Useful and Dangerous Discourse:
Deconstructing Racialized Knowledge about African-Amercian Students

By Keffrelyn D. Brown
& Anthony L. Brown

Keffrelyn D. Brown and Anthony L. Brown are assistant professors in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction of the College of Education and affiliated faculty in the Department of African and Diaspora Studies at the Univesrity of Texas at Austin, Austin, Texas.

Drawing from Michel Foucault's notion of "useful" and "dangerous" discourse coupled with the theory of racial knowledge (Goldberg, 1993), this conceptual article examines how two common counter-discourses about African-American students operate and create racial knowledge in education practice. By *counter-discourse,* we refer to knowledge, theories, and histories that emerge as a direct challenge to commonly held deficit-oriented beliefs about racial groups and social phenomenon. We contend that while counter-discourses are useful to challenge problematic theories and practices, counter-discourses are not immune from dangers of their own. In a Foucauldian sense (Foucault & Rabinow, 1984), we maintain that counter-discourses are paradoxically both useful and dangerous. The intent of this article is to explore the double relational meanings of two contemporary counter-discourses: *oppositional culture theory*

and the *cultural difference theory*. We focus on these particular counter-discourses because they reflect common educational discourses used to understand African-American academic achievement. It is our intent to illustrate how these discourses can operate in both useful and dangerous ways in teacher education.

In this article, we draw from existing educational scholarship about African Americans, in addition to our ongoing experiences with preparing both elementary and secondary teachers to illuminate the challenges of using these counter-discourses to address concerns with African-American students. We should note that it is not our intention to provide an exhaustive review on oppositional culture and cultural difference theory. Rather, our review of the literature draws from the common and dissenting arguments related to oppositional culture and cultural difference to illustrate theoretically how counter-discourses can operate in useful and dangerous ways. Specifically, we illustrate how, in spite of their re-articulation as counter-discourses to traditionally deficit-oriented ways of framing African Americans in schools, the two alternative discourses explored in the article can ironically re-inscribe these students (as well as the family, community, and cultural/racial group from which they come) in static, homogenizing ways. We conclude with a discussion about the complexities and implications of drawing from discourses that seek to improve, yet unintentionally may reinforce limiting, deficit thinking (Brown, 2010; Valencia, 1997) and ways to talk about and work with African-American students. Additionally, we offer three suggestions for how teacher education programs can help students understand and navigate between these counter-discourses.

Historical Context: Counter-Discourse and African Americans

Throughout the twentieth century, discourses of deficiency characterized common explanatory frameworks used to understand the experiences of African-American students in schools (Brown, 2009; Milner, 2010). These discourses positioned African-American students, along with their families and the communities and cultural/racial group of which they were a part, as lacking the skills, experiences, beliefs, and values needed to succeed in schools and in society. Drawing from education scholarship, Bondy and Ross (1998) note several longstanding myths held by teachers about African-American students that draw from deficiency perspectives. Collectively, these myths assume that African-American students, along with their parents, families, and/or caregivers do not care about education. In some instances, it is presumed that African-American students themselves lack the motivation and interest to learn or that African-American families do not provide appropriate intellectual experiences and support for their children. The problem with these deficit-oriented discourses is that they reinforce the assumption that African Americans cannot succeed at the same level as their White counterparts (Sleeter, 2008).

Schools, policy, and popular media also draw from longstanding deficit-oriented explanations to explain African-American students' experiences in schools. These explanations, however, do not go without challenge. At least since the 1970s, scholars (Valentine, 1971; Ladson-Billings, 2009) working in the areas of

multicultural education, curriculum theory, and educational anthropology have offered alternative counter-discourses that sought to position African-American students in non-culturally deficient ways. Collectively, these counter-discourses challenged deficit-oriented perspectives of African Americans by illuminating both the structural and institutional contexts in which social behavior occurs, as well as acknowledging the role agency plays in this process.

Two popular counter-discourses found in contemporary discussions about African-American education include the oppositional culture theory and the cultural difference theory. While not totally replacing traditionally deficit-oriented discourses, preservice and inservice teachers, including educators who view themselves as committed to multicultural teaching, commonly use these counter-discourses. Yet despite efforts to recognize the structural factors that curtail African-American students' opportunities to learn and the ways individual agency operate in the midst of these limiting conditions, these counter-discourses can unintentionally open the possibility to homogenize African Americans in a social discourse of specialized need and intervention. They also create the conditions whereby African-American students are positioned as different and deviant from what is considered normal. They can help to fasten in place a racialized body of knowledge to read, understand and ultimately act on African-American students. Drawing then from the central theoretical argument of this paper, counter-discourse has the potential to be both "useful" and "dangerous" and for these reasons, we suggest that teacher education programs directly address these issues. In the next section, we explore the notion of useful and dangerous discourse as it relates to the use of counter-discourses in teacher education.

Counter-discourses that have emerged since the 1970s to suggest that preservice teachers required an alternative discourse to challenge preconceived ideas about African-American students. Across the 1970s and 1980s, multicultural scholars called for teacher preparation that encouraged teachers to recognize and understand cultural differences, with much of this work seeking to help teachers challenge the history of biases and stereotypes about African Americans (Banks, 1979; Gay, 1985; Grant, 1981). By the 1990s, teacher education research focused on ways to provide teachers the culturally responsive and relevant pedagogical practices to meet the specific needs of African-American students (Irvine, 1990; Ladson-Billings, 2009). Since the 2000s, scholars have challenged teacher preparation programs to specifically focus on the relevant constructs of race and racism in teaching (Brown & Brown, 2010; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Milner, 2003, 2007). In drawing from this extant literature, this article provides a lens that can help preservice teachers to recognize the contradictions of counter-discourse. While we agree that teacher educators need to provide preservice teachers with the knowledge and conceptual frames needed to challenge deficit thinking about African-American students with counter-discourse, we further argue that perservice teachers need to understand that even counter-discourses can have the unintended consequence of reifying racialized narratives about African-American students.

Theoretical Framework

This article draws from the perspective that all educational discourses can be both useful and dangerous. This idea is borrowed from Michel Foucault's (Foucault & Rabinow, 1984) notion that "nothing is innocent and everything is dangerous" (Lather, 2006 p. 47). Foucault, however, further notes that just because something is dangerous does not mean it cannot also be useful. In other words, while discourses, solutions and alternative ways to address social problems can be "useful" in their ability to disrupt common assumptions about a social practice, history or person, they are also "dangerous" because of how they get picked up and help to reify problematic categories of difference.

Discourse is useful when it ushers a new, less deficit-oriented way to understand a social phenomenon. For example, the historical trajectory of social science and educational discourse about African Americans has provided new knowledge or what we refer to as a "counter-discourse" to challenge commonly held, myopic, stereotypical and/or deficiency oriented beliefs about African Americans. This use of counter-discourse has been a cornerstone to multicultural teacher education for decades.

The danger of counter-discourse is its potential to create an essentializing racial knowledge (Goldberg, 1993). This racial knowledge emerges in the midst of an epistemological foundation that provides "information about racial nature: about character and culture, history and traditions" (p.150) and thus, helps to "establish a library or archive of information, a set of guiding principles about Otherness: a mind, characteristic behavior or habits, and predictions of likely behavior" (p. 148). When recognizing the dangers associated with the deployment and enactment of counter-discourse, we posit that counter-discourses about African Americans have the potential to open new possibilities that challenge existing discourses of race, while simultaneously creating the dangerous condition of helping to reify homogenized categories of racial difference and deviance. We suggest in this article, however, that this can occur even with counter-discourses that seek to challenge problematic biases and stereotypical perspectives about African-American students. We contend that counter-discourses often possess a double relational meaning that is both useful and dangerous. In the section that follows, we examine how common African-American educational discourses employed to understand and address the academic achievement concerns of African-American students such as the oppositional culture theory and cultural difference theory possesses dual meanings that both open new possibilities of meaning while also potentially reifying problematic essentialisms of culture and difference.

Oppositional Culture Theory

Few arguments exist that have received more attention to explain the underachievement of African Americans than *oppositional culture theory*. Much of

this work emerged from the anthropological studies of John Ogbu (1981, 1995b, 2002, 2003). From the fields of educational anthropology, educational sociology, and educational foundations, Ogbu's notion of oppositional theory operates as a prominent discourse for explaining African-American underachievement. In addition, the notion of oppositional theory has been used in popular culture and within everyday schooling contexts to make sense of the experiences of African-American underachievement in schools.

At a fundamental level *oppositional cultural theory* suggests that some African Americans learn to take on cultural forms that reject the mainstream norms of schooling because African-American students see the educational system as an extension of the dominant culture that threatens their cultural identity and systematically reproduces inequities. As Ogbu (2004) explains in his own words:

> Oppressed minorities are bitter for being forced into minority status and subjected to oppression. They usually hold the dominant group responsible for their "troubles" (e.g., their inferior economic and political status, demeaning social positions, poor health and housing, and stigmatized cultures and languages or dialects). Under this circumstance, involuntary minorities respond collectively as a group and they also respond as individuals in ways that reinforce their separate existence and collective identity. Furthermore, their response often makes their oppositional collective vis-à-vis their perceptions of the collective identity in the dominant group. (p.5)

This quote, which was published posthumously after his death, reflects the theoretical core of Ogbu's (2002, 2004) conception of oppositional culture theory, which remained through the early 2000s. Through the 1990s and in the 2000s numerous scholars explored the validity of this theory in a variety of educational contexts (Carter, 2006; Diamond, Lewis & Gordon, 2007; Downey & Ainsworth-Darnell, 1998; Ferguson, 2002; Foster, 2005).

Oppositional culture theory serves as a counter-discourse in two ways. First, this framework rejected deficit arguments by suggesting that African-American underachievement was not due to genetic or cultural explanations but was constrained by an historically entrenched caste system. Second, Ogbu's (1981, 1995b, 2004) work critiqued conceptions of cultural difference as an autonomous cultural form, by linking African-American culture to both historical (albeit at times inaccurate, see Foster, 2005) and structural forces that produced cultural difference. As Ogbu (1981) posited in his early work, African-American cultural forms "are not an irrational or random set of activities; they form a part of culturally organized system which evolves through generations of collective experiences in tasks designed to meet environmental demands" (p. 417). Again some 20 years later in his 2004 *Urban Review* piece, Ogbu (2004) again reiterates that cultural difference and collective identity emerged and sustained by the "mechanisms or mistreatment of minorities" (p. 5). He thus, remained consistent from the 1980s to the present, that oppositional cultural was socially and historically constructed.

While the original intent of the oppositional culture theory was to account for the structural forces of African-American underachievement, over time this

work—particularly its pragmatic applications in scholarship and lay discourse—would focus less on structural forces and more on presumed cultural forms that informed African-American achievement. Nowhere was this more visible than in Ogbu's co-researched and co-authored work with Signithia Fordham (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986), where they argued that the "burden of acting White" was a cultural practice that governed how Black students conceptualized student achievement. Simply stated, the acting White thesis maintained that African Americans' race and class positionality created limited opportunities (particularly their opportunity to receive a quality education) to succeed in the U.S. Over time, this condition developed into presumed cultural ways of adapting in which Black students viewed academic achievement as a White cultural domain. Thus, the primary deterrent to academic achievement among Black students was the manner in which other Black students ridiculed and described Black students who engaged in the academic achievement as "acting White." This also became the most critiqued aspect of Ogbu's work (Carter, 2006; Downey & Ainsworth-Darnell, 1998).

One of the central critiques leveled against oppositional cultural theory was the lack of data to support the sustained claims made about African-American achievement. Downey and Ainsworth-Darnell (1998) express a common sentiment:

> The oppositional cultural model has become so respected in the academic community that it threatens to divert attention from other explanations for the racial gap in school performance. (p.550)

From the late 1990s to early 2000s, numerous studies found problems with both the oppositional culture theory and the burden of acting White theses. Ferguson's study with over 40,000 students found little evidence to support the oppositional culture thesis. Ferguson's (2002) study found that African-American students reported that their friends believed it was "very important" (56%) "to study hard and get good grades" (p. 35). Diamond, Lewis, and Gordon (2007) also found that Black students' beliefs did not "translate into the development of a pervasive or distinctive oppositional orientations toward education" (p. 656). Recent scholarship has consistently shown that the burden of acting White or other oppositional cultural orientation are not sustained empirically in both quantitative (Ferguson, 2002) and/or qualitative work regarding the achievement of African-American students (Carter, 2006). Given the empirical limitations of these theoretical explanations, why does oppositional culture and the burden of acting White remain so pervasive within the educational and popular discourse about African-American education?

Perhaps it is the case, as some scholars (Brown, in press; Somers & Gibson, 1994) have argued, that once a theory is introduced in the public imagination for a sustained period of time, it becomes an unquestioned metanarrative for explaining a particular phenomenon in society. In the context of race related analysis, these metanarratives operate as racial knowledge (Goldberg, 1993) where particular ideas become mobilized through epistemological foundations that make possible how we are able to "know" a racial group's social and educational experiences. We argue

that this is the case for oppositional culture theory; for despite the critiques and challenges leveled against it, the notion that some Black children resist schooling and consequently fail to achieve academically does not seem to go away.

From this standpoint, we argue that the oppositional culture thesis is both useful and dangerous. For example, when viewed in the context of its time and intellectual intention, Ogbu's framework helped draw attention to the fact that culture does not exist in a vacuum but is constrained and defined by socio-historically entrenched structures that blocked educational opportunities for Black students. The oppositional framework is also useful in its acknowledgement that African-American students have agency and resist inequitable schooling that, in some cases, may involve the expression of various cultural repertoires in the context of school. The distinction, however, between previous studies on oppositional culture and the more recent body of scholarship on Black achievement highlights that while students are conscious of the conditions that impede their opportunities to learn (Diamond, Lewis, & Gordon, 2007) such awareness has not hindered their aspirations for school achievement.

One danger associated with the oppositional cultural framework is how it moved away from the initial blocked opportunities framework (Lundy, 2003) to a theory focused more on the cultural forms of African-American disengagement to schooling. Another danger is related to how the oppositional culture framework was picked up within the educational and popular lay discourse as the primary explanation for the experiences of all African-American students. It is also a paradox that this theory, despite basing much of its saliency on structure and context, also failed to account for the long, rich history in the African-American community of pursuing schooling and academic excellence—even under the threat of death or violence (Anderson, 1988; Perry, Steele, & Hilliard, 2003). This example of the oppositional culture theory as a counter-discourse demonstrates the concomitant meanings of discourse that are both dangerous and useful, particularly when they are employed to provide a kind racial knowledge about a group's social and educational experiences.

Cultural Difference Theory

Cultural difference theory argues that different ways of looking at, understanding and acting in the world exist among people that come from different groups who live together in one society. Such groups can differ in many ways, often culturally, ethnically, and racially. Western-based societies, however, are organized such that the worldviews and perspectives aligned with the dominant group (e.g., White, middle-class) generally set the standard for appropriate ways of being (Ogbu, 1995; Valentine, 1971). This means that people who think, approach, value, act, or experience things considered different from the norm often get positioned as abnormal, deviant, or strange. Normative ways of being in U.S. society align with the cultural norms most often associated with White, middle class experiences and values (Ogbu, 1995).

The history of cultural difference theory goes back to the 1930s. During this period the social sciences employed biological scientific theories to argue that African-American underachievement was defined by deficient genes or by the biological composition of the African-American body and mind (Scott, 1997). Within this framework, African-American intellectual capacity was constructed as innate and preordained by "nature." In the 1930s, however, both anthropologists and sociologists poignantly argued that it was cultural and ecological forces, rather than genetic ones that defined African-American intellectual capacity. Throughout the 1930s and 1940s, numerous studies illustrated the different ways in which African-American life was shaped by social forces (Frazier, 1939; Johnson, 1941). It was clear that this new socio-cultural framework was attempting to upend the existing theories of genetic difference. The new socio-cultural framework, acknowledged that differences in social status and education were informed by a myriad of ecological and sociological circumstances, as opposed to the theories that understood racial differences in social mobility as informed by biological and genetic differences. Here sociologist E. Franklin Frazier (1949) words express this thought:

> When the sociologist began to direct his attention to the Negro, it was to study him as a "social problem" in American life. The general point of view of the books and articles published by this group of sociologists was that the Negro was an inferior race because of either biological or social hereditary or both; the Negro because of his physical characteristics could not be assimilated; and that physical amalgamation was bad and therefore undesirable. These conclusions were generally supported by the marshalling of a vast amount of statistical data on the pathological aspects of Negro life. (p.2)

This statement, in many ways, reflected the sentiment among the University of Chicago School trained sociologists who argued that a new paradigm was needed to examine the cultural and social forces of African-American life. During this period, the cultural difference theory took form. This framework evolved through most of the twentieth century to challenge genetically deficit-oriented theories that suggested African Americans possess inherently deficient social and intellectual capacities. Focusing on culture helped to critique the existing paradigm of genetic deficiency but still positioned African Americans as different and deviant from the mainstream. However, later theorists argued that one could only understand cultural differences in relation to individual agency (Hannerz, 1969). Linking agency to culture placed emphasis on acknowledging how African Americans read, defined, and acted in their own lives. This agency presumably manifested in cultural adaptations found in all aspects of social life, including dialect, ways of learning and orientations/approaches to schooling (Abrahams & Gay, 1972). Yet while this notion of agency and cultural adaptations helped to spurn new ways of thinking about African Americans and their experiences, these adaptations were different from those valued in the mainstream and thus, were often viewed as abnormal and deviant. For example, in response to the argument that African-American students, along with their families and cultural group did not "care" about education, scholars

pointed out the biases implicit in the argument. At a broader level, these biases related to the fact that African-American perspectives on education were judged using normalized constructions based on White, middle-class values (Valentine, 1968). Those scholars (Gay, 2000; Irvine, 1989; Ladson-Billings, 2009) who later critiqued deficit-oriented cultural difference views in teaching recognized that if schools and teachers were to more effectively meet the educational needs of their students, it was imperative to recognize and move from the cultural standpoint from where African-American families presumably operated.

Though scholars have acknowledged the cultural differences that exist between the values, experiences and perspectives validated by mainstream educational culture and those possessed by African Americans since at least the early 1970s, a proliferation of literature devoted to non deficit-oriented cultural differences emerged during the early 1990s (Foster, 1991; Irvine, 1992; Ladson-Billings, 1995a). This work targeted many different aspects of the schooling process including curriculum concerns (Banks, 1993b; Gay, 2000), K-12 teaching (Foster, 1989; Ladson-Billings, 2009, 1995a, 1999b,) and teacher preparation (Banks, Cochran-Smith, Moll, Richert, Zeichner, LePage, Darling-Hammond, & Duffy, 2005). By the 2000s, a wide body of extant literature emerged targeted to "cultural" ways of teaching. Drawing from terms such as "culturally responsive teaching" (Gay, 2000), "culturally competent teaching" (Irvine, 1989, 2003) or "culturally relevant teaching" (Ladson-Billings, 2009, 1995a), these terms referred to an orientation and practice of teaching that placed cultural concerns at its center. While the theories associated with each of these terms place emphasis on different aspects of the teaching and learning process, common to each is the acknowledgement that U.S. society and its schools operate in culturally normative ways that alternately deny or marginalize alternative perspectives. Each of these theories also recognizes how the sanctioning of limited, culturally normative school approaches creates inequitable opportunities for African Americans to learn. As a result, these theories also advocate that schools and teachers address concerns with equity and social justice.

Contemporary education scholarship bears evidence of the popularity of culturally responsive/competent/relevant approaches to teaching. Countless articles and texts have devoted attention to the topic of "culturally responsive" and "culturally relevant" teaching across the 1990s and into the twenty-first century. It is also common to find content area teacher education scholarship (e.g., literacy, science, math, social studies, physical education) and work in the broad area of university teacher preparation that argue the need to prepare candidates to teach in culturally responsive/competent/relevant ways, regardless of their actual skills to accomplish this task (Gay & Howard, 2000). In the teacher education classes that we teach, we find that many (but not all) students appear open to the idea of teaching in "culturally responsive/relevant" ways. Our observation that teacher candidates recognize the need to address cultural differences in classrooms aligns with existing research on the topic (Milner, Flowers, Moore, Moore, & Flowers, 2003). In our courses, students talk about or write about the need for schools and teachers to acknowledge cultural

differences, particularly around the racial and cultural differences between teachers and students using culturally appropriate teaching. The majority of the students in our classes are White, yet they acknowledge the deep cultural and racial divide that often exists between teachers and students. This is relevant when preparing to teach in a context where the U.S. teacher population is overwhelmingly White and the student population is becoming increasingly more racially and culturally diverse (Banks et al., 2005; Milner et al., 2003). Many of the White students in our classes express the need to learn more about groups of color, particularly African Americans. These teachers often harbor anxiety and fears about teaching students with whom they have little experiential, historical or intellectual knowledge. Thus, at a pragmatic level, the notion of teaching in culturally appropriate ways holds resonance for the students. This, however, too often translates into the presumption that in order to successfully teach students of color one must possess a specialized set of teaching methods targeted specifically for this particular population (Bartolome, 1994; Ladson-Billings, 1995a; Ladson-Billings & Brown, 2008).

When asking students what knowledge they hope to gain from taking the first author's course, it is common for students—most of whom are generally White—to state that they want to learn how to successfully teach students who come from cultural/racial backgrounds different from the teacher candidates' own. This is rooted in the presumption that African-American students require a unique kind of schooling experience that their non-African-American peers do not need. In this way, African-American students cannot exist within the norm and are positioned as different and/or deficient. While this particular rendering is both troublesome and inaccurate, it reflects a popular approach taken to multicultural education and diversity in classrooms and schools around the U.S. (Sleeter & Grant, 2006).

Bartolome (1994) alerted teachers that to teach in humanizing, socially equitable ways, one cannot approach teaching in a set, prescriptive or overly determined way. Ladson-Billings (1995a) echoed this call, cautioning teachers not to view culturally relevant ways of teaching as a distinct body of teaching strategies designed only for African-American students. She challenged teachers to think of culturally relevant teaching as simply "good teaching" that drew from approaches to curriculum and pedagogy that all students needed to experience but that they did not have access to because of the limited epistemic positions of traditional school practices. What these and other scholars who advocate placing culture at the center of teaching recognize are the limitations, biases and inequities related to mainstream, normative schooling experiences. These limitations create the conditions whereby students who do not come from a cultural background that aligns with the mainstream will fail to receive cultural support/valuation for their own cultural selves (Gay, 2000; Irvine, 1989; Ladson-Billings, 2009). Fundamentally, such experiences draw from epistemic limitations that either marginalize or render invisible alternative curricula knowledge, teaching approaches, or value systems related to K-12 schooling. Without understanding that this is the reason mainstream K-12 school knowledge, pedagogic practice and value systems require transformation (King, 1995), teach-

ers and other education stakeholders myopically read efforts to infuse culturally appropriate ways of teaching as only for students positioned against the norm as "other." This limited way of viewing teaching makes it possible to essentialize African Americans as a single, monolithic group who hold the exact same set of experiences, values and academic needs (Guiterrez & Rogoff, 2003). It also creates the conditions whereby teachers who plan to teach in schools that do not have a substantive population of non-White students feel little impetus to adopt an orientation to teaching that values cultural responsiveness and the recognition and critique of inequities in schools and society.

The cultural difference theory also provides a powerful example of how a counter-discourse can operate in useful and dangerous ways. There is no doubt that K-12 schools and teachers need to recognize and know how to effectively employ culturally appropriate ways of teaching. This is vitally important for African-American students and all other groups of color. It is also imperative that White students receive a culturally appropriate learning experience as the existing canon of knowledge, in addition to the pedagogic strategies and value systems that compromise traditional schooling require disruption and transformation. This means radically changing not only what is taught in schools, but also how it is taught and how students, along with their families, cultural and racial groups are viewed and positioned in schools. This is the only way that K-12 schools and all of the students who attend them will ever move closer to providing an equitable, socially just educational opportunity for all.

Yet at the same time, cultural difference approaches to teaching are too often taught, picked up and implemented in myopic, limited and superficial ways. Similar to the critiques offered for how multicultural education is picked up and used in K-12 school settings (Sleeter & Grant, 2006), culturally appropriate ways of teaching are presumed to be only for students of color and in particular, as a primary way to "motivate" them to learn. Such teaching is also stripped of its critical aspects and its focus on cultivating sociopolitically aware students who possess the tools needed to critique and help to improve inequitable societal relations (Gay & Howard, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1995a). Equipping teachers to recognize the useful and dangerous elements of employing cultural difference counter-discourses is necessary if we are serious about creating a just, transformative learning experience of all students.

Discussion and Recommendations

In this article, we make the argument that discourse—how we talk about, read and act on the world—plays a powerful role in the lives of African-American students. Discourse, however, even when unrecognized, operates as a type of meaning-making knowledge for individuals. When social constructs like race entwine with discourse they produces a racial knowledge that is what Foucault theorized as both useful and dangerous (Foucault & Rabinow, 1984).

When counter-discourses circulate and become homogenized in the public

imagination they can become dangerous when used to make sense of and respond to the educational needs of African-American students. For example, in teacher education, a danger emerges when preservice teachers use counter-discourses in one-dimensional, static and ahistorical ways. We suggest that moving from the theoretical lens that all theories, including those that operate as "counterdiscourses" are potentially both "useful" and "dangerous" helps preservice teachers and scholars sort through the complexities and contradictions of theory.

This approach to teacher education calls for preservice teachers to develop complex reasoning in their thinking about African-American achievement beyond a dialectical approach where preservice teachers are made aware of the deficit discourses in achievement discourse and then via the course instruction are provided a new counter-discourse. Instead, an additional step must be put in place to help preservice and inservice teachers understand that counter-discourses are "useful" in their ability to open new possibilities for addressing the inequitable educational conditions of African Americans, while concomitantly recognizing that no theory is universally applicable and immune to dangerous constructions.

If teachers are to provide African-American students with an equitable learning experience we recognize that teacher education programs must first help teacher candidates distinguish between useful and dangerous uses of discourse in teaching practice. To assist in this process, we offer three recommendations for how teacher education programs and faculty might help preservice teachers recognize and navigate within the contradictory nature of discourse about African-American students.

• *Recommendation One*: We propose that it is imperative that teachers have the opportunity to critically examine the role and operation of discourse in teaching/schooling practice. When discussing the different kinds of discourses that inform early childhood practice, Marsh (2003) notes that preservice teacher candidates need to recognize the powerful way that discourse frames how teaching is understood and enacted in classroom practice. Unfortunately, teachers often do not receive support in deciphering how discourse operates in their own thinking and practice and thus, fall victim to unreflective teaching that limits efforts at providing an equitable educational experience. We offer that all teacher education programs have a responsibility to make sure that teacher candidates understand and recognize what is meant by discourse and how discourse frames and constrains the very way people think about and act on phenomena.

• *Recommendation Two*: Second, we propose that in order to prepare teacher candidates to work effectively with all students, preservice teachers must leave their programs with a clear understanding about the theories, frameworks, and perspectives that frame their professional practice. How do they envision their approach to teaching? What theories, frameworks, and perspectives support this vision? What are the assumptions embedded in their vision about the role/responsibility of teachers and students and

their learning? Requiring that teacher candidates consider and reflect on these questions is important because, in some instances, the candidate may hold knowledge that suggests African-American students or their families, devalue education because of cultural reasons. Asking teacher candidates to critically think about the implications this argument has on school and teacher responsibility, as well as on efforts to involve families in the life of the classroom creates the opportunity for preservice teachers to think more deeply about the potential impact of their ideas on students' learning.

• *Recommendation Three*: Finally, we recognize the need for teacher education programs to introduce preservice teachers to theories, frameworks and perspectives in a way that acknowledges the intellectual trajectory of the idea explored. This means helping students to understand that explanatory discourses do not emerge in a vacuum. Discourses unfold in the midst of social phenomena and context; and often, new ways of thinking are not easily accepted (Kuhn, 1970). We suggest that teacher candidates need to understand the contested nature of discourse, and this can occur if we ask preservice teachers to pay particular attention to the theoretical tensions embedded in the discourses they bring with them and that they acquire throughout their program. The importance of understanding the contested nature of discourse becomes evident when we consider that many discourses emerge in the context of "speaking back" to, or countering existing ways of talking about and approaching an issue. Without understanding the trajectory in which a particular discourse emerged, a teacher candidate has no context behind why/how that discourse developed, or how any given discourse "speaks" to/with others. In the case of discourses grounded in concerns with social justice teaching and equity, it is vitally important that teacher candidates understand the assumptions, histories and context that inform these approaches to teaching. Doing so will allow preservice teachers to have a fuller, more complex picture of why teachers should adopt a teaching vision that is not rooted in low-expectations and deficit views of African-American students but simultaneously does not presume that all African Americans (or members of any cultural group) operate in or have the exact same cultural experiences (Guiterrez & Rogoff, 2003).

References

Abrahams, R. & Gay, G. (1972). Talking Black in the classroom. In R. Abrahams & R. Troike (Eds.), *Language and cultural diversity in American education.* (pp. 200-207). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Ainsworth-Darnell, J. & Downey, D. (1998). Assessing the oppositional culture explanation for racial/ethnic differences in school performance, *American Sociological Review, 63*, 536-553.

Anderson, J. D. (1988). *The education of Blacks in the south, 1860-1935.* Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press.

Banks, J. A. (1979). Shaping the future of multicultural education. *Journal of Negro Education. 48*(3), 237-252.

Banks, J. A. (1993a). Multicultural education: Historical development, dimensions, and practice. *Review of Research in Education*, *19*, 3-49.

Banks, J. A. (1993b). The canon debate, knowledge construction, and multicultural education. *Educational Researcher*, *22*(5), 4-14.

Banks, J. A., Cochran-Smith, M., Moll, L., Richert, A., Zeichner, K., LePage, P., Darling-Hammond, L., & Duffy, H. (2005). Teaching diverse learners. In L. Darling-Hammond & J. Bransford, (Eds.). *Preparing teachers for a changing world: What teachers should learn and be able to do*. (pp. 232-274). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Bartolome, L. (1994). Beyond the methods fetish: Toward a humanizing pedagogy. *Harvard Educational Review*, *64*(2), 173-195.

Bondy, E., & Ross, D. D. (1998). Confronting myths about teaching Black children: A challenge for teacher educators. *Teacher Education and Special Education*, *21*(4), 241-254.

Brown, A. L. (2011). Same dld stories: The Black male in social science and educational literature, 1930s to present. *Teachers College Record, 113*(9), 2047-2079.

Brown, A. L., & Brown, K. D. (2010). Strange fruit indeed: Interrogating contemporary textbook representations of racial violence towards African Americans. *Teachers College Record. 112*, 31-67.

Brown, K. D. (2010). Is this what we want them to say? Examining the tensions in what preservice teachers say about risk and academic achievement. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, *26*(4), 1077-1087.

Carter, P. (2006) Straddling boundaries: Identity, culture, and school. *The Sociology of Education*, *79*(3), 304–328.

Clark, K. (1965). *Dark ghetto: Dilemmas of social power.* New York: Harper & Row.

Diamond, J., Lewis, A., & Gordon, L. (2007). Race and school achievement in a desegregated suburb: Reconsidering the oppositional culture explanation. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education. 20*(6), 655-679.

Downey, D., & Ainsworth-Darnell, J. (2002). Research for oppositional culture among Black students. *American Sociological Review. 67*(1), 156-164.

Ferguson, R. (2002, March) What doesn't meet the eye: understanding and addressing racial disparities in high achieving suburban schools. Paper presented at Weiner Center for Social Policy, Cambridge, MA.

Foucault, M., & Rabinow, P. (1984). *The Foucault reader.* New York: Pantheon.

Fordham, S., & Ogbu, J. U. (1986) Black students' school success: coping with the 'burden of acting White, *Urban Review*, *18*, 176-206.

Foster, M. (1989). "It's cooking now": A performance analysis of the speech event of a Black teacher in an urban community college. *Language in Society*, *18*, 1-29

Frazier, E. F. (1939). *The Negro family in the United States*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Frazier, E. F. (1949). Race contacts and social structure. *American Sociological Review. 14*(1), 1-11.

Gay, G. (1985). Implications of selected models of ethnicity identity development for educators. *The Journal of Negro Education. 54*(1), 43-55.

Gay, G. (2000). *Culturally responsive teaching: Theory, research, & practice*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Gay, G., & Howard, T. (2000). Multicultural teacher education for the 21st century. *The Teacher Educator*, *36*(1), 1-16.

Goldberg, D. A. (1993). *Racist culture: Philosophy and the politics of meaning.* Oxford, UK: Blackwell.

Grant, C.A. (1981). Education that is multicultural and teacher preparation: An examination from the perspective of preservice teachers. *The Journal of Educational Research, 75*(2), 95-101.

Guiterrez, K., & Rogoff, B. (2003). Cultural ways of learning: Individual traits or repertoires of practice. *Educational Researcher*, *32*(5), 19-25.

Hannerz, U. (1969). *Soulside: Inquiries into ghetto culture and community.* Chicago: University of Chicago.

Hill, N. E., Castellino, D. R., Lansford, J. E., Nowlin, P., Dodge, K. A., Bates, J. E., & Pettit, G. S. (2004). Parent academic involvement as related to school behavior, achievement, and aspirations: Demographic variations across adolescence. *Child Development*, *75*(5), 1491-1509.

Irvine, J. J. (1990). *Black students and school failure: Policies, practices, and prescriptions*. New York: Greenwood.

Irvine, J. J. (2003). *Educating teachers for diversity: Seeing with a cultural eye*. New York: Teachers College Press.

King, J. (1995). Cultured-centered knowledge: Black studies, curriculum transformation, and social action. In J.A. Banks & C.M. Banks (Eds.), *Handbook of research on multicultural education* (pp. 265-290). New York: McMillan.

Kuhn, T. (1970). *The structure of scientific revolutions*. Chicago: University of Chicago.

Ladson-Billings, G. (1995a). Toward a theory of culturally relevant teaching. *American Educational Research Journal*, *32*(3), 465-491.

Ladson-Billings, G. (1995b). But that's just good teaching! The case for culturally relevant pedagogy. *Theory into Practice*, *34*(3), 159-165.

Ladson-Billings, G. (2009). *The dreamkeepers*: *Successful teachers of African American children* (2nd ed.). San Francisco: Jossey Bass.

Ladson-Billings, G., & Tate, W. (1995). Toward a critical race theory of education. *Teachers College Record, 97*(1), 47-68

Ladson-Billings, G., & Brown, K. (2008). Curriculum and cultural diversity. In F. M. Connelly, M. F. He, & J. Phillion. (Eds.) *Sage handbook of curriculum and instruction* (pp. 153-175). Los Angeles: Sage.

Lather, P. (2006). Paradigm proliferation as a good thing to think with: teaching research in education as wild profusion. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education, 19*(1), 35-57.

Lundy, G. (2003). The myths of oppositional culture. *Journal of Black Studies, 33*(4), 450-467.

Marsh, M. M. (2003). *The social fashioning of teacher identities.* New York: Peter Lang.

Milner, R. (2003). Reflection, racial competence, and critical pedagogy: How do we prepare pre-service teachers to pose tough questions? *Race Ethnicity and Education, 6*(2), 193-208.

Milner, R. (2007). Race, narrative inquiry, and self-study in curriculum and teacher education. *Education and Urban Society, 39*(4), 584-609.

Milner, R. (2010). What does teacher education have to do with teaching? Implications for diversity studies. *Journal of Teacher Education*, *61*(1/2), 118-131.

Milner, H. R., Flowers, L. A., Moore, E., Moore, J. L., & Flowers, T. A. (2003b). Preservice teachers' awareness of multiculturalism and diversity. *The High School Journal*, *87*(1), 63-70.

Ogbu, J. (1981) Origins of human competence: A cultural-ecological persptive. *Child Development*, *52*(2), 413-429.

Ogbu, J. (1995) Cultural problems in minority education: their interpretations and consequences part two: case studies, *The Urban Review*, *27*(4), 271-297.

Ogbu, J. (2003). *Black American students in an affluent suburb: A study of academic engagement*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Ogbu, J. (2004). Collective identity and the burden of "acting White" in Black history, community, and education. *The Urban Review. 36*, 1, 1-35.

Perry, T., Steele, C., & Hilliard, A. (2003). *Young, gifted, and Black: Promoting high academic achievement among African-American students.* Boston: Beacon.

Pettigrew, T. (1964). *Profile of the Negro American.* Princeton, NJ: D. Van Nostrand.

Scott, D. (1997). *Contempt and pity: Social policy and the image of the damaged psyche, 1880-1996*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina.

Sleeter, C. E. (2008). Preparing White teachers for diverse students. In M. Cochran-Smith, S. Feiman-Nemser, D. J. McIntyre, & K. E. Demers (Eds.), *Handbook of research on teacher education* (3rd ed.) (pp. 559-582). New York: Routledge, Taylor, & Francis Group and the Association of Teacher Educators.

Sleeter, C. E., & Grant, C. A. (2006). *Making choices for multicultural education: Five approaches to race, class and gender* (5th ed.). New York: John Wiley & Sons.

Somers, M., & Gibson, G. (1994). Reclaiming the epistemological "other:" Narrative and the social constitution of identity. In C. Calhoun (ed.), *Social theory and the politics of identity* (pp. 37-99). Cambridge, MA: Blackwell.

Valentine, C. (1968). *Culture and poverty*. Chicago: University of Chicago.

Valentine, C. (1971). Deficit, difference, and bicultural models of Afro-American behavior. *Harvard Educational Review*, *41*, 137-157.