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ABSTRACT

This study examines the attitudes of eight white teachers, plus the principle investigator, who characterize themselves as anti-racist and what experiences contributed to the development of those attitudes. The analysis reviewed present teacher education courses and cited research about alternative programs and at-risk students. The driving force of teaching is engagement and not what the state or education school mandates. Engaged pedagogy includes: (1) cultural relevancy; (2) teacher reflection; (3) a pedagogy of hope; and (4) teachers as researchers (and curricularists). The study also raises the questions about current dilemmas related to curriculum changes and risk-taking to develop student engagement. (EH)

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We're All Equal and Some Are More Equal Than Others: Retro and On-going Musings on the Evolving Identifies of Anti-Racist White Educators

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Session 3.29
Evolving Identities of Antiracist White Educators
Mark Perry
Antioch University Seattle

We're all equal and some are more equal than others: Retro and on-going musings on the evolving identifies of anti-racist white educators

I began this journey asking questions: What does it mean when a teacher is one of the only, if not *the* only white face in the classroom? Who are we, white educators who choose to teach students of color and work collaboratively with teachers of color? What is our role? Can we be effective? How are our responsibilities different because of race, ethnicity, and privilege?

Retro-fittings

A few years back I got this idea in my head that I would sit down with some white teachers who described themselves as anti-racist and try and figure out how they became the people they were. One thing led to another. I moved from looking at others to looking at myself which led to ventures into autobiography and currere and trying to understand better what drives those of us who consider ourselves anti-racist educators. Eventually, this led to a three-year study on the impact and implications of white teachers who teach students of color and work with teachers of color.

Taking a glance at the initial group of eight white teachers, only one, in addition to myself, taught at the school in the subsequent study. At the time, all worked in urban, alternative school environments where, as whites, they were in the minority. Seven of the eight grew up and attended school in communities they described as homogenized, parochial, suburban, and middle class. Half named their upbringings as conservative and half as liberal. Evelyn was a twenty-nine-year-old who attended a private prep school where "there were only a few black kids."

> I didn't notice any black kids, but I didn't ask questions. I didn't say, there are no Black kids. It bypassed me in my youth. My feelings and prejudices were a product of the time I was raised in. I heard about civil rights but I don't remember conversations at the dinner table.

Tom was twenty-eight and attended mixed or predominantly black schools from grades three through ten. His recollections are also a "product of the time."

> The experience was one of great alienation when I was in nearly all black schools -- being ostracized and attacked for being white. I also learned a lot about black culture and society and black people. Going to more mixed schools was generally a very positive experience. It's easier to understand your own racial and cultural identity in a mixed environment. Going to majority white schools from 11th grade through college was a very alienating experience for me. I felt that no one else was aware of themselves in racial/cultural terms.

Tom described being "keenly aware" of racism when he was younger but not willing to speak out or act on his "rage and frustration" when he was a witness to racist behaviors. Evelyn was exposed to issues of peace and justice in her home. She student taught in a racially mixed school, but her first teaching assignment was in an affluent suburb. "Culturally white and extremely frustrating" is how she described that first year. She sought, and subsequently found, an urban alternative school.

Early teaching experiences had an enormous impact on each teacher. Natalie, a twenty-eight year-old, second generation daughter of European immigrants, sought out jobs working with migrant workers in California and working class whites on the south side of Chicago where she found other white teachers thinking she "should accept their racism, trying to include me because I was white."

> I worked with working class whites. These kids responded when I brought up these issues. Teenagers have respect for people who bring up these issues about racism and challenge them. The other teachers reinforced their racism.

All of these teachers self-consciously chose to work with students of color. What impact does this have on their students? For Evelyn, it was an issue of class. The business as usual attitude in the suburbs "sickened" her, although she questioned how much white guilt had to do with her choices of materials and subjects in the classroom. Irene and Tom were more circumspect.

> The color of your skin is a huge determining factor in who you are. There's no avoiding it. I am white, I grew up white, I will always be white. I'd like to move beyond that, but I don't know how. (Irene)

> Being white is reflected in everything I do. My whole understanding of the world, and thus my teaching of it, comes from the perspective of a white person. (Tom)

This is just a dabble into a series of spoken and written conversations with this group of teachers, but it pushed buttons in me. Is there something that makes us different from other whites? It's not genetic, so what is it in our experiences or the environments we choose to live and work that brings us to a need to be anti-racist in our teaching? This

also raises the question that maybe we are only kinder, gentler white folks. Walter Mosley's Easy Rawlins once said, "they often take the kindest white people to colonize the colored community." Are we merely societal safety values even under the best of intentioned circumstances?

More questions, fewer answers

As part of my current teacher education position I work with teachers in the local public schools who teach students expelled from their regular schools and/or who are homeless, on probation, or in detention. I recently presented a workshop on using writing as a method to motivate and increase basic skills. I began by trying to set some context which led to using two of our allotted three hours talking about the implications of working with this population of students and our roles and responsibilities as teachers. Looking around the room it was noticeable that about eighty percent of the 35 teachers were white. Traveling around their schools, it was just as evident that the percentage of students of color was far higher than the sixty percent they represent in the district. On a personal note, I am also amazed, recently coming from Chicago to Seattle, just how many white kids I see in these same schools, including the detention center.

What caused the most furor was a point I made about our roles in these schools. Citing research (Raywid, 1995) that looks at alternative programs, I presented the finding that transitional, re-entry, or last-chance alternatives that characterize the Seattle programs show no long term correlation of success between what goes on in the programs and the level of dropouts, suspensions, and expulsions. I couched this in terms of it not necessarily being a case of us, as teachers in these programs, not being highly motivated or experienced, but that what works in our programs is not replicated in regular public schools. The point of these re-entry and transitional programs is to prepare students to successfully re-enter the schools that failed them initially. This created a firestorm of response.

One teacher asked, what's the point in continuing to teach if what I do doesn't work? Just asking the question made me want to say, maybe you *shouldn't* be teaching here, but better judgment prevailed. I used an analogy. If you save someone from drowning, teach them to be expert mechanics, then throw them back into the water, will they be able to survive? What are we doing in these so-called alternative programs when our students are not succeeding back in their original schools? The program director added that in a recent survey of their students only eight in one hundred successfully made the transition back to school.

My original intent in asking the question about the purpose and intent of the schools in which we work was to create a framework for introducing the use of writing with at-risk and marginalized students. I didn't realize how much the question of worth and personal self-justification would surface as the predominant issue. Not so coincidentally, probably, in this setting it was only the white teachers who questioned the appropriateness and consequences of the question.

De-colonizing our thoughts and practice

The overall question that continually guides my work is: what is worthwhile to know and experience? This is followed up with the subsequent questions: why, how, where, for who, from whom, who benefits, and how do we translate these questions into effective practice? (Schubert, 1986). Especially as this relates to the issues facing white teachers, how do we honestly interrogate (hooks, 1990) our teaching to better understand who we are, why we do what we do, and how we create an evolving identity that does not get stuck in liberal or radical neo-racist and neo-colonial formations and practices? When do our good intentions turn into their opposite?

I wanted to know: Is it possible to enter "realms of the unknown with no will to colonize or possess?" (hooks, 1991, 58). Is a decolonizing intersection of voices possible? Can we create individual and collective transformative processes that lead to reciprocal relationships in the classroom? I did a double take when I read a reflection Irene wrote after participating in a Black History Month assembly that brought together African-American and Latino high school students.

> Holy god, they were angry. And righteous. Truly I was frightened. Not because I was white. I wasn't afraid of bodily injury. What was I afraid of? So many things really. Afraid of what is going to happen if "minorities" organize. To me. To humanity. Afraid that maybe there is a part of me that responds to the anger, that maybe a violent revolution would be cleansing. At the expense of myself? (Interesting word choice, expense.) And my loved ones on both sides of that wall? I found myself wavering. One minute I was chanting, yes, yes! And the next, I'd think, but I, as a white woman, cannot carry the responsibility of my race. The white man's burden is not my burden. I will not accept it. So why do I feel guilty? Why has America been built off the blood of others, of human beings? And why must this be my homeland?
>
> Things have been easy for me. I have always recognized the easiness of life (I'm sure that humility is commendable), but how do I make it easier for others? What route should I take? It was quite ironic that as all of these thoughts were running through my head, I got in my car and "God, Part II" by U2 came on and these words, which I have always admired, shot straight at me:
>
> I don't believe in excess
> Success is to give
> I don't believe in riches
> But you should see where I live

Irene gives me both hope and pause. Is our racism so entrenched (Bell, 1992) as to be imperceptible to self, such as Irene's comment that she wants to make it "easier for

others?" Or can we create a process of self-interrogation and individual and collaborative reflection that allows a de-colonizing practice?

Currere of Marginality

My personal search led me, first, back to self, to autobiography through a currere of marginality (Edgerton, 1992; Pinar, 1994). In attempting to avoid reductionist concepts of self (Witherell, 1991) that do not allow for change, especially when our immediate societal connection to being white (as teachers) is as authorities and professionals, such as social workers or police, I wanted to transcend or transgress (hooks, 1994) a color blind approach (Ladson-Billings, 1994) that only obliterates difference instead of seeing difference (Lorde, 1979) as a bridge to a transformed or transgressed practice.

How do we respond to what we see and, in turn, learn to see differently? How do we break from fixed views based in our upbringings or our participation in the dominant society and culture, even as we attempt to create alternative ways of being?

> (Currere) represents a call for the cultivation of an internal dialectic. It is a call to examine one's response to a text, a response to an idea, response to a colleague, in ways which invite depth, understanding, and transformation of that response. (Pinar, 1994, 119)

It is impossible for us to totally break from our preconceived notions of self and other, but as teachers, can we recognize the question and response and then cultivate the internal dialectic? Self-conscious anti-racist white teachers, unfortunately, are not the norm in schools. In reaction, inside schools, including the academy and teacher education programs, we are frequently institutionally marginalized (by other whites) for our desire to be anti-racist in practice as well as philosophy. Looking at the margins as existing in a dialectical relationship with the dominant center or "white supremacist capitalist patriarchal society," (hooks, 1992) I used a currere of marginality (Edgerton, 1992) where the center does not, by definition of its authority, need to know the margins, but, in contrast, to survive in the dominant society, learns to know the center.

In searching to develop my own currere of marginality as a foundational piece in developing a pedagogic practice as a white educator, I sought to discover how and why I find myself on the margins and where and how privilege serves as an assumptive barrier and when it can be used to challenge the center. I began to trace my choices and perceptions from 60s radical to counterculture hippie to imprisoned political prisoner to activist and organizer to teacher with an eye, not to any exceptionalized meaning, but to trying to find a sense of process and change that worked for me and could be a learning experience for other white teachers.

Creating an engaged pedagogy

I worked as teacher, principal, and administrator concurrently at two urban alternative high schools for "dropouts" over nearly ten years from the mid 80s to mid 90s. In extolling the successes at both schools, I was often asked if they could be replicated. I was never able to come up with a satisfactory answer. There were many reasons for success: small schools, small classes, relevant curriculum, democratic processes, and student involvement. But I always felt hesitant in giving a blanket answer of yes because I know every situation is different just as every student is different. At the same time, I wanted to understand better how and what we were doing so I could articulate it to others, especially white teachers who truly wanted to be different and anti-racist. Drawing on personal experience and the work and narratives of other practitioners and researchers, I finally put together a theoretical framework that began to explain our work.

I should note that I was resistant to creating a written paradigm. Charting what looks like a blueprint goes against my nature. These types of frameworks imply (at least to me) certainty, conformity, predictability, and standardization. My search is for ambiguity, complexity, and nuances. My emphasis is description and experience of the process more than outcomes. Yet I don't discount outcomes. In fact, the outcomes of the schools were overwhelmingly positive, just not easily measured. Given this tension, I began by naming four main components, each with subcomponents, and three underpinnings or pillars. My general approach in creating this framework goes back to my continual asking of the question what is worthwhile to know and experience and my belief that teaching is an art and a journey and not primarily a technical task. Not to discount the importance of technique, training, and expertise, I sought to see the driving force of teaching as engagement and not state or education school mandates.

Engaged Pedagogy

* Academics * Culture * Critical Thinking	* Experience + Reflection = Growth	* Risk Taking * Insinuating Complexity	* Valuing Teacher Voices * Collaboration

Cultural Relevancy	Teacher Reflection	Pedagogy of Hope	Teachers as Researchers

Social Construction of Meaning	Student-Centeredness	Dialogue and Discussion/Democracy

Cultural Relevancy

This first component is based in two assumptions: 1) the need for anti-racist education and pedagogy committed to social change and issues of diversity, equity, and democracy; 2) the moving of the question, do race, gender, and class impact on education and teaching to *how* do race, gender, and class impact. This allows a look at the implications of these social constructs and the creation of an alternative practice not solely based in critique but in a supportive environment where mistakes are seen as an implicit part of the process and not something that calls the whole into question.

Three subcomponents, seen separately, but used in combination, underlie the component of cultural relevancy -- academics, culture, and critical thinking.

- Academics. The essence of this subcomponent is striving for academic excellence and looking at new ways of teaching (Ladson-Billings, 1994). It redefines excellence, seeing it as a complex standard that takes into account student diversity and individual differences. It encourages multiple teaching approaches and styles including cooperative learning, team teaching, multi-level classrooms, project-based and hands-on learning, and finding new and relevant source materials, such as first-person narratives, and creating new materials, such as new canons of relevant literature.

- Culture. Variously described as cultural consciousness and cultural competence (Ladson-Billings, 1995), this works to use students prior knowledge and experiences to explore their own cultures and other peoples' cultures using multiculturalism, as well as centric approaches, with a strong emphasis on language, including bilingualism and multilingualism.

- Critical Thinking. This is about acquiring the tools of critical thinking, learning how to think and then applying it in academic and practical settings. From a teaching viewpoint it is the teaching of how to think as opposed to what to think. This does not mean teachers don't express their opinions, but their views and students views are constantly open for interrogation and introspection. Projects can be created ranging from personal and school issues to student and community identified problems.

In looking at all three subcomponents of cultural relevancy, one of the goals is to try and move beyond or transform a standard definition of multiculturalism. In doing this it recognizes overt issues of power, privilege, and authority and includes talking honestly about concurrent social issues such as white supremacy, patriarchy, racism, sexism, and homophobia. It also seeks *not* to essentialize identities or separate cultures and ethnicities into holidays, months, or foods, thus striving for a more holistic (and political) approach. In combination, it is one lens that challenges a colorblind approach (Ladson-Billings, 1994) and allows whites to acknowledge and take responsibility for being part of the dominant culture while simultaneously being part of creating new or alternative practices and ways of being.

Teacher Reflection

This component begins with the equation: experience + reflection = growth (Posner, 1996). It tries to simply and succinctly describe the on-going nature of the process of learning. As teachers, to be effective and to make this process of engaged and anti-racist pedagogy real, we need to make time to look at what and how we teach, individually and collectively. Hopefully, this leads to developing the self-discipline to become reflective practitioners. One benefit of a self-reflective practice is the understanding that, as learners and teachers, we construct meaning through our experiences and this, in turn, propels the growth process.

One of the subpurposes within this component is a commitment to autobiography as a means to identify transformative learning experiences in our own lives. By naming for ourselves and others those moments that stand out as powerful learning experiences and by looking at the nature of those experiences and the conditions that brought them about, we can begin to incorporate some of these processes into our teaching, the goal being to help our students become, themselves, self-reflective in their learning and their lives. To teach it we have to do it.

Pedagogy of Hope

The two basic tenets of this component are 1) a belief in the goodness in people and a belief that all students can succeed and 2) the idea that what we see in someone is what we are looking for (Kohl, 1994). This translates into a teaching practice that is looking for what is right, not what is wrong in students and in their work. It openly challenges a deficit model of viewing students and their needs. It stresses the positive and aims to use strengths to overcome weaknesses.

Being hopeful opens doors to risk taking and insinuating complexities. It looks at risk taking as being at the heart of good teaching. It means asking questions. It becomes our way of knowing and being in the world. It sees making mistakes as a natural part of the learning process, the key becoming our ability and willingness to identify and learn from our mistakes. Insinuating complexity (Kohl, 1994) is about viewing knowledge critically and seeing issues and problems as relative and relational. This does not mean there are no rights and wrongs; it does look at values and morals. What it strives to accomplish is to problematize, to look for the proverbial gray areas, to go below the surface and beyond accepted definitions and judgments. It deconstructs, but does so to create the ability to reconstruct, take action, and create alternatives.

Teachers as Researchers (and Curricularists)

Asking the question, who creates or should create curriculum, this component acknowledges, validates, and values teacher voices. It allows teachers to tell our stories, giving voice to our experiences and it validates the idea that teaching is an art. Breaking

with the traditional and institutionalized research and development curriculum design model, this proposes an alternative, collaborative process between all of the parties, or stakeholders. Not only is this more equitable, its range of involvement includes many who would normally be disenfranchised or left out of the loop including parents and community members. Most particularly it places a high responsibility on teachers and is inclusive of students. At its heart it is participatory and collaborative.

The three underpinnings or pillars of this paradigm are 1) the social construction of meaning, 2) student-centeredness, and 3) dialogue, discussion, and democracy.

- Social construction of meaning. This pillar asks the question: how is meaning constructed? Contrary to the view that meaning is handed down by others or the research and development approach noted above, this says that knowing is a multidimensional social construction. We have and create experiences. Most importantly, this allows learning to come from naming and solving problems and issues.

- Student-centeredness. This pillar seeks to value and validate students' prior knowledge and prior experiences. Starting with student concerns and lived experiences, it jointly and collaboratively creates projects and curriculum that combine student experience with what is generally named the knowledge of the disciplines or organized bodies of knowledge. As teachers, we try to concretize the process and help make it real and beneficial for students. Grounded in Dewey's concept of moving from the psychological to the logical (Dewey, 1902; 1916), we help students obtain the tools and information to take responsibility for their own learning.

- Dialogue, discussion, and democracy. In many ways, this is the glue, on both macro and micro levels, that holds this framework together. One of the goals is to create a democratic environment throughout the curriculum and schools beginning with the teaching staff and including the whole of the student body. Connected to and incumbent within a student-centered approach is the necessity to not shy away from social issues or difficult questions. Ironically, where many schools defer these questions or limit their discussion, in this kind of democratic community of learners, it works to engender student self-confidence and expression and student/teacher trust. Once again, in this type of learning community, students are allowed and encouraged to examine the relationship between self and society as individuals and within the various communities in which they live. One of the positive consequences is that when looking at their own actions, negative behaviors within a school setting make less sense because of their vested interest in the process. Alternative ways of being and learning are created and of value to students as they truly begin to take responsibility for their own learning.

Current dilemmas

This engaged pedagogy framework is just that -- a framework. It is a theoretical portrait or multiple lens developed through ten years of alternative school teaching in collaboration with others. My hope in beginning to detail it is that it can serve as a guide or jumping off point for others who want to do similar teaching or create a similar type of school. For white educators in particular, my hope is that it can serve as a frame of reference for those of us who strive to be anti-racist and progressive in our teaching and a way to look at our own work, ask questions, name and understand what is working and what is not, and recontextualize our frames of reference as white teachers.

Utilizing the question of worth (what is worthwhile to know and experience) and this engaged pedagogy framework, I am, once again, re-examining my own teaching and positionality as a self-defined anti-racist white teacher, most recently as a teacher educator. At present, I am grappling with three intertwined issues:

> (1) The value and/or ability of teacher education programs to promote social change through teacher preparation.
>
> (2) For new teachers who enter the profession idealistic and energized and experienced teachers who want to re-energize and change, what structures can be built that can create and sustain a momentum that allows these teachers to take risks and be leaders for change?
>
> (3) How, as marginalized, anti-racist white teachers who practice engaged and democratic pedagogy, can we continue to work for change and keep our jobs in the schools in which we teach and in the academy without retaliation (implicit and explicit) from the powers that be within these institutions?

Who's driving the car?

How is curriculum created within teacher preparation programs? Even within progressive philosophies, are we primarily producing new teachers who can fit into the status quo of schooling and schools? Donaldo Macedo (1995) asks the question: "How can schools of education reconcile their technicist and often undemocratic approach to teacher preparation with the urgency to democratize schools?" (53) Continuing, he states:

> In most instances, schools of education represent the most conservative sector of university life bent on reproducing values designed to maintain the status quo while de-skilling teachers through a labyrinth of how-to methods courses devoid of any substantive content. (53)

What drives teacher education programs? Is the desire to meet state mandates within conservative political times holding progressive philosophies and teaching

practices hostage? Is accountability subverted to the point that it rests primarily on the school's teacher placement record? If we preach progressive education, but temper it by overwhelming students with methods courses geared to meet state mandates, are we only reinforcing the status quo? What does it mean when our internal structures are in contradistinction with what we profess in class syllabi? Are we doing more damage than good because we raise an expectation of radical reform or change but undercut it by not living and teaching by our own words?

Recent evaluations of the Philadelphia schools highlighted three tasks important in urban school restructuring: building community, generating knowledge about change, and reinventing curriculum, instruction, and assessment (Christman, Cohen, and MacPherson, 1997). If we teach lessons gleamed from research like these in teacher education programs, should we not also be doing this ourselves within these same programs? Among ourselves? And with the students? And involving the teachers in the schools where we place students? And with parents and community members within the communities in which the schools are located?

I don't want to get too esoteric, but many things worry me these days. The local newspaper recently carried a report from the Children's Defense Fund (Seattle Post-Intelligence, 3/13/97, A4) reporting that sixteen children, one child every hour and a half, die of from guns. That very same day I was in a school where a middle school student brought a gun to protect himself on his way home from a perceived enemy. Another middle school student who lives at a youth facility at night wrote the following later that afternoon in a writing workshop:

> I'm going to write about my race. Before I got locked up I never thought about what I was doing. And I would say that I was doing it for my race. But ever since I got locked up I thought of what I was doing. I know now I was never helping my race. I was losing my race. I was taking my race down.

In conversation with other students, this young man went on to say he now understands that when he attacked rival gang members he was being used. He had begun to take personal responsibility within a societal context. Not all of the students agreed with him, but what stood out for me was the high level of reflection and discussion. What also stood out as I thought about this more later was that I was not seeing this type of thinking or this incident talked about in teacher preparation classes and especially not in faculty and curricular meetings. If these types of issues are not appropriate in designing curriculum that needs to fit into finely tuned state mandates, obviously there is not going to be time for discussion among students or among instructors.

This got me thinking about a statement made by the recently murdered The Notorious B.I.G. who said, "you're nobody until somebody kills you." Have we reached the point as progressive teachers that our personal risk taking is individually and institutionally held in check even when we know that every day nearly a classroom of young people are killed by guns. Do we still have the courage to speak out -- among

other teachers and within our own faculties -- knowing we may pay a price, but knowing that the price to be paid if we don't is at best slow death. I have often been asked by preservice teachers: when I enter the classroom, how do I not become the complacent, cynical teachers I see and don't want to be? Maybe a crisis in consciousness is in order....among teacher educators.

Postscript

Some might call it bearing witness, but it is my hope that among whites and in conjunction with educators of color we can continue a dialogue that, in light of the fact that nearly 90% of all public school teachers are white, brings to light the necessity to look closely at the implications of our teaching children of color (as well as white children), our roles as teacher educators and colleagues, and our identity and actions as anti-racist whites committed to social change.

I would like to continue this dialogue with whoever has an interest. Until June 30 I can be reached at Antioch University Seattle, 2607 Second Avenue, Seattle, Washington, 98121-1211; 206/441-5352 x5616.

My e-mail address until June 30 is: mark_perry@mist.seattleantioch.edu

I can also be reached at my home: 2809-27th Avenue West, Seattle, WA 98199; the phone is 206/285-6520.

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