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Literature Review:

White Teachers Among Diverse Populations

A problem in education stems from both the discrepancy in the racial and gender demographics of educators that favors white females over other identities and the lack of recognition of the role of this identity, especially in more diverse classroom settings. Among analysis of diverse classrooms, whiteness often remains unchecked. The rhetoric surrounding classroom reform, while promoting cultural awareness, rarely examines the role of the teacher’s own racial, ethnic, and cultural identity. This rhetoric affirms the idea that whiteness does not need to be checked in a diverse classroom. For example, in a white teacher’s diverse classroom, analysis of the student's race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status can be illuminating finding resolutions to different classroom dynamics and achievement gaps. However, without also analyzing the way in which the teacher treats students of diverse backgrounds (justly, differently, overemphasizing differences, or completely ignoring differences), this research is not complete. By analyzing the white identity of teachers and the effects of this identity in promoting a racial awareness, educators can begin to deconstruct the environments which liberate and which limit students of color in the classroom. Therefore, I have guided my research with the following questions: Does whiteness play a role in the classroom of teachers, especially teachers of students of color? How can teachers who identify as white create classroom environments culturally inclusive and free of bias?

The methodology for the acquisition of research included searching keywords like “white teachers,” “teacher racial identity,” and “racial rhetoric in classrooms.” In one case, I searched “Teach for America” in order to find studies that could also relate to cultural awareness in teachers, as I found in Why Do They Stay?: Exploring the Factors That Contribute to New Jersey TFA Alumni Remaining in the Classroom beyond Their Two-Year Commitment. The research databases used were ERIC Proquest, Proquest Education Journals, Google Scholar, and the Villanova Falvey Memorial library online search. Additionally, I found other research articles through the bibliographies and in-text references of other research articles. The online database searches produced the vast majority of the references.

While I have compiled a substantial list of resources, I recognize that there are ways in which my searches and referencing may have produced a content bias. For example, I began searching with keywords like “teacher racial bias,” later realizing that this search could produce content that suggests that a certain type of teachers have a racial bias, rather than research that may have demonstrated cultural awareness among teachers rather than bias. Further, in looking at the citations of the research articles I was using, I often found data that supported or provided a foundation for research that I had already referenced. In order to expand the realms of research I cited, I could begin by expanding my keywords to be more inclusive towards research with conflicting results, and also results where pre-teacher training regarding cultural awareness has little to no effect on teacher practice.

The majority of the research occurs within the United States, as the racial dynamic within classrooms within the United States is unique due to its history and policy surrounding public and private schools. Further, most research occurred within the past ten years, with the exception of McIntyre. This may be due to racial awareness becoming more widely recognized or due to my search methodologies.

While the research varied in results and findings, my findings can be categorized into three themes surrounding their responses to my research questions: recognition of whiteness in the classroom, understanding different cultural contexts of students, and building student-teacher relationships. The three themes often intersect and connect with one another.

**Recognition of Whiteness in the Classroom**

In Borsheim’s research article, “You Could Argue It Either Way: Ambivalent White Teacher Racial Identity and Teaching about Racism in Literature Study, she presents a case study following a white high school English teacher and her teaching about racism in a unit about A Raisin in the Sun” (Borsheim 2018). The researcher ultimately determines that the white teacher’s ambivalence in her racial identity undermined her practice. Further, the researcher ultimately argues that the future recognition of ambivalence and providing a type of compensation for that ambivalence could be productive pedagogically. While the article presents substantial evidence regarding the individualized study of one classroom teacher, the study could be more effective if universalized to include many white English teachers working with a similar demographic. The work’s relevance lies in its examination of race from the point of view of a white teacher. While analyzing the promotion of a positive classroom environment from a student perspective can be constructive, including the role of the teacher’s own identity can also play a significant part in improvement.

In Crowley’s literature review, “White Teachers, Racial Privilege, and the Sociological Imagination,” Crowley compiles recent literature (2004-2014) surrounding the identity of the white teacher, as white individuals dominate the profession while students remain varied in racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds (Crowley 2016). The editor cites that the review stems from a greater need to articulate studies surrounding the White teacher identity, so to promote better teacher education programs for white teachers preparing to promote cross-cultural awareness. While the work’s expansive references function effectively in creating a more comprehensive idea of the white identity in teachers, the sheer volume and length of the review can be intimidating. The work’s relevance stems from its great expanse of research examining the role of Whiteness in educating a colored population (now 48% of American student populations).

White’s dissertation, *Exclusionary Discipline and its Effect on Black Students’ Achievement: A Quantitative, Comparative Study*, examines the relationship between suspension and academic achievement in Black students, enhancing the understanding previously researched that Black students are suspended, both in and out of schools, in greater proportion to white students (White 2016). Her method involved measuring the out of school suspension (OSS) and in school suspension (ISS) as the independent variable while measuring Mathematics and reading GCRCT scores (a Georgia standardized test) as the dependent variable. One hundred and eighty students were selected to participate in this study, comprised of 45 students with no suspensions, 45 students with only ISS, 45 students with only OSS, and 45 students with a combination of ISS and OSS during school years 2011-2012. The study found that from year to year, the reading scores of all Black students changed at significantly different rates. However, the change was more dramatic for students who did not receive OSS, as their reading scores improved from year to year more dramatically than the reading scores for Black students who did receive OSS. This research could be used to supplement many previously researched understandings of misconceptions fostered in a classroom with weak student-teacher relationships that result in unnecessary and sometimes discrepant discipline.

Erskine-Meusa intended to search for evidence of how culture shapes African American students’ view of themselves, and to explore how African American student pedagogical experiences with White teachers shape their attitude about school in her study “Culture Matters! African American Students, White Community College Teachers: A Case Study of Cultural Differences and Their Consequences” (Erskine-Meusa 2017). Erskine-Meusa focused on the experiences of six community college African American students’ classroom experiences with White teachers. The results of this study revealed that many of the White teachers experienced by the research participants demonstrated some aspect of colorblindness in their pedagogical practices. The results also found that the African American community college students in this study valued the use of culturally responsive pedagogy in the classroom. Each interview included participants’ observations of the recording of field notes and maps, which led to data analysis and eventually to develop new questions. The study addresses potential research flaws near its conclusion, but undeniably provides information relevant to teacher methodology by providing African American student perspectives. However, because the research was conducted in a community college setting, it is less informative to my potential role as a secondary school teacher.

Researchers have analyzed data and have concluded that mainly white teachers are racially biased due to preferences stemming from racial stereotypes that depict some groups as more academically oriented than others. Most of this research has been based on comparisons of only black and white students and teachers and does not directly test if other nonwhite students fare better when taught by nonwhite teachers. McGrady and Reynolds engage in a more inclusive study, “Racial Mismatch in the Classroom: Beyond Black-white Differences. Mixed methods analyses of Asian, black, Hispanic, and white 10th graders in the 2002 Education Longitudinal Study” confirm that the effects of mismatch often depend on the racial/ethnic statuses of both the teacher and the student, controlling for a variety of school and student characteristics. The results from the student academic statistics of and teacher interviews among students with white teachers, Asian students are usually viewed more positively than white students, while black students are perceived more negatively. White teachers’ perceptions of Hispanic students do not typically differ from those of white students. Postestimation comparisons of slopes indicate that Asian students benefit (perception wise) from having white teachers, but they reveal surprisingly few instances when black students would benefit (perception wise) from having more nonwhite teachers. This research adds another dimension to my understanding what comprises of students of color, introducing the idea that within the grouping of “colored” there are different biases and reactions to students of different ethnic and racial groups under this umbrella term.

Using eight group discussions, McIntyre’s community-based participatory action research project, “Making meaning of whiteness: Participatory action research with White female student teachers, explored the meaning of Whiteness, and White racial identity,” with 13 White middle- and upper middle- class female student teachers at a private northeastern university (McIntyre 1995). This emphasizes the lived experiences of human beings, the subjectivity and activist stance of the researcher, and an emphasis on social change. The research is strong in its analysis and coding; however, the lack of teacher exposition to the classroom and the provision of student perspectives puts into question the validity of teacher statements in these sessions. McIntyre concludes in voicing the need for multicultural anti-racist curriculum in schools; populating the teaching force with people of color; planning long-term learning and teaching experiences that expose White students to the lives of people of color; rewriting the history of race and Whiteness into our texts; and requiring that White teachers develop awareness of their racial identities so as to support, challenge and educate their students. The research adds value to my work because rather than only recognizing the black or brown as racially charged identities, it identifies whiteness a facet of identity to analyzing as well.

**Understanding Different Cultural Contexts of Students**

In her dissertation, *Contexts That Inform Racial Awareness and Affect Teaching Practice: A Study of White Bilingual Teachers*, Shank investigates the varying contexts that inform racial awareness and teaching practice for White bilingual teachers while also investigating the impact that racial awareness has on teaching practice in bilingual teacher preparation in the effort to prepare all teachers for working with diverse student populations (Shank 2016). Due to its form as a dissertation, this study’s comprehensiveness functions to inform far beyond its role as an empirical research study. However, this lengthiness also requires an in-depth analysis of the 229-page document that contains the research. The value of this research lies in its analysis of White instructors who possess a degree of awareness in their bilingualism, adding another dimension of specificity to a broader white identity. The participants in this study included four White bilingual teachers and six instructors at the university where the participants received their certification. The four teachers in this study were White bilingual women who had been teaching for the last two to five years. Although all instructors addressed issues of race in their courses, White teacher candidates in the required courses for the bilingual certificate engaged in deeper conversations on issues of race than their peers in other courses. The four teachers in the study also demonstrated a strong level of racial awareness as well as culturally responsive and multicultural teaching practices such as pedagogy that ensure equity for students, multicultural content integration. They also acknowledged the socioemotional needs of students in their classrooms.

Although a myriad of studies has identified significant causal factors of African American academic underachievement from the perspectives and circumstances of the student, limited studies focus on this problem from the perspective of the educator. Rivers nonexperimental, descriptive quantitative study, *Educating African American Males: Examining Teacher Perceptions and Cultural Interpretations permitted an examination of the perceptions and cultural interpretations of educators who teach African American males* (Rivers 2010). The dissertation is incredibly strong in the distribution of a questionnaire to 120 teachers. All of the questions, analysis, and consequent quantitative results are included in detail (in a lengthy, 120-page document). The findings of this study show that 86.2% of the surveyed population indicated they believed that understanding the culture of a student is essential to academic success, yet 81% of the participants indicated they learned most of what they know about African American males through professional experiences. Additionally, less than half of the participants strongly or somewhat agreed that formal educational training adequately prepared them to service African American male students. The dissertation is extremely valuable to my research, as it both produces solid numbers and recognizes then examines the role of teacher perceptions in multicultural education pertaining particularly to African American students.

As a middle school teacher, Van Horne came to recognize the ways in which she, as a white teacher, reflected her own narrative in the classroom, and that the teaching of this one narrative proved to be isolating for students of color. As a response to this issue, she begins her research, “8th Grade Global Studies Teachers Move beyond the Status Quo to Address Issues of Race and Racism in Our Classrooms,” engaging six White, female, middle school social studies teachers in her race-critical action research process coupled with a case study to critically reflect on decisions we make about issues of race and racism in our curriculum and in our interactions with students (Van Horne 2018). She engages in this work in order to ensure that the current teacher force (largely White, female, middle to upper middle class, heterosexual, Christian) has what it takes to serve as high-quality teachers for all students, especially students of Color. While the research only focuses on six teachers with very specific identities, the hyperfocus allows for a greater amount of detail and precision in the analysis and research. Her research concluded that teacher partners attempted and in some cases succeeded in appropriating culturally relevant tools that helped them deepen their anti-racist practice. Specifically, Kaitlyn and Rachel redesigned a unit on Africa to include a focus on the agency of African communities within global food insecurity issues. Theresa and Natalie restructured their classrooms to open up spaces for student's voice, and Helen built a caring classroom community that insisted on high expectations for students while providing the academic and social support needed to ensure student success. However, it also concluded that the teacher partners often resisted the tools offered to them and this resistance prevented them from enacting greater levels of antiracist teacher practice. In multiple instances, the teacher partners maintained race-evasive identities by denying or ignoring the counternarratives of their students and by failing to identify the systemic nature of racism in classrooms. Van Horne criticizes her own work analytically and provides strong evidence for reformed teaching methodology. This research would be incredibly valuable to my work due to the incredible amount of detail Van Horne goes into regarding white teachers and students of color.

Meadows’s qualitative research study, “White teachers, white children, white schools: Multiculturalism in geographically homogeneous communities,” was intended to examine white teachers’ reaction to the challenge of using transformative multicultural education practices within predominantly white classrooms in predominantly white communities (Meadows 2002). Two research questions were addressed: What are the personal constructs of teachers regarding their Whiteness? How do the constructs of Whiteness influence multicultural education in a predominately white classroom? The researcher designed and implemented a training course for white teachers in predominantly white environments. Sixteen early childhood professionals voluntarily participated in the course. Data was collected through journals throughout the process. This researcher found that when issues relating to Whiteness and to the use of transformative multicultural education practices in predominantly white classrooms were approached with an eye toward framing instruction within Midwest ideology, participants were much more willing to engage in both personal introspection and an examination of educational resources. This research provides relevant information, especially in light of the prevalence of school segregation. However, the article studies teachers of early childhood teachers, who may not have the same engagement with students in terms of race as a teacher of a higher age level.

**Building Relationships**

Chambers’ dissertation, *Why Do They Stay?: Exploring the Factors That Contribute to New Jersey TFA Alumni Remaining in the Classroom beyond Their Two-Year Commitment*, stems from a recognition of the shortage of highly qualified teachers in urban school districts as an ongoing concern in education, especially in light of the fact that half of the new teachers will leave within three years. She consequently decides to study the experiences of 20 TFA alumni who are currently in the classroom five or more years beyond their two-year agreement date. Because the article is a dissertation, it takes an in-depth approach to analyze retention rates among teachers, including a history of Teach for America, a historical overview of the undersupply of teachers, and the effects of No Child Left Behind. While many of the research articles I have found critically view poor retention rates associated with Teach for America, this research presents elements that contribute to better retention among teachers, possibly offering solutions to disconnected relationships between students and teachers. However, many of their reasons for staying in the classroom were connected to the relationships built with students. Participants in the current study also focused on the different relationships formed with other TFA teachers, TFA staff, and key staff members in their respective schools.

Warren’s dissertation study, *Empathic Interaction: White Female Teachers and Their Black Male Students* provides an examination of empathy’s utility for improving student-teacher interactions. The author inquires of a small cohort of White female teachers selected for being perceived as effective teachers of Black male students to ascertain a) how these teachers conceive of empathy; and b) how their conceptions of empathy alongside a more established definition of empathy in social psychology is applied in interaction with their Black male students. Methods of inquiry include interviews, focus groups, and classroom observations. The four teacher participants demonstrate a significant degree of flexibility in their academic, behavioral, and social/relational interactions with youth, supporting a positive classroom community. The research provokes questioning in its understanding of empathy and the quantification of empathy. While I believe that the incorporation of empathy and relationships into the classroom plays an important role especially in their relationships of students of different racial backgrounds from their own.

“Can We Talk? Using Community-Based Participatory Action Research to Build Family and School Partnerships with Families of Color” presents research by Yull, Blitz, Thompson, and Murray presents findings from a series of focus groups with middle-class parents of color in a small city in the Northeast United States. Using critical race theory, this research examines the parents’ experiences in the community and with the schools. School-focused findings include a lack of cultural competency in the schools, stereotyping, and racial disproportionality in school discipline. The researcher provides strong evidence proving its marks themes of lack of cultural competency in the schools, stereotyping, and racial disproportionality in suspensions and school discipline were identified. This research is relevant to my work in its emphasis of the importance of incorporating familial relationships into the teaching of students, especially if teachers must engage with their students empathetically to break down the white-teacher black-student relationship.

Yull, Wilson, Murray, and Parham identify a problem in schools typically expecting parents to engage with the school system in ways consistent with White, middle-class parenting and behavioral norms and in ways that are deferential to the school’s agenda in their research “Reversing the Dehumanization of Families of Color in Schools: Community-Based Research in a Race-Conscious Parent Engagement Program” (Yull, et. al. 2018). The community based participatory action-research project uses a race and class-conscious framework to understand barriers to the involvement of parents of color and reframe parents’ role in the school system as advocates whose primary purpose is to bridge cultural disconnects between White teachers and students of color. The research argues that the Parent Mentor Program, in which marginalized parents of color assist in high school classrooms, increases the engagement of parents of color in the school system. The research provides strong evidence arguing this case; however, the limited scope of the study prevents the analysis of these relationships from becoming universally applicable. The research is relevant and engaging especially due to the ways in which it engages racial constructions as contributing to ideas of superiority and dehumanization.

**Areas for Future Research**

Much of my research has pointed to the systematic issues in the lack of recognition of the white identity that creates non-inclusive classroom environments that affect student education. However, while the discrepancy is noted and the themes of recognition of whiteness in the classroom, understanding different cultural contexts of students, and building student-teacher relationships outline greater, more abstract needs, the research demands further investigation into the tangible steps to creating pre-service workshops that promote awareness of Whiteness, understanding of greater cultural context, and the tools to create more empathetic student-teacher relationships.

**Implications for the Field**

The critical role of this research lies in its recognition of whiteness as a concept to be examined, to be questioned, and to be actively recognized in the context of teaching in order to promote a more inclusive classroom environment. Without the recognition that whiteness can unknowingly play a role in decisions surrounding discipline, grading, and classroom environment, the teacher can subconsciously design the classroom to better function for students who align with his or her identity. Much of the research cites using pre-teaching workshops as a means to begin the process of this awareness, putting into question both the effectiveness of current pre-teaching workshops and the risks of promoting programs that require little pre-teaching workshops. Much of this research comes to the understanding that the future of inclusive education lies in the teacher’s -- and in the United States, the white teacher’s -- role in recognizing the role of their own biases in the classroom. A greater focus on learning and unlearning lessons on racial inclusion, cultural competency, and the standardization of whiteness can play a large role in creating classrooms more inclusive of all identities. Further, in highlighting the necessary nature of a teacher to be constantly learning, teachers can learn how to be more inclusive from their students, rather than only affirming their own beliefs and assumptions.

**Reflection**

One of my greatest challenges as a teacher is understanding that my whiteness alone can play a role in the classroom, especially among diverse populations. Among teachers, whiteness and the privileges it affords can subversively promote a classroom environment in which teachers’ ignorance of the active role of race in the classroom perpetuates the lack of cultural awareness that promotes systems of inequality in the first place. Especially approaching graduation, as advisors recommend Teach For America and programs of the like, where the role of white teachers entering more diverse classrooms is amplified, I hoped this research would critically inform me of both the ways in which white teachers in my position can become more aware of the conscious and subconscious ways whiteness plays a role in the classroom environment.

The recognition of whiteness and greater cultural awareness permits students to exist in an accepting environment that critically examines racial differences rather than ignoring them; the root of injustice is often found in ignorance. However, in the final category of my research, student-teacher relationships, researchers have highlighted that the medium for this understanding often comes in knowing students, having high expectations for students, and meeting them wherever they are.

I have realized that my greatest ally in teaching is to treat students as though they have the capacity to change the world, rather than living with the assumption that I alone have the answers. Allowing myself to let down this demonstration of intellectual superiority would allow teachers to break down the barriers that halted my relationship with the students. As an instructor, we often separate ourselves from students out of fear of them questioning authority. However, I had not realized that the greatest method of gaining their respect was to demonstrate my own vulnerability and give them the space to show their own. In classroom environments, this often means having open and honest conversations with students about race, ethnicity, diversity, and inclusion. Admitting that I, as a white female teacher, am often wrong (and in a way, admitting my humanity) can prove to be my greatest ally in instruction.

School requires students to showcase weakness constantly, as an integral part of learning is admitting times when they are wrong. This admission provides the basis for students’ learning, as they come closer to recognizing their own comprehension of what is true. However, the growth process cannot occur without this admission. Therefore, when students do not feel comfortable in a setting, their capacity for growth significantly diminishes. Learning to the relationship between teacher and student into a relationship between two people not only makes the class more enjoyable, but gives students the opportunity to be wrong, to be vulnerable, and to grow from this place into greater confidence and comprehension.

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