldview, learning style, social organization, language and so forth . . . when a student of color is acknowledged as a source of valuable information, the group becomes dependant on his/her contributions. This can help to dispel any notions by students (and faculty) about minority incompetence. (p. 126)

I found, as Delpit argues, that as White students questioned their own understanding of education, they made room for more perspectives and became more willing to listen to their colleagues of color not because they felt like they should but because they needed to. To be successful in the classroom, the White students had to listen and take seriously the experiences and suggestions of their Latina(o) peers. It seemed to me that for all of the MTT students, this was a new experience.

What They Learned: MTT Final Presentations

At the end of the semester, each student had to give a presentation to the class on a topic related to bilingual education or educational equity. While the presentations were on a myriad of different topics dealing with diversity, education, multilingual-

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ism and equity, the White students remained loyal to the new cultural rules they had learned about personal experience and what rationale and assumptions are useable. Many of the students offered personal experiences as part of their presentations. While White students used experience to rationalize their choice of topics, the bilingual and non-White students used personal experience in a more substantial way—often as evidence on the subject. They used their own experiences as a main source of research information in their presentations and/or as evidence in their arguments.

For example, Carmen talked about the Dream Act, a bill allowing immigrant students from Mexico to attend college without legal immigration documentation and at the “in-state” cost of tuition instead of the international cost. She said, “Do you know any friends that want to come [to college] but can’t because they do not have papers?” To this, someone in the class responded out loud, “Yeah.” She continued, “I have some too and that really makes me mad.” Her presentation focused on some friends who were working on the Dream Act campaign and about how hard it was for immigrants to obtain the correct legal documentation or “papers.” She offered her own opinions about two of her elected officials who both opposed to the bill. She stated, “You know it’s not like they’re [undocumented immigrants] going to come right to college so I don’t know what their problem is. [Students in the class laugh.] Children are our future supposedly so why don’t we want them to have their dreams?”

Other bilingual students followed the pattern of using personal experience instead of book knowledge in their presentations. Akemi, a student from Japan, spoke about TEOSL by re-telling how she learned about Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) and why she was in the United States to learn to teach English. To explain how instructional programs were used to help ELL students, Lily stated, “I remember when I was in high school. I had Spanish science books but in Scottsdale, they have them but they are only used for clarification.”

Jane, a student from Taiwan, related a personal experience with having to learn English before entering college classes. She began her presentation reading from a written script. When she spoke personally and used her own experience as an argument for her perspective, she looked out at the class. At the end of her presentation, she argued, “the U.S. is supposed to be an example of democracy to world but they overlook inequalities.” Sarah used her own experiences and those of four friends she interviewed as her evidence regarding the effectiveness of bi-lingual education. Miguel talked about his experiences with and without ESL assistance in high school and used interviews as evidence as Sarah did. He said,

I didn’t think BLE/ESL worked but I have seen the light. [Most of the students laughed at this statement.] I realized something has been taken from me by doing these interviews [in his research for the presentation]. This is hard because language and culture are very important to me.

Legitimate or “Expert” Knowledge

The students of color, in particular the Latina(o) Spanish speaking students in the class became experts—their knowledge being legitimate. This knowledge was not just from books or learned in class, but was derived from their daily experiences as a person of color. As Michael Apple (2004) explains, legitimate knowledge represents “particular views of normality and deviance . . . of what ‘good people act like’” p. 61). The combination of a strong, skilled teacher, outnumbered White students, and Latina(o) and Asian students empowered to use stories as expert knowledge combined to create a de-privileged space.

This space was small in relation to a society structured by a political ideology that privileges Whiteness. But something happened in the MTT, even if temporarily in a classroom context. White students changed their behavior and learned to follow different experts than society generally assigns to them. This de-privileged space re-organized cultural capital, re-distributed power, and re-defined expert or legitimate knowledge. All of these characteristics were made possible by a key component of Whiteness (like all cultural systems)—its ability to fail.

The Failure of Whiteness as a Cultural Logic

The White students in the MTT cohort were unprepared for a context in which their natural responses and their experiences would be less legitimate than others. The White students’ Whiteness was not so much the lack of Spanish skills or skin color but the misguided expectation that they would never be one whose experience was disregarded or the one who didn’t understand a simple lesson on vocabulary or the one who would have to change the way they talked to fit in. Again, most of the White students had predicted that they would probably be in the minority but they hadn’t anticipated what this would mean in terms of making mistakes in class or adopting different versions of appropriate behavior to be successful. It seemed that they had not really thought of themselves as White or as operating with a cultural understanding, let alone one that could fail so quickly and easily in class.

From the first day of class, Whiteness became noticeable, capable of having characteristics, making mistakes and being misleading. We saw in the Spanish lesson that the students had not expected such an experience. They anticipated some level of adjustment but figured the responsibility rested mostly with the other students who would need to “get used to them.” We also saw that their initial assumptions about the economic validity of bilingual education were problematic to the rest of the class and they rethought their comments. In essence they learned that if they wanted to avoid long uncomfortable silences after their comments in class, they had to rethink what they were saying. I am not convinced that the White students were deeply changed. I am not sure if there is a way to know this for sure. But in this case, their behavior changed and they at least had to consider the validity and the presence of other perspectives on education.

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The de-privileging space of the MTT challenged Whiteness, showing them that their success depended, at least to an extent, on their ability to listen and take into account different versions and perspectives about education and social issues. Their ability to read complex and subtle cues from their classmates about when to use personal experience and when to rely on those of the bilingual students and those who have experienced racism were valuable lessons and resulted, again, from a relatively small time in such a space. The presence of stories as evidence and perspective was something the White students couldn't argue with and after awhile, stopped competing with. At some point, there were some things Claire, Alisha, and the other White students (no matter how hard they tried or how defensive they got) couldn't understand or be an expert at. Making those things privileged (like experiencing racism or being pulled out of class for remedial English instruction) pushed the White students to rethink their identity and the limitations of their knowledge as teachers and as ordinary people.

The struggles detailed and analyzed here are not only for pre-service teachers or teacher educators. In a true Bakhtinian sense, these White pre-service teachers are representations of a society much larger than themselves. We are all participating in a system that keeps them leaving urban and poor districts. We have a large role to play in how prepared teachers are to be challenged, misunderstood, humbled, and embarrassed in their first years of teaching. And we have an obligation to students to prepare teachers who will consider what they and their parents have to say as equal to theirs. I believe that most White teachers want to do this but they don't know how. Colleges of education cannot teach something they don't do so this seems like a challenge for all of us—to put ourselves in cultural contexts that push us to adopt and accept many forms of legitimate knowledge.

Universities must insure that faculty of color are recruited and valued, who then feel free to challenge students as much as White teachers can. An important agenda is that of improving communication between local community needs and recruitment efforts. It must also include adjusting program entrance requirements for experienced teacher aides and staff from the communities struggling to retain teachers. These are all issues that require diverse sets of legitimate knowledge and the ability to listen and pay attention to ideas that may de-privilege our own. We need more studies that detail what “de-privileged spaces” look like and how they are created, particularly for the majority of teachers who are White.

Whiteness and the Seeing Man: An Ending we Can Learn from

The story of the seeing man trying to rule the country of the blind ends with an escape. The citizens of the country of the blind decide there is something very wrong with his eyes and set out to capture the seeing man and remove his sight. The seeing man runs to the mountains, and the story ends like this:

[to] lay quite still there, smiling as if he were content now merely to have escaped from the valley of the Blind, in which he had thought to be King. And the glow of the sunset passed, and the night came, and still he lay there, under the cold, clear stars.

The citizens of the country of the blind were wrong about the seeing man. It wasn't his eyes that were the problem. It was his arrogance. He could not accept the beauty of a landscape set up for the blind or a cultural system that valued blindness over sight. His inability to learn how to be successful in such a space was his ultimate downfall. Similarly, White pre-service teachers need to see the limitations of their Whiteness and also find the value and importance of others' perspectives so they can learn to be successful in classrooms in many different cultural contexts.

Some White teachers already do this very well and should be documented and encouraged. Meanwhile, we should be particularly worried about those who cannot. We should be just as worried as we would be about the math pre-service teacher who cannot explain simple fractions or the first grade pre-service teacher who doesn't know phonics. As teacher educators, we can help prepare White teachers to appreciate multiple landscapes and adapt to foreign cultural contexts to prevent their "escape." We can encourage them (and ourselves) to "not see" more effectively.

Notes

¹ The cohort program name has been altered. All students' names as well as the teacher's name have also been changed to protect anonymity.

² Translation: "This Student doesn't understand anything. She is a bad student."

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