

## Unlearning Colorblind Ideologies in Education Class

By Jung-ah Choi

Journalist Ellis Cose (1993) cogently writes, “Racial discussions tend to be conducted at one of two levels—either in shouts or in whispers. The shouters are generally so twisted by pain or ignorance that spectators tune them out. The whisperers are so afraid of the sting of truth that they avoid saying much of anything at all” (p. 9). This quote resonated with me. While teaching about racism and racial issues, I have often pondered: why is it so difficult to *talk*—not shout or whisper—about race and racial issues in academic settings? This question has been grappled with by a number of researchers and teacher educators (Goodman, 1998; Ladson-Billings, 1996; Nieto, 1998; Tatum, 1997, to name a few) who use Critical Race Theory (Ladson-Billings, 1997; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) or Critical White studies (Marx, 2003; Scheurich, 1993; see also Sheets, 2000) to challenge liberal discourses about racism, to interrogate the system of racial oppression, power, and privilege. Critical Race Theory and Critical White studies have been introduced as part of teacher preparation programs and have informed critical multicultural education by

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allowing prospective teachers to examine curriculum and pedagogy in relation to institutional racism. Critical multicultural education poses a paradigmatic challenge to liberal discourse on race, i.e., colorblind ideology. For example, critical multicultural education brings the significance of race to the fore in its analysis of social relations (King, 1991; Ladson-Billings, 1997; Lewis, 2001; Sleeter, 1996) whereas liberal discourses tend to disguise racial inequality by employing the rhetoric of equal opportunity and fair treatment. Critical educators, particularly Critical Race pedagogues, critique colorblind ideology as tantamount to racism because it serves to maintain racial inequality. King (1991), for example, refers to colorblindness as “dysconscious racism” since colorblind ideology sustains and justifies the culture of power (see also, Delpit, 1988). Colorblind ideology constitutes a new racism in the era of political correctness and free market individualism (Bonilla-Silva, 1997; Carr, 1997). Gordon (2005) writes, “Colorblindness is a bid for innocence, an attempt to escape our responsibility for our White privilege. By claiming innocence, we reconcile ourselves to racial irresponsibility” (p. 143).

Sociologists (Bonilla-Silva, 1997; Feagin, 1993; Frankenberg, 1993) also point out the pervasiveness of colorblind ideology in White people’s perspectives and attitudes. Bonilla-Silva’s book, *Racism without Racists*, contains an extensive exploration of the rhetorical devices of colorblindness, arguing that colorblindness is manifest in several ideological threads present in discursive spaces: abstract liberalism (“affirmative action is unfair to White people”); naturalization (segregation is natural); cultural racism (“Mexicans do not put much efforts into education”); and minimization of race (“racism is a thing of the past”). Tatum (1994) explains that such colorblind reactions as “I am not a racist,” “I am not comfortable talking about race,” and “I do not have stereotypes or prejudices” occur at the early stage of White racial development (p. 404). In this early stage, which Tatum (1994) calls the “contact stage,” Whites rarely describe themselves as a part of a racial group and pay little attention to other races (p. 404).

Educational researchers and teacher educators document instances in which discussions about race and racism have engendered opposition and resistance within White pre-service teachers (Case & Hemmings, 2005; Chavez, Chavez, & O’Donnell, 1998; Hytten & Warren, 2003; Solomon et al., 2005). Ladson-Billings (1994) describes her own encounters with the rhetoric of colorblindness:

My own experiences with White teachers, both pre-service and veteran, indicate that many are uncomfortable acknowledging any student differences and particularly racial differences. Thus some teachers make such statements as “I don’t really see color. I just see children.” Or “I don’t care if they were red, green, or polka dot. I just treat them all like children” (p. 31)

Teaching racial issues to advocates of colorblind ideology or to contact-stage Whites can be particularly challenging because exposure to issues of oppression, institutional racism, and power makes “color” visible and thus forces White students to face their White identity and White privilege (Cochran-Smith, 1995; Lawrence & Tatum, 1997; McIntyre, 1997; Tatum, 1994, 1997). Also, when their colorblind

ideology is challenged, White pre-service teachers often assume a defensive position (Roman, 1993; Goodman, 1998). The emergence of Critical White Studies addresses the fact that many White students lack interest in racial issues and calls for engagement in race discourse. Critical White Studies (e.g., McIntosh, 1998) embraces the White audience more directly by emphasizing the ideology of Whiteness, i.e., what it means to be White, and what it means to be a colorblind teacher in this society. Critical White Studies moves beyond the colorblind stance and helps White teachers to explore their racial identity by confronting the racialness of the White experience (Frankenberg, 1993).

My first encounter with colorblind rhetoric in education classes is an embarrassing yet transformative memory. Years ago, I, as an Asian female faculty member, taught an education class in a predominantly White institution. The class, which was required of all pre-service teachers, was designed to discuss racism and other forms of oppression in the context of education. We read an excerpt of *The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African American Children* (Ladson-Billings, 1994), one of the most widely read books in multicultural education. The book critiqued the “I don’t see color, I just see children” attitude and developed a theory of culturally relevant teaching. When I asked my students to express their initial reactions to Ladson-Billings’s contentions, one of the students remarked assertively, “Teachers should not stereotype race. Seeing color in children is like stereotyping.” Another similar comment followed: “Teachers shouldn’t give differential treatment based on race.” Immediately after this student’s comment, a majority of students in the classroom consented, either audibly or inaudibly. I was totally at a loss in finding a constructive response to this comment because their claims made perfect sense in their own way. The claim that teachers should not have stereotypes about certain races is completely valid, although, paradoxically, this claim is what Ladson-Billings critiques. In retrospect, I should have been more prepared, since this line of commentary recurs almost every time a discussion on race and teaching occurs. This experience engendered numerous questions and quandaries. The colorblind rhetoric expressed in the education classroom disturbed me in a way that I could not fully explain. What is it about colorblind rhetoric that garners such public acceptance? What should I have said in reaction to my students’ attitude towards colorblindness? What reading should I have assigned in order to debunk colorblind ideology? Should I debunk it at all? Where did they learn this value and why do they internalize it so deeply? Are colorblind attitudes always wrong? If not, in what context does colorblind ideology work? In order to solve my quests, I had to delve into colorblind ideology, and that exploration became the genesis of this article.

As an attempt to unpack the colorblind model that so many pre-service teachers endorse, I made the most of my own teaching experience as a teacher educator, reflecting analytically on classroom discussions and student reactions. Accurately speaking, the reason I was frustrated with colorblind attitudes was not because the students presented a different political stance than my own, but rather because my inability to answer student questions hindered me from accomplishing my pedagogical

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goal, which was to promote critical thinking skills by challenging their habits and preconceptions about race. What I found most vexing was that colorblind ideology seemed so well-intentioned that it was hard to fight against. Apparently, I was not alone: in scholarly journals, I located the stories of a number of teacher educators who struggled to problematize liberal discourse in their classrooms. Also, I collected first-hand interview data by talking with teacher educators (my colleagues) who have taught multicultural issues. These interviews were conducted in a dialogue format rather than as structured, formal interviews, and these dialogues occurred as the interviewed instructors and I casually talked about our dilemmas and quandaries. This study thus incorporates the spirit of the self-study method in the sense that it emerged from my own quandary and that my goal was to improve teacher education practices, including my own. The self-study has gained increasing legitimacy and popularity during the last ten years as a methodological stance in teacher education (Cochran-Smith, 1999; Zeichner, 1999; see also Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001). From my interviews and scholarly articles, I gleaned a multitude of information about the colorblind rhetoric that propels pre-service teachers' beliefs on education and race. In the following sections of this paper, I identify the ideological constructs of colorblind rhetoric.

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### **Ideological Underpinnings of Colorblindness**

According to the liberal discourse that has developed in the post-Jim Crow era, a good citizen is colorblind. Likewise, the prototype of a good teacher has been constructed around the ideal of colorblindness, and this ideal is manifest in comments such as, "I do not have stereotypes or prejudices," or "Everyone deserves an equal chance." This article contends that these colorblind ideologies work to disguise the racial privilege embedded in educational institutions. What norms underlie colorblind beliefs? And how does critical multicultural education respond to specific forms of colorblindness? I collected the classroom discourse by interviewing eight racially diverse teacher educators and analyzing their stories in a way that illuminates their philosophical and ideological grounds. As a result, I classified colorblind rhetoric into five ideological constructs: the apprenticeship model, the nationalistic/assimilationist stance, the deficit perspective, meritocratic belief, and the neoliberal/postmodernist framework. The following details these five constructs.

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#### **a. Apprenticeship Model of "Learning to Teach" as Colorblind Ideology**

Most pre-service teachers expect to learn teaching skills and discipline techniques in education classes (Holt-Reynolds, 1992; Joram & Gabriele, 1998; Kagan, 1992). All the teacher educators that I interviewed observed that pre-service teachers assume that teacher education involves learning instructional techniques. This depoliticization of the act of teaching is based on the idea that there is a set of neutral knowledge that all students need to know and that there is a single ideal pedagogy that can be applied to all students. Within this framework, which is called the "apprenticeship model" (Britzman, 1986), the role of teacher education

is minimized to the teaching of instructional strategies. The apprenticeship model, which has been a default mode of teacher education, involves learning to teach by doing and, in most cases, by imitating teachers. The apprenticeship model privileges accumulated knowledge over the learner, diminishing the cultural resources that the learner brings to the classroom. This assumption of teacher education justifies colorblind ideology.

Britzman (1986) critiques the apprenticeship model for its lack of intellectualism. My own teaching experience and the interviewed teacher educators' experiences demonstrated pre-service teachers' predilection toward practicality, devaluing intellectualism. The students generally display more eagerness to learn solutions to racism than to raise questions about institutional racism. In their research on how to engage Whiteness, Hytten and Warren (2003) point out that White pre-service teachers tend to grow impatient when instructors try to *just talk* about racial issues without proposing solutions. They characterize White students' interest in finding solutions to racism as a missionary-like zeal to make changes. The practical orientation toward multicultural education is captured in one student's comment in my education class: "This [information about multicultural education] will be good information if I teach inner-city kids, but I am not planning on teaching in the inner-city." Tellz and O'Malley's (1998) interaction with pre-service teachers captures the same attitude: "multicultural education was something to 'get through,' 'a waste of time' that failed to explore the real world of teaching" (p.169).

The expectations raised by apprenticeship-based teacher education hinder one's ability to see education as a potential agent for empowerment and social change (Giroux & McLaren, 1986; Sleeter, 1996). While the apprenticeship model presupposes that school is an assimilationist agency where young students learn knowledge and skills generated by experts and established social norms and standards, Critical Race pedagogues critique the very norms and standards in terms of their racialness. Under the apprenticeship framework, a teacher candidate only has to learn the teaching skills necessary to effectively transmit knowledge and skills. In contrast, critical multicultural education questions the asymmetrical power relations embedded in "norms," "standards," and "curriculum;" and forefronts the racialness of what appears to be neutral. Therefore, critical multicultural educators denounce the apprenticeship model for its colorblind nature. When race discourse is situated in the apprenticeship model, it is often structured in a way that emphasizes minority students' underachievement and presupposes that a teacher's role is to "help" minority students perform well on standardized tests. A discussion that presents tips for teaching minority children without examining the school's relationship to systemic inequality often relies upon the deficit model, which will be discussed later in this article.

The premise of critical multiculturalism is that the school institution plays a major role in perpetuating and reinforcing White dominance and White privilege. Lisa Delpit's (1988) seminal article, "Silenced Dialogue," provides insights into how school's hidden norms, such as interpersonal codes, operate under White cul-

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tural norms, linguistic expectations, and logic. According to Delpit, a person who learns to teach without conducting a serious critical assessment of these norms will inadvertently comply with this form of White dominance. Delpit urges educators to examine the “silenced dialogue” that exists within the school setting and to be aware of the historical, social, and political conditions in which school institutions favor a certain group of people. For example, the dominant discourse of professionalism is embedded with White ideology. Under normative discourse, “treating all students equally” is deemed professional and fair, and advocating for any particular group is construed as unprofessional or practicing favoritism (Brandon, 2003; Tarca, 2005). However, Critical Race pedagogues, like Ladson-Billings (1994), question this norm, arguing that treating all students in the same way and neglecting racial disparities ends up marginalizing racial minorities who have only limited access to resources. As the opening vignette shows, Ladson-Billings’ position was met with resistance in many teacher education classes. The teacher educators that I interviewed all confirmed that their students were uncomfortable with the concept of seeing color or making judgments based on race and that they questioned the validity of such approaches.

The apprenticeship model exalts field-based experience over the intellectual value of teacher education. In Joram and Gabriele’s (1998) research, they capture one student comment that reflects this attitude: “University courses have little to offer prospective teachers. I should be out in the field” (p.179). Similar comments recurred across all my interviewees. I have heard pre-service teachers say that they can’t wait to go out and teach in a real situation. These comments are steeped in the apprenticeship model’s behavioristic assumption that learning occurs through imitation and repetition (Britzman, 1986). Concurring with Britzman’s critique of the apprenticeship model, Johnston (1994) argues that the experience of teaching in the real classroom does not always become a *learning* experience; rather, it can sometimes be just an experience. In his critique of the apprenticeship model, Labaree (1996) argues that curriculum of education schools lacks academic rigor and thus occupies a lowly status in the academic hierarchy. He laments that teacher education curriculum is geared towards “doing” rather than “thinking” (see also Mandzuk, 1996), and towards applied discipline rather than pure discipline (Labaree, 1996). The apprenticeship model is consistent with the K-12 school norm where compliance and docility are valued over creative and critical thinking (for an extended discussion of this, see Mandzuk, 1996). The apprenticeship model positions the university—K-12 relationship as hierarchical, and this assumed hierarchy becomes a hidden curriculum of the teacher education curriculum, and in turn places the pre-service teachers and their students in a hierarchical relationship. Critical pedagogy’s egalitarian view, i.e., its belief that teachers and students are equal intellectuals who both have the agency of reflective thinking, problematizes this hierarchical assumption of the apprenticeship model.

**b. Nationalistic and Assimilationist View as Colorblind Ideology**

“Aren’t we all Americans, no matter what race?” This view is a classic example of colorblind rhetoric. The stance is well captured in my student response to video clips from *Color of Fear* (Lee, 1994) where people of color self-identified by used modifiers before “American” such as, “I am African-American” or, “I am Mexican-American.” My White students wondered why people of color cannot claim to be ‘just American’ and commented, “Once they are born here they have to say ‘I am an American.’” Another of my students said that she is so proud of being an American and that they (minorities) should feel proud too. Critical Race Theory proclaims that nationalistic ideology often marginalizes racial/ethnic minorities because nationalistic rhetoric in the United States is in sync with the logic of assimilationism, which insists that minorities should be mainstreamed into the majority’s way of life. Rosaldo (1993) notes that in a society where minority groups feel marginalized, nationalism is the disguise of cultural stripping, requiring all citizens to be raceless and disembodied. In the field of education, minority children’s alienation and disengagement in school support Rosaldo’s assertion. This logic of assimilationism is prevalent among college students. A Latino student cited in Lewis, Chelser, and Forman’s (2000) study said, “People tell me, ‘You’re American! Speak English, damn it!’” Arguably, these angry comments define speaking English as a critical condition of being American. This is reminiscent of the following comment from one of my own students: “If I go to Germany, I will have to learn to speak the German language and adopt a German life style. If they [immigrants] refuse to learn the American way and stick to their ethnic way, why did they come to America?”

While the formation of nationalistic and assimilationist logic constitutes a colorblind ideology, Critical Race Theory uses minority people’s counter-story telling to racialize the discourse of nationalism in the United States. Multicultural educator James Banks (1991) writes that textbooks are embedded with Eurocentric ideology, which “results in Anglo immigrants to the West being called ‘settlers’ rather than ‘immigrants’ ... calling the Americas the New World subtly denies the nearly forty thousand years that Native Americans have lived in this land” (p. 128). Lowen’s (1995) book, *Lies My Teacher Told Me*, documents how K-12 education textbooks depict people of European descent as heroes and founders of the nation and covertly degrade racial others as second-class citizens. A more fundamental problem lies in the fact that the accounts of minority cultures, lifestyles, and histories that are represented in K-12 textbooks are written by White people and from the perspective of White culture. This touristic manner of addressing minority culture, i.e., the “content integration” approach (Banks, 1991) or “conservative multiculturalism” (McLaren, 1995), has been criticized for its methodology because minorities are presented as the object of the gaze (voiceless) instead of the subject of the gaze (Haymes, 1996). bell hooks (1993) poignantly points out the problem of the commodification of culture in the US: “The commodification of Otherness has been so successful ... Within commodity culture, ethnicity becomes spicy, seasoning that

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can live up the dull dish that is mainstream White culture” (p. 21). The focus on “American” identity and nurturing “citizenship” overshadows race-based tensions and struggles and characterizes the “good citizen” as colorblind. In addition, K-12 textbooks represent immigrants as those who voluntarily come to United States, silencing discussions of global politics.

Pre-service teachers’ beliefs in colorblind nationalism are therefore socially constructed through their educational experiences. Patriotic ideology (love of our nation) and nationalistic sentiments (e.g., pride in the nation’s accomplishments) have been instilled throughout the educational system, and these attitudes are reflected in my students’ comments as, “I am so proud to be an American. Why don’t they feel proud?” Critical multiculturalism questions Euro-centric curricula and by replacing the illusion of national unity and harmony with the history of race-based struggles. Critical multicultural theorists believe that challenging nationalistic ideology will allow students to engage in a deeper analysis of nation and nationalism, the meaning of democracy in relation to racial inequality, and the conditions of a pluralistic society.

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### c. ‘Deficit’ Perspective as Colorblind Ideology

As research has documented, one of the common characteristics of many White pre-service teachers is a lack of interest in or a disengagement from racial discourse (Case & Hemmings, 2005; Solomon et al, 2005). However, the opposite is also true: some White pre-service teachers show empathy and passion for racial issues and have the desire to teach at an inner-city school. However, when further analyzed, their sense of responsibility is often based on the deficit belief or what Delgado (1996) calls “false empathy” (Cannella, 1998; Duncan, 2002; Gale & Densmore, 2000). When the topic of the achievement gap was posed to White pre-service teachers in my and the interviewees’ classes, the discussion was dominated by comments such as, “Blacks are mostly raised in low-income families with poor parenting” or “they [African Americans] do not value education and they are more vulnerable to peer influence.” Such student comments, which surfaced frequently, echoed the deficit paradigm. Similarly, Duncan (2002) describes at length how “pathologies thinking” is permeated in education classes, while such thinking is observed less in other disciplines. Bonilla-Silva (1997) identifies this way of thinking as cultural racism, referring to the framework of explaining low educational and occupational achievement as a cultural deficit. Very few of my pre-service teachers relate low achievement to oppressive racist structures that are embedded in school knowledge, hidden curriculum, and policy.

This cultural racism, like other manifestations of colorblind ideologies, preserves White privilege and absolves Whites of responsibility. The deficit model, as Cannella (1998) argues, enables pre-service teachers to judge the Other through the lens of White privilege. Although the deficit belief does not directly espouse colorblindness because teachers often profess, “I love kids and will try to be sensitive to inner-city kids’ needs,” or “I will not have stereotypes on students of color



and will care for them equally,” deficit perspective *is* colorblind because it fails to acknowledge the extent to which racism has permeated institutional and societal realities, and it thus fails to acknowledge teacher’s own ethnic/racial identities. As Banks (1991) notes, developing and clarifying White students’ own ethnic and cultural identities is the best way to develop more positive attitudes toward other racial, ethnic and cultural groups (see also Gay, 2002).

McIntyre (1997) uses the term “White Knight” to refer to many White students who “lacked a sense of urgency about the need to restructure educational institutions. [The participants] conceptualize the problem as being internal to their students. The solution then is to ‘save’ them” (p. 668). Without sufficient social awareness, all that these White teachers can do is to show pity and sympathy toward socially marginalized people or to espouse the “I am so lucky that I was born in middle class family” attitude. Also, as the other teacher educators that I interviewed shared with me, pre-service teachers tend to divert discussions of racism by focusing on environmental problems such as lack of school funding, limited access to resources, or dysfunctional family lives. Those who adopt the “deviant model” or the “benevolent helping model” (Sleeter, 1996) end up silencing the flaw inherent in the educational system and blaming environmental faults for underachievement. Within this framework, “education” often means “assimilating different cultures into White culture.” This stance on education has been critiqued for “normalizing” diverse students (e.g., Baker, 2002). Critical educators move beyond the deficit thinking by validating the cultures of minority students and utilizing them as a resource for learning. Such pedagogy, i.e., “culturally relevant teaching,” offers an oppositional framework to confront the deficit theory.

Colorblind ideology is evident in the epistemological assumption of school knowledge. Apple (1999) points out the racial biases inherent in what appears to be neutral truth in curriculum (Castenell & Pinar, 1993). Scheurich and Young (1997) assert that current constructions of race are a product of the paradigm of mainstream social science, which is based on the epistemological foundation of White-based modernistic inquiry. If “epistemological racism” controls mainstream scientists’ inquiries or ways of thinking, science and the social sciences will end up replicating racist knowledge. Going beyond the deficit theory requires disrupting this epistemological racism (e.g., questioning who participated in knowledge construction, whose way of knowing is legitimated as official, scientific, and value-free, and whose interest is being served) as well as institutional racism (e.g., altering standard-oriented school curriculum). The existence of epistemological racism makes it clear that the racial achievement gap is not only an individual or an environmental problem, but rather a more systemic and institutional problem.

Pre-service teachers’ appeal to deficit theory is affirmed by the romanticized images of teachers portrayed in popular media. For example, the movie *Dangerous Minds* depicts Ms. Johnson as a model teacher who saves “culturally deprived” teenagers through her extraordinary mission and compassion. I have had several students comment positively on this movie, commenting “It was very inspiring”

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and “This kind of movie made me want to become a teacher.” Such renditions (e.g., *Stand and Deliver*; *Lean on Me*) are critiqued for their heavy reliance on the deficit model. Gale and Densmore (1998) critique *Dangerous Minds* for its reliance on the ideology of the “benevolent helping” teacher, noting that Ms. Johnson is “implo- ring her students to accept this flawed logic of choice as freedom, and reinforces their subordinate positions” (pp. 95-6). Critical literature shows that the benevolent helping is insufficient because racial oppression is systematized in schools (Ladson- Billings, 1994; Van Galen, 1993). Van Galen’s research found that teachers who are self-claimed “caring teachers” are implicated in larger power struggles regarding race, and as a result, racial minority students do not feel sufficiently cared for. This research speaks to the politics of caring (see Valenzuela, 1996) wherein that individualistically defined ethic of care only reinforces power differentials between races (van Galen, 1997). Pre-service teachers are generally aware that the playing field is not equal. However, when inequality discourse is situated in the colorblind framework, the deficit view becomes an inevitable component of their way of think- ing about race. Transcending the deficit view requires a political commitment that reaches beyond a humanitarian commitment. Cochran-Smith (1991) suggested that fighting against racist practices requires teachers to take on social responsibilities, which she calls “going against the grain.”

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### d. Meritocratic Belief as Colorblind Ideology

Meritocratic ideology, or the belief that hard work will pay off, is one of the American public’s deep-seated educational creeds. Apparently, this belief system is particularly appealing to many teachers because meritocratic ideology insists that one’s status is earned by hard work and that school gives students this chance to suc- ceed. Meritocratic ideology effectively cancels out race-discourse by minimizing the significance of the impact of racism. Pre-service teachers are generally favorable to the view that personal or environmental deprivations, not racism, hinder learning. When introduced to racial disparities in SATs or the incarceration rates of Blacks and Whites, most White students, as the interviewees testified, attribute these dispari- ties to conditions attached to socioeconomic status, e.g., family structures or poor neighborhoods of minority people. Arguably, reducing racial problem to problems of socioeconomic status buttresses the meritocratic belief, reasoning that class is an attainable trait instead of birth-ascribed; therefore, dreams of obtaining middle class jobs or suburban homes can be attained as a reward for hard work and compliance in school. The literature points out that meritocracy is a classed ideology based on White privilege (Cose, 1994; Feagin, 1994; MacLeod, 1994).

A number of researchers have demonstrated how and why meritocracy is racial- ized. In her ethnography on first and second generation Latino youths, Valenzuela (1996) discovered that second generation Latino youths have less motivation than the first generation because, as she argues, schools subtract valuable resources from them and discourage them from working hard in school. Her research directly shows how school operates as a barrier to Latino youths’ achievement of their meri-

ocratic dreams. Similarly, Fine's (1991) research shows how institutional policy and practice make it hard for minority kids to actualize meritocracy. Katz's (1999) research concurs, showing how White teachers and students of color clash in their culture and beliefs; as a result, those teachers interpret these students as uncaring, and students do not trust school institutions. Ogbu's (1994) ethnography reaches a similar conclusion, arguing that racial minorities (e.g., African Americans), sneer at meritocratic creeds, which he frames as a reaction to systemic racism. This research portrays a vicious cycle in which lower class minority kids do not take advantage of the opportunity that schools proclaim to provide. Meritocracy is a classed concept as well as a raced one. MacLeod's (1995) ethnography shows that the Hallway Hangers, low income youths living in a public housing project, lowered their aspirations as a defensive mechanism after witnessing the numerous failures experienced by people surrounding them. The belief that school achievement is equated with success was crushed at an early age when the Hallway Hangers experienced fundamental flaws in societal structure. His research contradicts the meritocratic insistence that hard work will pay off no matter who you are.

Their strong belief in the American Dream creates a cognitive dissonance when pre-service teachers encounter critiques of meritocracy. In such cases, some of my White students question the validity of a critical stance, commenting that "There are many Blacks who have made it," and that "There are scholarships available for minorities." From a Critical Race Theory perspective, offering scholarships, particularly athletic scholarships, fits into the "interest convergence" because it serves White's self-interest to preserve White privilege (Bell, 1980, cited in Decuir & Dixon, 2004). Despite the apparently numerous resources now available to racial minorities, substantial racial differences in educational achievement still persist. These statistics indicate that meritocracy is a faulty ideology. Who defines merit? Who has better access to attain this merit? Critical Race pedagogues question these.

Research demonstrates that meritocratic ideology is a form of middle class White discourse and that its primary beneficiary is often middle class White people. Working class children and youths tend to evaluate the use and worth of schooling through their life experience. For example, Navajo students evaluate the worth of schooling differently than their White counterparts whose "notions of success—school credentials, individual careers, and individual economic prosperity—do not reflect those of the Navajo" (Deyhle, 1995, p. 408). Viewing education as a means to individual success fits a primarily White belief system based on individualism. According to bell hooks (2003), the African American view of education differs from the view of education as a means to individual success because they value fully holistic individuals who nourish their souls through spiritual life and service to others (pp.11-12).

Wide acceptance of a meritocratic belief system stems from the view that racism, e.g., slavery and segregation, is a thing of the past and that, in the present time, equal opportunity is given to every race. Most K-12 history books contribute to this belief in the triumph of liberty and justice by celebrating the accomplishments of

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the African American Civil Rights Movement. In addition, most textbooks glorify racial minorities or low-income youth who have overcome adversity and proved that America is a place of equal opportunity. Pre-service teachers tend to affirm this belief with their experiences or their parents' experiences, telling the stories that their parents grew up with nothing, but they pulled themselves up by their bootstraps. In this regard, many pre-service teachers' appeal to meritocratic ideology is accounted for by their own class backgrounds. Labaree (1996) problematizes the population that education school serves, saying the education school is "more attractive to candidates from the working class, for whom it represented an accessible way of attaining middle class standing, than for middle-class women and men (especially men) who had other prospects" (p.33). My interview data also confirmed that those who overcame their own circumstances tend to show more resistance to this critical perspective on education. Another reason that the idea of a meritocracy appeals to pre-service teachers is that it has practical implications for their daily job. One of the students in my education class once commented that she could not act on the critical stance of education, although she perfectly understood the shortcomings of meritocracy. She further remarked that she wanted to encourage minority students to work hard. Understanding the shortcomings of meritocracy does not mean discouraging students from working hard for upward mobility. Rather, it means helping minority students understand the system and routes to success in relation to their racial positions. Teachers who do not understand the workings of this systemic racism and injustice are doomed to fail in providing appropriate care to minority students, and they may helplessly blame individuals instead of recognizing the web of social, political, and institutional issues.

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### e. Neoliberal Postmodern Framework as Colorblind Ideology

The entertainment industry increasingly influences the school institution, where rigid norms and standards are constantly challenged by resistant youths. In recent years, the popularity and dominance of African American youth culture, particularly hip-hop and sports, has changed racial configurations in social relations and public discourse (Kitwana, 2002). Within this historical juncture, the younger generation of pre-service teachers is more resistant to Critical Race Theory's central thesis—"people of color are an oppressed group"—because they can reference successful entertainers and popular African-American peers. With an increasing number of mixed race youths and the blurred boundary between what is traditionally known as White domain and Black domain, it is now hard to characterize distinctiveness between racial groups (see Pollock, 2001). This cultural practice provides a context where diversity is easily translated into "difference," which shifted race discourse away from equity and social justice. In multicultural education class, the interviewed teachers testified that their students often make comments such as "it all depends on individuals (not on race)," similar to the comment in other research, "we are all different in our own way" (Gales & Densmore, 1998).

In the academic circle, celebrating "difference" is buttressed by the "post-"

paradigm, which, in general, denies the validity of universal and all-compassing theory. Post-modernism has gained legitimacy as anthropologists began to problematize the fixedness of conceptualizing culture, e.g., identifying culture with events, places, practice (see Duesterberg, 1998; Lather, 1991; Hoffman, 1996 for extended discussions on postmodern conceptualizations of culture). Race discourse has been complicated as scholars explore other categories of oppression, such as gender, class, nationality, and sexuality. This trend is captured in my teacher education class. Pre-service teachers frequently ask questions such as, “What about wealthy African Americans who live in nice houses? Are they as oppressed?”; “I think White trash are more oppressed than Black CEO’s”; “Shouldn’t we talk about gender inequality (as well as race issues)?”; and “We are all different. No two human beings are the same.” The subtext of these comments implies that race intersects with class and gender in such a way that race does not become a single determinant of oppression or privilege. Another strand of rhetoric that White students in my and my interviewees’ classes often rely on is the I-have-been-discriminated-against story. Many White students of the interviewees’ classes express discomfort with the notion of affirmative action and position themselves (or other Whites) as victims of this policy. This position apparently supports the postmodern conceptualization of power; power is situational, shifting, and contingent. Although in real life situations, domination-subordination is crosscut with other social categories and is situationally determined; this aforementioned rhetoric serves to minimize racial differences and thus preserves White privilege. This reliance on a multiplicity, which Nieto (1995) points to as one of the major critiques of multicultural education, is equivalent to emphasizing the plight of Nazis and the plight of White supremacists.

In academia, a postmodernist view of culture has taken hold since scholars accepted Foucault’s thesis that power operates situationally. Foucaultian understandings of culture provide insights for ethnographers who examine micro-cultures in which workings of power are diffused and dispersed in specific local contexts. Postmodernists (see Lather, 1991), following Foucault, contend that the formula “White as oppressor and minority as oppressed” does not always correspond neatly to real life contexts and emphasize that power does not function in a linear fashion, but rather operates in multifaceted, contingent, and at times contradictory ways. This line of thinking garners merit in analysis of culture; however, critical scholars warn that it allows people to lose sight of structures of domination and to merely romanticize difference and pluralism. In discussions of racism, postmodernist arguments often collude with colorblind racism by neglecting to address institutional racism. This logic is evident in such comments in my data as “Racism is no longer an issue in this society”; “Racism is a thing of the past”; and “This book is written more than ten years ago, and this no longer happens nowadays.”

Postmodern rhetoric is burgeoning with the advance of neoliberal consumer capitalism, under which neoliberal buzzwords such as individual freedom, autonomy, and choice render racial categories more fragile. The historical context of neoliberalism, the free-market, buttresses rugged individualism and ends up reinforcing

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the status quo (Apple, 2001). More importantly, such an individualistic paradigm promotes colorblind rhetoric by framing racism as an individual problem. Feagin and O'Brien (2003) found that White people exhibited a tendency to view racism as an isolated problem exhibited only by individuals who make outright racial slurs, who blatantly discriminate against others on the basis of race, or who espouse White supremacist beliefs (see also Feagin, 2000). Those who interpret reality through the individualistic framework tend to dismiss the Black-as-oppressed thesis as White-bashing because, in the post-Civil Rights Movement era, they do not witness very much visible bigotry, blatant racial slurs, or outright prejudice. This individualistic framework has been nurtured in K-12 education, in which racism has been equated with blatant racial prejudice or discrimination. Schoolteachers preach that their students should not be prejudiced against people of color. This misleads students to believing that racism can be solved if individuals eliminate their personal prejudices. However, as Tatum (1997) aptly notes, "prejudice is one of the inescapable consequences of living in a racist society . . . Prejudice is an integral part of our socialization, and it is not our fault" (p.6). Racism should be addressed as what Tatum (1997) defines as "a system of advantage" rather than an issue of personal prejudice or stereotypes. The role of teacher educators should be to inform pre-service teachers that racism is "a system involving cultural messages and institutional policies and practices" (1997, p. 7) and to teach them to recognize race-based prejudices instead of denying them. It is essential to address how well-intentioned teachers can still be participating in racist practices. By differentiating institutional racism from interpersonal racism, teacher educators can make students aware that racism is no longer a matter of the attitudes of discrete individuals, but rather an integral component of the system in which all of us work.

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### Toward Unlearning Colorblindness

The colorblind rhetoric expressed by pre-service teachers constitutes a coherent system of justice where raceless teachers "help" racial minorities to succeed in the system. The rhetorical devices of colorblindness discussed thus far (the apprenticeship model, nationalistic ideology, the deficit perspective, meritocratic ideology, and postmodernist-neoliberal rhetoric) sometimes do not entirely shy away from race discourse, but they domesticate it by "othering" racial minorities. The tale of justice and equality told by liberal discourse does not exist in a vacuum. Rather, colorblind ideology is a product of the pre-service teachers' own socialization in K-12 education through both explicit and hidden curriculum. Kincheloe (2004) points out that colorblind ideologies are also a product of teacher education programs, because all educational programs and curricula are built on a foundation of normative knowledge as opposed to critical knowledge (p. 56). Critical multicultural education provides an oppositional framework to conceptualize the teacher education program in terms of its curriculum and pedagogy. However, given that colorblind ideologies are a product of our socialization in institutions, it is neither possible, more importantly, nor desirable to eradicate students' colorblind beliefs

by teaching the oppositional framework. Imposing “counter-knowledge” (Giroux & McLaren, 1986), e.g., Critical Race Theory, will only replicate the apprenticeship model—the model that critical pedagogues critique. Cochran-Smith (1995) asserts that we can “unlearn” racism by re-examining our own biography and situating it in the larger socio-historical context that contributes to the socialization process. “Unlearning” does not always mean dismantling colorblind ideologies. The process of “unlearning” racism, with careful pedagogical planning and mediation, essentially invites reflections on our own complicity in racism and our own racial identity. In other words, unlearning racism is not substituting colorblind beliefs with color-conscious beliefs, but instead allowing students to struggle with their own belief system and their locations in relation to power relations. This task, which Dewey (1920) calls “psychologizing the subject matter,” is left with teacher educators. In this psychologizing process, students’ colorblind ideology can be a starting point to spur a meaningful discussion on what it means to teach students to fight against injustice and what role public education plays vis-à-vis racial issues.

How do teacher educators help unlearn colorblind beliefs? Critical Race Theory provides a new conceptualization to question the liberal discourse of teacher education. Therefore, Critical Race Theory or critical theory in education can be an excellent tool for raising self-reflection among pre-service teachers. This self-reflection includes questioning the presumption that being White is normal and examining their own socialization process and complicity in racism. In his class, Duncan (2002) uses Critical Race Theory as a pedagogical tool to facilitate reflexivity and to destabilize the colorblindness that permeates student thinking. Critical Race Theory is powerful because of its reflective value in teacher education class. Furthermore, this reflective process heightens what Kincheloe (2004) calls “critical complex vision.” Understanding the complexity of teaching in its relation to power, culture, and authority is a step away from the apprenticeship model (Florio-Ruane, 2002). Often, in classroom, discussions on colorblind ideologies take students to a myriad of associated issues and questions that fundamentally disturb their assumptions on education. How can we heighten racial awareness (color-consciousness), not stereotyping a certain race? Is colorblind ideology always flawed? Is color conscious attitude always right (Valli, 1995)? These questions raised by students have tremendous pedagogical value because they are the gestures toward appreciating the complexity and unlearning racism. Effective teacher educators, just like effective teachers, would serve as facilitators who guide students’ un/learning process and also serve as role models whose own quest to unlearn racism become an integral part of students’ learning process (Cochran-Smith, 1995; see also Lea, 2004).

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