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Yes, I'm White, But…Now What… Cultural Competency & Deficit Perspectives in White Preservice Undergraduate Women Teachers

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ABSTRACT

This phenomenological qualitative study used Rowe, Bennett, and Atkinson's (1994) White Racial Consciousness Model to conceptualize racial awareness among White undergraduate female preservice teachers. Findings indicate that White preservice teachers recognized their White racial identity but lacked an understanding about their positionality within systems of whiteness. They use colorblind perspectives when discussing issues of race and racism in support of an enlightenment narrative. Participants sought diversity competencies in their student teaching experiences because they suggested their teacher preparation programs and precollege experiences limited their exposure to diverse identities and settings. They held deficit perspectives about Students of Color and struggled communicating with parents. Implications for practice are included related to improvements within teacher preparation curriculum and undergraduate student development.

Keywords: White women preservice teacher, White racial consciousness, teacher preparation

According to the National Center for Education (2020), American teachers are entering a more diverse school environment despite *de facto* [1]school racial segregation (Durham-Barnes, 2015; Ramsay-Jordan, 2020). Public K-12 enrollment continues to increase among Students of Color, including Black, Hispanic, Asian-American, and multiracial populations (National Center for Education, 2020). To educate these students, undergraduate teacher preparation programs prepare approximately 3,500 candidates annually (National Center of Education Statistics, 2016). However, these teacher candidates do not mirror current student demographics as the majority of the teacher population is White and female, with less than 15% of all public school teachers identifying as Persons of Color (National Center for Education, 2020).

This identity gap between students and teachers is significant because preservice teachers must be equipped to address individual differences, such as racial or cultural identity, between learners (Baker, 2017). Teachers shape the future of the students they educate, and higher education leaders assist in building these future educators' foundations.

[1] *De facto* segregation is the separation of groups that occurs because of uncodified laws or through discriminatory practices.

Higher education leaders are charged with an enormous task in preparing future preservice K-12 teachers (Allen et al., 2017).

However, there are limitations in teacher preparation that perpetuate colorblind [2]approaches in support of racial or cultural differentiation because there is a lack of multicultural education and competencies for teacher candidates (Allen et al., 2017). In particular, White professors are the majority of teacher education faculty which may facilitate limitations to curriculum and draw boundaries to the extent to which preservice teachers can develop their consciousness of "self" and "others" (Allen et al., 2017; Case, 2012; Picower, 2009; Wilson & Kumar, 2017). These curricular disconnections can produce unhealthy teacher-student relationships and deficit views of students among teacher candidates (Baker, 2017; Ramsay-Jordan, 2020). Many teacher candidates graduate from their undergraduate programs unable to equally educate their Students of Color or are aware or competent in the experiences, cultural values, and uniqueness of Students of Color (Baker, 2017).

[2] The ideology that race plays no factor and is unnoticed. Whites' rationalization minorities' contemporary status as not a product of systemic racism rather a result of market dynamics, naturally occurring phenomena, and Blacks' imputed cultural limitations (Bonilla-Silva, 2017).

There is a lack of "knowledge of self," particularly among White teacher candidates, about their identity and biases, and they are unaware of their positionality in whiteness (Allen et al., 2017; Shah & Coles, 2020). White women are most likely to be student leaders, engage in colorblind perspectives, and frequently do not conceptualize systemic whiteness (Cabrera et al., 2016a). This surface racial consciousness manifests in undergraduate students because of structural, curricular gaps and how whiteness inoculates system beneficiaries in ways such as colorblindness or postracial logics (Allen et al., 2017; Sasso et al., 2022). Thus, a better understanding is necessary to unpack the nuances of how White undergraduate women preservice teachers conceptualize their experiences with racial diversity and understand their White racial consciousness.

This phenomenological qualitative study used Rowe, Bennett, and Atkinson's White Racial Consciousness Model (WRCM) (1994) to conceptualize the racial consciousness of White female preservice teachers and their experiences with diverse student identities. The following research question guided this research study: How do undergraduate White female preservice teachers recognize their positionality and racial locations when engaging with other diverse identities?

In this article, the authors intentionally position racialized identities as “White” and “Black” as presented by the study participants. We do not use “Caucasian” or “African American” because these are uncommon vernacular used by undergraduate students (Sasso et al., 2022). The authors also intentionally further capitalize racial identities such White or Students of Color to acknowledge the importance of race for its salience in college identity development (Sasso et al., 2022).We also use “whiteness” in lowercase because it refers to a generalized collective identity and whiteness because it is a system of oppression in order to "reject the grammatical representation of power” (Perez Huber, 2010, p. 93).

Conceptual Framework

This study used Rowe, Bennett, and Atkinson's White Racial Consciousness Model (WRCM) (1994) to explore how undergraduate self-identified, White female preservice teachers are conscious of their White identity. White racial consciousness (WRC) is defined as "one's awareness of being White and what that implies concerning those who do not share White group membership" (Rowe et al., 1994, p.133). Within WRCM, two constructs of racial attitude types, racial acceptance, racial justice, and describing one's racial attitude orientation (LaFleur et al., 2002).

Racial acceptance also consists of two attitude types, integrative and dominative. An *integrative* attitude type is expressed as comfort with minorities, and the *dominative* attitude type focuses on the negative attitudes that White persons hold against racial/ethnic minorities. *Racial justice* is comprised of two attitude types, reactive and conflictive. Individuals with *reactive* attitudes understand that White persons benefit from unearned advantages. Those with a *conflictive* attitude type do not support overt discrimination of Persons of Color, but they believe that efforts such as affirmative action are discriminatory against White persons.

Racial attitude orientation is developed through observational learning and can change with situational influences (LaFleur et al., 2002; Rowe et al., 1994). This change of situational influences supports the use of this model for this study, which describes how students explore racial consciousness in their teacher education setting through sharing their lived experiences of navigating diverse environments and situations as student teachers. WRCM was used to develop the semi-structured interview guide and for initial axial coding in data analysis.

Literature Review

Whiteness

Whiteness is a cultural discourse and system that excludes intersectionality and shields White college students from privileged behavior and social class structures (Cabrera, 2018, 2019). Due to the absence of marginalization or oppression, Cabrera (2018) contends that whiteness does not fit under Crenshaw's (1989) definition of intersectionality. According to Cabrera (2018) as well as Harris and Patton (2018), educators often confuse intersectionality—a system of interrelated domains of oppression—with an identity construct (2018). White people who participate in whiteness enables them to practice *White agility* which is deflecting conversations and personal accountability about race and racism (Cabrera, 2019).

White individuals engage in white agility also when they adopt a unique identity in an attempt to avoid conversations about race and racism because they find them uncomfortable (Cabrera, 2019). In an effort to steer clear of racial issues, some White people make a distinction between themselves and good and evil (Foste, 2020a). This referred to as the *enlightenment narrative* in which white persons position themselves (good) against or above other white they believe are racist (bad) (Foste, 2020a). These approaches are more individualist performative efforts

rather than engaged work to dismantle racial oppression (Lensmire et al., 2013; Levine-Rasky, 2000).

The background of *White immunity*, which explains how White identities are immune to disparate racial treatment, is often missing from subsequent discourses on whiteness (Cabrera et al., 2017a; 2017b). The idea of White immunity was developed from the idea of *White privilege* and encompasses colorblind racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Edwards, 2017; McIntosh, 1990). *Color-evasiveness*, often known as colorblind racism, is a kind of racism in which White people claim not to notice race and refrain from discussing racial issues (Applebaum, 2010; Annamma et al., 2017; Edwards, 2017). *White privilege* is an implicit institutional social and racial advantage experienced by White persons and is afforded to them by others who are also White in positions of power and authority (Kendall, 2002; McIntosh, 1990).

Further, white privilege is the absence of prejudice among White persons and without assumptions of negative behaviors from others (Kendall, 2002; McIntosh, 1990). Good Whites recognize overt racism and denounce it. Bad Whites are blatantly racist and act in isolation. In the good versus evil binary there is no systemic racism, just individual acts. McIntosh (1989), unpacks how facing White privilege from a systemic

approach, naming it may require action, ownership, change that will result in a loss of power leading to the dismantlement of White privilege. The loss of White privilege brings with it fear. A good White teacher recognizes there are disadvantages in the educational system, but they play no role further protecting whiteness as it belongs to no one. White people being taught not to recognize White privilege further protects it. These concepts of whiteness are part of the system of racial oppression known as *white supremacy* (.e.g. the preferential treatment or superiority of white culture). This system is often reinforced on college campuses and prioritizes institutional participation and interaction with White students (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Feagin, 2006; Omi & Winant, 2015).

Institutions have attempted to focus on and uphold White students' development of a positive White racial identity through performative diversity and inclusion programs (Abioye & Sasso, 2023; Sasso & Marcy, 2023). This comes at the expense of dismantling racist whiteness structures, particularly when they do not feel required to inform their fellow White students (Foste, 2020b). White students who feel disenfranchised by any challenges to this hegemony externalize blame because they cannot assert their privilege (Harris et al., 2019; Sasso, 2019).

Moreover, most of these social justice programs or activities center on whiteness through *white privilege pedagogy* which attempts to help students to become aware of their individual privileges in a larger system of whiteness but permits students to believe they are experiencing a transformation (Margolin, 2014). They are commonly used to educate teachers and other educator about whiteness (Lensmire et al., 2013). Yet, the primary critique that they are insufficient for student socialization and may increase white immunity to continue proliferation of whiteness in higher education (Ashlee et al., 2020).

For example, students may continuously contradict their own understanding by making racist statements through forms of backstage racism which is hidden backstage racism (Foste & Jones, 2020; Sasso & Marcy, 2023). White students often participate in covert racism and cannot recognize their place in the system of White supremacy (Foste & Jones, 2020). Because of this, White undergraduates have the chance to experience what is known as *racial arrested development*, a state of relative ignorance (Cabrera et al., 2016).

Many White undergraduates in leadership roles or cooperative learning, such as student teachers, engaged in racial narcissism (white savior complex) to give the impression that they had more exposure to and

understanding of racial problems (Foste, 2020a). Moreover, other White students often adopt "White Knight" attitudes, where they judge Students of Color as immature and have paternalistic ideas that they should be saved which is a deficit approach (Trepagnier, 2006).

White student leaders believe they have the ability to claim ownership over Students of Color, which is an example of whiteness being treated as property (Cabrera, 2011; Gusa, 2010; Harris et al., 2019). Good White students believe they are more racially aware than other White classmates because they have received specialized inclusion teaching with a broad, general idea/assumption that education programs are innately social justice orientated or equity-centered or claim to have a diverse social circle (Foste, 2020a).

White Female Preservice Teachers

White preservice teachers fear appearing racist because of beliefs, sharing in groups they do not identify with, and fear of losing control of Black students (Durham-Barnes, 2015; Picower, 2009). Furthermore, White preservice teachers gain the opportunity to learn and practice classroom management techniques and discipline practices that over punish Students of Color (Larkin et al., 2016; Picower, 2009; Shah & Coles, 2020). Durham-Barnes (2015) highlights how teacher educators

derive from White middle-class America who rarely consider themselves racial beings. They lack experiences in diversity, and whiteness was not discussed in their formative years for many White female preservice teachers (Durham-Barnes, 2015).

Young (2011) has identified four types of racial personae exhibited by White educators. In the first category, racism is an individual action removing "us" and placing responsibility on the unknown "them." In the second category, racism continues to be a singular phenomenon but ranges from explicit to obvious. Individuals in the third type are willing to fight racism but do not recognize their complicity or privilege. The fourth personae recognizes their positionality and subtle internal racism yet do not observe racism as systemic (Young, 2011). White preservice teachers lack racial comprehension; they view racism as an individual phenomenon rather than a systemic and institutional reality which is defined as "old racism" as conceptualizing race between individuals, while "new racism" is defined as institutional (Wilson & Kumar, 2017).

The undergraduate experience for preservice teachers allows them to remain insulated and to negate discourse to challenge racial ideology (Picower, 2009). Their whiteness protects and maintains dominant ideology and stereotypes, which they utilize to evade, subvert, and avoid

racial challenges (Picower, 2009). These are expressions of white fragility and immunity and when challenged, they become defensive and deflective (Abioye & Sasso, 2023). Attempts to change preservice teachers' racial attitudes and beliefs are negligible or incremental (Larkin et al., 2016; Shah & Coles, 2020).

Goodwin argues that teacher programs are reactive versus proactive, seeking to address the "problem" rather than create epistemological change (Goodwin, 1997). Shah and Cole's (2020) found that contextual factors inhibited and neutralized integrating anti-racial practices into teaching. Preservice teachers perceived racism as something that happens to others, not noticing how their whiteness influences Students of Color. Preservice teachers believe that, due to limited awareness, they could not benefit from antiracist education, and this disconnect arises from modern racism which can be challenging to translate because it is subtle and implicit (Shah & Cole, 2020). Durham-Barnes (2015) found that preservice teachers struggle with White privilege, White guilt, discomfort, absence of cultural consciousness, and powerlessness. Yet the question of race discussions assist preservice teachers in examining assumptions, beliefs, and stereotypes remained

unanswered. There was no evidence of the lasting impact and little evidence of transference in the classroom (Durham-Barnes, 2015).

There is a disconnect between preservice teachers' expressed beliefs and their classroom practice. Many White teachers demonstrate colorblind ideology with statements like "all children are equal," and "I do not see race" which permits White preservice teachers to deny how whiteness intrudes on People of Color (Durham-Barnes, 2015; Sue, 2006). Colorblind logic allows postracial morphing that racism is a historical event, although it persists in the United States.

However, many White preservice teachers are not ignorant about race issues (Garrett & Segall, 2013). Within education, Students of Color recognize their racial identities as early as Kindergarten and socialized to recognize their differences, often leading to negative internalization (Song, 2017). White preservice teachers also are frequently unable to fully conceptualize or contextualize racial identity development because of color-evasive or colorblind perspectives (Hazelbaker & Mistry, 2021). Preservice White female teachers acknowledge that the academic K-12 education structure works better for some than others (Shah & Coles, 2020). Rather, they have identified the contributing factors or blame that

reside with students, student families, socioeconomic status, parental involvement, school resources, culture, and limited life experiences.

Yet, preservice teachers often locate responsibility outside of themselves and do not identify institutional or systemic racism as a factor (Shah & Coles, 2020). These individual behaviors or actions of preservice teachers reinforce and uphold disparities in education such as through deficit perspectives about their Students of Color, grade evaluation bias, and approaches towards student discipline (Suh et al., 2020; Wilson & Kumar, 2017). There is a lack of racial identity consciousness preservice teachers possess and teacher educators are challenged to provide a diverse educational experience in which schools of education also struggle with providing preservice teachers with a diverse teacher preparation program (Durham-Barnes, 2015).

Methods

This phenomenological qualitative study explored the extent to which undergraduate White female preservice teachers recognize their White racial identity in their experiences with other diverse identities. These lived experiences shape the future teachers' development and impact their Students of Color. Phenomenology was the research method chosen to understand because it "is the qualitative analysis of the

conscious experiences of phenomena from the first-person perspective" (Privitera & Ahlgrim- Delzell, 2019, p. 276). Phenomenological investigations develop a narrative of experiences to move research from an abstract to a conceptual understanding, allowing researchers to portray the essence of participants' lived experiences (Moustakas, 1994). Rowe et al. (1994) White Racial Consciousness Model was used to inform the design of the semi-structured interview guide and conceptualize the phenomena of racial consciousness in this study.

Participants

The target population was White undergraduate female preservice teachers because they are the majority of primary and secondary educators. This study used a snowball criterion sampling procedure by initially contacting area teacher education faculty across a large Midwestern metropolitan area to provide initial potential participants from multiple universities. The inclusion criteria included: (1) Enrolled in an accredited 4-year higher education institution; (2) Participation in a formal, accredited teacher preparation program at their host institution; (3) current or immediately recent experience in a clinical student teaching experience in a diverse K-12 school setting; (4) self-identify as a White cisgender female. Using White Racial Consciousness theory as the

conceptual framework, participants needed no prior experiences with race, class, or other diversity as the researchers sought to understand the meanings participants ascribed to their experiences (Cabrera, 2016). All participants (*n*=7; see Table 1) selected a pseudonym and are upper-class students in their preservice clinical teaching experiences. The preservice teachers taught in K-8 suburban schools in the Midwestern region of the United States and engaged in various student teaching environments and levels.

Table 1

Participant Profiles

Pseudonym	Race	Gender	Student Teaching Area of Focus
Amy	White	Female	Music education
Ann	White	Female	Early childhood
Grace	White	Female	Elementary education
Jasmine	White	Female	Elementary and middle school
Kelsie	White	Female	Early childhood K-3
Loralae	White	Female	Elementary education
Rose	White	Female	Elementary education

Positionality

Foste (2020b) suggested a process of reflexivity when engaging in research examining systems of whiteness and identities. Therefore, the primary researcher considered their positionality in relation to the participants in this study to avoid cultivating White comfort, as suggested by Foste (2020b). The researchers identify as cisgender heterosexuals with different racial identities. The lead researcher is an African American woman K-12 administrator, and the second researcher identifies as a mixed-heritage Latino male.

The researchers consider whiteness through intersecting identities of race, gender, and social class. They acknowledge the privilege and power held due to their professional identities as educators and their responsibility to advocate for educational equity. The researchers recognize the innate privileges that White women teachers possess, which exceed the teachers' of Color apparent authority. These assumptions were bracketed through Rowe et al. White Racial Consciousness Model (1994).

Data Collection

This was an institutional review board-approved investigation in which the researchers utilized a semi-structured interview guide using open-ended questions, which allowed the researcher to ask follow-up questions for clarification (Privitera & Ahlgrim-Delzell, 2019). The

interview guide asked participants about their teacher preparation, positionality, racial identity, racial exposure, racial ideology, and attitudes and beliefs developed over their life span. Questions were included such as “How do these inequalities manifest in the K-12 educational system? How might they appear in your classroom?” as well as “Describe how your teacher preparation courses have prepared you to build relationships with students and parents of color?”

Participants selected their pseudonym alias to protect their confidentiality and were interviewed in person and over Zoom, which lasted approximately 60 minutes. Interviews were recorded and professionally transcribed to prepare for data analysis.

Data Analysis

In congruence with phenomenology, the interpretive paradigm was used for data analysis. This paradigm posits that reality cannot be separated from previous and existing knowledge, and the researchers' positionalities are inherent across all phases of the research process (Angen, 2000). Lived experiences are constructed through socially and experientially developed understandings and meanings, such as through whiteness (Angen, 2000).

The researchers assumed the privileges of whiteness are frequently invisible to the beneficiaries of the system based on previous research (Cabrera, 2015; 2016; McIntosh, 1989; Omi & Winant, 2015). Thus, the researchers used White Racial Consciousness Model (Rowe et al., 1994) to contextualize findings by identifying the theory domains through each of the racial attitudes as axial codes. Then, the researchers reread the data to identify relationships between the axial codes used in the open coding process, where they were grouped into more abstract and complex categories (Saldana, 2021). Focused coding uses selective coding to narrow how White undergraduate preservice teachers engage with diversity by "validating those relationships and filling in categories that need further refinement and development" (Jones et al., 2014, p. 45). The researchers interpreted the themes that emerged from the participants' stories and examined whether or not the identified themes fit within the context of white racial consciousness. Final collapsed themes were organized using code mapping validated by an external auditor as part of trustworthiness strategies (Saldana, 2021).

Trustworthiness

To meet the trustworthiness criteria in this study, the researchers addressed the standards of credibility, dependability, and confirmability as

defined by Jones et al. (2014). Credibility was met through member checking, which presented participants with their interview transcripts and early review during the coding process, where no changes were requested by participants. Dependability was met by keeping an audit log of research activities and documents (Jones et al., 2014). Confirmability was used by using a student affairs/higher education researcher as an external auditor to validate the themes (Jones et al., 2014, p. 37). The external auditor examined the veracity of the themes, and the researchers accepted by highlighting any inconsistencies between what was said and the effect on the participant (Foste, 2020b).

Findings

Findings revealed two major themes. The first was that participants held some extent of white racial consciousness but attempted to separate themselves from issues of race. Participants also did not believe in the concepts of white privilege. However, they attempted to use their preservice teaching experience to address their cultural competency gaps and held deficit perspectives about Students of Color in their classrooms.

Yes, I'm White, but…

White female preservice teachers used postracial or colorblind logic to distance themselves from participation in a more extensive system of whiteness. Some denied the existence of White privilege and consistently provided exceptions to their whiteness. Participants often used phrases such as "I am White, but…" or "I am White, and…" followed by statements suggesting they had Black or Hispanic friends or even knew interracial couples to identify themselves as nonracist. Several participants said they felt unsupported in exploring their whiteness because they were nervous about being perceived as racist. The students struggled to understand how their lived experiences fit within the broader society and found it difficult to distinguish between ideas about privilege and their White identity and whiteness.

I'm White, but…not Privileged

Participants often expressed discomfort and shame when discussing their White privilege but were more comfortable externalizing privilege to concepts of social class that whiteness provides them. Ann denied the existence of White privilege by stating, "For me, it's just the Color of my skin. And I don't feel like I have White privilege. Like, I mean, what is White privilege?" Kelsie also noted that:

I would say my parents mostly veered away from it [discussion of race]… but I was in my own world and didn't really realize the things in the bigger world… More of like, they didn't know and also, the area we were in was very White. Like, it just didn't come up very often.

They did not entirely under the concept of White privilege because most reported growing up in a predominantly White environment where they did not have to acknowledge the experiences of Persons of Color. Many had been racially isolated or had little exposure to Black or other Students of Color in their upbringing and relied heavily on media and their family perspectives.

I'm White, but…not Racist

Participants were concerned with being perceived as racist to uphold an enlightenment narrative. They recognized racism exists, yet disassociated themselves or anyone they knew directly as racist to locate themselves outside of racism. For example, Loralae shared:

I know my family came over, like, post-American enslavement, pre-Nazi Germany. So, I feel like my family came over right in that little window where it's like, we're good. We didn't like, hate on

anybody, like, we're good here. And then, I didn't meet many of my grandparents. But so, like learning, as I've aged and just learning more about, like, oh, you can have monsters in your family and not know it.

Some participants named friends, extended family members, a grandparent, or even a parent who was racist. However, they separate themselves from this. Two participants acknowledged racist family members, denouncing racist ideologies, and appeared to understand how exposure to continual racist beliefs negatively impacted their interactions with Black people. These two participants also seemed more racially aware than participants who disassociated. Jasmine shared that she has a Black brother-in-law and noted that her father was uncomfortable having a Black son-in-law. She compartmentalized this as, "So, but for some of my mom's side, I don't think that they're racist, or I don't think they have a negative impression on Black people. I think it's mostly just my dad's side. That's all." Jasmine went on to share how her father's racist beliefs did create fear of People of Color and shared she is working on reflecting how this could impact her as an educator.

In many other instances, participants demonstrated colorblind ideology, but they also showed the belief that Black students were also colorblind. Amy believed students only began to recognize their racial identity around junior high. Ann also demonstrated colorblindness by stating, "Like, I put my pants on just like you put your pants on….So, I never really seen a difference…. You're a person. I'm a person. I don't see Color."

They provided verbal affirmations of equality and neutrality in "seeing" Black or Students of Color similarly. Ann worked with younger students and did not believe kindergarteners recognized their racial identity and added, "I don't think they see it. As much as, oh, you're just my friend." When asked how they viewed their Black students, they often responded, "I do not view them differently." However, others, such as Loralae, attempted to nuance this to note that they acknowledge the different experiences but still used a postracial perspective. She shared, "I come from people who, regardless of skin tone, you do what you can to help out who you can, and you see past all that, but you also acknowledge that it's different, but you don't let it affect your viewpoint." These

colorblind perspectives often hide their actual perspective, presented when discussing individual narrative examples.

Although they wanted to be perceived as nonracist, participants frequently racialized parents and their students when they felt threatened by victimizing themselves. They described Parents of Color in contexts of physical aggression and described themselves as the victim. They described Latinx parents differently as respectful and broadly racialized Black identities as more physical or violent. For example, Amy shared, "I feel like the way that everything in Ferguson was handled was extremely violent. And I feel like that that was where it could have been handled a little differently." Thus, participants had varying degrees of understanding of how their White racial identity impacted their consciousness of their Students of Color. Participants blamed their educational disconnect on factors outside themselves as well as their undergraduate program and used Students of Color in their student teaching placements to gain cultural competency.

Gaining Cultural Competency with Deficit Perspectives

White female preservice teachers described a lack of diversity within their teacher preparation program and limited diversity within their

education program faculty. Participants were conscious they lacked cultural and diversity competency as preservice teachers and sought this through *cultural extraction* in which they gained diversity competency at the expense of Students of Color. They also held deficit perspectives in their attempts to gain cultural competency by interacting with Students or Parents of Color.

Cultural Extraction from Students

Participants noted that cultural competency is essential. Rose highlighted, "you just need to know how to cater to those students and how People of Color sometimes do end up being the ones that slip through the cracks and have the extra accommodations and needs." Rose's comments undergirded a deficit framing to suggest that "People of Color" need equity support not because of historical or systematic oppression, but because they are more likely to need more support because they are incapable.

While their undergraduate experience offered participants the most exposure they had experienced with Persons of Color, they felt their undergraduate teaching program left them underprepared to teach anything other than White men or women. Grace shared, "I feel like all of what we are learning in class, we're just automatically assuming just (teaching to)

straight White male, all the time." They felt the least prepared for managing relationships with parents, Ann noted, "And sometimes I'm like, I just don't want to talk to them, because I don't want to get in a fight. I don't want someone swinging on me." There was a consensus on the need for additional coursework and restructuring of the curriculum.

Many participants reported the desire to meet the needs of their future Students of Color. They expressed that their respective teacher preparation programs provided limited coursework about diversity and other student identities. Therefore, they desired to acquire more cultural competency, which they sought by intentionally interacting with Students of Color at their student teaching sites. Rose shared her excitement to teach in a diverse setting because she felt she lacked this understanding:

> *And my next placement I'm going to, I know it's a more diverse school as well and so I'm very excited for that as well, because I'm just like, I want to know how to teach that, because it's not something that was brought up when you're growing up, not to me at least.*

Amy described her process of cultural extraction through interaction with her Black students in her preservice experience:

They love learning in the classroom, whether it was me teaching in front of them or my cooperating teacher, and it was just really nice to kind of get a feel for it, because in the demographic where I grew up, we didn't have a whole lot of Black kids in either – in the elementary/junior high or the high school I went to. So, just being able to see that environment and being able to see the stereotypes of African Americans from the demographic I grew up in proved wrong in really an amazing thing.

Few participants felt equipped entirely to meet the diverse needs of their students, particularly among their Black students, based solely on their preparation. Some participants felt more prepared due to lived experiences by way of an immediate family member, location of student teaching, or substitute teaching experience. Kelsie highlighted these competency gaps as well:

I feel like the areas I've been in haven't really prepared me much, just because there hasn't been as much diversity as there would be if you go further into the city or anything. So, I feel like that would be good experience. But the schools that I've been at, haven't really.

However, in using this process of cultural extraction with their preservice teaching experiences to address their self-aware cultural competency gaps, they engaged in deficit perspectives about Students of Color. Preservice teachers understanding of how to teach was also shaped by their cooperating teachers, who also identified as White women. Teaching in diverse spaces assisted with noticing cultural differences, yet their experiences educating Students of Color were underdeveloped.

Deficit Perspectives

Participants frequently centered examples of Black students, rather than other Students of Color, when referencing negative examples and how they successfully taught them content knowledge. Their families were described as "complicated" or "broken," in which Students of Color lived in poverty. Grace described one male Student of Color: "There was one student at my previous placement, who we were making an IEP for him. So, the home life didn't seem that great, and the test scores weren't great." These deficit perspectives often lead to conflict with parents. Jasmine described Black students as "respectful," and she indicated her engagement with parents:

> *It's really hard to try and figure out, okay, when am I overstepping the boundary, and whenever they may not have the best parental arrangement at home, they feel like they can rely on you and for you to be a confidant.*

They also characterized Parents of Color from a deficit perspective. Ann and the participants frequently felt they were doing Students of Color a favor by presenting them with additional support and felt disrespected when they backfired in various ways. Parents of Color often responded by speaking with the preservice teachers, and Ann shared one other experience:

> *Or they think you have an attitude when you say something, and you really – you understand what I'm saying? It's like, "Don't talk to me with an attitude." Well, I really wasn't talking to you with an attitude. But it's like, they come in with a predisposition that, oh, this is going to be a bad encounter, because this teacher is White.*

When participants described Students of Color, they cited examples that perpetuated a *struggle narrative* or as resilience against oppression if they were successful. They did not center on Students of Color in which success was normalized, such examples with honors

programs or in other academic contexts. For example, Jasmine shared, "Okay. I would describe them – most of them were polite, and they were a little advanced, especially in Dr. [name removed] school [location removed]. Some of them were a little more advanced than other students, which I thought was pretty cool."

Even though Jasmine's account was positive, she seemed surprised that the students were educationally advanced beyond her White students. Instead, participants shared examples in contexts of individual education plans (IEP), in student conduct, or as an exception if they were successful. Rose attempted to connect that she had positive interactions with her Students of Color, but she used deficit framing,

> *Yeah, so interaction wise, I feel same as pretty much – maybe even more welcoming. I feel like there's this one little girl in my head particularly. She like struggles a lot. She's one of those students with an IEP, and she is a little girl of Color, and she lights up every time.*

Loralae was unaware of her description, but shared an example and expanded that other White teachers do the same, "We've got this one girl who, both her and her twin sister, they seem to struggle. I overhear other

teachers talking about their struggles, their behavioral issues, their inabilities to focus…." Participants also described Students of Color as coming from lower socioeconomic status with lower social class status. Then, their families were described as "complicated" or "broken," in which Students of Color lived in poverty. This was noted even though the student teachers in this study taught in middle-class spaces. Grace described one male Student of Color: "There was one student at my previous placement, who we were making an IEP for him. So, the home life didn't seem that great, and the test scores weren't great."

Discussion

The study explored the extent to which White female preservice teachers' ability to recognize their positionality and racial location within whiteness. Preservice White women undergraduate teachers selectively opted out of whiteness as the "good White" and named others "bad" to dissociate themselves from racism. They held deficit perspectives about their Students of Color in framing their academic progress as a struggle narrative and used them to gain cultural competency within their student-teacher placements. They claimed racial ignorance because they claimed reversed racism in racialized relationships and were critical of their

teacher preparation program for allowing them to be underprepared. These findings contribute to existing research.

The existing structure of American higher education does not effectively educate White students for interaction in diverse settings, especially educators (Abioye & Sasso, 2023). There are specific institutional initiatives to educate students culturally to better prepare them to participate in a multicultural society, but they come at a price for Students of Color (Boatright-Horowitz et al., 2013; Sasso et al., 2022). White female student teachers promoted an enlightened narrative and participate in virtue signaling (Foste, 2020a).

Participants were critical of White privilege and how it inferred; these pedagogy-based trainings helped them understand their social class advantage, which they felt was tied to their White identity since they confused whiteness as a system with White identity as an individual construct (Abioye & Sasso, 2022). They described limited diversity training, which has become the de facto way of treating individual racism (Cabrera, 2012; Cabrera & Corces-Zimmerman, 2017).

Participants propagated an enlightened narrative in which they positioned themselves as "good Whites" who are disassociated from the

White pre-college experiences and racist family members, but rather they perceived diversity property to accrue (Robbins & Jones, 2016; Foste, 2019, 2020b). These White preservice teachers also perceived their cultural competency as a measurable goal rather than an ongoing self-improvement process (Foste, 2020a). It was indicated that their teacher preparation programs sponsored a limited diversity curriculum and racial faculty representation, they promoted a racial harmony narrative. (Foste, 2020a). These connected findings contextualized within the extant research also have implications for practice but should be applied within the transferability boundaries of this study.

Limitations

While the researchers followed four principles of trustworthiness relating to the transferability of this study, there are nonetheless recognized limitations to this study. Qualitative studies are limited in generalizing findings (Stake, 2010). The findings are limited to the context, setting, and study participants. The researcher did not observe preservice teachers during the student teaching process; therefore, student interaction was not witnessed. The demand characteristics may have been provided by the researchers who had prior knowledge of preservice

teachers but not with the individual participants. This may have facilitated social desirability to impact how individuals filtered their self-disclosure. Also, the individual disparities in the meaning and intent of the race and viewpoints were not considered in this research. The small sample size could not adequately reflect or understand the development of all White women preservice teachers' racial awareness or attitudes. The researchers also acknowledge that the emphasis on whiteness and the value of voice for historically oppressed cultures may be perpetuated by this study.

Implications for Practice

Cultural Competency

According to Gloria Ladson-Billings' research surrounding *The Dream-Keepers*, master teachers held two commonalities, exposure and a transformative moment (Ladson-Billings, 2009). The transformative moment thrust these educators into a reflection that caused them to reimagine and adjust their educational philosophies. Ladson-Billings suggests it is beneficial to assist young teachers' development to give them higher educational experiences, causing them to reflect on themselves and the world around them. Knowledge can be garnered from the

transformative moments of others and infused into the teacher preparation process.

Cabrera et al. (2016b) argue that too much comfort is placed on the White undergraduate experience, and there is no disruption to cause racial growth. The desired disruptors should happen in and outside the lecture halls and be embedded in all aspects of the teacher preparation process. Another challenge is to assist White teachers in fully seeing BIPOC students as humans. Baker (2017) points out that White female teachers' failure to see their Students of Color and hear their uninterrupted perspective is due to the teachers' internal fear, and their desire to control students hinders the educational process (Baker, 2017).

Higher Education

There was a consensus that most preservice teachers in this investigation felt the need for greater preparation for teaching Students of Color. The infusion of diversity in all collegiate coursework demonstrates the necessity to look at all aspects through a lens of diversity (Ramsay-Jordan, 2020). The participants in this study reiterated the importance of creating opportunities for teacher candidates to engage with racially diverse populations with faculty, collegiate peers, and student teaching

experiences (Durham-Barnes, 2015). In order to give PSTs exposure to faculty and staff of Color, there must be a concerted effort for universities to hire and retain faculty of Color.

Multicultural Curriculum

Picower (2009) noted this responsibility to note that schools "have a critical responsibility to address and transform these understandings as a fundamental part of preparing teachers for any setting, but particularly ones where they will be responsible for the education of Children of Color" (p. 211). There needs to be a collaborative reformation to modify and revamp the student teaching experience (Carter Andrews et al., 2018). Teacher preparation programs should critically examine race and sociocultural concepts that disenfranchise K-12 students and integrate reflective practices and critical consciousness for teacher candidates (Allen et al., 2017). This may lead to and or support educational disruptors creating culturally relevant pedagogy in the teacher education curriculum (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Culturally relevant pedagogy allow for foci on entity and achievement, equity and excellence, developmental appropriateness, teaching the whole child and student-teacher relationships (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011). Picower (2009) argues that when White

female educators label themselves as loving, it attempts to invalidate the need for antiracist work creating an innocence for the White educator.

K-12 Implications

Participants called for a disruption to whiteness and tools to continue their racial awareness journey. The professional development for teachers may begin at the undergraduate level but must transition into the K-12 world. Participants in the study reported relying heavily on their cooperating teacher's perspectives of themselves and others to mold their ideology. Shah and Cole (2020) highlighted supporting mentor teachers. Considering the profound influence a cooperating teacher can have on a student teacher, it would be beneficial to strategically assign cooperating teachers who are willing to undergo diversity and inclusion training prior to placement. Teacher trainers and preservice teachers need guidance on why it is essential to work toward social justice (Durham-Barnes, 2015; Shah & Coles, 2020).

White teachers do not have to confront their whiteness in the America K-12 educational system (Hazelbaker & Mistry, 2021). The White female preservice participants in this study reaffirmed the need to address preservice teacher racial consciousness in the collegiate process. Prior to college, most of the participants lived in spaces with limited

diversity and in spaces where whiteness was protected and unnoticed. Preservice teachers in this also acknowledged their White racial identity, but not their own participation in whiteness.

They did not fully understand how their positionality could impact Students of Color and had limited tools to combat biases or unfavorable racial perspectives. Several possessed a, "Yeah, I'm White now what?" perspective to suggest they would have benefited from a more disruptive collegiate experience to better understand to not just make meaning of their White racial identity, but the ways in which it intersects with whiteness. This approach may humanize how Students of Color differently experience whiteness and orient white preservice teachers towards culturally relevant pedagogy.

Conclusion

The White preservice teachers in this investigation had the desire to meet the needs of their future students of Color but were not equipped to comprehend the challenges fully. Each participant displayed varying degrees of understanding of their White racial consciousness. Whiteness within the United States academic world is complex. White female preservice teachers can identify it but struggle to locate it precisely. Some repeatedly declared their nonracist beliefs minimizing the systemic system

of whiteness to an individual level. They needed to be viewed as a "good" White. Their educational deficits were attributed to factors outside of the academic realm. Rarely were they described positively, and when depicted favorably, it was an anomaly.

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