

Critical Dialogue: Transforming Teacher Preparation

Larry Bryant and Glenda Moss

The majority of the students at our university self-identify as Hispanic. As of spring 2013, out of 274 students planning to become teachers, 64% identified as Hispanic, 17% as African American; 17 % as Caucasian, and .8% each for Asian, Native American, and Other. The fact that there is a wide range of Spanish proficiency among our Hispanic pre service teaching candidates, reminds us of the politics of culture and language in the United States that is rooted in patterns of racism. Although race dialogue in teacher preparation programs and local communities is not a new concept (Author, 2008), we continue to be concerned about how to effectively engage pre service teachers in critical conversations that might lead to anti-racist practices in K-12 classrooms.

Building on previous work with primarily ethnically White pre service teachers in the Midwest (Author, 2008) and Pacific Northwest (Author, 2012) we wondered how students in our current diverse Southern setting would respond to the same race films and race dialogue. The purpose of this paper is to share our action research, designed to engage pre service teachers in a dialogical study of race. Our experience as classroom teachers and teacher educators lead us to believe that teacher preparation programs still fall short of specifically addressing the issue of racism in teaching. Since the demographics in schools continue to change, it is important for beginning teachers to understand how race was constructed in the United States and the ways it is sustained through policies and practices in society and schools. This study serves to educate pre service teachers on the construction of race and give them an opportunity to reflect on how they will use this critical knowledge from the research workshop as they prepare to teach. Our research questions include the following:

- What new knowledge from viewing three race films most impact pre service teachers' understanding of racism?
- What racial assumptions do pre service teachers question as a result of viewing three race films?

Theoretical Frame

This project was inspired by the well-established body of knowledge labeled critical race theory (Bergerson, 2003; Delgado, & Stefancic, 2001; Dixon & Rousseau, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 2005; Stovall, 2005; Yosso, 2005), which was first theorized by Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995). Dixon and Rousseau's (2005) described "whiteness as property" and showed how "tracking can be viewed as one of the current means through which the property right of whiteness is asserted in education" (p. 8). While education policies have deconstructed tracking, classroom and social practices continue to leave visible evidence that racism is alive.

The CRT movement began in the field of legal scholarship that studies race, racism, and power (Bell, 1992). Legal scholars such as Bell have been instrumental in raising critical questions concerning the lack of social change to bring about equity. Bell's (2003) "Telling Tales: what stories can teach us about racism" convinces us that we are on the right track to create space for White preservice teachers to learn about the historical construction of race and recent experiences of racism as told by people of colour, living in the same community. Only in understanding the differences in treatment encountered at grocery and department store check-outs, can White preservice teachers begin to think about White privilege as a commodity (Levine-Rasky, 2000), work through the pain of change (Rich & Aaron, 2004) and begin to think about what it means to develop "culturally responsive" teaching practices (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Lecompte & McCray, 2002). The role that community plays in emancipatory pedagogies is grounded in the work of communication theorists such as Freire (2003)/1973, Habermas (1981), Rorty (1989), and Foucault (1980).

We believe it to be a moral imperative that teacher education programs follow the lead of Bell and his predecessors such as E.B. Dubois, and become critically conscious of the presence of racism in society. We introduce race dialogues as an experiential learning piece to afford pre service teachers the

opportunity to gain knowledge and sensitivity about themselves through dialogues about race as a social construction. The full day's event with our students involved using a diversity study circles (DSC) framework – an approach designed to foster dialogue on race with the goal of critical self-reflection in response to interfacing with diverse multicultural experiences (Author, 2008) – in conjunction with the PBS documentary series, *RACE: The Power of an Illusion* – a set of three videos that challenges our assumptions about race and looks at the “underlying social, economic, and political conditions that disproportionately channel advantages and opportunities to white people” (http://www.pbs.org/race/000_About/002_04-about.htm).

The format of the workshop events included alternating between the three films and critical dialogue. A discussion after each film provided an opportunity for participants to share responses, talk about thoughts or feelings that came up during the viewing, and contribute personal experiences. We took field notes and participated by sharing our personal experiences and facilitating the open dialogue to ensure everyone had a chance to talk. We stressed the role of listening for understanding (Burbules, 1993; Isaac, 1993; Jenlink & Carr, 1996) as a key to building a learning community. Discussion continued through a shared lunch hour and informally at the end of the all-day workshop.

Participants and Setting

Our sample population reflected our teacher education demographics provided in the opening statement of the paper. The participants entered the project as preservice teachers who have been admitted to the teacher education program, making them junior or senior status. The first viewing of the films took place in a home because the set of films was designated for home use; six students participated. A new set of films were purchased by the university so that we could show them on campus. The second viewing was done in a classroom setting; two students participated. Currently, the sample has reached eight participants.

Methods and Methodology

Preservice teachers were invited through the distribution of flyers in regularly scheduled classes. When participants arrived, we explained how the workshop would be conducted, weaving between viewing a film and engagement in dialogue. We also explained that preservice teachers could participate in the workshop and then choose to not sign consent forms to allow us to analyze their narrative responses to the film. The preservice teachers were asked to write a definition of race before we began the first film. Following the film, they responded to the following questions: What in the film most impacted your thinking and/or feelings? What in the film made you question your prior assumptions concerning race, poverty, gender, class, or other social issues? What topic in the film do you want to discuss further? We then invited the participants to share their responses to the film in a dialogical format. This resulted in the sharing of connected stories of experience. Those participants who signed consent forms gave us their written responses so that we could analyze the narrative data (Polkinghorne, 1995).

Constructing Critical Knowledge

Upon the completion of watching the race films and engaging dialogue, we set out to understand the research questions; “What new knowledge from viewing three race films most impact pre service teachers' understanding of racism and What racial assumptions do pre service teachers question as a result of viewing three race films?” To begin, visual and auditory data about the researchers may have polarized the assumptions of our pre-service teacher participants. Glenda self-identifies as a senior citizen, white female from east Texas and Larry self-identifies as a middle-aged, black male from inner city Chicago. Despite our opposite exteriors, the pre-service teachers followed our lead as we began to discuss how they initially perceived race and racism prior to viewing the race films. We wanted to begin the conversation with laying “bread crumbs” (modeling links and connections to prior knowledge and experiences) that would later

explore the pre-service teacher's consciousness about the potential of viewing these race films as a means to a transformative experience. By engaging in this practice, we learned that we could obtain student's trust in regards to taking risk when discussing race and racism, and to provide the assurance that they would be safe while taking such risk.

The pre-service teachers' responses favored a Marxist paradigm; here Smith (2000) describes this form of narration as a historical, economic, and socio-cultural based analyses of their lived experiences. Furthermore, in the spirit of Polkinghorne (1995), we organized the pre-service teachers' narratives using "narrative smoothing" (p. 38) analyses, which assisted us in discerning irrelevant and redundant data as we addressed and readdressed the research questions. The outcomes of the narrative analysis led us to better understand what new knowledge from viewing the race films impacted pre-service teachers' understanding of racism.

During the dialogue, pre-service teachers confronted their short understanding of race and racism. One pre-service teacher acknowledges their naivety by stating,

I'm not sure when I became aware of my race. I don't have any memory of being told I was white. I was aware in elementary school, that other races were labeled "minorities" which inferred that I must fall into the "majority" category. No one overtly taught me that white people were superior to any other race, but somehow I knew my "category" was safer. I never felt judged for being white until I was older.

Yet, another pre-service, when speaking of their lack of knowledge concerning race and racism, wrote,

Growing up with missionary parents in Papua, New Guinea and Guatemala, I had an unmistakable sense that we were minorities in the midst of other cultures. Since my parent's work was to help the people we lived among [st] by helping to provide God's word to them in their heart languages. I recognized that we were there because we had a deep concern and love for [these] people who did not enjoy this treasure of scripture that we had had from our births up. Did the differences in our cultures and appearances create in me a sense of race and hierarchy? On the contrary, my sense was that we were seeking cultural equality because of our essential equality as humans.

One other student identifies with knowing about racism, however struggled with the complexities of how it is produced and reproduced and most importantly how it's applied and maintained. This pre-service teacher's comment clearly illustrates a sense of knowledge of racism but the lack of language to fully explain it.

I became aware of race when I was about 10 years old. My mom used to clean houses for wealthy white people. I noticed the way their houses looked, their cars and the kids also the neighborhoods. This made me understand that some white people are wealthy, that most of them can afford nicer things in life. I noticed that the neighborhood had no Black residents, only white. Race to me just means a color that someone has. I am trying to change my mind on how I feel about it and to change my viewpoint. I identify myself as a Black woman whom can accomplish anything in life. I don't and will not let anyone belittle me or tell me that I can't do it.

Many pre-service teachers' narratives illustrated they were "hole-filling" for the knowledge they had not yet acquired. Their narratives suggest the pre-service teachers may have been using

inefficient ways of knowing, however, upon the viewing of the race films, pre-service teachers were situated with knowledge that race is not biological, instead it is a concept created by society to establish a hierarchy that advantages some while disadvantaging others. One pre-service teacher comments on the phenomena by saying,

I am always amazed when I hear about how scientists in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries spent so much time and resources trying to prove a connection between “race” and physiological hierarchy. Science was not ethically or morally neutral. Nor is it today. I am impressed by the critical need for constantly uncovering this fact, so that we do not fall into a sin that is particularly tempting to people of European heritage – pride and the twisted desire to create a perfectly homogenous society by persecuting and exterminating all other human groups.

While another pre-service teacher came to better understand the idea of deoxyribonucleic acid (DNA) versus pigment by noting,

What most impacted me was when the students in their classroom did a DNA test on each other to discuss origins of their ethnicity. I found this most important because it shows me that each student has a genetic DNA code that matches someone else’s that could be a thousand of miles away. This is very interesting to me because it shows DNA does define you, race does not. You could be African American but be more similar to a Caucasian or Mexican person.

This theme continued throughout the narrative analysis, where yet another pre-service teacher calls to our attention how

we look different on the outside, but genetics proves otherwise. We are genetically alike in ways. There are small variations. Under the skin we really are the same.

Many of the pre-service teachers acknowledged they had a general emotion about racism, however, they did not have the lexicon to articulate their emotions until they viewed the race films. One pre-service teacher summed up how they would transfer their emotions into a form that would articulate their new knowledge by generating the following vocabulary list of terms:

genetic experiment; genetic variation bet humans vs. other species; biology used as an excuse to naturalize race; eugenics; locations in the world – skin pigment – vitamin D; patterns of “top team” in basketball; gradual vs. fast travel.

Overall, the pre-service teachers’ understanding of race and racism was often times demonstrated in the form of a critical story. This aspect of the narrative analysis is contextualized alongside of CRT’s storytelling tenet, which asserts that storytelling is a viable method in the ascertaining of the voices-of-color (Bergerson, 2003; Delgado, & Stefancic, 2001; Dixon & Rousseau, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 2005; Stovall, 2005; Yosso, 2005). Our pre-service teachers began the process not fully understanding the language of race and racism, yet we conclude they gained invaluable new knowledge concerning humans at the DNA level. They explicitly and intentionally pointed out the fact that despite our physical differences, genetically humans are more similar than different. For example, one pre-service teacher noted: “race is not biological – there is 85%

variation between racial groups, but there is also 85% genetic variation within racial groups,” which was a quote from the film.

Bread Crumbs

Once we had clearly established a new lens and the pre-service teachers could make meaning of their experiences with the film, we employed a functional approach (Bruner, 1991) to address the question as to what racial assumptions do pre-service teachers' questions after viewing the race films. Here our initial conversation focused on the role of race and racism. The pre-service teachers had come to know that one role of racism is to advantage those with socially desirable features, while disadvantaging those with socially undesirable features. This aligns with CRT's social construction tenet that race is socially constructed and maintained and is a by-product of countless human choices, which are inherent to human judgment. As continuity was built between the pre-service teachers lived experiences and the new knowledge, they were able to better articulate the racial assumptions. Most narratives offered a holistic variation of their assumptions, while others spoke on very personal and highly emotional accounts. For example, this pre-service teacher offers this statement:

I am always astounded by the attempt of Caucasian scientists to probe by “objective means that some races are inferior to others that are superior. The purpose of a project like this is not rooted in anything like sound scientific thinking, but rather in something as petty as the desire to form social cliques on a population scope. That my cultural countrymen and countrywomen attempted this deeply saddens and shames me.

To further support the assertion that assumptions have been effected, another pre-service teacher stated,

What made me question my [an] assumption I used to have was when the video showed how when the Blacks first came, they didn't judge them, they looked at them as equals. But once someone decided to implement race that's when everything changed. My assumptions is that the reason race came to be was because they just wanted to know why Blacks were different, how they are different from them. So that is what started Race and discrimination. The film has taught me to not place blame on a certain race because it all happened because they wanted answers to their questions.

Here, this pre-service teacher rationalized their assumptions through a historical lens, which takes into account a chronological response to the shaping of racism. This may very well have some credibility to the formation of racism through a curious but deliberate method of understanding differences. And in turn, using those differences to exploit the bodies they were curious of. Yet, in stark contrast but equally important, another per-service teacher who spoke of a different ideology, when they stated:

I liked the quote at the beginning of the film, “Race is not about how you look, but about how people assign value to how you look.” I find it interesting that Jefferson wrote about and verbally defended life, liberty, and democracy; but in actuality practiced human bondage. I wonder if he was blind to his hypocrisy. Seems that anyone different from us (whoever “we” are) is deemed inferior.

This particular pre-service teacher calls into question, the continuous and arbitrary use of difference to discriminate. They also question the assumption of how could one in one breathe favor social justice, but in the next breathe favor racist practices. As the pre-service teachers ponder these forms of atrocities, another “bread crumb” is dropped and will be revisited as they experience newer knowledge and ways of knowing. For example, another pre-service teacher explains their assumptions by saying,

The part of the film where they were saying social differences were being reconciled in biological differences. People were segregating themselves and others because of those differences in color and other physical characteristics. There is an even greater dynamic when there is a mixed-race person who doesn't fall into any one-race category. I think that we need to stop categorizing people based on old ways of thinking.

Yet another pre-service teacher reflectively states,

What made me question my belief and theories was when I was watching the video about sports. I was a person who felt that Blacks excelled in sports but not so much academic. This was by far the wrong assumptions to assume. This makes me think about how I look at different races and not to be so quick to say, “Asians are smart, African Americans are trouble makers, etc...”

Lessons Learned

We are not very far into this project with only eight participants but offer a couple of comments based on our analysis of the data. For a number of pre-service teachers, it was more difficult to make deep connections to their assumptions. This thought, however, does not illustrate a negative attribute on their part; instead it illustrates there continued need for this work to be done. As we connected the narratives to the analysis, we learned two key points:

- 1). The pre-service teachers are in the infancy stages of understanding race and racism, which they have limited knowledge of the complexities of the phenomena; and
- 2). The pre-service teachers are not skilled at accessing or articulating their assumptions at a critical level.

These points are derived from the constant comparison between the pre-service teachers' narratives and the research questions (Polkinghorne, 1995). In concluding the analysis and to offer the final “bread crumb”, a pre-service teacher makes the assumption that, “*money has a greater bearing on what we become in life [than race].*”