

Tools of Whiteness & Teaching for Critical Consciousness

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As the US has been going through its latest iterations of racial reckonings in the wake of murders and violence against children, women, and men of color, there has been increasing attention on the roles that educators have played or can play in either reproducing or disrupting racism in educational spaces. While powerful socializing forces such as families and media certainly contribute to these phenomena, schools are also being recognized as key socializing levers that influence how students of all races come to understand what race is and how racism works in overt and covert ways.

For example, educators have the potential to ignore reckoning with the ways that racism manifests in the lives of students inside and outside of school and let the powerful ideas that underpin racism to go unchallenged. In so doing, educators facilitate a process for White students and students of color to take on the trappings of internalized racism. Under these circumstances, the problematic ideas and oppressive outcomes that disproportionately and detrimentally impact people of color may come to be seen by students as natural, normal, or deserved. In this scenario, at best, White and students of color can grow into adults who do not question or challenge the racist conditions evident in our society. At worst, White students can grow up to actively perpetrate violence against people of color at interpersonal and ideological levels. This dynamic is even more fraught and reflective of the power of racism in the context of a teaching force that is predominantly composed of White people, especially in schools and districts serving predominantly students of color.

In our own work (El-Amin et al., 2017; Seider & Graves, 2020), we have intentionally sought to research and report on the work of educators and schools who *do* seek to engage their students in recognizing, understanding, and resisting racism. Specifically, we conducted a longitudinal research project in high schools intentionally engaged in developing Black and Latinx students' critical consciousness. By *critical consciousness*, we refer to the skills and motivation necessary to analyze and challenge oppressive social forces such as racism.

Following the students from the class of 2017 in each of the participating high schools from their first day of school through their high school graduations, we collected 5 waves of quantitative data in the form of surveys measuring students' (n=643) critical consciousness development over four years. We also conducted interviews each year with a subset of students (n=60) from each of the participating high schools to hear how students were making sense of their critical consciousness and how they felt their schools were contributing to it. Lastly, we conducted over 300 full day observations across all the schools to document how the participating high schools helped develop their students' critical consciousness. In so doing, we have identified numerous curricular, pedagogical, and relational practices through which educators can support Black and Latinx's youth's developing critical consciousness of race and racism (Seider & Graves, 2020).

Broadly, our research suggests that schools are an essential site for nurturing critical consciousness about race and racism with youth of color ((El-Amin et al., 2017; Seider & Graves, 2020). Yet, limited research has taken up how this work can be carried out with a primarily White teaching force. Additionally, while it is extensively documented that White educators frequently resist teaching about race and racism, oddly, we know far less about the classroom practices of White educators who are *motivated* to engage their students of color in

learning about racism. Essentially, we lack insight into the contexts and pedagogical moves that help White teachers (in their racial identity) effectively support the critical consciousness development of their students of color.

Early literature about White teachers teaching about race and racism focused predominantly on the tendency of White teachers to avoid, minimize, and resist conversations about race and learning about racism during pre-service training and as full-time classroom teachers (e.g. Sleeter, 1993; McIntyre 1997; Lewis 2001; Hytten & Warren, 2003). This research also revealed the large numbers of White teachers who lack knowledge about the complexities of structural racism and reflective stances about their White identity. More recent research about White teachers teaching about race - often referred to as second-wave White teacher identity studies - nuances this narrative and highlights White teachers who are race-aware (Ullucci, 2011; Segal & Garrett, 2012); who understand the relationship between race, teaching and learning (Ukpokodu, 2011); and who attempt to teach in culturally responsive ways in predominantly schools of color (Hyland, 2009;). Notably, a few recent studies found that some White teachers have high levels of racial awareness and can *intellectually* describe the importance of developing students' of color critical race consciousness. Yet, they lack the confidence to actually embed topics of race and racism in their teaching practice (Segall & Garrett, 2013).

Very few studies explore what White teachers do when they have the confidence to teach about race and racism and attempt to do so. What pedagogical approaches do they try? How do

these approaches land with students? Where do White teachers experience challenges and what are the roots of these challenges?

Our goal in this chapter is to begin to explore some of these questions. Drawing on our longitudinal observational data, we look closely at lessons taught by three White educators as they earnestly attempt to teach about race and racism. Ultimately, we conclude that these White teachers used meaningful, thoughtful, and rigorous curricula resources to support their students' developing critical consciousness about race and racism, yet they encountered several pedagogical challenges that may be rooted in their socialization into Whiteness. Our findings have implications for White teacher preparation and support and offer practical insights for White teachers who are actively seeking to foster critical race consciousness with their students. Below, we describe several key theoretical frameworks that we drew upon in investigating and making sense of these lessons by White educators about race and racism.

Critical Consciousness

The term, critical consciousness, comes from Brazilian philosopher-educator Paulo Freire (1970) who defined critical consciousness as the ability to recognize and understand oppressive social forces such as racism as well as to engage in resisting and challenging these forces. From his work as a literacy teacher in rural Brazil, Freire came to believe that fostering critical consciousness should be the primary goal of education, particularly for individuals from oppressed and marginalized groups.

Building on Freire's foundational work, Watts, Diemer, and Voight (2011) have conceptualized critical consciousness as consisting of three distinct but related components: 1)

critical reflection or social analysis; 2) political self-efficacy; and 3) critical action. *Critical reflection* refers to the ability to name and analyze forces of inequality. *Political self-efficacy* (sometimes referred to as a sense of agency or critical motivation) is the internal belief that one is capable of, and has the capacity to effect social change. Finally, *critical action* refers to an individual's actual engagement in events and activities intended to challenge oppressive forces and structures, and the unequal conditions they perpetuate. The combination of these three components is what Freire calls praxis and argued that critical consciousness should be understood as the integration of all three components: critical reflection, political self-efficacy and critical action.

In terms of *how* to foster critical consciousness, Freire (1970) characterized traditional approaches to education as a “banking model” in which the teacher serves as an all-knowing authority figure who deposits their knowledge into students. Freire critiqued this banking model as antithetical to nurturing critical consciousness in students from oppressed groups because this approach teaches students to adapt to their conditions rather than learning to challenge the social forces that oppress them. Rather, Freire (1970) wrote that critical consciousness must be nurtured through a “problem-posing education” in which the educators and students work together as partners to investigate real world problems facing their community. Through this problem-posing approach, students are able to see their community and society as capable of transformation, and to recognize themselves as capable of contributing to such transformation.

Freire's foundational writings have served as a guide for numerous contemporary approaches in education for supporting young people's developing critical consciousness of oppressive forces. These approaches include critical literacy (Kincheloe, 2008; Lee, 2007), critical media literacy (Kelly, 2013; Morrell, 2004), participatory action research (Duncan-

Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Fine, 2008), critical civic inquiry (Kirshner, 2015), and ethnic studies (Cabrera et al., 2014; Cammarota, 2007). Still other scholars and educators have reported on specific classroom-based practices that can contribute to students' critical consciousness development. These classroom-based practices include "open classrooms" that foster free and respectful exchanges of ideas (Campbell, 2008), debate of controversial public issues (Hess, 2002), and experiential and project-based learning (Flanagan & Christens, 2011; Kahne & Westheimer, 2003). A number of the studies reporting on these approaches and practices on students' critical consciousness development hold useful insights for considering the teacher practices featured in this chapter.

Colorblind Racism

Also relevant to the present study is scholarship that explores White teachers' resistance to teaching about race (e.g. Amos, 2011; LaDuke, 2009; Segall & Garrett, 2013). Although this chapter focuses on teachers who are motivated to deepen their students' critical race consciousness, theories of resistance that explicate *how* White Racial Socialization and White Dominant Culture can unconsciously live in the practices of White teachers are useful because they explain why the White teachers we observed still faced pedagogical challenges. In sum, White teachers can have high literacy about Whiteness (i.e., White privilege or White dominant culture) and still lean into these constructs in their practice.

Putting aside the possibility that some White teachers adopt explicitly racist ideas and/or are actively enacting racist behaviors or dispositions, the potential of White teachers to ignore how racism impacts the lives and schooling of students of color can be informed by Bonilla-Silva's (2006) colorblind racism framework. Colorblind racism¹, according to Bonilla-Silva, is

¹While Bonilla-Silva's concept of "colorblind racism" makes an important contribution to the research literature, we also believe the term itself has several shortcomings. First, the term "colorblind" can lead people to believe that race

defined as an ideology that, “explains contemporary racial inequality as the outcome of nonracial dynamics,” (p. 2). Informed by notions of the United States having overcome issues of racism through the hard fought outcomes of the Civil Rights struggles of the 1960s, White people who subscribe to colorblind racism believe that wide-scale racism has been overcome in the US and that racial disparities that may manifest are explained by people’s of color choices and efforts rather than being the result of any overarching racially oppressive ideologies or practices. The result of this mistaken “colorblind” ideology is a further reproduction of racism as White people will not see race as a useful lens through which to analyze racial disparities, much less to analyze their own roles in reproducing and perpetuating these disparities.

According to Bonilla-Silva (2006), the foundation for the multiple frames of colorblind racism is abstract liberalism. Abstract liberalism is described as, “using ideas associated with political liberalism (e.g., ‘equal opportunity’, the idea that force should not be used to achieve social policy) and economic liberalism (e.g., choice, individualism) in an abstract manner to explain racial matters,” (p. 56). In this regard, people applying abstract liberalism tend to foreground an individual's choices and effort and minimize or deny the effects of the structural forces that inform and constrain the choices of people of color, in particular. In the realm of teaching and pedagogy, abstract liberalism could take many forms including teachers focusing on the achievements or behaviors of people of color (whether in their curriculum, or even students in their classes) while obscuring or ignoring the role racism or other dynamics of oppression in informing their behaviors or achievements.

is equated with skin color while we understand skin color to be just one of many markers of race. Second, the term "colorblind" can be confused with the biological condition that impacts people's abilities to perceive color. Lastly the biological form of "colorblindness" has some ableist connotations in the label itself (i.e. someone being defined by their lack of ability). Accordingly, our preference is to use the term "race-evasiveness" in its place

Bonilla-Silva (2006) describes a number of different ways that colorblind racism can manifest. One particular manifestation that can occur as White people actively or passively refuse to reckon with race is in the form of *minimization*. Minimization is described as a semantic move or ideology characterized by a sense that racial discrimination “is no longer a central factor in affecting [people of color’s] life chances” (p. 57). Operating under this frame, White people may not discount the notion of individually experiencing discrimination but will attribute the discrimination to causes other than race or racism. At worst, White people operating under this frame will accuse people of color of being oversensitive to when and how racism is operating. In the realm of schooling, White teachers employing the minimization frame downplay or obscure the ways that their students of color articulate the ways that race and racism are impacting their lived experiences inside and/or outside of school (Picower and Kohli, 2017).

Tools of Whiteness

As the highly publicized events and phenomena informed by racism have made it more difficult for White educators to comfortably apply the minimization frame to their analysis of the lives of their students of color, there have been calls for White educators to authentically confront the ways racism has informed their own ideologies as teachers as well as the lives of their students of color (DiAngelo, Love 2019, Picower 2021). And while calls from the public sector and the research realms have put schools and educators in positions where they are expected to reckon with racism and help their students of color better understand and resist racism, researchers have been documenting ways that White teachers have much work to do to teach about race in racism in ways that do not do further harm to their students of color. In *Reading, Writing, and Racism: Disrupting Whiteness in Teacher Education and the Classroom*, Picower (2021) documents numerous ways in which White teachers, through unreflective

training and practice, enact pedagogies or implement curricula that “socialize students to internalize existing racial ideologies, ensuring that racial hierarchies are maintained through the education system,” (p. 26). Picower refers to these practices as “tools of Whiteness.” Two particular Tools of Whiteness that are relevant in our research project are the “Not That Bad” and “White Gaze” tools.

The “Not That Bad” tool is characterized by teachers who “downplay the horrific nature of past oppressions by promoting a sanitized picture of history, thereby maintaining White innocence,” (Picower, 2021, p. 35). In conversation with Bonilla-Silva’s minimization frame, teachers employing this tool do students of color a disservice by minimizing the oppression that their ancestors (or even closer family relations) faced in the past and “mask children’s ability to understand current inequality,” (p. 35). And while teacher’s intentions may be grounded in notions of developmental appropriateness or desires not to traumatize students, Picower argues that this tool will undermine the wellbeing of students of color by skewing their senses of what challenges their communities have continued to face and what their communities have done (or can do) to resist racism.

The “White Gaze” tool is characterized by “attempting to collapse everyone into seeing the world through...the perspective of White people...[and] teaches students to think like those in power, in turn preparing students to empathize with oppressors rather than those marginalized by power” (Picower, 2021, p. 43). Again, this tool has the very real potential of having White students and students of color internalizing racist ideologies even if the teacher has the intention of shedding light on or problematizing circumstances where racism was actively occurring. In considering the ethnographic field notes we collected from the classrooms of White teachers as part of our *Schooling for Critical Consciousness* project, we found that the practices described

by Bonilla-Silva (2006) and Picower (2021) in their work on race-evasive educators were manifest in different ways in the work of a number of these educators, even as they actively and deliberately engaged youth of color in analyses of racism and other forms of oppression.

Transgressive and Negotiated White Racial Knowledge

Research by Crowley (2016) offers an additional lens for considering the ways in which White teachers who do not resist opportunities to talk and teach about race can still struggle with their own roles or complicity with reproducing racism. Specifically, in his study of pre-service White teachers, Crowley reported on a distinction between, on one hand, White teachers' willingness to critique larger structural and ideological issues that impact students of color and, on the other hand, an unwillingness to examine their own racialized behaviors and teaching choices. Drawing on work by Leonardo (2009), Crowley characterized the former occurrences as White teachers displaying *transgressive White racial knowledge*, which Leonard describes as occurring when "White individuals engage in race discourse that runs counter to established norms of White racial knowledge," (p. 1019). However, Crowley observed that, in instances where these White pre-service teachers were prodded to examine their own behaviors and teaching choices, they were more likely to engage in *negotiated White racial knowledge*, which occurs when White people make "connections between critical understandings of race and their own lives [and then draw] conclusions that allow[s] for a measure of comfort and distance from the implications of racism," (p. 1022). In other words, Crowley's work illustrates ways that despite White educators' abilities to critique systems like colorblind racism or meritocracy writ-large, they may still struggle to see, articulate, or act on ways that they themselves might be reproducing racism with their own teaching choices and behaviors.

False Hope and Critical Hope

There can also be profoundly negative consequences for students of color if educators teach sanitized or magical narratives about how communities of color have displayed resilience in the face of oppression (Clay, 2019). If students of color are taught narratives that portray the racism that people of color face(d) as normalized and the ways they resist(ed) it as the acts of brave individuals, this can actually counteract their will to analyze racism and take action against it. Clay (2019) asserts that students of color need to be taught about how communities of color escaped from racism in its various and dehumanizing forms, and how communities (i.e., not individuals) came together to organize against racism and other systems of oppression in acts of what Clay calls “organized deviance” (p. 105). Framing racism as an explicitly dehumanizing system that should not ever be normalized will help students not accept its current pervasiveness. Foregrounding the collective actions that communities took to resist against racism, according to Clay, will facilitate the will of students of color to resist racism themselves. In the absence of the approach Clay calls for, students of color may develop a sense of “false hope” (Duncan-Andrade, 2009) where young people embrace an unfettered sense of future possibility that leaves them unprepared to cope with racism that they are likely to encounter. To counter false hope, Duncan-Andrade argues that educators need to help students of color develop a sense of “critical hope”, where they recognize opportunities for individual and collective socioeconomic mobility in the face of racist structures and practices, and are, consequently, empowered to see resisting racism as possible and necessary.

While work that outlines the traps and pitfalls White teachers make while teaching about race tend to foreground curricular choices or struggles, our observations led us to notice how White teachers can also err in their pedagogical choices intended to nurture their students’ developing critical consciousness about race and racism. Most of the White teachers in our study

used curricular materials written by authors of color or rigorous curricular resources that actively engaged structural racism. Yet, even with robust source materials, White teachers faced several challenges as they tried to facilitate critical race analysis with their students. What follows in the “Results” section is a presentation of a few key teaching vignettes that we drew from the field notes and interviews from our study. We use these vignettes to illustrate how well-intentioned White educators can unwittingly replicate patterns of White ideology as described above that can have deleterious effects on Black and Latinx students’ skills and will to analyze and resist racism.

Results

“I’m going to switch you to more AP language”

In an eleventh grade Advanced Placement English course at Baker High School, Ms. Jamie Beckham, a White teacher in her forties— introduced her class of predominantly Black students to a personal essay by New York Times journalist Brent Staples entitled “Just Walk On By: Black Men and Public Spaces.” In this powerful essay, Staples describes numerous strategies he employs as a Black man during late-night walks through his city to avoid appearing threatening to White passersby and police officers. For example, he describes whistling melodies from classical composers such as Beethoven and Vivaldi as the “equivalent of the cowbell that hikers wear when they know they are in bear country.” Staples confesses to the reader that adopting such tactics has required him to “smother the rage I felt at so often being taken for a criminal.”

After students pulled out the copies of this essay that they had read the previous night for homework, Ms. Beckham began the class discussion by asking them: “What was our main idea for this essay?”

One young woman raised her hand to speak: “Stereotypes can cause harm for innocent victims.”

“I’m writing that down,” Ms. Beckham said. “Then I’m putting a semicolon here to add to the main idea. And I want to go stronger than ‘to cause harm.’”

The same young woman continued: “They can become dangerous.”

“Good,” Ms. Beckham said, “What about the cowbell reference?”

A young man raised his hand. “I thought the cowbell was like a warning signal because I looked at the paragraph. He compared bear country to White society, and the cowbell to his whistling Vivaldi that he’s coming.”

“I’m going to switch you to more AP language,” Ms. Beckham told him. “The word is *analogous*. In the same way he whistles to calm the society who think he’s a criminal, a hiker uses a cow bell to warn the bears he is coming. Now let’s go back to the paragraph structure. What was going on prior to that sentence?”

Another student volunteered to answer this question: “He is writing about how no mugger would be whistling Vivaldi’s Four Seasons.”

Ms. Beckham nodded affirmatively: “What is Staples’ ultimate message that he says is happening at the end of this?”

“I think he’s saying despite all his actions, danger still exists,” a young woman asserted. A classmate offered a different perspective: “I thought he was saying that there are dangers, but he is lessening them and changing them. He is changing himself to be more accepted by the society.”

“Great!” Ms. Beckham said enthusiastically. “We have an argument here, which we love. So let’s capture our two arguments.” She jotted down both students’ perspectives on the white board and then shifted the discussion back toward the essay’s diction related to music.

In observing this lesson and then discussing our field notes after the fact, several key impressions emerged from this lesson. First, Ms. Beckham used Staples’s essay to great effect in supporting her students’ development of technical skills related to identifying the main idea and analyzing paragraph structure and diction. Second, Ms. Beckham’s choice of this essay introduced her students to the writing of Brent Staples, a journalist of color and editor at the *New York Times* who is a Pulitzer Prize recipient. But, third, the class discussion that Ms. Beckham led and moderated only lightly alluded to the fact that the focus of Staples’s essay was the pernicious ways in which his movement through the world is shaped by racism, discrimination, and stereotyping and the corresponding pain and rage this reality causes the author. Put another way, Ms. Beckham pushed her class to focus more intensively on Staples’s use of analogies than on Staples’s description of the ways he had to appeal to the sensibilities of White people so as to avoid the very real possibility that their lack of critical reflection about his race could lead to emotional if not physical violence.

The focus Ms. Beckham puts on the technical aspects of Staples writing, at the expense of the substantive issues Staples raises about navigating racism, represents a subtle version of Bonilla-Silva’s minimization frame of colorblind racism. Bonilla-Silva’s presentation of minimization involved ways that some White people will try to downplay or refute when people of color say that they have experienced racism. In this particular case, while Ms. Beckham does not deny the ways race and racism contextualize what Staples is describing, she does not take the time to have her students reflect on the substance of Staples’s piece. The concern is that Ms.

Beckham's focus on the technical aspects of Staples's writing may obscure or downplay the role that racism has in Staples's life and (perhaps by extension) in the lives of her Black and Latinx students. As her students describe how Staples employs strategies to avoid the mental and physical violence informed by racism, Ms. Beckham uses the lesson as an opportunity to focus on teaching AP-level vocabulary words and lauds her students for developing a clear argument. In this regard, Ms. Beckham ignores the likelihood that her own students have to navigate the same high-stakes dynamics that Staples describes. This teaching move has the potential for sending the message to her students that the racism that they navigate is not worthy of attention or analysis.

This teaching move also reflects some measure of Picower's "Not That Bad" tool of Whiteness. While the examples of the "Not That Bad" tool that Picower presents tend to focus on teachers downplaying the horrific and dehumanizing nature of historical iterations of racism, we see ways that the essence of this tool could be applied to contemporary iterations as well. In this case, Staples reflects on how Black men can be criminalized while engaging in mundane activities such as walking down the street. Importantly, our society is rife with examples of the types of violence enacted against Black men while engaging in these mundane activities.

Accordingly, the dynamics that Staples describes that he navigates can have life-and-death implications for him and other people of color in similar situations. While acknowledging the role of stereotypes in this situation, Ms. Beckham's teaching of Staples's piece places little to no focus on the grim implications for Black men and other people of color in similar situations.

Looking through the lens of the "Not That Bad" tool, the potential result of this teaching move could be inadvertently to send the message to students that the racism that people of color have to navigate and endure is unremarkable and part of what society should expect of people of

color. A metaphor to explain the danger of this approach would be to analyze the swimming patterns of a fish in a pond, without acknowledging that the pond is polluted and could ultimately kill the fish no matter where or how they swim. Ultimately, normalizing the racism that people of color have to navigate and endure (with potential deadly consequences) can, as Clay describes, socialize students of color to not feel that racism is a pernicious system that needs to be dismantled and/or make them feel a reduced sense of hope or agency to engage in a process of resisting racism.

There is no one right way that Ms. Beckham should have approached this lesson to facilitate students' critical consciousness development about race. Arguably, Ms. Beckham's opening question about the article's main idea was an excellent foundation. Yet, for this question to have motivated the deep racial literacy that critical social analysis involves, Ms. Beckham needed to allow students to sit with the specific *racial* context and *racial* themes in the text, putting race on the table as the primary analytic lens.

For example, consider the first student's response, "Stereotypes can cause harm for innocent victims." Here, Ms. Beckham could have said something like, "Yes, and in this article, who is the author foregrounding in their discussion about how stereotypes harm?" This question may have created space for the class to explore the intersection of race and gender implicated in the article, and to analyze the distinct experience of being a Black male in the U.S. Ms. Beckham could also have asked students to unpack the stereotypes Brent Staples described and to discuss their own experiences with racial stereotypes. This conversation might have allowed students to generate a social analysis motivated not only by the essay's narrative but also by their own. Lastly, Ms. Beckham could have pushed students to think about the relationship between racism and critical action and led students to analyze the strategies that Brent Staples described as

mechanisms for his survival. Why did Mr. Staples feel that whistling songs from White composers would provide him cover or safety? What are the implications of that reality - if it is one? What experiences did students have with similar or different strategies for resisting or surviving despite racism? Do these strategies change the underlying structures of power that lead to pervasive stereotypes to begin with? Any of these conversation strands would have provided a more robust pathway to students' critical consciousness development and still facilitated opportunities to build technical skills related to diction, mechanics, and literary analysis.

“You need to let us linger there more.”

In the twelfth grade African American Literature course at Baker High School, we observed one of Ms. Beckham's colleagues, Mr. Henry, enact another of the tools of whiteness. Mr. Henry—a White teacher in his mid-thirties—was leading his students in a discussion of James Baldwin's 1962 novel, *Another Country*, which focused on interracial relationships during a time period when such relationships were not only taboo but illegal in many parts of the United States. In one class discussion of *Another Country*, Mr. Henry and his students considered Baldwin's claim that the Blues represent a lever for transforming racial injustice in America. First, Mr. Henry played his students a blues standard, “Trouble in Mind,” that Baldwin explicitly references in the novel:

*Trouble in mind, I'm blue,
But I won't be blue always.
Cause I know the sun's gonna shine in my back door someday.*

When the song ended, Mr. Henry asked his students: “Why in this song is the sun going to come in the back door?”

“The back door represents Black History,” a young woman said.

“Black History will shed light on what America is,” another young woman explained.

Mr. Henry nodded enthusiastically. “Yes. If the house is America, what does the darkness represent?”

“Ignorance?” asked a young man.

Another young man jumped in. “So the house represents America, and it’s filled with darkness, which is ignorance. And Black people will open the back door to bring the truth.”

“Yes!” Mr. Henry told his students. “Baldwin believes the Blues will bring the truth about the Black experience in America.” He pointed to his well-worn copy of Baldwin’s novel. “And how do the Blues help lead Black and White people to another country without actually leaving America?”

“The other country is when both Black and White people understand each other,” a student suggested.

“Yes!” Mr. Henry said. His enthusiasm at his students’ reading of Baldwin’s work was palpable.

This lesson was an engaging and intellectual one, and Mr. Henry was one of the most impressive teachers we observed across all of the schools in our *Schooling for Critical Consciousness* study. Importantly, however, midway through their study of *Another Country*, a group of students requested an afterschool meeting with Mr. Henry to express some concerns about their learning. As Mr. Henry explained in an interview, his students were concerned that he “was guiding the [class’s] conversations to optimistic outcomes.” In other words, Mr. Henry was focusing the class’s discussions on Baldwin’s prescriptions for overcoming White supremacy rather than on Baldwin’s descriptions of “Black suffering and Black pain and the experience of living under White supremacy.” According to Mr. Henry, the students told him: “You need to let us linger there more.”

Our observations of Mr. Henry's classroom point to both similarities and differences from the vignette from Ms. Beckham's class described above. Similar to Ms. Beckham, Mr. Henry provided students with a rigorous text by a writer of color and effectively taught students a technical skill using the text - in this case, the ability to decode a metaphor. Mr. Henry also made a similar misstep in failing to create space for students to discuss the connections of the text to their material and embodied experiences *as* people of color. Unlike Ms. Beckham, Mr. Henry foregrounded issues of race and racism in his lessons, but he did so by focusing primarily on the novel's hopeful sentiments.

Importantly, Mr. Henry may have chosen this approach because he felt that optimism was important for students against the backdrop of sweeping national racial unrest at the time of his lesson. He may have also believed that highlighting Baldwin's strategies for countering White supremacy would help students connect to strategies of resistance in their own lives. While these goals are understandable and admirable, Mr. Henry's intentions fell short precisely because they were not coupled with opportunities for students to authentically contend with the painful realities of structural racism. As a result, even though Mr. Henry was urging his students to focus on "hopeful" moments in the text and actively working to facilitate hope, ironically, he was simultaneously failing to foster the kind of hope that research suggests is most beneficial to his students as people of color.

Recall from this chapter's Introduction that scholar Jeffrey Duncan-Andrade (2009) characterizes critical hope as the ability to assess one's lived experience realistically and authentically through a justice-based lens while also envisioning the possibility of a better future. In schools, critical hope is facilitated when teachers and students *painfully examine* their lives in an unjust society alongside discussions of prescriptions for change. In other words, facilitating

critical hope requires teachers to not only make room for pain in classroom discussion and analysis but to honor that pain itself may pave the path to justice. In essence, Mr. Henry's students asked their teacher to adopt a pedagogy of critical hope when they requested more time and space to contend with and linger in Black suffering before moving forward into offering strategies for change.

In lieu of critical hope, Mr. Henry was facilitating what Duncan-Andrade (2009) refers to as false or hokey hope, which seeks to deepen young people's feelings of optimism and possibility *without* acknowledging the presence of oppressive forces in their lives. Whether intentionally or unintentionally, false hope minimizes the severe impact of inequities on students' lives. Andrade suggests that such false hope is most often facilitated by "spectators" - those on the outside of the deleterious impacts of injustice who instead experience systemic privilege (p. 183) By offering his students an analysis of Baldwin's novel that focused on reasons for optimism about race relations in the United States, Mr. Henry used a framework of the world likely generated by his status as a White man and inadvertently imposed this lens on his students. In so doing, he effectively silenced the connections students wanted to draw from their lived experiences to the experiences of racial mourning described in the novel. Additionally, by creating classroom conditions where Black and Latinx students *had* to avoid the dehumanizing realities of racism and focus almost exclusively on the spaces of possibility in conversations about race, Mr. Henry was also socializing students to approach critical racial analysis with this same White ideological worldview.

As described in the Introduction, Picower (2021) refers to the intentional or unintentional socialization of students of color into White ideologies on the part of White teachers as "White Gaze." While Picower suggests that White teachers ask students to take on a White ideological

worldview through their white-washed *curricular* content, Mr. Henry's lesson suggests that White teachers can also enact the White Gaze even as they engage a text written by an author of color. As we saw with Mr. Henry, this enactment of White Gaze involved selectively determining the aspects of a text that should have salience in the classroom and making those selections based on his White racial point of view. In this case, the passages Mr. Henry elevated provided a pathway to "rosier" conversation about racism. His enactment of White Gaze also included signaling his desire for optimistic responses through overt enthusiasm when students' answers contained a hopeful glimmer.

Notably, Mr. Henry's students were not receptive to this socialization and exercised their agency to resist his pedagogical approach and speak up about their concerns. They provided clear guidance about what they wanted and needed from their teacher - the opportunity to contend with their feelings and pain as students of color in the United States. Importantly, Mr. Henry responded gratefully and positively to students' feedback. His response serves as a model for current and future teachers. He told the class what he heard and acknowledged that his positionality as a White man prevented him from seeing the text as his students did and also shaped his pedagogical choices and analysis. Mr. Henry also followed this acknowledgment with material changes. He not only began to restrain his participation in class discussions minimizing the impact of his Whiteness, but he also invited students to identify readings and topics to incorporate into the course's syllabus. Further, he began to share power with students, asking them to serve as discussion leaders in future race-based discussions. All of these moves contributed to Mr. Henry's students praising his abilities as a teacher and the influence of this African American Literature course on their developing critical consciousness in interviews with our research team.

“Are we going to be the only Black kids there?”

At Legacy Academy, Ms. Michaela Todd— a White social studies teacher in her early forties—sought to prepare the predominantly Black and Latinx students in her eleventh grade history class for their upcoming participation in a mock presidential debate with other local high schools. Ms. Todd’s class had participated in this event in previous years, and she had observed that the other high schools participating in the mock debate were from affluent suburban communities comprised predominantly of White students and had concerns about how her students might be perceived or treated by these students. In this lesson, Ms. Todd sought to prepare her students for encountering these peers. The school’s principal, Mr. David Johnson, observed the lesson from the back of the room.

The lesson began with a “Quick Write” in which Ms. Todd explained: “At our debate tomorrow, it is possible that we will hear things that feel offensive or hurtful to us, our families, and our communities. I want to take some time today to think about how we will respond.” She asked her students to write silently for five minutes in response to the following prompts: 1) Think about a time when someone said something to you that you found especially offensive or hurtful. What did they say? How did it make you feel, and how did you respond? Looking back now, would you change anything about your response?

Then several students shared what they had written. One student shared an incident with a racist bus driver. Another described a recent experience in a store and explained that her strategy was to smile sarcastically and incorporate the person’s response into whatever she said next. Other students shared that, when they’re insulted, they respond by laughing, insulting the other person, and making a skeptical facial expression. Another student loudly sucked on his teeth to illustrate his response to hearing an insulting comment.

Ms. Todd picked up on this last example. “Some of the other kids tomorrow won’t know what that [teeth-sucking] means.”

“Are we going to be the only Black kids there?” a young woman in the class asked immediately.

Ms. Todd acknowledged that there were likely to be just a few other Black students participating in the event, and she shifted the discussion to offering several “self-care” strategies that her students could utilize if they heard something offensive or hurtful from other participants. She shared a slide on the class’s white board that included “talk to someone you trust,” “breathe,” “take a break/step out,” and “sit next to/look at your people.”

“Isn’t that racist?” one student asked, in response to the last point about seeking out allies.

Ms. Todd shook her head. “It’s a reminder to support each other and to speak up when you hear things you disagree with.”

A young woman raised her hand. “So, basically what I’m getting from this is that we need to watch out because we’re Black?”

Principal Johnson spoke up in response to this last comment. He rejected the idea that the students had to watch out because they were Black. “This is about holding your stance and your values.” There was a low rumble of discontent across the classroom in response to this explanation, and the class period ended shortly thereafter.

Interestingly, interviews with Legacy Academy students following this lesson suggested that their frustration with the lesson had to do with perceiving Ms. Todd to be raising the specter

of racism or racial prejudice in ways that did not name race explicitly, and doing so in a way that left them feeling less motivated to engage in the mock debate. While it seems clear that Ms. Todd had laudable intentions to prepare her students for the racial prejudice they might face at the debate and to think about strategies for how to navigate these potential situations, we can see in her instructional choices that she failed to name race explicitly - a fact her students found puzzling and frustrating. They repeatedly tried to clarify Ms. Todd's intentions. One student asked whether they would be the only Black students there after Ms. Todd expressed a vague sense of concern about whether White students would understand some of her students' potential responses to insensitive comments or behaviors. A second student asked if it would be "racist" to take Ms. Todd's race-evasive suggestion that the students look to each other for support if they encountered any racial prejudice. A third student asserted, "So, basically, what I'm getting from this is that we need to watch out because we're Black" after yet another response from Ms. Todd that failed to mention race specifically. Her students gave Ms. Todd three opportunities to name race in explaining the dynamics about which she was concerned. However, Ms. Todd never named race explicitly, and the conversation ended with the principal explicitly stating that the students did not need to think about their perceived behaviors through the lens of their identities as Black and Latinx young adults.

Ms. Todd's goal of helping students modulate their behaviors because of potential racial prejudice without explicitly naming race represented an honest attempt to help her students navigate racism that backfired. The impetus for the conversation was Ms. Todd's concern for how her students might be treated and viewed by White people in ways that reflected racial prejudice. Furthermore, she attempted to guide her students to (re)act in ways that she felt would not reflect poorly in the eyes of potentially prejudiced White people, but without explicitly

naming this racial dynamic. Ms. Todd's seeming reluctance to name the dynamics of Whiteness explicitly resembles Crowley's (2016) notion of enacting a form of *negotiated White racial knowledge*. Her reluctance to name Whiteness and her focus on helping her students focus on their own behaviors in a potentially racist context gave Ms. Todd an opportunity to distance herself from Whiteness and some of the advantages she and other White people receive. Furthermore, the way Ms. Todd framed the issue implicitly asked her Black and Latinx students to sympathize with and/or not challenge the perspectives of potentially prejudiced White peers they encountered at the mock debate. Rather she seemed to ask her students to respond to these potentially problematic perceptions held by their White peers by acting in ways that would not further fuel these perceptions. This type of approach has the potential to teach students to sympathize with racist ideologies or behaviors rather than to challenge them or see them as problematic.

Ms. Todd might have facilitated this conversation to greater impact if she simply stated to students that she wanted to have a conversation about race and racism ahead of the scheduled debate. She could have framed it as an honest conversation with her students about the racial dynamics she anticipated they were going to face because of her own experiences and socialization with Whiteness. Ms. Todd could have also talked about the ways that she, herself, was still learning how to enact *transgressive racial knowledge* into her own teaching practices and asked her students to share more of their own thinking about the racial dynamics—and effective responses to these dynamics—in predominantly White spaces (Crowley, 2016). In this regard, rather than trying to distance herself from Whiteness, she could have framed her proximity to Whiteness and her desire to disrupt it as uniquely positioning her to work with her Black students to navigate or disrupt the racial dynamics with a critical eye .

Discussion

Recall from the Introduction that we ground our understanding of critical consciousness in Watts, Diemer and Voight's (2011) model that describes critical consciousness as the praxis of social analysis, social action, and political agency (Seider & Graves, 2020). What emerges in the vignettes featured in this chapter are examples of well-meaning and engaged White teachers seeking to nurture the critical consciousness of their students of color, but inadvertently employing pedagogical tools of Whiteness that subvert their best intentions. In so doing, these educators hampered their students' opportunities to engage in social analysis of oppressive forces such as racism and/or weakened their will and skill to challenge such forces.

In the first vignette, for example, Ms. Beckham committed the error of focusing her teaching on the technical aspect of Brent Staples's "Whistling Vivaldi" essay at the expense of addressing the ways in which Staples's essay illustrated the persistent and pernicious nature of racism. In so doing, Ms. Beckham applied a "Not that Bad" frame that limited her students' opportunity to use Staples's work for reflecting upon experiences with racism—and how to navigate such racism—in their own lives (Picower, 2021). In the second vignette, Mr. Henry's students demanded that their teacher apply a less optimistic (perhaps even naively informed) analysis of Baldwin's novel *Another Country* because doing so denied them the opportunity to engage in deeper social analysis of Baldwin's writing and to reflect on its relevance to their own lives. In this regard, Mr. Henry's error was to facilitate an investigation of Baldwin's work dominated by his own "White Gaze" (Picower, 2021). Similar to Ms. Beckham, Mr. Henry's enactment of one of the tools of Whiteness limited his students' opportunities to engage in a more critical analysis of Baldwin's work (until his students intervened!). It is instructive that both Ms. Beckham and Mr. Henry selected texts for their respective courses that could be

characterized as culturally relevant or culturally responsive due to their potential resonances with their students' backgrounds and experiences; however, both educators made pedagogical choices that limited their students' opportunities while reading these texts to engage in meaningful social analysis of their content and contexts.

The third vignette featured in this chapter is fascinating because the teacher, Ms. Todd, seemed invested in helping her students develop a sense of political agency to challenge racism and to nurture social action skills in this regard, but she sought to do so without offering her students an authentic opportunity to engage in social analysis about race and racism. Because Ms. Todd wanted her students to be prepared for the likelihood that they would experience some measure of racism in their upcoming debate competition, she engaged them in a conversation about brainstorming strategies they might employ if they encountered racism. The problem was that Ms. Todd failed to explicitly name racism as the social force they needed to analyze and subsequently challenge. Over the course of this vignette, Ms. Todd's students engaged in three separate attempts to nudge their teacher to name racism explicitly, so as to contextualize and make relevant the actions and strategies she had instructed them to brainstorm. In the absence of this context, Ms. Todd's students expressed discontent and a lowered motivation to participate in the mock debate at all. As described above, Ms. Todd's race-evasiveness, reluctance to speak explicitly about racism and Whiteness, and encouragement of her students to focus on their own behaviors in a potentially racist context seemed to emerge from Ms. Todd's own negotiated White racial knowledge (Crowley, 2016). Put another way, Ms. Todd's enactment of another tool of Whiteness produced an outcome where her students lost their motivation to compete in the debate competition at all because she pushed them to engage in social action with adequate social analysis of the context they were walking into.

Our time conducting research at their respective schools informs our sense that the educators featured here were actively and earnestly committed to nurturing their students' critical consciousness. However, building on the work of Bonilla-Silva (2006) and Picower (2021), our analysis also revealed that White educators' teaching without being sufficiently reflective about how they employ pedagogical lenses that center Whiteness can reproduce racism or other oppressive systems in the form of leaving Black and Latinx students without the skills or motivation to challenge racism. White teachers' positionalities often give them privilege over students of color on the basis of teacher-student, adult-youth, and racial dynamics. This gives White teachers an extraordinary amount of power to shape teaching and learning, especially as it pertains to race. With these power dynamics in mind, it becomes even more important for White teachers to reflect on the kind(s) of authority they exercise over students of color whose critical consciousness they are trying to develop.

White teachers who rely on a banking model of teaching, where the teacher is seen as the ultimate possessor of information, are more likely to reproduce racism because Whiteness is so powerful and often invisible to those who benefit from it (McIntosh, 1988; DiAngelo, 2018). Freire's (1970) notion of a more reciprocal, problem-posing relationship between teacher and students better positions White teachers to disrupt Whiteness in their teaching because they are engaging with students of color as teaching and learning partners, while still honoring the fact that their primary role is to facilitate learning for their students. For Ms. Beckham, that would entail having students engage in a social analysis of key texts, rather than merely technical analyses of the writing in these texts. For Mr. Henry, that would entail trying not to overlay analyses centering Whiteness and, instead, to engage his Black and Latinx students in analyses of key texts that feel authentic to their lived experiences as people of color. For Ms. Todd, that

would mean naming race and racism explicitly as she prepared her students to navigate and challenge the racism she anticipated they would face. Importantly, Mr. Henry exemplified such reciprocity in the final sentences of his vignette by engaging his students as teaching and learning partners and pivoting his teaching after putting himself in position to receive critical feedback from them. This is the kind of partnership that more White educators would do well to cultivate with their students of color because such partnerships would allow their students' perspectives to hold value in the teaching and learning process and therefore to center perspectives of peoples of color in the teaching and learning process. Moreover, de-centering perspectives informed by Whiteness will better position students of color to build the skills and motivation (i.e. agency) to further develop critical consciousness.

Implications

Schools have the potential to be important sites for the critical consciousness development of youth of color (and White youth). Yet, there is a need for more research and scholarship on how this work can be carried out with a primarily White teaching force. Our study begins to fill this knowledge gap and underscores that a desire to nurture critical consciousness about race is not sufficient for effectively doing so. Even when White educators are deeply committed to critical consciousness development with their students of color, they can face numerous challenges.

The teachers in our study experienced challenges that moved beyond the curriculum and what teachers teach to the nuances of *how* teachers teach. In other words, the White teachers in our study all had access to high-quality materials that had the potential to deepen students' critical consciousness about race, but they lacked the full range of pedagogical techniques that would allow them best to develop their students' critical racial analysis, agency, and commitment

to social action. To advance critical consciousness development in schools, we need to think carefully about the opportunities teachers have to deepen their instructional repertoire with respect to teaching about racism. In classrooms with students of color, teachers may also need support navigating and holding the complexity and range of emotions that accompanies learning about lived experience in a marginalized identity as a part of classroom content.

Overall, we should not underestimate the complex pedagogical questions involved in developing critical consciousness about race and racism. For example, how should educators balance creating space for the raw and logical painful emotions of learning about racism with developing the sense of agency and sense of possibility required to complete the critical consciousness cycle? How should educators facilitate conversations about historical texts and literary works in ways that allow students ample space to elevate their everyday experiences alongside historical narratives? And how can educators leverage a text containing visceral racial content to teach technical skills (i.e., literary devices) without minimizing or diminishing either of these domains?

One possible space of intervention is to provide all teachers with professional development as a part of pre-service and in-service training where they can both discuss and practice instructional moves that effectively create a container for racial dialogue. Given the demographics of our current teaching force, it is also critical that we begin to ensure educators have access to differentiated professional development based on their identities. Even with the best intentions, White teachers in our study frequently made pedagogical decisions rooted in their racial socialization as White people and their positionality as racially privileged. To effectively support the critical consciousness development of their students of color, White teachers need opportunities to consistently analyze how their Whiteness can influence their

instructional choices to the detriment of critical consciousness development and in some cases, increased harm for students.

As for what such professional development might look like in schools, one approach that we are currently exploring is a professional learning community in which middle school educators leading advisories in their respective schools work collaboratively to plan, try out, and then reflect upon practices for nurturing students' critical consciousness of race and racism in their respective advisories. A professional learning community is a collaborative space that offers sustained support for educators to critically analyze their practice and learn from one another (Dobbs et al., 2017). We are serving as participants and facilitators in these professional learning communities that meet monthly for approximately an hour and a half. Although these PLCs are not designed specifically for White educators invested in supporting their students' critical consciousness development, many of the participating educators are White. In the role of facilitator within these PLCs, we do *not* position ourselves as experts capable of offering answers about how to strengthen students' critical consciousness. As described above, such a banking approach to education is at odds with the concept of critical consciousness, and, moreover, schools and classrooms are such context-specific places that impactful curriculum and practices in one school or classroom might be received very differently in another schooling context. However, the PLCs *do* offer educators the time and space to engage in deep and collaborative reflection upon curriculum and practices they are contemplating sharing with their students; to solicit and wisdom feedback from colleagues that allows for refinement and improvement; and, to debrief and discuss afterwards how particular lessons or activities landed.

Our interest in deepening educators' capacity to do critical consciousness work via professional learning communities emerged, in part, out of the recognition that the White

educators profiled in this chapter are genuinely committed to supporting their students' developing critical consciousness of race and racism, and that the challenges or missteps we profiled were often the result of insufficient opportunities for feedback, collaboration, and coaching. In-school professional learning communities might be one route to creating such feedback, collaboration, coaching, and space for self-reflection for educators invested in this work.

To be clear, we believe it is incredibly important for educators to learn, think, and reflect upon the ways in which race and racism impact their own lives and those of their students, but it is also the case that this is a continuous, lifelong process. There is no “end zone” or “finish line” at which point educators now know enough to lead lessons on race and racism without any error ever in their classrooms because these topics are both complex and dynamic. What this means, however, is that all educators have to be willing to position themselves as learners alongside their colleagues in spaces such as professional learning communities and alongside their students in academic courses, advisories, extracurriculars, etc. Think back to the vignette of Mr. Henry featured earlier in this chapter in which his students respectfully but forcefully rejected his positioning of himself as an expert on the ideas about race and racism offered by James Baldwin in *Another Country*. What Mr. Henry's students pushed for, instead, was for their teacher to position himself as a co-teacher and co-learner alongside them, working collaboratively to decipher Baldwin's ideas. And the learning experience for all involved became deeper, richer, and far less fraught when Mr. Henry learned to embrace this role.

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