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“Can We Call this Racism?” YES! Disrupting White Educational Spaces and Affirming Students’ Positive “Possible Selves”

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Abstract

As two White, privileged educators and researchers, we have questioned, challenged, and examined how to best operate in diverse classrooms, keeping in mind our joint goals of advancing socially just teaching agendas alongside our desire not to “whitesplain” issues centering on race to students of color. Through narrative case phenomenology and Critical Whiteness Studies frameworks, we analyze separate classroom events in which racialized content was both unexpected and foregrounded. Our responses in these moments, and our ensuing conversations and intellectual discussions, serve as data for this paper. Additionally, these scenarios are ripe for analysis as we have served either as teachers or researchers with distinct priorities and roles. The classroom scenarios we present have caused both our personal introspection and professional growth. Implications for practice include our assessment of anti-racist teaching as a moral and ethical issue that belongs in classroom space, no matter the educational circumstances.

Keywords: Critical Whiteness Studies, Flint Water Crisis, Detroit, Racial Identity Development, Possible Selves, Critical Academic Agency

Introduction

In an effort to examine the possible ways that White educators and scholars interact with students and communities of color, we, as two White, privileged critical educators, reflect on our work advocating for social justice in the classroom. This examination was initiated when our interaction with African American teens was questioned. We were working on an action research project with a high school environmental justice class in Flint, Michigan, addressing social issues emerging from the Flint water crisis. In the process of this study, interactions led to students' speaking and thinking about systemic racism, inequality, and the stories students tell about themselves that might serve to position them both in and outside of the classroom.

At the end of this project, another researcher challenged our intervention within a group of students who decided to write a fictionalized play about the water crisis, a scenario that we will describe below. These accusations upset us because we view ourselves as advocates for equity and social justice. In this project, we perceived ourselves as working constructively with the students and community to listen, document, and share their stories. As White educators and researchers, we are cognizant of being outsiders to the community and the experiences of students of color. Our efforts were deliberate and intentional to support the classroom teachers in allowing the students to control the direction of the class curriculum.

We are mindful that our actions, even when well-intentioned, have the potential to reinscribe a hegemonic perspective on the experiences of the students. This project has prompted us to interrogate what it means for us to work in allyship with students of color and in communities of color as White researchers and educators. We question how our practices effectively balance our position as outsiders to the community with our interest in supporting the development of the critical academic agency of students of color living in marginalized communities. An examination of our intentions and practices form the nucleus of this paper.

Methodology

We use the process of self-study (Berry, 2008) as a means of reflecting on our practices in ways that make explicit our tacit decision-making. It is important to note that this study is a

reflection on our practice set in the context of an action research project in Flint, Michigan. Self-study describes the focus of the study rather than a particular methodology. Pinnegar and Hamilton (2009) suggest that self-study is not a defined set of practices but a methodology for studying professional practice through the systematic reflection on diverse sets of data, careful consideration of the researchers' own backgrounds, and the careful and systematic reflection on the observations they are making about the context of their practice. We view our work as being well aligned with LaBoskey's (2009) five principles: it is self-initiated, self-focused, has a goal of improving our practice, it is collaborative, draws on a variety of data, and views validity as being grounded in trustworthiness.

Our reflections center on our work with students: including a review of our field notes, communication with each other, student work, and post-project interviews with the students. We found that during the project our interactions with the students prompted them to share stories about their lives in Flint and instances that reinscribed dominant negative racial stereotypes and their experiences as raced individuals. For us, this posed a dilemma: Do we tacitly promote students' stories as outsiders to their community, or do we challenge the students' experiences and their grounding in racist narratives? Allowing the students' stories to develop and be distributed unedited runs the risk of perpetuating racist narratives by students in the personal identity or conformity stage of their cultural identity development (Sue & Sue, 2003; Wijeyesinghe & Jackson, 2012). On the other hand, we are not members of the Flint community, and it is unclear what role we have in aiding the students in telling the many stories that exist in Flint. The classroom scenarios this paper presents have afforded us the opportunity to question our responsibility as White educators when working with students of color. Further, we continue to ponder how Whiteness might impact our work as educators and researchers.

Acknowledging our own location as raced individuals is critical to understanding our positionality in our work. I (Author 1) am a White, female instructor of writing at the university level. My scholarly interest centers on critical digital storytelling, which is why I was asked to participate as a co-principal investigator on a seed grant meant to investigate the water crisis in Flint from the vantage point of a high school classroom. I (Author 2) am a White male teacher-educator. My teaching and research both center on using place-based education as a pedagogical tool to cultivate students' critical academic agency. It was this background

and my experience working in different schools with college students, teachers, and elementary students that connected me to the work in Flint.

Literature Review

To reflect on our experiences, we start with a definition of the purpose of education as supporting students in the process of identity development and cultivating their critical academic agency (Burke & Lazarowicz, 2021; Love, 2019). We draw from Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Critical Whiteness Studies theoretical frameworks to theorize how Whiteness, through our own personal classroom experiences, operates in an educational context. Critical Race Theory, and its joint foci on the ubiquity of race in the social world and the use of counter-stories to contradict majoritarian stories that dominate (White) human expression (Delgado, 1989; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Solórzano & Bernal; 2001; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002), serves as a starting point for our analysis. However, CRT is problematic in its reliance on the Black/White binary, inadequately addressing discrimination against other groups of people (i.e., colorism, the experiences of the Latina/o, AAPI, and LGTBQ+ communities). Critical Whiteness Studies offers a departure from CRT as it emphasizes deconstructing how Whiteness is both normalized in power hierarchies and reproduced in society (Matias et al., 2012). As Cole (2021) articulates, Critical Whiteness Studies provides a scholarly platform for White academics to “interrogate their complicity in the system of White supremacy and attempt to subvert Whiteness" (p. 283).This is echoed by Jupp and Lensmire (2016) who argue the second wave in White identity studies is one that eschews race-evasive identities into probing race-visible identities, “White teachers who, with more and less success, are attempting to come to grips with their own complexity and complicity in a White-supremacist system and seeking to learn how to fight against it” (p. 986).

Critical Whiteness Studies highlights the relational ontologies of Whiteness that operate among students, teachers, and the curriculum by examining the preponderance of Whiteness that inhabits educational spaces. There are issues with White educators instructing multiracial classrooms as Smith et al. (2017) articulate, particularly in how White identity has shaped educational environments (Gillborn, 2006; Sheets, 2001). This is particularly true in classroom settings if left unchecked. Ahmed (2007) claims that Whiteness functions as a habit that frames the backdrop of all social action, orienting bodies in specific directions by telling

them what they can and cannot do. Ahmed calls for "disorientation" of this order to disrupt Whiteness in inherited spaces.

Drawing on our experience in different classrooms, we note that when White educators work with students of color who are early in their identity development (Sue & Sue, 2003), there is a complex tension that shapes the practice. If we are silent and listen to students, there is the risk that our silence can be perceived as a tacit affirmation of ideas and representations of marginalized cultures based on negative stereotypes and portrayals of the student's culture that emerge from a dominant White culture. Questioning students when they adopt or represent themselves using these stereotypes risks silencing the student's personal narrative about their lived experiences. However, stereotypical tropes also exist in the community even if they are incomplete representations of the community (Adiche, 2009); allowing the stories to emerge unquestioned potentially perpetuates narratives that reinscribe social injustice based on racism. Given the current demographics of education in which the majority of educators are middle-class White women, and the student body is increasingly diverse (de Bray et al, 2019), we believe that it is important for White educators to find ways to engage constructively with students of color as they navigate their own racial identity development.

As Matias et al. (2012) purport, White instructors do not get to determine what is or is not racist. There is inherent danger when White people make the decision "placing the manifestation of race/racism in the hands of those who racially benefit from the subjugation of people of color" (Matias et al., 2012, p. 296). It is vital for educators to understand the pervasiveness of Whiteness and how it functions in institutional settings (Ahmed, 2007). Deconstructing Whiteness through deliberate classroom acts requires that students examine the binaries that exist in society by challenging their perceptions of the status quo (Bekerman & Zembylas, 2011; Zembylas & Bekerman, 2016). This examination works to encourage teachers to become "critical design experts" (Zembylas & Bekerman, 2016, p. 277) who utilize students' everyday stories as a catalyst for reimagining the social order. Classroom practices can be transformative sites where more than content material is obtained. Schools are systems of inherited White spaces (Ahmed, 2007), and education needs to go beyond teaching students of color to exist and survive; rather, classroom instruction should disrupt Whiteness to create a more equitable and socially-just environment (Edwards, 2006). Teachers do a disservice to students by being apolitical or remaining neutral in the face of pervasive Whiteness.

There is a history of utilizing education for both cultural affirmation and disruption. A wide body of literature and research speaks to the importance of appreciating the cultural and educational capital students of color bring into the classroom (Banks, 2015; Bernal, 2002; Delpit, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Nieto & Bode, 2021). In the context of this paper, Critical Whiteness Studies offered us a direction forward. Through this lens we were able to investigate our own motivations and practices, foregrounding our Whiteness and its possible complicity in race-based scenarios within our classrooms and research practices. We believe there is value in this self-interrogation, as it is our goal to disrupt the (White) status quo and to center the cultural identities and experiences of the students we work with.

In our reflection, we assume "racial realism" (Bell, 1991), which is the idea that race and racism are real and have a material impact on how communities are structured, and that both race and racism shape how we interact as individuals in educational settings. Race is a social construct based on physical appearance as well as an individual's cultural and ethnic history. Race serves both as a tool by institutions and communities to identify and classify people and a source of identity. Identity results from internal processes where individuals develop a sense of self as they interact with communities and institutional structures (Renn, 2012). Classrooms are spaces where students develop their own identity, including their racial identity, in the context of pervasive racism (Wijeyesinghe & Jackson, 2012). Because we see identity development as a key aspect of education, we as educators and educational researchers believe that we play an important role in supporting students' identity development.

Most discussions of identity development build on Erickson's (1994) model following a set of stages that individuals' experience. Sue and Sue's (2003) paradigm of racial and cultural identity development provides for five stages of identity development: conformity or identification with White culture; dissonance or experiencing conflict between White culture and their experiences; resistance/immersion, by which individuals of color resist White culture and immerse themselves in their own culture; introspection or a struggle to balance White culture and their own culture; and finally, synergistic articulation and awareness through which individuals integrate their own cultural heritage and knowledge to form an identity that balances racial/cultural identity with other aspects of self. These stages are mediated through social interactions with others who belong to the same and other groups; thus, identity formation happens at the intersection of culture and individual agency (Côté & Levine, 2014). Markus and Nurius (1986) further expand on the role of agency in identity

development by articulating the idea of possible selves. Our possible selves are a vision of who we might be; while they are individual visions, they are also distinctly social and are a result of social comparisons and the social narratives we experience and tell about ourselves and our communities. Our agency derives from our ability to see ourselves as members of a community of practice where we have the ability to transform ourselves and our community (Basu, Barton, Clairmont, & Locke, 2009).

Our Work in Classrooms

Collectively we draw on over three decades of work in educational settings; here we highlight two of our most recent experiences in Flint and Detroit as the focus for this reflection. In these settings, we worked with schools in which the students were predominantly students of color and the classroom teachers were White. While we identified ourselves as White researchers from outside the community, it is our belief that the students saw us more as teachers due to the kinds of interactions we had with them, and we often acted as co-teachers.

Reflections from Detroit

For the past seven years, I (Kristian), have been taking pre-service teachers to an elementary school in Southwest Detroit. In preparing the pre-service teachers, I discuss the different stories told about the neighborhood with them. It is common for the pre-service teachers to only know the neighborhood and the school by reputation through the news. Media sources routinely cite the high poverty rate, the high crime rate, and concentration of immigrant families in the neighborhood. All of these perceptions are true, but the stories are incomplete and reflect a deficit perspective. What I work to highlight, in conversations with the pre-service teachers, is the number of locally owned restaurants and the neighborhood grocery store behind the school whose wall is a bright mural painted by a local artist and an example of the common public art in the neighborhood. While there are no statistics, there is also evidence of a number of homes with extensive gardens and signs of home renovation. I also highlight the large number of local organizations that interact with the school, from the church next door to the local Veterans of Foreign Wars post. In preparing my pre-service teachers to work in this community, I want them to start with positive stories about the neighborhood.

This construction of the neighborhood from an asset perspective is problematized when the pre-service teachers and I first engage with the elementary students in talking about the community. During a project discussing converting a vacant lot into a neighborhood space, the elementary students often focused on the deficits. There isn't a Walmart, Zapzone, or pool; they want one of these built on the vacant lot. They talk about how parks are full of trash and are not safe places to play. When envisioning the park, they share a desire for a quiet place to be away from the noise of the truck traffic at the local international border crossing, one of the busiest in the world. Some students yearn to see evidence of nature, because "there is no nature in our neighborhood." They talk about the vacant houses that are dangerous and places where homeless people stay. These issues and this framing are elicited when students are asked about activities to create change in their neighborhood.

It is during the less structured interactions with the students that I am able to identify the assets they may see in the community. During informal interactions they are more likely to share that they like playing games in the street with their friends and that they want places to have their parents come watch them play or to play with them. They want to be able to take younger siblings to the park to play in the sandbox. They want to work with their parents at the restaurant or in the garden. What is not shared in formal conversations are examples of community assets, such as the strong sense of family, entrepreneurship, and community engagement that are implicitly described in the informal conversations.

It became evident when reflecting on the structure of these classroom narratives that the negative stereotypes about the neighborhood dominated the perceptions of both the elementary students and the pre-service teachers. Both groups highlight poverty, the lack of nature, and the other deficits in the community. I view it as a critical part of my role as an educator to refocus these conversations to include the community's assets, including evidence of natural resources, community engagement, and entrepreneurialism. At the same time, I work to reframe the deficits the students and pre-service teachers highlight so that they can be seen as the impact of White supremacy and structural racism. Abandoned houses are the result of redlining. The noise and air pollution from the local industry are the consequence of environmental racism. The prevalence of litter and the dirty streets are the outcome of poorly run city services that overwhelm residents' ability to maintain their neighborhood and undermine a sense of belonging and ownership. As a White educator working in this community of color, I have a responsibility to ensure that these young students do not

internalize the negative experiences as part of their identity. This is a challenge in a system that focuses on meritocracy and individual responsibility. Without feedback, the children in this school in Detroit will grow up to be like the teens in Flint who are unsure if they can call the injustices that they experience racism.

Reflections from Flint

At the time of our work, residents in Flint, Michigan, were living through the daily realities of having their home water poisoned by lead. Since the population of Flint is largely African American and below the poverty line, questions were raised that linked the crisis in Flint to environmental racism, eco-justice, and classism.

We spent an eight-week term working with students at a Flint high school who were enrolled in an environmental justice course. Their curriculum focused on environmental injustice issues from around the world. However, the students shared that they were more interested in addressing what was happening presently within their community. Their teachers agreed, and following their lead, allowed the students to rewrite the course curriculum. Students chose to work on a variety of group and solo projects for the term that addressed the water crisis in different formats; their efforts culminated in a public performance called "Change Day." On Change Day, students presented their projects: spoken word poetry, songs they had written, digital stories, and short skits to express their frustration and anger about their reality living with the water crisis in a community space. They invited community members, public officials, and parents to the public event.

In reflecting on this experience, we highlight two instances where discussions centering on race entered the classroom. The first was the conversation for which we were criticized. It happened as I (Christopher) was checking with the groups. As reported in my field notes, one group (both male and female, White and African American) was preparing a fictionalized skit about the water crisis. The parts they selected represented different community members. Through the process of writing this spoken word performance, the students engaged in dialogue with me about their intended roles. David (African American) initially planned to play the part of a prisoner experiencing the water crisis from inside of jail. Aaliyah (African American) planned to be a struggling mother. The other students (African American) opted to represent different family members or citizens from Flint. Their White peer, Nicole, planned to portray the governor. My conversation with the group centered on

how by default the students of color took on the parts associated with negative community stereotypes, while the White student selected roles (first governor, then teacher) representing positions of power. Following this conversation, the students decided to switch parts. More importantly, the students started a dialogue about power dynamics, stereotypes, and how they were represented by these positionalities.

In interviews held at the end of the class, several students from the skit group reported that they worked together to identify multiple stories that represented Flint, stories that altered over time. Aaliyah stated how the group wanted to explore stories that they "knew." She decided to continue to represent a struggling mother, reporting, "That's something you see often in Flint; but also in Flint, you see families working together." David reported that the group spent a lot of time talking about the importance of not perpetuating stereotypes. He stated, "I was the inmate, but I figured out it'd be kind of stereotypical because you know, people like to portray African Americans as like they always go to prison. So, then I changed it to a politician because he was like a big role in the whole Flint water crisis."

We believe that the value in fostering conversations about race and representation are critical dialogues to have in the classroom. In addition, in the concluding interviews, students described the decision-making process as a group conversation. Aaliyah shared that the students helped each other form the roles, stating, "We talked about what we would like to do, so it kinda was a group effort for everything, it wasn't just certain people at certain roles." In reflection, we recognize that this change in emphasis from roles grounded in stereotypes to different stories and counter-stories emerged through the dialogue initiated by the researcher (Author 1). However, the students' critical awareness was raised by the end of the course, and they depicted these conversations as part of their learning process.

The second instance we reflect on happened when I (Christopher) was working with an all-African American female group writing a rap about the water crisis. The students asked if they could get feedback on their lyrics. As they were talking through some of the phrasing they used, they asked permission to label what was happening in Flint as "racism." Without hesitation, I said "Yes," affirming their insight into their experiences. We believe that it is problematic for us as White educators to define racism for our students. We also think that acknowledging their perceptions of racism is a critical first step in raising students' critical consciousness (Freire, 1973). In the final interview with Ayala, a student in the rap group, what emerged was her ability to connect her experiences with other examples of environmental

racism from around the globe that had been discussed in class. She spoke about the impact of pollution on kids in Detroit, Jakarta, and other cities. We view her ability to name and connect her experience to other examples of environmental racism as a critical aspect of cultivating her critical academic agency, where she now recognizes that it is important for her to speak out about the injustices she sees happening to children in particular.

Reflections on our Past and Implications for Future Practice

Classrooms are historically White spaces and failing to acknowledge and question these environments reinscribes the hegemonic White perspective (Ahmed, 2007; Stewart & Gachago, 2020; Zembylas & Bekerman, 2016). We see this issue with the elementary students in Detroit focusing on negative issues in the neighborhood. In the absence of counter stories, students of color are likely to internalize these perspectives or remain unsure about their ability to name their experiences, like the students in Flint who asked permission to identify their experiences as racism. They remain in what Sue and Sue (2003) identify as the conformity stage. The hegemonic power of historically White spaces shapes students' perceptions of their identity and of their community. Unchecked, these negative stereotypes become internalized (Padilla, 2001; Poupart, 2003), and students struggle to move beyond the conformity stage. Sharing counter-stories that focus on the community assets and affirming the contradictions they see is a critical step in allowing students to move to immersion where they see the conflicts between their own experiences and White narratives.

When we interviewed David after the conclusion of the course, he expressed the connection he saw between his self-representation and his increased sense of agency. In an interview he stated, "I feel like this environmental class has inspired me to try to make more change…go out in the community and try to make change like help people if I see they need help and I can help." David linked his participation in Change Day to affirmation of his voice, academic agency, and community capital (Stewart & Burke, 2021). We see these conversations with the students as tools for challenging the hegemonic White structures in the classroom by raising their critical consciousness (Freire, 1973) so that students can become aware of how the representation of each story might be interpreted by different audiences. Raising this awareness allows students to make conscious choices about their own positionality. We recognized that in our quest for socially just and anti-racist work, we do not want students like

David to believe, at 15 years old, that his "role" in life is that of a prisoner. We also wondered how students' identities might be "marked" if they shared a personal story that represented a negative stereotype, particularly in front of an audience at a public event. By encouraging more complete stories, we see the possibility of helping students construct affirmative views of their possible selves thereby promoting a greater sense of agency.

The centering of community assets in Detroit, the affirmation of the rap group, and the questioning of David's group are practices that are aligned with Ahmed's (2007) notion of "disorientation" and of disrupting White inherited spaces. These practices also offer a platform where students can examine everyday stories that highlight the Black/White power binary (Zembylas & Bekerman, 2016). We both felt that not challenging the students' racialized perceptions would have been an act of violence committed upon the students of color by reifying the safety of the status quo of a White supremacist and White comfort zone (Zeus & Porter, 2010).

Our position in the classroom should disrupt racist structures and affirm students' insights and views, as we assist students toward reframing their experiences as social and cultural assets by highlighting those models as possible selves for the students to aspire toward inhabiting (Marcus & Nurius, 1986). In our experience, this means flipping the curriculum to center the stories the students bring with them into the classroom (Stewart, 2017; Stewart & Gachago, 2020). In Detroit, recognizing gardens and landscaping maintained by residents as both community and natural resources and identifying immigrant families as entrepreneurial with an understanding of globalism and cosmopolitanism changes the narrative. In Flint, allowing the students' to rewrite the curriculum to focus on Change Day was an example of resistance that demonstrated leadership and communal engagement versus centering the story on the water crisis.

There is an inherent conflict in the way that we have constructed our roles that goes back to the initial criticism that we wish to address next. While we see classrooms as White structures that reinforce White supremacy and believe that we have an obligation to disrupt that space, we recognize that this continues to place us at the center of this system (Cole, 2021). We see this most clearly illustrated with the students who asked if they could link the water crisis to racism. We found it problematic that these students felt a need to seek approval from the White researcher to validate lyrics formed around their exposure to environmental injustice and eco-racism. We felt the "yes" response was justified as students do not need an

adult's permission, particularly a White adult's permission, to validate their racialized and lived-experiences. We felt the students were operating inside an inherited space formed by Whiteness (Ahmed, 2007) and therefore were accustomed to being educated within a White supremacy culture in which asking permission to share or to acknowledge Black experience was commonplace. In answering "yes" to the students, in part, we disrupted the White forces that shaped the room, thereby naming the students' experiences as valid, real, and a counter-story to White majoritarian power structures. There is not an option for silence as we must turn our gaze toward the pervasiveness of Whiteness even if that means allowing White complicity to Black pain to surface (Stewart & Gachago, 2020).

The problem we face is that we are left in the role of affirming student narratives; and as a result, we play an unwarranted position in certifying what is or what is not racism to the students. Matias et al. (2012) articulate how White people do not get to determine what is and what is not racist. What happened in Flint *is* environmental injustice due to race. This student called it as she saw it and so should anyone who encounters racism. We understand that in educational spaces both historicized and dominating Whiteness becomes the only breathable air in the room. Students of color should not be expected to survive or even be taught how to exist in these environments (Edwards, 2006). It is up to White people to dismantle systems of White domination that we have created by developing new territories where racial literacy can be advanced by all the participants in the classroom. The question we are left with is how do we engage with students in ways that allow them to articulate their own identity without playing a role in determining for them what is and what is not racist?

Structural racism is deeply embedded and not always easily identified. Over the last few years and through continued dialogue about our experiences, we have recognized how our own Whiteness impacts all that we do in our teaching and scholarship. As we move forward, we will continue to push ourselves toward professional growth by assessing our own complicity in reproducing White-centric classrooms and curricula. This means that we continue to dismantle inherited White spaces and work toward building better and sustainable relationships with our students and within the communities they reside. This last point is perhaps the most imperative. We cannot decolonize entire systems alone. Buy-in is required from everyone who inhabits the space. How to create relationships that are more than transactional (i.e., in a classroom for a grade) and that utilizes the community as primary and vital stakeholders must become the focus of our ongoing work. Dismantling structural

racism requires more than just answering the questions students raise. Classroom orientation must focus on placing students in a position to examine the structural inequities that form the queries they pose. This means everyone who operates in these environments has a responsibility to reshape the values, beliefs, and norms to rebuild the space.

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