

The Color of Caring: Race and the Implementation of Educational Reform

By Jean A. Patterson, Jenny Gordon,
& Paula Groves Price

Since the overturning of the 1896 “separate but equal” *Plessy vs. Ferguson* ruling with the 1954 *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision, U.S. society and schools (in theory) have attempted to make the basic tenets of democracy and freedom a lived reality for all citizens, without regard to race (Jones, 1998). Since the *Brown* decision, U.S. social mores have considerably changed, with most discourse centered on “colorblind” ideology—where one’s race is believed to be irrelevant to one’s treatment in society.

We argue, however, that colorblindness is merely a cover for inequities that continue to exist. The consequence of a colorblind ideology is the denial of individuals’ racial identity, culture, and history and the presumption of an equal playing field (Schofield, 2001). As an ideology, colorblindness is particularly persuasive because it seems to advocate for an equal and just society. However, in a just society skin color would not be associated with degrees of power or privilege. We agree with Thompson (1999), who posited, “Colorblindness

Jean A. Patterson is a professor in the College of Education at Wichita State University, Wichita, Kansas. Jenny Gordon is a professor in the College of Education at the University of Binghamton, State University of New York, Binghamton, New York. Paula Groves Price is a professor in the College of Education at Washington State University, Pullman, Washington.

The Color of Caring

is parasitic upon racism, it is only in a racist society that pretending not to notice color could be construed as a particularly virtuous act” (p. 524).

The colorblind perspective is reflected in the bulk of educational research, including research on school reform, where there is an “overwhelming presence of Whiteness” (Sleeter, 2001). Ironically the overwhelming presence of Whiteness is accompanied by an astonishing unawareness of that presence. Whiteness is presumed to be the universal lens that fits all experience, a presumption that automatically denies multiple perspectives. In other words, Whiteness is normative and, as a result, is not questioned (Ladson-Billings, 1998). Colorblindness, therefore, becomes the ideal through which we extend ignoring Whiteness to ignoring race as a whole.

We believe that race is central to what schools do and how they do it. However, in most cases, race is focused exclusively on people of color and Whiteness is glaringly absent from racial discourse. Race (conceptualized to include Whiteness) is not often claimed as fundamental to educational reform efforts (Shujaa, 1994). Mainstream educational reform efforts are usually colorblind and premised on unacknowledged assumptions of Whiteness, which are taken for granted and seen as “race neutral.” We believe that the Whiteness underlying educational reform is far from race neutral and perpetuates existing power relations.

Colorblindness is therefore fundamental to the enactment of reform through pedagogy and practices that assume race has no effect on how children learn. It is through “race-neutral” perspectives that instruction is seen as a generic set of teaching skills that should work for all students (Ladson-Billings, 1998). When colorblind pedagogies do not work for all students, particularly students of color, the “problem” is conceptualized as individual deficiency (García & Guerra, 2004; Valencia & Solórzano, 1997), but neither the pedagogy itself nor the Whiteness embedded in the pedagogy are questioned. Conceding that Whiteness and White pedagogy are not universal poses a threat, as White people might lose their unacknowledged advantage (McIntosh, 1989). Another threat such a concession presents is acknowledging the need to make race central to a wholesale reconceptualization of education and pedagogy rather than creating superficial, additive solutions that only serve to reify Whiteness. We argue that conceptualizing race to include Whiteness is essential to understanding how schools undertake reform, and in the case of one reform initiative in North Carolina, defined the terms in which it could be implemented.

Theoretical Framework

Nel Noddings (1984; 1992; 1999) and others who promote caring in education (e.g., Eaker-Rich & VanGalen, 1996; Gilligan, 1982; Pitman & Zorn, 2000; Roland-Martin, 1992) have done a great deal to bring attention to the importance of relationship in the educational process, however these views of caring have adopted a colorblind perspective (Thompson, 1998). They do not acknowledge the systemic nature of racism, the perpetuation of inequity within social structures, and the recreation of White privilege. Instead, White theories of care tend to view racism as an individual failing that results from prejudices that can be overcome

through personal transformation. That is, they are premised on the assumption that each of us is responsible for our own choices. Consequently, while promising to transcend inequities associated with race, White theories of educational caring reproduce them.

Noddings (1984; 1992) articulated the most cogent and influential theory of caring in education. She posited that caring is comprised of four components: Modeling, dialogue, practice and confirmation.

1. Modeling: Teachers' show students what it means to care for others so that they learn not only what it means to care but also how to allow themselves to be cared for.
2. Dialogue: It is through dialogue that teachers and students connect with each other. Dialogue establishes the intimate knowledge of the other required in caring relations.
3. Practice: Teachers give students opportunities to care for others. Without opportunities to enact caring themselves, students do not learn how to become caring people.
4. Confirmation: As Noddings (1992) put it, "In confirmation we spot a better self and encourage its development" (p. 25). Teachers look at the good within each individual and find ways to foster that goodness.

Noddings' four components focus on individual nurturing and do not take into account the institutional structures that perpetuate racism and other inequities. The implication is that individual behavior will make for a more caring world and, therefore, that the responsibility for this task lies at the individual level. Noddings' theory has been challenged by Black feminists for its lack of acknowledgement of the systemic forces that sustain the status quo, which has been an ongoing source of inequity and oppression (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002; Ware, 2002).

Noddings and other White feminist theories of caring are based on the individual nurturing that emerges from the mother-child relationship. In contrast, Black feminists and scholars who critique colorblindness have called into question these theories for assuming the home is a "haven" or safe, protected space. For many African-Americans, the home is not a shielding haven, nor is it a space where values can be nurtured in isolation of the outside society. Instead, the home is a place to nurture many of the skills and knowledge to survive the brutal realities of institutional racism in the outside world (Collins, 1990; Thompson, 1998). Additionally, while White theories of care are centered on the mother as the primary nurturer, caring in African American families is historically the responsibility of more than just the immediate family. The extended family, church, and the community often claim responsibility for caring for children, a tradition rooted in West African customs as well as the African-American experience of slavery (Collins, 1990). As a result, there is an emphasis on community in Black notions of caring that is largely absent from White views (Thompson, 1998).

An alternative to White feminist caring is Beauboeuf-Lafontant's (2002)

The Color of Caring

womanist caring, which draws upon African American women's knowledge and experiences. Womanist caring stresses the importance of three characteristics:

1. The embrace of the maternal: Beauboeuf-Lafontant (2002) contrasts White conceptions of mothering as private and individual with community-oriented Black conceptions that "through feelings of shared responsibility, commit themselves to the social and emotional development of all children in a community" (p. 77).
2. Political clarity: Teachers who demonstrate political clarity recognize that society and by extension, its schools, are structured to ensure the success of some groups of children and the failure of others. According to Beauboeuf-Lafontant (2002), such teachers take a holistic view of their students and are concerned with more than just their academic well being.
3. An ethic of risk. Beauboeuf-Lafontant (2002) maintains that the ethic of risk comes from an understanding of the interdependence among people and commitment to fight injustice. Self is intimately connected to others and "It is an intimacy with and not an aloofness from other people that motivates womanist educators to see personal fulfillment in working toward the common good." (p. 81). The ethic of risk requires a commitment to overturn the very power relations that White caring reproduces.

Beauboeuf-Lafontant's three components contrast sharply with Noddings' theory by foregrounding the structural inequities that promote the success of some (e.g., White middle class people) at the expense of others (e.g., people of color).

In addition to assumptions of racial neutrality and colorblindness, other White middle class assumptions include ideals of fairness, personal autonomy, and political neutrality. The belief that society is just and equitable undergirds the White assumption of fairness; that is, if one adheres to the rules, then one can be successful. Rules are believed to be valid and legitimate except in extenuating circumstances. The White assumption of autonomy is seen in the belief that we make our own fate and that we are independent actors personally responsible for our own lives and the choices we make. The White assumption of education as politically neutral is upheld by the belief that schools are neutral sites that are not about politics, but are about nurturing children.

We use Noddings (1984; 1992; 1999) and Beauboeuf-Lafontant's (2002) theories of caring in education to look at how race (conceptualized to include Whiteness) affected the implementation of the A+ Schools Program, an arts-based reform designed to augment student achievement and appreciation for the arts. We examine the implementation of the A+ Schools Program in three very different schools, with a particular focus on instruction and pedagogy. One school, Mountain Top, located in the mountains in the western part of North Carolina is all White. The second school, Piedmont Elementary, is located in an urban setting in the center of the state. Predominantly African American, it is more racially diverse than the other two schools, with Whites comprising about 20% of the population. The third school, Jackson, located in a rural, northeast corner of the state, is over 90% African American.

The A+ Schools Program in North Carolina

In the 1995 school year, the A+ Schools Program was piloted in 25 schools across North Carolina. Its goals were to promote systematic arts-based instruction as a means to enhance student achievement and to cultivate an appreciation of the arts. The program was built upon Gardner's (1983) theory of multiple intelligences, particularly the idea that children learn and demonstrate knowledge through the various art disciplines. A major premise of the A+ Schools Program was that the arts "build classroom communities which transcend the social and racial barriers that so often obstruct learning" (Thomas S. Kenan Institute for the Arts, 1994). Early documents describing the A+ Schools Program strongly focused on and claimed that the thematic, interdisciplinary teaching and daily arts instruction in A+ is key to overcoming racial barriers and creating rich learning environments where students could thrive academically. For reasons not made known to us as graduate student researchers, the explicit articulation of race and the promise of arts instruction in alleviating racial barriers and increasing test scores was later removed from many of the official documents describing the A+ Schools Program and replaced with more generalized language that stressed better community and school relations. Nevertheless, the majority of schools who applied for and received the grant to pilot A+ were disproportionately poor, low performing, served predominantly African-American populations, and were looking for a way to boost student achievement.

North Carolina initiated a high stakes accountability reform in the fall of 1996 called the ABCs of Education (Public Schools of North Carolina, 1997). Like many states, North Carolina implemented the ABCs of Education in response to calls for greater accountability that came out of the Goals 2000: Educate America Act signed into law in 1994. North Carolina elementary schools were required to meet predetermined benchmarks for demonstrating improved performance on large-scale math and reading tests and the percentage of students on grade level in grades 3-5. Schools were placed into one of four categories: "exceeds expectations," "meets expectations," "no recognition," or "low performing" based on the results of these statewide tests. Schools that met or exceeded their expectations received financial rewards, schools that fell into the "no recognition" category received nothing, and schools that were labeled "low performing" were assigned an assistance team and experienced public humiliation when the results were reported (Groves, 2002). The ABCs of Education became part of the context of the implementation of the A+ Schools Program. Schools undertaking the A+ Program had to come to terms with the accountability reform that emphasized standardized testing as a measure of student achievement. Attitudes toward the ABCs of Education were also contextually derived and linked to the race of teachers and their students.

Researchers' Positionalities

The three authors (Jean and Jenny are White and Paula is African American

The Color of Caring

and Japanese biracial, all female) were members of a larger team of evaluation researchers hired by the Kenan Institute for the Arts to conduct a comprehensive evaluation of the A+ Schools Program. Our backgrounds and life experiences overlapped in some respects and diverged in other ways, all of which influenced our assumptions about race and education as we collected data in these schools. Of the three authors, Jean was the only native North Carolinian. Jenny was from a predominantly White community in the northeast and Paula hailed from a culturally diverse urban city in southern California where her biracial identity was rarely disrupted. Therefore, what Jean observed in the A+ Schools was nothing out of the ordinary for her, whereas Jenny and Paula both experienced culture shock upon relocating to North Carolina. What they observed in the A+ Schools was completely different from their prior experiences.

Jenny was raised in an upper middle class environment, attended private schools and earned her Bachelor's and Master's degrees from private colleges. Her privileged background solidified her narrow sphere and orientation to race and what constituted effective and innovative teaching. Paula and Jean's families were middle class, and both attended public schools, and received their Bachelor's and Master's degrees from large, urban public universities. Jean's middle class neighborhood growing up was all White, and although she attended racially mixed schools, they were still predominantly White and race was not talked about at home or at school. During most of her school years, Jean had no Black teachers. Paula attended public schools in California that were mostly racially segregated, but she was still unprepared for the racial isolation and poverty she encountered in rural North Carolina schools.

Prior to pursuing doctoral study, Jenny and Jean had many years of teaching and administrative experience working in schools, and our professional indoctrination further influenced our conceptions and expectations of what constituted good teaching. Paula, on the other hand, pursued graduate study immediately after completion of her Bachelor's degree, thus her conceptions of effective teaching emerged primarily from her experience as a student.

Methods

The research team designed a five-year evaluation plan (1995-2000) to document the progress of the A+ Schools and capture the variety of interpretations and implementation of the A+ Schools Program. The heart of the evaluation was the qualitative portion that consisted of visits to each school in which researchers observed classrooms and activities and interviewed local stakeholders, individually and in focus groups. Over the four years of data collection, the evaluation team spent 527 days in A+ Schools speaking with students, teachers, teacher assistants, counselors, educational specialists, custodial, cafeteria, and office staff, principals, parents, district personnel, and other community members. Questions centered on how A+ was proceeding: what worked and what did not; how students were responding to increased arts instruction and the integration of the arts with regular subjects; and how A+ Program efforts were affecting instructional planning, student

learning experiences, and collaboration among teachers, community partners, and parents. Once the ABCs of Education was implemented, we asked questions related to its perceived effects on the A+ Program, and evaluation team members sought overall reactions to the ABCs from various stakeholders.

White members of the research team did not consider the A+ Schools Program to be premised on White middle class assumptions until persons of color on the research team pointed it out. Regardless, race was never an explicit or formal focus of the A+ Schools program evaluation. No interview questions on our protocol addressed the role of race in determining how the reform was defined and implemented. As a result, the focus on race at some schools was more explicit than others.

The three schools presented here were selected for this analysis for several reasons. First, they represent the demographic and geographic diversity of the A+ Program pilot schools. Second, the three authors were directly involved in data collection at them, which included interviews and focus groups with administrators, teachers, parents, community members, and students, as well as observations of lessons. Jenny collected data at Mountain Top, Paula collected data at Jackson, and Jean collected data at both Piedmont and Jackson. Although we had access to the entire 25-school database, we believed our analysis was strengthened through our personal involvement with these particular schools. To protect their confidentiality, we have used pseudonyms for the schools as well as the individuals we quoted.

The Color of Caring

In this section, we present an analysis which foregrounds the importance of race in the implementation of the A+ Schools Program in three very different schools. We analyze each school around three themes: (1) the role of context in shaping how school personnel conceptualized the A+ Schools Program in terms of pedagogy and practice, (2) the enactment of caring in each school as it played out instructionally in classrooms, and (3) the consequences of enacting caring in particular ways.

The Role of Context in the Conceptualization of the A+ Schools Program

Mountain Top Elementary. Mountain Top Elementary School is located in the mountains in the western part of the state. Typical for this remote mountain region, its 200 student population is 100% White. Extremes of wealth and poverty make up the school's diversity with 44% of the students receiving free or reduced lunch.

The school is considered "different" from others in the county in part because it is located at the edge of the county and, because of its location, has experienced an influx of new residents from other parts of the state. In addition, the school has been very successful on statewide high stakes achievement tests, repeatedly achieving exemplary status. Mountain Top has been named one of the Top 25 Schools in North Carolina. Because of its high test scores, its marginal location, and its differences from other schools in the county, the school has been afforded a considerable amount of autonomy and has escaped the scrutiny from the district office that other schools have endured.

The Color of Caring

Mrs. Carver, the one African American teacher at the school, is the first and only African American teacher in the entire county. She is an example of the influx of residents from other parts of the state and contributes to the perception that the school is different. It is no coincidence that the only explicit conversations about race at this school were had with this teacher and Jenny. As a White researcher uncomfortable talking about race, Jenny tried to indirectly raise the subject by inquiring how Mrs. Carver was adjusting to her new school. Mrs. Carver answered the questions asked but then elaborated about some of her experiences being the only Black person in the community. For example, Mrs. Carver told Jenny,

And then one day on the playground when my [adult] daughter came ... it was after school and the kids were leaving. And one boy said, "You guys are brownish sort of." And I said, "Yes." And I got ready to say something and my daughter said, "Yes we are brown." And that was it.

All too often, race becomes discussable only when someone of color enters the situation. This suggests that colorblindness is indeed a myth in that race is, in fact, noted and has an impact on how we proceed in situations.

At Mountain Top the A+ Schools Program was conceptualized as arts integration and hands on experiences. During her visits to the school Jenny saw many different examples of such lessons including a lesson on tessellations taught jointly by the math and art teachers to a group of fourth graders, a lesson taught to a multi-aged K-1-2 class centered around a decomposer tank complete with millipedes, worms, and roly-polies, and a large scale baking project conducted by another multi-aged group of kindergarten, first and second grade students. The importance of integrating the arts into instruction was demonstrated by one teacher who put it, "I think I feel better ... than I probably ever have as far as the arts actually helping us to integrate the regular curriculum. I think ...that our arts teachers are helping us teach regular curriculum more than we ever have in the past." At Mountain Top, the A+ Program did not alter the "regular" (White) curriculum, but was used as an additional pedagogical tool to enhance their Whiteness. Systemic inequities, meritocracy, autonomy, and political neutrality were never called into question. The A+ Schools Program enhanced the existing instruction and pedagogy by allowing teachers' resources to enrich the curriculum and time to collaborate more on their planning.

Fundamentally, at Mountain Top, the A+ Program was used to enrich existing educational practice; a practice defined by the White power structure to support the goals of individual achievement and increased academic performance. Despite some teachers expressed reluctance to engage in the high stakes accountability movement, the accountability tests served the school well, measuring individual achievement in a way that would establish Mountain Top as one of the Top 25 Schools in North Carolina on more than one occasion. The A+ Program undoubtedly enhanced traditional curriculum delivery but it did not change the fundamental objectives being taught. Whiteness was indeed reified by the leveraging of the A+ Program to reinforce educational practice as defined by a White school board and White administrators.

Piedmont Elementary. Piedmont Elementary is located in a predominantly African American working class neighborhood in a city of about 80,000 people. About 450 students attended the school, which had a population that was 80% African American and 20% White, and 65% of the students were on free and reduced lunch. The principal was a White male and 26 of the 30 teaching staff were White, with 25 of those White females. Only four African-American teachers, all women, were on Piedmont's faculty.

Over the years, the neighborhood surrounding Piedmont Elementary had gradually changed from racially mixed middle class to lower middle class and predominantly African American. Along with increasing numbers of poor students, faculty and staff reported that Piedmont had more students from single parent families, more students with complicated family problems, more transient students, and more students with learning and behavior problems.

At the time of the study, Piedmont was the only magnet school in the city, with about 50 or 10% of the students comprising a small magnet population. The principal cautiously related that Piedmont was selected to be a magnet school because district administrators were "looking at...racial isolation pockets, seeing if they can reduce the minority statistics a little bit and increase the majority statistics in the school so that you don't have just overwhelmingly one race of kids in a school." A White teacher told Jean the decision for Piedmont to become a magnet school was fueled by the desire to attract more White students to a predominantly "Black" school. She whispered "Black" in this and subsequent conversations about the racial composition of the school's students and neighborhood. Whispering of "Black" illustrated the evasion and suppression of race talk at Piedmont Elementary.

Piedmont's faculty voluntarily selected the A+ Program as its magnet theme. For the White faculty, the decision to become an A+ School was the best choice for their particular student population. Race and socioeconomic status were factors influencing Piedmont's decision to adopt the A+ Program as good for "our kind of students." Yet, race was never explicitly articulated. Instead, it was referenced in vague, general terms, or whispered about, as though it was impolite to engage in talk about race. However, for the most part, Jean also evaded and avoided direct race talk at Piedmont. It was not until much later, in revisiting the data she had collected, that issues of race at Piedmont came to the forefront.

White teachers at Piedmont primarily conceptualized implementation of the A+ Program as using the arts to teach the core curriculum. African American teachers, on the other hand, conceptualized the A+ Program as representing the type of education they had as children attending segregated schools. They saw the A+ Program as arts appreciation and exposing students to cultural events such as plays and classical music performances, which would help students become "well rounded" people. That is, their mostly poor students would benefit from exposure to White, middle and upper class cultural activities. They critiqued Piedmont's implementation of the A+ Program as lacking academic rigor. Two African American 5th grade teachers in particular expressed the belief that their students must perform

The Color of Caring

well academically if they were to leave Piedmont with the tools they needed to succeed in middle and high school. The unspoken implication was teaching what their students needed to learn to be successful in White society. In retrospect, what they seemed to be communicating to Jean was a belief that students must be fluent in the language of the White middle class, as their students' future success was likely to be defined in those terms.

Jackson Elementary. Located in a poor, rural community in northeast North Carolina, Jackson Elementary enrolled about 250 students, mostly African American, from a small racially divided town of approximately 1000 residents. The school, one of the poorest in the state and county, with over 90% of the students receiving free and reduced lunch, was historically one of the lowest performing schools in the state. The school was “officially” labeled low performing with the onset of the state’s high stakes testing program, and frequently experienced visits from “assistance teams” from the state and county to develop plans and strategies to improve student achievement.

Partly due to the school’s history of low achievement, remote rural location, and general poverty of the district and surrounding areas, Jackson had a difficult time attracting and retaining qualified teachers. The school experienced high levels of teacher turnover over the course of the evaluation, and this turnover was exacerbated by state policies that did not permit the school to rehire quality teachers following a poor performance on the state’s standardized tests because they had not yet completed their certification requirements. The school did, however, retain a small core group of teachers from the community who had taught in the school for many years.

Jackson School, in a sense, experienced two different A+ Programs based upon the principal of the school. In the beginning of A+ Program implementation, the mostly African-American faculty conceptualized the program as integrating arts into the curriculum, but primarily in the art classes, where art teachers would use their discipline to teach core academic subjects. The teachers interpreted Gardner’s (1983) theory of multiple intelligences to mean hands on, group work in the grade level classrooms, and art integrated with core curriculum in the art classes. The White principal of the school, however, envisioned A+ as a performing arts program, and expected teachers to plan multiple assemblies and performances per month for parents and the community. This difference in definition and understanding of the A+ Program, coupled with the stress of high stakes testing, was a source of great tension between the school faculty and the principal.

After two tumultuous years, Jackson changed principals and underwent a re-conceptualization of the A+ Program. Principal Richland, a well-respected African American man from the community, used the A+ Program as a vehicle to create a learning environment focused on togetherness, community, and knowledge of self. He told Paula,

This year, I feel good about A+ here. The arts and regular teachers are working together—everyone is involved in the whole school program. The teachers are

Jean A. Patterson, Jenny Gordon, & Paula Groves Price

having a much better picture of what the program is about and understand that we are all in the fold. I was really impressed with the artists that came in this year (as guest visiting artists). We had a North Carolina Blues artist come in and play for about an hour. He talked to the kids about the history of blues. We really need to implement that type of music into our A+ Program. I want to make more cultural things that the kids could learn. You would be surprised how many of our kids don't know anything about their culture or their history. I asked the kids what they knew about the blues, and hardly any of them knew anything. I required them to go home and ask their grandmothers about the blues and write a short paper on it. I really want them to have a better sense of self with their culture.

In this new conceptualization of the A+ Program, race became central to both what was taught and how it was taught, with more emphasis on connecting with and learning from the community. This reconceptualization of the A+ Program also provided a space for teachers and students to explicitly discuss race, as they used the arts as a vehicle to add African American history and culture in a curriculum that was largely centered on Whiteness.

The Enactment of Caring in Each School

Mountain Top Elementary. In many ways, Mountain Top exemplified the enactment of Noddings' conception of caring in an all White context. At Mountain Top, Noddings' caring was evident on many levels, from the way the school was structured to its curriculum and pedagogy and to the relationship between the school and the surrounding community.

The school was structured in an innovative manner centered on team-taught, multi-aged classrooms. Children and teachers remain together over a three-year period (K-2; 3-5) exemplifying Noddings' "continuity of place, people, purpose and curriculum" (1992: xii). In terms of curriculum, teachers exemplified Noddings' notion of *modeling*. In one 3rd and 4th grade science class, the children created "film strips" with colored markers on strips of clear overhead celluloid about a nonfiction topic of their choosing. The topics ranged from volcanoes to horses to rivers, to black widow spiders. The pictures were colorful and detailed and were accompanied by an information card. A student teacher maneuvered the images on the overhead projector while each child read from information cards to an attentive audience. Some of the children read clearly and loudly while others needed encouragement. Some cards contained minimal information and others were chock full. Regardless, the teacher had a positive comment for each child. To one child she remarked, "Andrew will be sorry he missed yours. He just loves horses." The teacher modeled for children the kind of dialogue that she was looking for. At the end of each presentation was a question/answer period and then applause. The teacher gave the children the opportunity to *practice* caring and *confirm* their better self through rewarding their peers with applause, explaining that this was part of their grade. White caring was an explicit part of the curriculum at Mountain Top.

Mrs. Carver, the African American teacher at the school, was in the middle of her first year on the staff when Author 2 interviewed her. She echoed the other

The Color of Caring

teachers, describing Mountain Top as a “very warm, caring environment. Everybody works hard and it doesn’t even show...and there’s a lot of trust within the faculty and the students. The students trust, students are respectful and caring. It’s just a nice, nice place.” This exemplifies Noddings’ conceptualization of caring by focusing on interpersonal connection, investment in others and in work itself, and trust between students and teachers.

White conceptions of caring extended to the school from the surrounding community. For example, during *Teacher Appreciation Week* the staff room was filled with baked goods and pots of gorgeous flowering begonias, one for each staff member. The plants were from a family who owned a local nursery and were accompanied by a note, which read:

To all staff members at Mountain Top School:
Please take a plant home with you. Just our way of saying “thanks” for doing a good job with our kids. If you didn’t get a plant, please let [the principal] know so she can pass it on to me.

Community support transcended family involvement to include local businesses.

What was not evident at Mountain Top was the conceptualization of caring that includes Beauboeuf-Lafontant’s political clarity and an ethic of risk. The teachers did demonstrate an embrace of the maternal by claiming the students as their own children. They worked hard to ensure that each child would succeed within the system and did not hesitate to give the extra time and attention that some of their less advantaged students needed. However, there was no acknowledgement of the unfairness of the system that allows only some children to come to school bathed and well fed. The teachers did not conceive mothering as political (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002) and did not acknowledge the structures that allow for the success of some students at the expense of others. The prevailing understanding of caring was through individual acts of kindness of which there were many.

Piedmont Elementary. White and African American teachers at Piedmont exhibited different ideas of the A+ Program and how it should be implemented. Both groups believed they were demonstrating care and doing what was good for their students, yet did so in very different ways.

Piedmont’s White teachers enacted caring in a manner that appeared consistent with Noddings’ framework. The A+ Program’s pedagogical philosophy of child-centered, hands-on, active involvement in learning, with the arts used as a vehicle for achieving academic success was particularly appealing to the White teachers. Even White parents expressed the belief that the A+ Program would expose children who were poor and “culturally different” to opportunities they ordinarily would not have. A White parent shared, “This is a Black neighborhood and I really like the idea that these kids are seeing something that they’ve probably never, ever seen... I think, “Wow! What a *great* opportunity for these kids to see something that they wouldn’t normally see.” Piedmont’s White teachers and White parents seemed heartfelt in their desire for the largely poor and racial minority students to

be successful and to have access to a broader range of (White) cultural activities. These views were not dissimilar from those of the African American teachers who expressed a desire for students to be exposed to a range of cultural activities. As will be seen, their desires stemmed from different motivations.

When analyzing the actions of Piedmont's African American women teachers and teachers' aides, they demonstrated caring for their students in ways more consistent with womanist caring. In Black traditions of caring, community is created through establishing adult/child relationships that are predicated on structure and authority in which adults clearly establish expectations for children to follow (Alder, 2002; Delpit, 1995; Noblit, 1993; Wilson & Corbett, 2001). In Beauboeuf-Lafontant's conception of womanist caring, Black teachers embraced the maternal by asserting their authority, not in a manner that resembled a patriarchal form of domination, but by drawing upon a deep sense of responsibility for all children entrusted to them to educate. Taking on the role of surrogate parents often means providing children with structure and discipline, high expectations, and a communal classroom environment where the message "we are all in this together" is communicated.

Piedmont's two African American 5th grade teachers, Mrs. Roberts and Mrs. Jennings were clearly more authoritarian and structured in their classrooms and were much tougher on their students than their White counterparts. Mrs. Roberts shared her concern that the A+ Program provided students with "too much freedom," and she believed Piedmont needed "a little bit more structure, discipline." These teachers made no excuses for their mostly poor and Black students. When White teachers were concerned that students did not have enough money to participate in activities, they raised money or even delved into their own pockets. In contrast, Mrs. Roberts told Jean if the students could afford to buy ice cream at lunch, they could afford to pay their own way for field trips. From her perspective, the students needed to establish priorities about how to spend their limited amount of funds and should not be dependent on handouts from others.

Mrs. Roberts and Mrs. Jennings often used direct instructional methods, maintained high expectations for student achievement, and their students obtained some of the highest test scores in the school. These teachers clearly understood the struggles and discrimination their students would likely experience if they did not leave the elementary school with a strong foundation of basic academic skills. Mrs. Jennings shared her concerns about the need for a stronger academic focus at Piedmont:

I know we're not where we're supposed to be...as far as academic, the academic aspect...I think it's a little weaker in that area. The arts have really gotten us where they're supposed to, but academically I think we need to be a little bit stronger. ... I know we're not supposed to teach to the test, but I think a lot of what we've been doing over the last three years - some of it has helped our kids and some of it has hurt our kids. Academically, I think [A+ has] kind of hurt them a bit. ... Academically I think there's just something lacking.

Attuned to the very real consequences of poor performance on test scores, Mrs.

The Color of Caring

Jennings critiqued Piedmont's implementation of A+ as having "hurt our kids" academically.

Mrs. Roberts, the other 5th grade teacher, stressed that her job was to prepare her students for the 6th grade. She was really discouraged when Piedmont's test scores went down following their first year of A+ Program implementation. She confided that students she received from a White teacher's 4th grade class "didn't know what they were supposed to know," so Mrs. Roberts ended up doing a lot of catching up that year. Mrs. Roberts sighed when she told Jean that very few of her students were where she thought they should be academically or where she would like for them to be. An African American teacher's aide (who worked with the 5th grade teachers) confided, "I feel like sometimes that some of the academics are being pushed aside for the arts."

That race was simultaneously invisible and obvious was a theme running through the data that Jean collected from Piedmont. However, it was not until well after her data collection activities concluded did she examine her data with an explicit focus on race. The whispers and evasions of race talk not attended to during the year she spent at the school became more prominent when re-examining the data several years later. At Piedmont, well meaning White principal, teachers, parents, and researcher were complicit in enacting a White conception of caring that suppressed race talk and where Whiteness remained the invisible norm.

Jackson Elementary. In many ways, the implementation of the A+ Program at Jackson when led by Mr. Richland, espoused Beauboeuf-Lafontant's (2002) notions of womanist caring. In faculty meetings, memos, and informal conversations with teachers, Mr. Richland stressed the importance of community and working together to share the responsibility and ownership for the students and their achievement. Similar to Patricia Hill Collin's (1990) conception of Black feminist caring, Mr. Richland and the teaching staff agreed that caring for students meant committing to the children of their community and ensuring success without excuses.

Similarly, teachers were encouraged to cultivate the well-being of the whole child as a part of their implementation of arts integration. Teachers engaged in many hands-on activities and used art as media to guarantee student success. The purpose of arts integration was not to perform in a show, but rather to make connections between curriculum and the whole child. The first grade teachers (Black and White) developed "yearbooks," or large portfolios of what the children considered to be their best art and writing, which the children constructed throughout the year. In the end, the children were proud of their visual representation of their success and growth over the school year. Other teachers became more explicit in discussing race in the classroom, and used Black artists and authors as a gateway to cultural conversations.

The principal, as well as a core group of veteran teachers, exhibited Beauboeuf-Lafontant's (2002) notion of political clarity. The principal used the A+ Program to provide a space for the teachers, students, and the community to claim race. While the principal created this climate overtly in the school, individual teachers did similar things in their classrooms—telling students their stories of being

educated in the one room school house down the road from Jackson school during segregation, frequently hugging students and talking to them about their need to be strong minded, and showing them how their existence fits into a larger framework of African-American history. These veteran teachers were the extended family of many of the students, as they had also educated many of their students' parents. Often these teachers disciplined their students with tough love, and treated them "like their own" because they cared, but more importantly worried about the future of their students. Sharing personal stories of racism as an enactment of caring was deemed a risk worth taking to equip their children with the critical skills to survive in a racist society.

The Consequences of Enacting Caring in Particular Ways

Mountain Top Elementary. Mountain Top interpreted the A+ Schools Program through a White ethic of care, an approach to the reform that added to the school's strong reputation in the surrounding community, in the county and throughout the state. The surrounding community took enormous pride in the school's success attributing it to both the school and the involvement of parents with their children. As local hotel manager and supporter of the school, Mr. Stone, put it

And I think, you know, to win, [Mountain Top] won an award last year or at the beginning of this school year and it just says a lot, you know for the faculty, for the students. I mean they go home and do their homework; they've got someone watching over them to make sure that their homework is done. And they're a great bunch of kids. You know and when they graduate and go on and the new ones coming in the fall are already briefed on what goes on here so it's like within minutes they know what's going to happen in the course of the school year which is cool.

As Mr. Stone indicates, at Mountain Top, the values between home, school, and the larger society are shared. All three work together to ensure the success of the students which they believed would occur through hard work and personal responsibility, which would pay off in an inherently fair system. Home, school, and society are pulling in the same direction, a direction that reinforces unrecognized and unquestioned White, middle class values.

While the county viewed the approach to education at Mountain Top with some skepticism, it adopted a hands-off approach to the school. Mountain Top's repeated recognition as one of the state's Top 25 schools as measured by the high-stakes accountability tests was a source of pride (as well as, perhaps, some bemusement) to county officials. County officials did not want to intervene in a situation that brought acclaim to their area and therefore gave Mountain Top considerable latitude because of its success with test scores and the school's location on the county's periphery.

On a state level the school received a great deal of recognition for its success with visits year after year by state legislators and policymakers and frequent awards for their success on the accountability tests. Whatever Mountain Top was doing was acknowledged as North Carolina's education at its finest. This school was touted as

The Color of Caring

an exemplary school whose achievements seemed to legitimize decisions regarding the direction of education in the state.

Piedmont Elementary. At Piedmont Elementary, White teachers' conceptions of caring did not permit them to understand that their African American colleagues were demonstrating care for their students. Instead, they criticized Mrs. Jennings and Mrs. Roberts' for not cooperating with the overall goals of the A+ Program. These two teachers were viewed as troublemakers who should either show their support for the program or transfer to other schools. In this school, the few African American teachers on faculty felt unable to publicly express what they believed was best for the mostly African American student population, thus they were marginalized by the dominant presence of White conceptions of caring. In this context, White teachers were not comfortable talking about race and enacted a colorblind version of caring, which in retrospect was not helpful to their students, but served to reproduce inequities and to reify deficit views of their poor and Black students.

Deficit views of students became evident when Piedmont's faculty and staff expressed that selecting an arts-based initiative for the magnet theme was the best decision for their children. They believed their mostly poor and minority students were unable to benefit from a foreign language or math/science magnet theme. In a focus group with Piedmont's teaching assistants, they were asked why the school chose to focus on the arts. Marian, a teaching assistant in grade 5, stated, "I don't think foreign language would have worked at this school, you know, thinking about the background of the children." To which Gloria, another grade 5 teaching assistant, added, "Or math and science." Marian then responded: "Right. We don't have the kind of kids I think that could have handled that." The decision to become an A+ School was based on the assumption that their mostly poor, mostly Black students could not handle an academically rigorous curriculum.

The outnumbered African American teachers attempted to counter deficit views of their students by focusing on preparing their students to perform well on the end-of-grade tests. Prior to the implementation of the A+ Program, Piedmont's test scores were respectable, as Mrs. Roberts, an African American 5th grade teacher put it, "Our test scores were up there, which they [district administrators] could never understand why, with our clientele of children, why we were scoring as high as some of the others - middle class and upper class children," which was a source of pride for the faculty and staff. With the A+ Program, Piedmont's test scores declined and under the ABCs of Education, they became mired in the "No Recognition" category, which meant they did not reach their testing benchmarks. Piedmont did not perform poorly enough to require takeover by the state, but neither did the school measure up to expectations or realize its potential.

Jackson Elementary. At Jackson, enacting caring from a Black feminist or womanist perspective carried significant consequences. While the community of Jackson, with a relatively large politically powerless population of African American residents, appreciated and applauded the new direction of Jackson School under

Jean A. Patterson, Jenny Gordon, & Paula Groves Price

the leadership of Mr. Richland, the district office was not pleased. After 2 years, Mr. Richland received word that all principals in the district were being reassigned, and he would be the principal of a middle school. This news was devastating to the staff and community of Jackson. One teacher said:

We all feel that since he [Mr. Richland] has been here, we have moved forward tremendously and improved a lot. We all respect him and he really tried to help us in any way that he can. He knows that we are doing the best that we can and he appreciated what we are doing. I can't believe that we will lose him.

Under Mr. Richland, the school was able to develop a much closer and positive relationship with parents and the community, the climate of the school improved dramatically, and student achievement improved significantly. The school was no longer “low performing” because over half of the students were now testing at grade level. Despite these marked improvements, the principal was reassigned to another school. Mr. Richland was equally upset when he heard the news:

I really am upset that I have to go. I've been trying to bridge the gap between home and school. I want it to be clear what the intentions here are...we have very few discipline problems now, which was a big problem when I first got here. We don't have any “I's” or “you's” here now—it is just “us” and “we.” I don't know what A+ is going to bring in the years to come.

Mr. Richland's replacement was a White female, and Jackson School was her first position as a principal. One teacher indicated that the change in principal was precipitated by district politics and the perception that Jackson's achievement problems were rooted in the school being “too Black.” The district hoped that a White principal would attract more White students to Jackson School, and student achievement scores would increase. Upset and frustrated, five veteran African American teachers announced their retirement immediately after the reassignment. Two veteran African American teachers who elected to stay indicated that the superintendent and district office made it clear that they were hoping to replace the retired teachers with new White teachers. One of these veteran teachers told Paula:

All of the new teachers that they had been interviewing last week are lateral entry [provisionally certified] and Black. As soon as the superintendent found out that all of the candidates were Black, he stopped interviewing. He only wants to fill the positions with White teachers, so right now we don't know what next year will be like if they can't find teachers.

At Jackson School, enacting caring and pedagogy in ways that countered the unacknowledged White norms resulted in devastating consequences. Conceptualizing the A+ Schools Program and using the arts as a means to implement Black feminist ideology—where race, community, political clarity, and risk are central—the school became a threat to the White power structure in the district. The school had always been predominantly African American in population because of the intense residential segregation in the county. What changed in the school under

The Color of Caring

the leadership of Mr. Richland was enacting Blackness through the curriculum and pedagogy. Not only was Jackson school “too Black” in population for the mostly White district office, it became “too Black” in content and practice. While the A+ Program offered schools the freedom to conceptualize and implement the reform to meet their own needs, Jackson School quickly learned that enacting the program in counterhegemonic ways resulted in the removal of that freedom.

Conclusions

These cases illustrate the importance of race in understanding how caring and educational reform are defined and enacted in schools. We maintain that the enactment of caring and educational reform must include claiming a school’s racial identity and an acknowledgement that the world is a place where race matters. Furthermore, we assert that both caring and the interpretation of educational reform are not racially neutral. Reform expresses the race of the people who design it and those who implement it. Practitioners, policymakers, and researchers must make race an explicit focus of educational reform rather than merely letting race play out in unexamined ways. Our analysis in this article explicitly contradicts the ideology of colorblindness.

These three cases demonstrate that all educational reform efforts are premised on racial assumptions and that Whiteness provides the subtext for both conceptualizing and enacting educational reform. All three schools illustrate the assumption that reform will be enacted the White way, by which we mean that educational reform will be implemented without the acknowledgement of race in order to sustain current systems of inequity and privilege. The White interpretation of the A+ Schools Program were thereby rewarded as in the case of Mountain Top, and the Black interpretation dismantled as was demonstrated at Jackson. At Piedmont the interpretations of the reform were conflicted with the majority White teachers dismissing the efforts of their Black colleagues even though those efforts were often more effective than their own. Piedmont is a microcosm, symbolic of larger power differentials where Whites privilege their own views and silence minority voices. Furthermore, the enactment of Black womanist caring at Jackson school was threatening to the district’s larger White power structure. It was acceptable for Jackson to have an all-Black student population, as long as teachers enacted a White curriculum and White ideals of caring. When the A+ Program was used to shift these ideals for a Black context, White district administrators took away the school’s leadership and momentum, and ensured the Black school returned to a White context.

Similarly, the White teachers at Piedmont used White feminist notions of caring to marginalize the pedagogy of Black teachers. Because the researcher, Jean herself is White, the perspectives and practices of the White teachers resonated with her and she became complicit in dismissing the alternative pedagogy that the Black teachers provided. She agreed with the White teachers and characterized the Black teachers who enacted womanist caring as harsh, uncaring, and lacking the ability to nurture children in the manner proscribed by White caring. Both Black children and Black teachers were seen to be operating from a deficit view. In an effort to

understand the Black teachers' reluctance to embrace the A+ Program, Jean spent a good portion of her time at Piedmont talking with them and observing in their classrooms. However, with a limited framework and perspective for interpreting their behaviors and attitudes, she was unable to see womanist caring. Instead, consonant with White assumptions, the Black teachers were seen as making a non-political, deliberate choice not to participate in the A+ Program.

At Mountain Top, the White interpretation of the A+ Program was so pervasive that race did not arise in terms of Jenny's understanding of how the reform was enacted there. As a White researcher steeped in the ideology of colorblindness, it did not occur to her to examine race as a factor in how A+ was understood and implemented. This blindness exemplifies how White interpretations get reified as the only valid approach and demonstrates the unwitting complicity that White researchers have in establishing White criteria for success and failure of a given program.

Paula, a bi-racial woman from Southern California, initially was forced to think about her identity in new ways as she entered racially segregated schools in the rural south. In Jackson Elementary, her look, dress, accent, and racial appearance immediately placed her in the category of exotic Other. Paula's ambiguous racial identity opened the door for race talk, which eventually allowed her to engage with the Black teachers at Jackson. These teachers then taught Paula about life in a rural, impoverished, racially segregated southern community, and in doing so revealed their nuanced, reflective, and positioned pedagogy.

All three of us, through our interactions with each other and a growing familiarity of the literature on Black teachers and Black feminist caring, were able to reflect on our own positions in new ways. Through comparing our experiences in the field and the vastly different understandings of the A+ Schools Program that we were seeing, we were able to develop new insights into the data we had collected. This led to a reconsideration of our original analysis that had been uncritically influenced by the subtext of Whiteness as exemplified in particular by White feminist conceptions of caring.

References

- Alder, N. (2002). Interpretations of the meaning of care: Creating caring relationships in urban middle school classrooms. *Urban Education, 37*(2), 241-266.
- Beauboeuf-Lafontant, T. (2002). A womanist experience of caring: Understanding the pedagogy of exemplary black women teachers. *The Urban Review, 34*(1), 71-86.
- Collins, P. H. (1990). *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment*. New York: Routledge.
- Delpit, L. D. (1995). *Other people's children: Cultural conflict in the classroom*. New York: New Press.
- Eaker-Rich, D., & VanGalen, J. A. (Eds.). (1996). *Caring in an unjust world: Negotiating borders and barriers in schools*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- García, S. B., & Guerra, P. L. (2004). Deconstructing deficit thinking: Working with educators to create more equitable learning environments. *Education and Urban Society, 36*(2), 150-168.

The Color of Caring

- Gardner, H. (1983). *Frames of mind: The theory of multiple intelligences*. New York: Basic Books.
- Gilligan, C. (1982). *In a different voice: Psychological theory and women's development*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Groves, P. (2002). Doesn't it feel morbid here? High stakes testing and the widening of the equity gap. *Educational Foundations*, 16(2), 15-31.
- Jones, J. M. (1998). Psychological knowledge and the new American dilemma of race. *Journal of Social Issues*, 54(4), 641-662.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (1998). Just what is critical race theory and what's it doing in a nice field like education? *Qualitative Studies in Education*, 11(1), 7-24.
- McIntosh, P. (1989). White privilege: Unpacking the invisible knapsack. *Peace and Freedom*, 10-12.
- Noblit, G. W. (1993). Power and caring. *American Educational Research Journal*, 30(1), 23-38.
- Noddings, N. (1984). *Caring: A feminine approach to ethics and moral education*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Noddings, N. (1992). *The challenge to care in schools: An alternative approach to education*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Noddings, N. (1999). Theory of justice and caring. In M. S. Katz, N. Noddings, & K. A. Strike (Eds.), *Justice and caring: The search for common ground in education* (pp. 7-20). New York: Teachers College Press.
- Pitman, M. A., & Zorn, D. (2000). *Caring as tenacity: Stories of urban school survival*. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.
- Public Schools of North Carolina. (1997). *The ABCs of public education*. Raleigh, NC: Author.
- Roland-Martin, J. (1992). *The schoolhome: Rethinking schools for changing families*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Schofield, J. W. (2001). The colorblind perspective in schools: Causes and consequences. In J. A. Banks & C. McGee-Banks (Eds.), *Multicultural education: Issues and perspectives* (4th ed., pp. 247-267). New York: John Wiley.
- Shujaa, M. J. (Ed.). (1994). *Too much schooling, too little education: A paradox of Black life in white societies*. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press.
- Sleeter, C. E. (2001). Preparing teachers for culturally diverse schools: Research and the overwhelming presence of whiteness. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 52(2), 94-106.
- Thomas S. Kenan Institute for the Arts. (1994). *North Carolina A+ Schools Program*. Winston-Salem, NC: Author.
- Thompson, A. (1998). Not the color purple: Black feminist lessons for educational caring. *Harvard Educational Review*, 68(4), 522-554.
- Thompson, A. (1999). Colortalk: Whiteness and *Off White*. *Educational Studies*, 30(2), 141-160.
- Valencia, R. R., & Solorzano, D. G. (1997). Contemporary deficit thinking. In R. R. Valencia (Ed.), *The evolution of deficit thinking: Educational thought and practice* (pp. 160-210). London, UK: Falmer.
- Ware, F. (2002). Black teachers' perceptions of their professional roles and practices. In J. Irvine (Ed.), *In search of wholeness: African American teachers and their culturally specific classroom practices* (pp. 33-45). New York: Palgrave.
- Wilson, B. L., & Corbett, H. D. (2001). *Listening to urban kids: School reform and the teachers they want*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.