Chapter 4

The Myth of Colorblindness: Helping Educators Recognize the Role of Race in the PreK–12th Grade Classrooms

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ABSTRACT

The United States is becoming a more racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse nation. More specifically, in public schools, students of color and those of Native American ancestry are anticipated to represent the majority of the student population in the near future. In contrast to the change in student demographics, the majority of classroom teachers remain White and monolingual. The differences in racial, ethnic, and linguistic experiences of the student and teacher populations could create cultural conflicts between the two groups. In response, this endeavor is purposed to provide an instructional framework for teacher educators who are tasked with preparing culturally competent teachers for increasingly multicultural classrooms.

INTRODUCTION

The United States is becoming a more racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse nation. More specifically, in public schools, students of color (i.e. Latinos/Hispanics, Blacks, Asian Americans, bi-/multi-racial) and those of Native American ancestry are anticipated to represent the majority of the student population in the near future. In contrast to the change in student demographics, the majority of classroom teachers remain White and monolingual. The differences in racial, ethnic, and linguistic experiences of the student and teaching populations could create cultural conflicts between the two groups. In response, the purpose of this chapter is to share the results of an action research study designed to gather information on student learning and evaluate an instructional framework for teacher educators who are tasked with preparing culturally competent teachers for increasingly multicultural classrooms. This instructional framework challenged the colorblindness discourse many pre-service and practicing teachers engage in. This was done by strategically presenting issues of race and racism and their intersections with other social identities through readings, student and instructor facilitated conversations, student presentations, and guest lecturers.

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BACKGROUND

Changing Classroom Demographics

In 2011-2012, 82% of the teaching population in the United States was White, non-Hispanic, female, and middle class (Howard, 1999; National Center for Education Statistics 2013b; Swartz, 2003). While most of today’s teachers are of European ancestry or White, only 52% of the student population is White, non-Hispanic (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013a). Given the anticipated increase in the number of students of color in public schools, it is a pressing issue that teacher educators prepare teachers to be knowledgeable about diversity and cultural responsiveness (Delpit, 1995; Gay, 2000; Irvine, 1997). Teachers need to have a full understanding of their culture, the culture of different racial/ethnic groups, and how culture impacts teaching and learning (Gay & Kirkland, 2003). Teachers also need to be able to participate in and facilitate constructive and meaningful conversations about race, racism, and privilege (deKoven, 2011). However, most White teachers graduate their teacher preparation programs with little to no knowledge of other cultural groups or understanding of their own racial socialization. A great concern arises in preparing White teachers for multicultural classrooms given their limited knowledge about others and their own racial socialization. As a result of the way many Whites learn to talk or not talk about race, many Whites utilize colorblind discourse when presented with issues of race, racism, and White privilege making it difficult for deep engagement on these topics (Bell, 2002).

Colorblindness

Colorblind discourse has emerged as a theoretical concept to characterize newer forms of racial attitude expressions by many Whites (Neville, Lilly, Duran, Lee, & Browne, 2000). This discourse grew out of the social, political, and culture of the United States following the Civil Rights Era (Bonilla-Silva, 2001, 2003). Colorblindness is an effort to not see or acknowledge racial differences (Frankenberg, 1993; Neville et al., 2000). It is the belief that race should not and does not matter in personal and societal spaces. It promotes a view of racial and ethnic membership as invisible and irrelevant characteristics in how people are treated (Neville et al., 2000; Schofield, 1986). Colorblind individuals see the concept of race as taboo and that the social life is the nexus for individual relations and circumstances (Schofield, 1986). While colorblindness is thought to be the opposite of racist ideals and practices, this concept allows for White individuals to also assert an unawareness of the existence of racism (Carr, 1997; Neville et al., 2000). In an effort to assert unawareness of race and racism and to not be seen as racist individuals, Whites who espouse the colorblind narrative are actually giving a greater endorsement of racism and the reproduction of inequality in social, political, and cultural realms in the United States (Bell, 2002; Bonilla-Silva, 2003; Carr, 1997; Lewis, 2001; Smith, 2013).

Frankenberg (1993) describes two manifestations of colorblindness. The first is color-evasion, which puts emphasis on sameness. This is considered to be a means for Whites to reject racial superiority. The second form is power-evasion. This is the belief that everyone has the same opportunities to succeed in life and that any failure is the fault of people of color (Frankenberg, 1993). With power-evasion, racial disparities are seen to be the result of genetics or biology or are attributed to individual lack of merit (Bonilla-Silva, 2003; Crenshaw, 1997). Both color-evasion and power-evasion removes race as a source of identification or analysis and masks the power of race while simultaneously demonstrating the diff-