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Internalized Racism and the Pursuit of Cultural Relevancy: Decolonizing Practices for Critical Consciousness with Preservice Teachers of Color

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Abstract:

In this article, we explore the need for decolonizing practices in teacher education for developing critical consciousness with preservice teachers of Color (PTOC). We assert that the development of critical consciousness for PTOC must include practices that specifically attend to their racialized experiences in the context of white spaces- their teacher preparation programs, the teaching profession, and society writ large- where they have been subjected to colonized paradigms of what it means to teach children of Color. We use culturally relevant/responsive teacher education to frame our discussion and place emphasis on the construct of critical consciousness.

Taught from books of the same bias, trained by Caucasians of the same prejudices or by

Negroes of enslaved minds, one generation of Negro teachers after another have served

for no higher purpose than to do what they are told to do. In other words, a Negro teacher

instructing Negro children is in many respects a white teacher thus engaged, for the

program in each case is about the same. (Woodson, 1933, p. 23)

The words of Carter G. Woodson are just as relevant today as they were over 8 decades

ago, especially when considering the experiences of preservice teachers of Color (PTOC) at

predominantly white institutions (PWIs). If preservice teachers of Color are in majority white

teacher education programs with majority white faculty and Eurocentric curriculum (Sleeter,

2017), is it plausible for us to believe that they will have a different outcome than white

preservice teachers as it pertains to developing culturally relevant/sustaining pedagogy? Much

attention in the research literature has been given to the demographic divide between white

teachers and PK-12 students of Color (Boser, 2011) and developing a social justice stance of

teaching and culturally relevant practices for white preservice teachers (Ladson-Billings, 2005;

Sleeter, 2001). The positioning of PTOC in the literature is often contextualized within

discussions of recruitment for the teaching profession (Villegas & Irvine, 2010). Our focus here

is not on recruitment but preparation. It does us no good to recruit more PTOC if the preparation

is status quo Eurocentric and colonized. Thus, given the limited attention in the literature (as

compared to that of white preservice teachers) towards developing a social justice stance of

teaching and culturally relevant practices for PTOC, one can infer that either teacher educators

think PTOC already know how to teach for social justice or they are simply insignificant

compared to the majority of white preservice teachers. Nevertheless, what is also ignored is the influence of the context of predominantly white institutions (PWIs) on the development of teacher identity (Jackson, 2018) and culturally relevant pedagogy for PTOC. While the literature shows clear patterns of marginalization, isolation and a lack of cultural affirmation in the experiences of preservice teachers of Color in general (Brown, 2014; Cheruvu et.al., 2015), it is also apparent that PTOC acquire limited understandings of culturally relevant pedagogy in their teacher education programs at PWIs (Jackson, 2015).

Relevant to the context of teacher education, King (2008) poses 2 questions that assist with unpacking Woodson's (1933) point about "enslaved minds" (i.e., colonized minds). This article is guided by these questions: "Is equal access to faulty curriculum justice (King, 1992)? What pedagogical alternatives are available, if academic scholarship and school knowledge are flawed by the ideology of white supremacy racism?" (King, 2008, p. 337). We explore the need for decolonizing practices in teacher education for developing critical consciousness with PTOC. We assert that the development of critical consciousness for PTOC must include practices that specifically attend to their racialized experiences in the context of white spaces–their teacher preparation programs, the teaching profession, and society writ large–where they have been subjected to colonized paradigms of what it means to teach children of Color. We use culturally relevant/responsive teacher education to frame our discussion and place emphasis on the construct of critical consciousness. We begin by briefly examining the ways in which critical consciousness is situated within culturally relevant/responsive teacher education. We then posit that decolonizing practices for PTOC must include attention to internalized racism. We conclude with recommendations for integrating decolonizing practices into teacher education curriculum.

Culturally Relevant Teacher Education

Culturally relevant (Ladson-Billings, 1995), culturally responsive (Gay, 2010), and culturally sustaining (Paris, 2012) pedagogies are gradations under the larger concept of asset-based pedagogies. Broadly speaking, asset-based pedagogies draw upon students' cultural frames of reference and funds of knowledge in the learning process. According to Ladson-Billings (1995; 2009), if students are taught in culturally relevant ways, there are 3 outcomes for learners: (a) experiencing academic success, (b) developing and/or maintaining cultural competence, and (c) developing a critical/sociopolitical consciousness. In a culturally relevant framework, the development of sociopolitical consciousness is necessary for both teachers and students. Sociopolitical consciousness is the ability to "critique the cultural norms, values, mores, and institutions that produce and maintain social inequities" (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 162). It is similar to Freire's (1970/2002) notions of *praxis* ("reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it," p. 51) and *conscientização* ("the deepening of the attitude of awareness," p. 109). While all 3 tenets work in tandem, we specifically focus on sociopolitical/critical consciousness, because PTOC must be equipped with knowledge, skills, and dispositions to resist and challenge racism and all forms of oppression in schools and their preparation programs. Also, teachers must be engaged critically with their students, school, and community and be willing to bring multiple historical and contemporary perspectives into the classroom and not be afraid to identify political underpinnings in texts, the communities, or social worlds of students. Culturally relevant teachers have a commitment to social justice, and they work to develop such commitments within their students. Scholars have documented strong evidence of such teaching grounded in critical/sociopolitical consciousness in the practices of inservice teachers of Color, particularly with Black women teachers (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 1999; Dixson, 2003).

Similarly, Villegas and Lucas' (2002) framework for culturally responsive teacher education identifies "a sense of sociocultural consciousness" and "skills and commitment to act as agents of change" as key tenets. Yet, teacher education efforts that center culturally relevant/sustaining pedagogy are rarely systemic and integrated throughout programs (Jackson & Boutte, 2018). This is not surprising given the maintenance of whiteness in teacher education through curriculum, accreditation requirements, entrance and licensure testing, teacher educator demographics, and white student resistance and ontological dispositions and identifications (Miller & Starker-Glass, 2018; Sleeter, 2017). While scholars urge teacher education to move away from its Eurocentric focus (Souto-Manning & Winn, 2019; Sleeter 2017), more discussion is warranted for *how* we infuse decolonizing practices into teacher education. We draw upon the work of Frantz Fanon (1952/2008; 1963/2004) to define the process of decolonizing the mind to be inclusive of practices that allow us to *be* and *become* fully human by recognizing, rejecting, and healing from the psychological damage of white supremacy, patriarchy, racial colonization, racial violence, racial exploitation, and racial oppression. Decolonizing practices are necessary and important for all preservice teachers, but they are especially important for building critical consciousness for PTOC learning how to teach in white teacher education spaces. "The development of teacher identity for preservice teachers of Color at PWIs occurs in racialized spaces where they are often positioned as the 'other' and marginalized even when those programs have a stated commitment to social justice teaching" (Jackson, 2018, p. 208). While limited understandings exist within the literature on the development of critical consciousness with PTOC, scholarship on internalized racism points us in the direction for the kinds of decolonizing practices needed in teacher education.

Addressing Internalized Racism

Diversifying the K12 teacher education pipeline, though critical, is merely an initial task connected to the protracted project of transforming the educational landscape in the United States. Separated from its rhetorical context and buzzword popularity, diversity is, after all, mere representation. Within a K12 system where 84% of teachers are White, 9% are Black, and 2% are Black males (NCES, 2020) a diversified teacher workforce would be a welcome change, even aesthetically speaking. However, beyond the challenge of limited teacher diversity, at issue for all educational stakeholders – including teacher educators and preservice teachers of Color – is the broader, more nuanced challenge of internalized racism. For preservice teachers of Color at PWIs, their experiences with internalized racism is often exacerbated by attendant racialized phenomena ranging from stereotype threat to internalized oppression to racial battle fatigue (Fasching-Varner, et al, 2015). All of this (and more) can negatively impact PTOC academically, socially, and psychologically (Cheruvu, et al, 2014).

Locating and Defining Internalized Racism

As a form of systemic oppression, internalized racism functions as personal conscious or subconscious acceptance of racist views, biases, and stereotypes of one's own cultural group that are drawn from and informed by the collective dominant society. On a personal level, internalized racism can birth and bequeath patterns of feeling, thinking, and behaving that result in critiquing, deprecating, discriminating, doubting, denying, and hating oneself while simultaneously valuing and valorizing the dominant culture. In this way, racism is reinforced as these toxic cycles repeat again and again.

There is, to be sure, a tripartite relationship between internalized racism, racism [writ large], and white privilege. As researchers (David, Schroeder & Hernandez, 2019; Kohli, 2012a, 2014) have observed, internalized racism can impact people of Color (POC) in a variety of ways

including inculcating a sense of inferiority, draining emotional energy, weakening personal

agency, and forcing them to continuously (re)orient themselves in psychologically defensive

postures. Along these lines, the degree to which POC experience and are victimized by racism is

often coterminous with the degree to which they absorb and internalize racism. As such, POC

often develop their own personal ideas, beliefs, actions, and behaviors that align and/or collude

with racism and racists (Kohli, 2012, 2014).

Of the various harmful functions of internalized racism, perhaps the most basic is that of

distraction. For example, in their centuries-long quest for citizenship, voting rights, etc., Blacks

in the US (perennial targets of white supremacy racism) have endured countless questions and

claims denying their very humanity and their right to existence, much less their access to the

voting booth. Not so ironically, the loudest claims and denials against Blacks' humanity have

come from those who have treated them inhumanely. As the racist logic dictates, why should the

right to vote be expended to those not seen as human (or only counted as three-fifths of a person

per the Constitution)? For Black people then, the struggle to prove themselves worthy of the

franchise was/is coterminous with and compounded by the struggle to *first* prove their humanity.

Interestingly, this racist tactic of distraction continues to prove most effective in key areas (e.g.,

education, labor) where Blacks have sought recognition, access, rights, and resources.

Before having arrived in their respective teacher education programs, PTOC were born,

reared, socialized, and educated within a broader context where the social and institutional

structures, policies, discourses, and practices were informed by the toxic, overlapping ideologies

of white supremacy racism, sexism, and xenophobia. Indeed, for PTOC, their routine

interpersonal encounters with racism, sexism, and xenophobia should not be considered

anomalous. Instead, these routine encounters are the path dependent outcome of living in a

system where physical and non-physical violence against people of Color is not only constant, but concretized.

Internalized Racism and Preservice Teachers of Color

Suggesting a freighted correlation between internalized racism and the exploitation of one's material, intellectual, spiritual, and emotional resources, Bivens (2005) interprets the internalization of racism as an ontological assault against self-love and the love of others. To extrapolate further, in one sense, those who experience routine racism are [at least] doubly impacted: first by everyday (i.e., common) racialized transgressions, and second by the onset of internalized oppression which often brings in its wake feelings of irritation, embarrassment, frustration, shame, and confusion (Bivens, 2005). Over time, these traumas compound and may (in certain instances) contribute to what Smith (2008) initially described as racial battle fatigue.

In a focus group study examining the experiences of 12 Black, Latina, and Asian women enrolled in a teacher education program, Kohli (2012) described their shared experiences with racial microaggressions, and how their experiences manifested into serial internalized oppression. The women recounted their cross-racial racialized experiences within their respective programs, and how they led to feelings of self-denial, self-deception, self-deprecation, and self-hatred. Though there was variation among their particular experiences, a constant thread woven throughout each of their stories is the realization that they did not merely internalize negative opinions about themselves (their cultures, names, histories, etc.). Instead, they likewise and simultaneously internalize lies and biases about the grandiosity, exclusivity, and authority of European/Euro American history, culture, and people. The conflation of these 2 things (self-denial plus valorization of whites/ness) may, in fact, serve as the hydraulics that start and sustain internalized racism and oppression.

Cheruvu, et. al (2014) examined the experiences of PTOC in early childhood teacher education programs. Their findings underscore the complex, racialized negotiations in which PTOC have to engage with themselves, majority white professors and students, and a discursive space "dominated by White, English-monolingual, middle class perspectives" (p. 237). In this sense, PTOC routinely experience what might be described as both tangible and intangible assaults (from without and within) upon their character, their bodies, their intelligence, and their capabilities. As such, for PTOC their journey to becoming teachers is pockmarked from battling "socially-imposed and self-internalized" negative opinions that tend to degrade their view of self as well as their individual and collective social and cultural identities" (p. 237).

Interestingly, among PTOC, the phenomena of internalized racism and its numbing effects seemed to occur and resonate most strongly with those who (by their own admission) lack an abiding sense of their own history and cultural background. In other words, the non-presence of heritage knowledge and functional cultural memory among PTOC working and learning in racially hostile, majority white environments, made them even more psychically vulnerable to racialized microaggressions and therefore to internalized racism and self-oppression. In a case involving a PTOC focus group, two women (one Mexican and the other Korean American) expressed their disappointment with having names that do not reflect their ethnic heritage (Kohli & Solorzano, 2012). They then went on to recount racialized classroom encounters of white teachers who routinely mispronounced students' names. For ethnoracialized groups, Bucholtz (2020) describes how names often become sites of negotiation and struggle within educational contexts. By extension, raciolinguistic tensions may appear in various forms ranging from assimilationist or protectionist impulses on the part of ethnoracial parents to racial microaggressions or on the part of white teachers who routinely mispronounce students' names

(Kohli & Solorzano, 2012). For the women in the study, such incidents are part and parcel of a broader, more systemic racist environment (of which teacher education programs are a part) that, by default, seems configured to generate racism and stimulate internalized racism.

In a study exploring the experiences of PTOC learning to teach for social justice with a Black teacher educator (Jackson et al, 2017), PTOC discussed their racialized experiences in their teacher education program, and the ways in which they made sense of race and ethnicity in the process of developing a culturally relevant stance. As a participant and author of the study, Laryn wrote about the difficulty she had with colorism–a form of internalized racism–and how she was in college before she learned more about what it was and how it had so negatively impacted her identity and self-esteem.

> Growing up, I received different messages about being Black. I received different messages from my peers, family, and church family, but all had the underlying message, be proud to be Black. I never really understood what that meant until my freshman year of college. I believe that colorism is a large factor in the Black community, so although I was taught to be proud of my melanin, there was always the message that lighter skin would always be considered better or prettier. I learned how colorism could negatively affect someone's social identity and self-esteem. The belief in my peer group was that you're only considered pretty if you had lighter skin and longer "good" hair. Although I was ignorant to the term, it wasn't until my freshman year of high school I realized how untrue that was. Learning more about myself and improving my self-esteem really changed the way I viewed colorism. During my freshman year of college, I really started finding myself a lot more proud to be Black. I learned a lot more about colorism and where it started and how it negatively affects the black community. Having the

opportunity to actually learn more about the term and study it, also helped with my cultural and social identity. I also believe the change in my peer group assisted with the transition. Being able to have deep conversations about being black on a predominantly White campus increased my awareness and also made me love my blackness more (pp. 101-102).

Laryn's experiences with colorism are not indicative of frailties of her individual actions and beliefs or of deficits within the Black community, but rather they are an outcome of living in and navigating racially oppressive and colonized spaces where the unescapable message is "white is right." Thus, efforts to assist PTOC with decolonizing the mind, have to be intentional.

Recommendations for Decolonizing Practices

We conclude with decolonizing practices that serve as an alternative to status quo Eurocentric and colonized teacher education that fails to acknowledge and center the racialized experiences of PTOC in developing culturally relevant/sustaining pedagogy. Returning to our guiding questions, our recommendations aim to move teacher educators towards curriculum and practices that present opportunities for PTOC to *be* and *become* fully human by unlearning and healing from internalized racism as they develop critical consciousness.

People of Color are affected by internalized racism and need knowledge, strategies, and opportunities to unlearn and heal from racist messages and ideologies that perpetuate racial inferiority. For PTOC, one affirming aspect of their experiences involves the strategies and methods that they have used in order to understand, cope with, and resolve internalized racism. Within the literature, PTOC frequently cite the importance of participating in explicit, critical conversations about race and racism (Kohli 2012, 2014). Attendant with this, teacher education programs are encouraged to evidence their commitment to equity and antiracism by hiring and

retaining diverse faculty who are both knowledgeable of and comfortable with facilitating

conversations about race and racism (Jackson, 2015; Jackson et.al, 2017). To be truly effective,

this should go beyond mere representations of diversity and cliché conversations about inclusion

and the need for social justice. Instead, critically conscious, diverse faculty within teacher

education programs are in a unique position to inform the criticality of said programs, as well as

the students attending them. Moreover, when facilitating explicit, critical conversations about

race and racism, the focus cannot rest with deficit understandings of PK-12 students of Color and

white preservice teachers. In Jackson et.al's study (2017), the PTOCs pointed out how issues of

race and equity were framed around the failure of students of Color, and they had limited

exposure to examples of academic excellence of students of Color. Thus, they felt as though their

presence in a predominantly white program was seen as exceptionalism. Whereas, if such

discussions of race and racism center PTOCs and recognized the issue of internalized racism,

then PTOCs would have opportunities to critically reflect upon their PK-12 experiences and the

ways in which internalized racism was exacerbated or interrupted. Such reflection is salient as

they develop critical consciousness around their agency as teachers of Color within racialized

schooling spaces.

Laryn's reflections on colorism were part of a cultural autobiography assignment she

completed in a course on teaching diverse learners with Tambra. Cultural/racial autobiographies

or memoirs on schooling have gained traction as a tool for assisting preservice teachers with

developing sociocultural knowledge and perspectives for culturally responsive teaching (Canniff,

2008; Gunn et. al., 2013). However, these kinds of assignments must make critical reflection

about race a requirement and not an option. We cannot assume that PTOC have had

opportunities to interrogate their racial socialization and unpack the ways in which they have

been affected by internalized racism. In the cultural autobiography assignment that Laryn completed, preservice teachers were first asked to think about the messages they received about race and ethnicity in their family, religious/spiritual community, and schooling experiences. They were then asked to write about how they were marginalized or privileged in school because of their race and ethnicity and the impact of such experiences on their racial and ethnic identity. And finally, they were asked to apply their gained understandings toward how they will perpetuate or reform the system through which they were schooled. In Laryn's writing, she stated,

> My memories and past experiences have helped me to grow as a person and how I identify myself. I believe that reflecting back on these experiences will help me considerably in the classroom… The desire for me wanting to become an educator is to make a change and not have another student go through all that I went through. My social and cultural identities will be relevant for me in the classroom in order for me to reach my goal. I've always had a dream to teach, but feeling inadequate academically deferred those dreams. My ideas about teaching, learning, and schooling changed over time due to me feeling inadequate… This reflection has allowed me to go more in depth and put a lot more of my past situations in perspective. This reflection has also given me the opportunity to really think about how I can turn all of my experiences into ways to reach my goals of making a change. I know that my past experiences can be considered a resource in the classroom.

As noted by Laryn, critical reflection on her past experiences with internalized racism as a PK-12 student informed her development of professional goals of making a change through teaching. This kind of reflection and analysis for PTOC is also a tool for healing from the psychological

damage of white supremacy in their pursuit of cultural relevancy and being and becoming more fully human.

Conclusion

Returning to the opening excerpt from Woodson (1933), PTOC do not automatically embody critical consciousness because of their race and ethnicity. Furthermore, if attention is not given to developing their critical consciousness, they can be just as detrimental to the neglect of PK-12 students of Color as uncritical white teachers. Teacher preparation spaces influence the development of critical consciousness. We acknowledge that all preservice teachers can benefit from the process of decolonizing the mind whereby they recognize, reject, and heal from the psychological damage of white supremacy, patriarchy, racial colonization, racial violence, racial exploitation, and racial oppression. However, due to the majority white faculty and Eurocentric curriculum that dominate teacher education, when there is a focus in the curriculum on developing critical consciousness, "the overwhelming presence of whiteness" (Sleeter, 2001) tends to control the narrative and more attention is given to the "Becky(s)" (Matias, 2019) than PTOC. It is past time that teacher education programs attend to the particular needs of PTOC and implement decolonizing practices that specifically address their racialized identities.

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Additional Resources for Classroom Use

Au, W., Brown, A.L., & Calderón, D. (2016). Reclaiming the multicultural roots of U.S. curriculum: Communities of color and official knowledge in education. Teachers College Press.

This book challenges master narratives in curriculum studies which omit the histories, stories, and contributions of official knowledge from communities of color. Drawing upon settler colonial studies, critical theory, and cultural memory, the authors bring attention to racialized and colonizing practices of the field.

Thiong'o, N. (1986). Decolonising the mind: The politics of language in African literature. Heinemann.

This is a collection of essays about the role of language in culture, history, and identity. The book positions language as an important weapon of colonization (as language carries culture, art, history, identity) and considers how freedom can be obtained through rejecting colonized linguistic forms.

Wijeyesinghe, C.L., & Jackson, B.W., III. (Eds.). (2001). New perspectives on racial identity development. New York University Press.

This book addresses racial identity and racial identity development across multiple racial groups. The analyses offered across chapters considers various models of racial identity development, how racism affects an individual's identification with a larger racial group, and the intersection of racial identity development and oppression.