

The Silenced Dialogue and Pre-Service Teachers

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Introduction

In 1988, Lisa Delpit published her seminal article, “The Silenced Dialogue,” referring to the lack of communication dividing Black and White educators and educators-of-educators when it comes to issues of race, specifically due to the disparity between reliance on theory (White) and reliance on cultural understanding (Black). Nearly a quarter century has passed since that article was written, but research about the attitudes, beliefs, and experiences of both Black and White educators seems to indicate that the Silenced Dialogue continues to exist in teacher education programs as well as in the broader world of the American education system (Dickar, 2008; Hayes & Juarez, 2012).

As a Diversity course instructor in a teacher education program, I began to wonder where my students and I fit into this dynamic of the Silenced Dialogue. Thinking back on my teaching tended to indicate that the Black and White students in my reflection-heavy and discussion-heavy courses frequently drew on their own educational experiences to try to reach each other, to tell each other about experiences of which the other may not be aware. This research project was born from my attempt to more systematically explore the manifestations of the Silenced Dialogue with my own pre-service students.

To this end, this research project explored two related research questions:

1. How did the “Silenced Dialogue” manifest in pre-service teachers’ reflections about contemporary diversity issues, especially “White privilege”?
2. In what ways did gender complicate or

enrich this understanding of the nature of racial talk in candidate’s journals?

The first question provided an attempt to analyze various features of the pre-service teachers’ reflections—including the word choices and the selection of topics considered in each reflection—to see how the silenced dialogue manifests in these documents. The second question was geared toward understanding how and why males and females each approached racial topics in their journals differently. The goal was for the combination of these two analyses to contribute to discussions surrounding the perpetuation of the silenced dialogue in schools of education.

Relevant Literature

One of the clearest, most agreed-upon elements in Multicultural Education is the need for more educators of color to work in schools, particularly in schools with children of color (Delpit, 1995; Foster, 1994; Irvine, 1990; Ladson-Billings, 1994). It is widely understood that when teachers and students come from a similar background and have similar experiences, the students benefit from this connection.

Unfortunately, for a variety of reasons, teacher education programs remain largely White (83% White according to the National Center for Education Statistics), and female (76% female) (Institute of Education Sciences, n.d.). The dominance of the Whiteness and femaleness of the teaching force has important implications for the way teachers understand and teach students of color, as well as the way they understand and treat their non-White teacher peers.

Although schools of education often include a Diversity course, as Kagan (1992, p. 154) points out, “candidates tend to use the information provided in coursework to confirm rather than to confront and correct their preexisting beliefs.” The background experiences of teachers contribute to

beliefs and attitudes that serve as knowledge filters, allowing in only confirming information and blocking information that does not confirm these previous-held beliefs (Anderson & Holt-Reynolds, 1995; Richardson, 1996). This is true for all teacher education candidates, not only White ones—but their prevalence in the teaching workforce can make White beliefs and attitudes feel like the only possible norm, and can make it challenging for non-white pre-service or in-service teachers to feel heard.

Perhaps that’s why studies focusing on the differences in perceptions and attitudes between White and Black teachers (whether in-service or pre-service) show a striking contrast in each race’s willingness to discuss race and race issues. For example, the African-Canadians interviewed by Finlayson (2011) uniformly felt comfortable discussing their experiences with race and racism and how they overcame these obstacles to become successful teachers.

Merseth et al. (2008) interviewed pre-service teachers choosing to teach in urban school settings, and what is striking about their responses is how comfortable they are discussing how their identities—including their socioeconomic statuses, races, educational histories and so on—impacted their teaching experiences as student teachers. This was especially true for the Black students, who spoke of their experiences straddling the “Black” and “White” worlds having earned their prestigious degrees but leaving behind their Black cultural backgrounds. In the words of the authors, “these teachers profoundly understood the advantages of social location and the value of knowing codes of power” (p. 103).

Alternatively, research about White pre-service and in-service teachers tends to indicate a marked tendency to downplay race issues, to play the “colorblind” card, or to simply resist exploring multicultural issues introspectively (Bolgatz, 2005; French, 2005; Gorski, 1988; Pollock, 2004).

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But of course the situation is more complicated than White people simply resisting discussions of race; there are legitimate reasons for White people to feel uncertain about teaching in culturally competent ways. Some researchers have pointed to misperceptions about multicultural education in general (Fry, 2000), which limits the likelihood that White teachers will apply multicultural strategies.

In addition, studies indicate that pre-service teachers sometimes believe that they are not adequately prepared to teach in a diverse context (Barksdale, et al., 2002). Hayes and Juarez (2012) go even further, arguing that culturally responsive teaching is not being taught in schools of education because it goes against White norms and—as we have seen—teachers as a whole are more likely to accept and adopt White norms because they are overwhelmingly White themselves. If White teachers do not understand multicultural education and are not being adequately taught culturally responsive teaching methods in their teacher preparation programs, they can hardly be blamed for feeling uncomfortable discussing issues of race that they are unprepared to sensitively tackle.

Providing yet another consideration, Dickar (2008) examined the impact of teacher race on teaching experiences, and found a complex racial situation at the 95% Black school that was her study site. Black students expected Black teachers to demonstrate a strong “racial solidarity” that the teachers did not always feel was warranted, and which left them in a difficult position vis-à-vis dealings with White teachers and administration.

Meanwhile, White teachers had difficulty speaking about racial issues and tended to engage in “evasive” race talk even though they were fully race “cognizant” when dealing with structural inequalities facing their students. In her analysis, Dicklar explored the fears (many of them legitimate) of the White teachers that if they explicitly discussed race, they were leaving themselves vulnerable to allegations of racism. She says,

... in an environment charged with distrust and with accusations of racism lurking in the shadows, White teachers seek ways to avoid coming under hostile fire. However, their reluctance to talk about race does not necessarily indicate that they are not aware of the significance of the issue. (p. 125)

This analysis complicates the more simplistic notion of the color-blind White teacher by providing an underlying ratio-

nale that might be a particularly strong point for new or pre-service teachers.

Setting and Methodology

The data for this study were collected during two sections of an MAT-level Diversity course taught in a medium-sized Southern university. A total of 45 teacher candidates were involved (see Table 1 for a demographic breakdown of the candidates). As seen from the table, students in these courses were disproportionately White and female, which fits the profile of American teachers overall (see the National Center for Education Statistics, quoted above).

These Diversity courses used Banks and Banks (2010) as their primary textbook, and cycled through a variety of social categories, including socio-economic status, race, gender, special education status, and sexual orientation. Along with each new social category, the candidates were assigned extra reading to help orient them to the continuing importance and relevance of the topic. Readings included Delpit’s “Silenced Dialogue” (1988), McIntosh’s “Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack” (1990), the chapter “Gone with the Wind” from Loewen’s *Lies My Teacher Told Me* (2007), as well as contemporary articles and books chapters on schools in Finland (Partanen, 2011), *Girl World* (Wiseman, 2009), the status of homosexuality in Hollywood (Harris, 2012), and the political impact of the increase in the Latino population (Scherer-Phoenix, 2012), among others.

Students wrote seven reflections throughout the course of the class; the only direction they were given was that they attempt to make the reading relevant for themselves and their potential teaching. Of these seven reflections, only one focused specifically on the concept of “race,” and this was their reflection on McIntosh’s “Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack,” exploring White privilege. This is of note, because many of the codes that emerged related to race were specifically about the candidates’ reactions to this reading about White privilege. The course was very discussion-heavy, and the reflections were intended to get students prepared for in-class discussions and activities geared toward bringing some of this silenced dialogue into the open.

For the purpose of this article, I gathered each candidate’s journal entries into a single document for that candidate, and then imported them as Word files into NVivo 9 software. Using NVivo, I ran word frequency queries at a broad-based level to begin to understand the themes that emerged throughout the journals; then I ran text search queries on the most popular themes to understand how they were used in context.

Finally, I combed through each candidate’s journal and coded their responses using the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), beginning with open coding, and then generating broader concepts and some categories. I allowed the words of the candidates to serve as code and concept titles and grouped similar phrases together into the same concept. Finally, some codes were grouped into categories. Other concepts did not require merging, as the concept itself was broad and sufficient for analysis.

Because of the significance of race identified in this particular project, I classified each individual journal by the race of the journal writer. I also classified them by gender for more specific analysis; however, a point of clarification is important: there were only two non-White male students among the 45 responses collected. This does not represent a significant enough sample to analyze responses by both race and gender. To avoid skewing analysis, I only ran matrix coding queries comparing journals by “race” OR “gender,” as opposed to both. In the following section, I will report results for both the broad-based layer of analysis and final layer of analysis: the comparison of themes that emerged from the journals along the demographic lines of race and gender.

Findings

When running the basic word frequency analysis on the entire population of students, the first thing that struck me was how far down the list of most frequently used words the word “race” fell, especially considering the way it was woven into class content in every topic covered. Of the course content topics covered, the word that was most frequently used was “reli-

Table 1
Demographic Information on Study Participants

Demographic	White	Black	Female	Male	Total
n=	37	8	28	17	45

gion" (356 times), followed by "White" (276), "class" (274), "gifted" (221), "gay" (217), "girls" (197), "Latino" (148), "race" (142), and "Black" (93). The more race-specific word "White" was listed first, which made sense given the majority-White class and the fact that the top two most frequently used words of the journals were "I" and "my." As stated above, one of the readings the class reflected upon was the article "Unpacking the Knapsack of White Privilege" (originally published in 1988, but we used the 1990 edition) so the use of the "White" in the phrase "White privilege" was common.

A Deeper Look

I decided to look a little deeper into this issue to see who was using the word "race" most frequently, who was using the word "White" most frequently, and who was using the word "Black" (a much less common word choice) most frequently. A text search query on the word "race" revealed that the 10 students who most frequently used the word "race" were:

1. White Female (frequency of use, 30)
2. White Female (27)
3. White Male (22)
4. White Female (21)
5. White Female (21)
6. Black Female (20)
7. White Female (20)
8. Black Female (19)
9. White Female (18)
10. White Female (18)

Seven of the top 10 users of the word "race" were White females, two of them were Black female students, and only one male student, in this case, a White male student, made the list. This seemed to indicate that White female students were the most comfortable discussing issues of race in their reflections, but actually the picture is more complicated.

A text search query on the word "White" revealed a somewhat similar pattern in terms of racial dispersion, with only two Black students in the top 10 most frequent users of the word "White:"

1. Black Male (frequency of use, 16)
2. White Male (15)
3. White Female (13)
4. Black Female (12)
5. White Female (12)
6. White Male (12)
7. White Female (12)
8. White Male (9)
9. White Male (9)
10. White Male (9)

Some interesting differences also emerged, however. In this case, the student most

frequently using the word "White" was a Black male, and the fourth most frequent user of the word "White" was a Black female; so given how few Black students were in the two courses, it is interesting that two of the top four most frequent users of the word "White" were Black. In addition, it is interesting that male students—who as we have seen were less likely to use the word "race," constituted six of the top 10 most frequent users of the word "White."

A text search query on the word "Black," which, as we have seen, was a far less frequently used word to begin with, revealed that four of the top 10 most frequent users were Black students:

1. White Male (frequency of use, 13)
2. Black Female (11)
3. Black Male (9)
4. White Male (7)
5. White Male (6)
6. Black Female (5)
7. White Male (5)
8. White Male (5)
9. Black Female (4)
10. White Female (4)

Since only about 18% of the class was Black, but 40% of the most frequent users of the word "Black" were Black, this seems to indicate more willingness on the part of Black students to identify themselves and others as "Black," and less willingness on the part of White students to identify others as "Black." This was especially true for White female students, of whom there was only one in the top 10 most frequent users of the word "Black."

Although White females seemed to feel very comfortable discussing "race" as a general topic, they were much less comfortable talking about specific races, especially avoiding the word "Black" to describe people. This mirrors prior research on the way Whites discuss race (Bolgatz, 2005; French, 2005; Gorski, 1988), especially the "evasive race talk" mentioned by Dicklar (2008) and "color-muting" discussed by Pollock (2004). In the case of this project, it is noteworthy that this seemed to be largely an issue among White females, as White males are significantly better represented among the top 10 users for the specific race terms "White" and "Black," even appearing as the top user for the use of the word "Black."

There are useful implications in this analysis; for example, even in a course where the specific topics of "color-blindedness," "the silenced dialogue," and "White privilege" are raised and discussed in class,

and even in written reflections where candidness and open dialogue are encouraged and expected, White students (especially White female students) were reluctant to recognize the races of other people, especially Black people.

Prior research on the subject (Pollock, 2004) explains how color-mutedness serves the function of soothing interactions between people of different races by pretending that cultural differences do not exist. It is especially disheartening, however, to see these results in a course predicated on bringing these issues to light with the intention of reducing their effects. Particularly given the somewhat anonymous nature of the assignment (since only the teacher reads it), the guarded nature of the race talk was an intriguing finding.

The Next Stage

For the next stage in the analysis, I combed through each person's journal and created open-codes related to the topic of race, combined some codes into categories, and then ran matrix coding queries to find out how the variables of race and gender changed the frequency of the codes. To begin with, the overall Top 10 code categories related to the topic of race in terms of personal reader reactions—as opposed to codes such as "connections between Blacks and other social groups" and "common conceptions about race relations in this country"—are listed in Table 2. It was previously mentioned that the only specifically race-themed reading required for candidates' reflections was McIntosh's article on White privilege, and this focus is clearly visible in these results.

Even to a casual observer, Table 2 might appear to be top-heavy with responses from the majority-White population in the course. This is, in fact, the case. Table 3 compares the Top 10 code categories for White respondents and the top 10 code categories for Black respondents. Along with the number of references separated by race, I included a "density" measurement to indicate the frequency of this code as a percentage of the total number of people in each race; in other words, the higher the density measurement, the more common the code among the particular population indicated.

This was necessary in order to compare the top 10 codes because of the unevenness in the numbers of people of each race. For example, there were six references by White students that coded to "refusal to feel White guilt," for a density measure-

ment of 16.2%. On the other hand, there were six references by Black students that coded to “White people do not know that White privilege exists,” for a density measurement of 75%, demonstrating its higher density among the smaller population of Black people. This measurement allows the reader to compare similar factors when looking at the top 10 code categories.

Table 3 illustrates the stark differences between Black and White responses

to the readings; the racial make-up of the responses is clear—White candidate reflections largely consisted of the following responses in regards to race:

1. Racism was not something they had ever thought about before (Black candidate responses in this code=0)
2. White privilege is either “less than before” or “exaggerated or unreal” (Black candidate responses in either of these codes=0)

3. The very notion of considering White privilege leads to feelings of anger or resentment (Black candidate response to codes “I’ve experienced reverse racism” or “refusal to feel White guilt”=1)

4. An admission that this topic is difficult to discuss (Black candidate responses in this code=0).

The most encouraging findings in this research are that the number one code category for both Black and White respondents was “As a teacher, I intend to do something about racism” and the number two code for White students was “White privilege is real.” Throughout the course of their reflections, White candidates admitted the reality of White privilege even as they struggled to downplay it by pointing out that “it has gotten better” or even suggesting it may not be as bad as the article made it seem. It may be that for many White candidates, even understanding the reality of White privilege was a step forward.

On the other hand, Black student reflections in regards to race heavily clustered around the following responses:

1. Personal encounters with racism.
2. Claims that they have personally experienced being “unprivileged” when it comes to each of the 50 artifacts of “White privilege,” thus making them all still relevant today.
3. A split reaction about how this came to be: were White people engaging in White privilege thoughtlessly, or were they complicit in White privilege by intentionally ignoring the effects of White privilege?
4. In any case, there was a sneaking sense of defeatism, as five of the eight Black candidates dishearteningly argued that “racism is just a part of life,” in the sense that it was a societal ill unlikely to be cured.

The most striking aspect of the Black reflections was their consistency, as the reflections of all eight Black student repeated the top eight code categories in various forms. The one Black student whose reflection contained the codes “I had never really thought about racism” and “I’ve experienced reverse racism” appeared to be an attractive, middle-class Black male who had been a successful student-athlete at his mostly-White school—experiences which could have protected him from overt racism in high school; however, his reflection ended with his sad realization that even these successes could not shield him from the effects of racism and White privilege forever.

Table 2
The Overall Top 10 Code Categories Related to Race

Rank	Code / Category Name	# References*	# Sources**
1	As a teacher, I intend to do something about racism	64	33
2	White privilege is real	45	36
3	White people do not know white privilege exists	26	23
4	I had never really thought about racism	25	22
5	White privilege is less than before	16	19
6	I have personally experienced racism	9	13
7	White privilege is exaggerated or unreal	11	11
8	Race is a subject that’s hard for me to discuss	7	11
9	Racism is just a part of life	9	10
10	Not much has changed (in 15 since article was written)	9	10

* References: total number of times this code appeared in the journals
 ** Sources: the number of journals that contained this code

Table 3
Comparison of White vs. Black Top 10 Code Categories Related to Race

White	# refs / density	Black	# refs/density
1. As a teacher, I intend to do something about racism	48/129.7%	1. As a teacher, I intend to do something about racism	10/125%
2. White privilege is real	38/102.7%	2. I have personally experienced racism	10/125%
3. I had never really thought about racism	24/64.9%	3. Not much has changed in 15 years (since release of article)	7/87.5%
4. White people do not know White privilege exists	20/54.1%	4. White privilege is real	7/87.5%
5. White privilege is less than before	19/51.4%	5. White people do not know White privilege exists	6/75%
6. White privilege is exaggerated or unreal	11/29.7%	6. Racism is just a part of life	5/62.5%
7. I’ve experienced reverse racism	9/24.3%	7. White people choose to ignore White privilege	5/62.5%
8. Race is a subject that’s hard for me to discuss	9/24.3%	8. Whites are the culture of power	3/37.5%
9. Refusal to feel white guilt	6/16.2%	9. I had never really thought about racism	1/12.5%
10. Whites are the culture of power	6/16.2%	10. I’ve experienced reverse racism	1/12.5%

Analysis of the broad based word frequency and text-search queries also indicated that gender played a role in how candidates discussed racial issues. I ran a matrix coding query dividing code categories by gender (see Table 4). Table 4 lists all applicable code categories (race in terms of personal reader reactions) in the order in which they were most prevalent for female candidates, then compares the density of their responses to male responses for these code categories.

Table 4 also includes a ratio of female to male responses by density. As an example, the code “I have personally experienced racism” has a 3.3 to 1.0 female to male ratio, meaning a female candidate’s response was about three times more likely to include this code than a male candidate’s response. In this case, of the eight Black candidates included in this analysis, six were female.

Word frequency analysis seemed to indicate that males were more likely to discuss racial topics candidly as suggested by their significantly greater use of the words “White” and “Black,” which (White) females tended to avoid. Deeper analysis complicates this picture. What emerged from this analysis was that female responses were more likely than their male counterparts to include almost all of the code categories present, with the exception of “White privilege is real” (ratio of 1 to 1), “Racism is just a part of life” (with a male/female ratio of

1.1 to 1), “White people choose to ignore White privilege” (with a male/female ratio of 1.3 to 1), and “refusal to feel White guilt” (with a male/female ratio of 1.6 to 1). What does these responses tell us?

In part, they tell us that when it comes to this overall code category (personal reactions to race), the male candidates generally had less to say than female candidates. In other words, the more common male use of the specific terms “Black” and “White” seems, on further analysis, to represent less a willingness to speak on the topic of race than a sense that race is a flat, settled topic requiring little introspection, positive or negative.

When males did react personally, it was more likely to be in a way that simultaneously acknowledged racism and White privilege while affirming current race relations. To demonstrate this phenomenon, following is excerpt from one male student’s journal:

It isn’t that I doubt the existence of a White power infrastructure (code: “White privilege is real”) that benefits from subtle racism. What I absolutely, flat-out abhor is the insinuation that I should feel guilty about every beneficial aspect of my life (code: “refusal to feel White guilt”).

Females were more likely to grapple with the topic in difficult and personal ways, often demonstrating contradictory ideas in the same journal entry as they struggled to make sense of it. This analysis

demonstrates that even though males were more willing to use specific race terms, females were more willing to “get their hands dirty” with personal responses to the topic of race in their journals.

Conclusions

I began this project because I wanted to see how the “Silenced Dialogue” played out in my own MAT level Diversity courses. These are classes which include substantial readings and discussions on race. I wanted to understand how candidates spoke about race, and how these conversations tended to play out along racial and gender lines.

The results were simultaneously disheartening and hopeful. They were disheartening because despite the semester-long journey to speak across differences and hear each other’s stories, Black and White students still had strikingly different approaches to the topic of White privilege. White students still tended to downplay its existence, while Black students still reported heartbreaking experiences with racism.

At the same time, this analysis does provide hope for educators as candidates—especially female candidates—appeared willing to grapple with their feelings toward White privilege, and overwhelming agreed that it did in fact exist, and that they wanted to create safe spaces in their classrooms where racism—overt and covert—would not exist.

Table 4
Comparison of Female vs. Male in All Code Categories Related to Race

	# Female Responses	Density	Ratio	Ratio	Density	# Male Responses
As a teacher, I intend to do something about racism	40	142.9%	1.3	1.0	105.9%	18
White privilege is real	28	100.0%	1.0	1.0	100.0%	17
White people do not know White privilege exists	19	67.9%	1.6	1.0	41.2%	7
I had never really thought about racism	18	64.3%	1.6	1.0	41.2%	7
White privilege is less than before	14	50.0%	1.7	1.0	29.4%	5
I have personally experienced racism	11	39.3%	3.3	1.0	11.8%	2
I’ve experienced reverse racism	8	28.6%	2.4	1.0	11.8%	2
Race is a subject that’s hard for me to discuss	8	28.6%	4.9	1.0	5.9%	1
White privilege is exaggerated or unreal	8	28.6%	1.6	1.0	17.6%	3
Not much has changed in 15 years (since release of article)	7	25.0%	1.4	1.0	17.6%	3
Whites are the culture of power	7	25.0%	2.1	1.0	11.8%	2
Racism is just a part of life	6	21.4%	1.0	1.1	23.5%	4
White people choose to ignore White privilege	5	17.9%	1.0	1.3	23.5%	4
Refusal to feel white guilt	3	10.7%	1.0	1.6	17.6%	3

Although the code category “I had never really thought about racism” was one of the most frequent entries in the White students’ journals, this was usually followed by a statement indicating that some understanding had developed from the materials presented in class and from discussions with their fellow candidates. These journals were evidence of a journey made by these candidates toward a greater understanding of people different from themselves. While they do showcase the gulf between White and Black conceptions of racial topics such as White privilege, they also tend to show a softening around the borders. While the “Silenced Dialogue” is clearly still resonant in these findings, there are also signs that the White students are listening, thinking, and understanding.

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