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What Do They Need to Know and Be Able to Do?

Anna E. Richert, David M. Donahue, and Vicki K. LaBoskey

John: Since becoming a public school teacher two years ago as a White male in my mid-30s, I have been surprised at the degree to which race has been a factor in my relationships with my students (particularly with my African-American students). I had previously worked in different racially mixed settings and I did not perceive much tension with coworkers of different racial backgrounds. Once I entered the classrooms of inner city public schools, however, I quickly felt my White racial background to be an obstacle in developing positive relationships with my African-American students. Early on in my classroom experience, I found my students labeling me racist in response to what I felt was reasonable behavior. Having completed a teacher education program that emphasized personal inquiry, I wanted to explore how my African-American students perceived my behavior as racist.

John is a middle school history teacher in Oakland, California. Most of his students are African American. Though committed to teaching underserved students in an urban setting, John wondered if doing so effectively as a White person was possible. For his master’s project he initiated a study that became a two-year journey of self-discovery about his White identity.

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All across this nation, teachers like John are working diligently to do a better job of teaching the African-American, Latino, and other children of color in their classrooms. And yet as a nation we have made little progress in accomplishing that goal. Rather than closing the achievement gap, evidence points to a persistent disparity in achievement between children of color and their White peers (English, 2002; Lee, 2002). The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reports, for example, that achievement levels for African-American and Hispanic students in mathematics and reading “are consistently and markedly lower than levels for white students as are high school graduation rates” (Banks et al., 2005, p. 237).

One factor that impacts student achievement and success in school is poverty. Whereas the United States is supposedly the “land of plenty,” it is not so for many children, having the highest rate of childhood poverty among Western democratic nations (UNICEF, 2005)—a reality that affects African-American and Hispanic children at alarmingly disproportionate rates (U.S. Census Bureau, 2003).

Poverty creates conditions that are associated with low achievement in school: poor nutrition, inadequate health care, unsafe living conditions, and limited opportunities for out-of-school learning. The “in-school” opportunities for learning for children of poverty are typically not conducive to high achievement either. Schools serving poor communities are more likely to have fewer curricular offerings, lower access to technology
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and other resources, and greater numbers of underprepared teachers than schools serving more affluent communities (Darling-Hammond, 2004; Oakes & Saunders, 2002; Shields et al., 2001). But poverty alone cannot explain inequities in school success. Independent of socioeconomic status, White children out perform their peers of color on the standardized measures used in classrooms today (Aronson, Fried, & Good, 2002; Singham, 1998; Steele & Aronson, 1995).

Whereas standardized tests are important given their role in determining school opportunities for students, they reflect only one measure of our inability to meet the learning needs of children of color in this country. Dropout, suspension, and expulsion rates for students of color exceed those of White and Asian students (Kaufman, Alt, & Chapman, 2002; Skiba, Michael, Carroll Nardo, & Peterson, 2002; Townsend, 2000; Verdugo, 2002). For students who stay in school, the picture is not much less bleak. Black and brown children are much more likely than their White peers to be taught by underprepared/noncredentialed teachers (Darling-Hammond, 2004); be assigned to special education (Donovan & Cross, 2002); and attend schools that are underresourced in terms of libraries, technology, and other services that would enhance the children’s academic preparation and success (Oakes & Saunders, 2002). Additionally, they are less likely to complete high school, whether through a diploma or GED (Kaufman, Alt, & Chapman, 2002) and if they do complete high school and are admitted to college, they are less likely to graduate from there as well (Cross & Slater, 2001). There is no shortage of evidence that our educational system in the United States is not serving well our children of color. The question we must ask ourselves is “why?”

Asa Hilliard (1991) posits will as another factor that obstructs our ability to achieve excellent outcomes for all children. He asks, “Do we truly will to see each and every child in this nation develop to the peak of his or her capacities?” If we do, he argues, “the highest goals that we can imagine are well within reach for those who have the will to excellence” (Hilliard, 1991, p. 22). Given what we know about national priorities and expenditures on education, a lack of will seems a reasonable hypothesis about why schools consistently fail to serve all students well. Kozol (2005) describes apartheid schooling in the United States and notes the segregation of schools by race and the predictable inequality of resources for schools serving African-American and Hispanic students.

While national priorities suggest a lack of concern for teaching all children toward high levels of academic success, we have substantial evidence that will might be less a factor for teachers—at least teachers such as John. A lack of know-how is more likely than a lack of concern. Like many others across this nation, John is determined to build a practice that serves the needs and builds the academic success of the children of color in his classroom. He is looking for knowledge about how to do so and the skills to do it.

This suggests a third factor that contributes to the achievement gap between White children and their peers of color: the race and ethnicity differences between White teachers and their students. In a recent review of research on the demographic profile of U.S. public school teachers, Zumwalt and Craig (2005) report that while the student population in the United States is becoming increasingly diverse, the teaching population remains predominantly White. Drawing on the 2003 findings from the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES), a branch of the U.S. Department of Education, they report that in 1999 and 2000, 84% of the public school teaching force was White. Of the remaining 16%, “7.8% were African American, 5.7% Hispanic, 1.6% Asian and .8% Native American” (p. 114). Hollins and Guzman (2005) draw on the NCES (2003) data as well and report that “the percentage of all public school students from ethnic minority groups increased dramatically from 22% in 1972 to 39% in 2000” (p. 477). They also
report that by the year 2035 students of color will constitute the statistical majority in U.S. public schools (p. 478).

The argument underlying this last factor, which we believe contributes to the disparities in academic achievement between White children and their peers of color, is that White teachers do not adequately understand the experiences, perspectives, and learning needs of children whose racial and ethnic backgrounds are different from their own. Coupled with this is the idea that White privilege blinds teachers to the ways in which schools function to support White students’ success while simultaneously discouraging similar success for students of color.

We focus our attention for this literature review on race and its role in teaching all students toward academic success. As teacher educators, we must prepare and support teachers like John who are determined to teach their students to high levels of academic achievement. John is White, most of his students are not, and for teachers like him, race raises challenges as they try to understand their students. For this review, therefore, we looked to see what the literature tells us about preparing teachers to teach students of color. We framed our literature review to answer two questions: What do White teachers who strive for equal and excellent outcomes for every student need to know and be able to do to accomplish their equity goals? How can teacher preparation and professional development better support these teachers to do this important work?

What White Teachers Need to Know to Teach about Race and Racism

Whether out of ignorance, fear, indifference, or the mistaken belief that it is someone else’s job, most White teachers do not address race and racism with their students, even though students in school are eager to talk about the subject (Lawrence, 1997; Lewis, 2004; Tatum, 1992a). Teacher educators such as Gay and Howard (2000) and Ladson-Billings (2001), among others, make the case that White teachers can and must learn culturally relevant ways of teaching to students of color, including teaching about race and racism. To do so, they must learn about how race and racism shape the lives of people in the United States (Ladson-Billings, 2000; Leavell, Cowart, & Wilhelm, 1999; Solorzano, 1997).

Understanding Race and Racism

Writing about preparation for teaching African-American students, Ladson-Billings (2000) describes the importance of understanding the pervasiveness of racism in U.S. history, the U.S. racial hierarchy with White and Black at opposite extremes, how everyone is placed along this continuum, and how moving toward Whiteness on that continuum confers privilege.

In addition to history, language plays a key role in learning and being able to teach about racism. Ladson-Billings (2000) speaks about grasping concepts of “equivalent” and “analogous” to avoid the “hierarchy of oppression” where discussions of racism degenerate into contests of who has suffered the most. Solorzano (1997) deconstructs stereotypes about intelligence, personality, and physical appearances used to denigrate people of color, how those stereotypes have been used to justify racist actions, and the connection between stereotypes and language. He writes, “when we think of welfare, crime, drugs, immigrants, and educational problems, we racialize these issues by painting stereotypic portraits of People of Color” (p. 10). To his list, we might add “inner city school,” “English learner,” or “special ed student.” He calls for continually examining the racial stereotypes in the language of popular and professional media.
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Understanding Whiteness, Privilege, and One’s Own Racial Identity Development

A substantial body of literature (Banks, 2001a; Berlak & Moyenda, 2001; Causey, Thomas, & Armento, 2000; Gay & Howard, 2000; Howard, 1999; Ladson-Billings, 2001; Lawrence, 1997; Valli, 1995) argues that before White teachers can successfully take on the task of teaching about race and racism, indeed before they can even imagine that it is part of their responsibility, they must first understand their own racial identity. When White teachers reflect on their racial identity, they can begin to understand racism as more than personal prejudice, a condition they do not attribute to themselves. When White teachers see themselves as lacking prejudice, they believe racism has nothing to do with them. By contrast, when White teachers see that their Whiteness enmeshes them in experiences and ideology that privilege them, they understand how they participate in perpetuating racism and oppression of people of color. They also begin to understand how non-Whites perceive them (Lawrence, 1997).

Whiteness, like race more generally, is socially constructed and developmental. Helms (1990, 1994) describes a six-stage process of White racial development that includes recognizing and overcoming one’s racism as well as building a positive nonracist racial and cultural identity. As with any stage theory, the stages are not entirely linear or exclusive. At the final stage of their development, White teachers internalize a new racial identity, acknowledge personal and institutional racism, and engage with allies—both White and people of color—to undo racism. This final stage represents a continual struggle, not an end point, for White people committed to antiracism. Towards developing this understanding of Whiteness, teacher educators may require future teachers to write and read personal racial autobiographies (Berlak & Moyenda, 2001; Causey et al. 2000; Ladson-Billings, 2000). Such strategies allow teachers to “consciously re-experience their own subjectivity when they recognize similar or different outlooks and experiences” (Ladson-Billings, 1990, p. 26).

Understanding the Identity Development and Experiences of People of Color

At the same time that White teachers must understand their own racial development, they must work with others, including students of color who may be in various places in their own racial development. White teachers must be prepared to incorporate students’ racial identity development into judging students’ readiness for certain conversations about race and when selecting materials, planning curriculum, and implementing lessons about race and racism (Gay, 1985). They must be ready for the challenges of facilitating classroom dialogue as they manage their own and others’ identities (Tatum, 1992b).

Cross (1991) describes a five-stage theory of Black identity development that is analogous for people from other marginalized groups. In the preencounter stage, African Americans, having absorbed negative messages about Blackness in the larger society distance themselves from their own racial identity and minimize the importance of race in daily life. An experience with racism, for example, in school or from law enforcement, leads the individual to encounter a new stage where race takes on relevance in an African-American person’s life. The resulting anger from experiencing White racism leads to immersion/emersion. At this stage, African-American persons are committed to exploring the multiple layers of Black history and experience and often dismiss or avoid anything White. The next step, internalization, is characterized by developing a positive, open, less defensive attitude toward Blackness and a willingness to work with others, including Whites. In the final stage, internalization-commitment, African-American persons are
secure in their racial identity, engaged in work to support the African-American community, and participate in multicultural efforts against racism.

How do teachers use knowledge about racial identity development to bring race as a subject for learning to their classrooms? Knowledge about racial identity does not provide answers, only the challenge of figuring out what to do with such understanding, how to manage new dilemmas, and how to reframe practice. Valli (1995) suggests that in classrooms where the teacher is White and the students are not, teachers must learn to manage the dilemma of being color blind and color conscious at the same time. Learning to be color blind would seem to fly in the face of frequent admonitions to White teachers that if they don’t see color, they don’t see the child. In this case, being “color blind” means color “no longer function(s) as a barrier and cease(s) to be a reified, essentialist construct, signifying only hostility and otherness” (Valli, 1992, p. 122). Becoming a color conscious White teacher means understanding students’ race and culture. It also means knowing that students view White teachers as racial beings and understanding, in a reversal of previous beliefs for most, that one’s White racial identity is not neutral.

Banks (2001a) adds several additional dimensions to understanding identity formation by encouraging teachers and their students to balance cultural, national, and global identifications. In his view, national identification does not take on the assimilationist cast common in classrooms where White teachers do not see color or believe in the inferiority of other races and cultures. “...[I]ndividuals can attain healthy and reflective national identifications only when they have acquired healthy and reflective cultural identifications, and...individuals can develop reflective and positive global identifications only after they have realistic, reflective, and positive national identifications” (Banks, 2001a, p. 9). To accomplish this, teachers need to “challenge the metanarrative” (Banks, 2001a, p. 12) that defines learning in classes that look at U.S. history and culture.

Conversations about experiences of persons of color, both historically and currently, necessarily become part of the school agenda and allow White teachers to see that “students of color are not the problem. Race and the historical legacy of racism, and what these issues have meant for our schools and students in the United States, are essentially the problems” (Milner, 2003, p. 176). This conception of learning and teaching about race challenges preexisting notions by the majority of White teacher education students who see teaching students different from themselves as a problem (Vavrus, 1994) that can be solved solely through pedagogy (Bartolome, 1994), not by looking critically at self or others.

Gay and Howard (2000) describe the need for “critical cultural consciousness” which results when White teachers analyze “their own ethnic heritages;...the assumptions and beliefs they hold about other ethnic groups and cultures; and compare their assumptions about cultural diversity with other groups’ versions of knowledge, truth, and reality” (pp. 7–8). This self-knowledge can then be translated into practices such as effective communication across racial lines and pedagogical skills for discussing issues of race and racism. It also serves as the first step away from unthinkingly centering Whiteness and marginalizing experiences and knowledge of people of color.

The road to critical cultural consciousness and inquiry into racism is not without stumbling blocks: White teachers’ fears about teaching students of color and resistance to addressing race and racism, which can be manifest through silence, diversion, guilt, benevolent liberalism, and neoconservatism (Gay & Howard, 2000; Gay & Kirkland, 2003; King, 1991). Elementary teachers may exhibit fear of teaching students of another race or fear making race and racism part of subject matter because they believe it is not age-appropriate or promotes racial separatism locally and threatens national unity. Sec-
ondary teachers, particularly in math and science, may question the relevance of race and racism to their disciplines. Across grades, White teachers fear they do not know enough about other groups and will say something to offend others or perpetuate stereotypes.

Another stumbling block is what King (1991) calls “dysconscious” racism. She warns the problem is not “the absence of consciousness...but an impaired consciousness or distorted way of thinking about race” that results from “an uncritical habit of mind...that justifies inequity and exploitation by accepting the existing order of things as given” (p. 135). Dysconscious White teachers deplore racism but defend or are blind to White privilege, meaning their reflection must be focused on the ideology and history of oppression so they “re-experience the way dysconscious racism and miseducation victimize them” (p. 143).

Yet another obstacle is White teachers’ insistence on a “safe” environment for talking about racism and oppression. These “‘safe places’ usually are not clearly defined, but they seem to imply conversations that are devoid of controversy, conflict, confrontation, and contention” (Gay & Howard, 2000, p. 5). By contrast, hooks (1994) maintains that safety precludes critical learning about racism and Freire and Macedo (1995) point out the unexamined White privilege of insisting on preconditions for discussing race.

Creating Positive Learning Environments and Teaching Content

In addition to explicit engagement with issues of race and racism, student teachers need to learn the pedagogical approaches that have resulted in high achievement for students of color, but not in a rote fashion. If new teachers are to employ these strategies appropriately, they must understand their philosophical, theoretical, and empirical justifications. As Dewey (1938) emphasized, educational endeavors need to be guided by a well-articulated “end-in-view.” Teachers must have a clear sense of the purposes, aims, and outcomes toward which their work is directed, if they are to make beneficial decisions about the nature of that activity. As Perry (2003) has noted, there are “extra” and particular competencies required of students of color in a racist nation that need to be understood and incorporated into the achievement visions of their teachers and schools. Nieto (1999) has used the phrase “academic success with cultural integrity” (p. 116) to describe the bimodal nature of this conceptualization. On the one hand, these students need to construct powerful subject matter knowledge. In addition, they must develop the orientations, often characterized as positive racial identity development, that will both allow them to succeed despite existing structural barriers and participate in the elimination of those racist-based impediments.

Powerful subject matter knowledge includes skills and deep understanding, as well as the ability to apply and extend that knowledge in innovative ways. As Ladson-Billings (1994) has noted, “If students are to be equipped to struggle against racism they need excellent skills from the basics of reading, writing, and math, to understanding history, thinking critically, solving problems, and making decisions; they must go beyond merely filling in test sheet bubbles with Number 2 pencils” (pp. 139–140). Such knowledge is best acquired or constructed, according to Delpit (1995), if skills are situated “within the context of critical and creative thinking” (p. 19). But powerful subject matter knowledge is only a part of the goal for students of color in a racist nation; it is necessary but not sufficient. They must also learn to question “the structural inequality, the racism, and the injustice that exist in society” (Ladson-Billings, 1994, p. 128) and “acquire the data, skills, and values needed to participate in civic action and social change” (Banks, 2001b, p. 197).
Learning Communities

In order to accomplish these goals, teachers need to be able to construct for their students of color “identity safe” (Steele, 2003) learning communities. According to Steele, identity safety can be created with a “simple relational strategy of using high standards and ability affirmation” (pp. 126–127). Many other scholars support this notion of combining “high expectations with unequivocal support; challenging instruction with personal caring” (Gay, 2006, p. 363). Although there can be many advantages to contexts where the teachers constructing these learning communities are of the same race as the students (Foster, 1997; Lee, 2001; Tatum, 1997), some research has found that White teachers can also be successful (e.g., Haberman, 1995; Steele, 2003). To do so, they need to truly believe that students of color are intelligent and capable and be able to convey that to them, as well as have the appropriate content knowledge and pedagogical skills.

Culturally Relevant Teaching

To create such an antiracist context, teachers must pay “attention to all areas in which some students might be favored over others” (Nieto, 1999, p. 169), which means attending to both the interpersonal and the instructional aspects of classroom life and the relationship between the two. Indeed there is substantial consensus in the literature on the need to conceptualize the desirable teaching of students of color in a holistic manner. A number of different terms have been used to describe this approach, but the most widely employed label at present is CRT, which stands for either culturally relevant teaching (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Milner, 2006) or culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2006; Irvine, 2003), often used interchangeably.

According to Ladson-Billings (2001), culturally relevant teaching or pedagogy is “based on three propositions about what contributes to success for all students, especially African American students: Successful teachers focus on students’ academic achievement; Successful teachers develop students’ cultural competence; and Successful teachers foster students’ sense of sociopolitical consciousness” (p. 144). Noteworthy here is that it is defined in terms of aims or outcomes rather than particular programs or strategies. Again, many scholars in this field support the notion that White teachers can learn CRT but since they are less likely to have previous knowledge of the social realities and cultural histories of their students of color, they need particular help in developing those understandings, in addition to the attitudes that will support them.

One of the more debated features of this process is related to the content of the cultural/racial information that White student teachers need to acquire. One danger regularly emphasized has to do with over-generalization or stereotyping. To mitigate this problem, Gutiérrez and Rogoff (2003) draw upon cultural-historical theory to advocate for familiarizing prospective teachers with historical “regularities” in various cultural communities, while also developing the expectation that individual students will vary in their involvement in and response to the multiple communities of which they are a part. The intent is to prevent the “pigeonholing” of particular students and instead expand the teachers’ pedagogical repertoires so that they will be better equipped to assist children of color in drawing upon both familiar and new approaches to ensure powerful learning (p. 23).

The implications of CRT for the preparation of White teachers who will be teaching students of color is that teacher education programs need to take a holistic approach. Teacher educators must conceptualize the endeavor not as the acquisition of discrete
content knowledge or pedagogical skills, but rather as the development of a “principled approach” (Kroll et al., 2005) to teaching that will result in a lifelong engagement in context-specific, inquiry-based practice committed to ensuring powerful learning for all students. Nonetheless, within that overall structure, it is possible to also gain from the literature more specific guidance as to what classroom management approaches and instructional interventions might best be added to the repertoires from which they will draw.

**Interpersonal (Classroom Management)**

The literature is consistent in acknowledging the close interconnection between the interpersonal and the instructional aspects of teaching. All those who wrote reviews of the literature related to successful classroom management for urban students, poor students, and students of color for the *Handbook of Classroom Management* (2006) emphasized this point: Critical theorists support “the constructivist philosophy that students learn best when actively engaged in meaningful, interesting, and important work. An authentic (relevant and engaging) curriculum is central to diminishing the need for behavior control strategies” (Brantlinger & Danforth, 2006, p. 168; see also, Gay, 2006; Milner, 2006). At the same time, however, these scholars and others in the field agree that the quality and nature of interpersonal interactions between teachers and students need specific attention. Research like that done by Ferguson (2001), Obidah and Teel (2001), and Lewis (2005) help us to understand why. Lewis makes clear that even the day-to-day, moment-to-moment interchanges can have a powerful influence on the development, or not, of a student’s positive racial identity.

The main implications for the education of White teachers are, first and foremost, for them to develop a critical cultural consciousness. Second, they must become more familiar with “the cultural values, orientations, and experiences” (Gay, 2006, p. 343) of their students of color, because “Cultural differences in discourse, performance, and self-disclosure styles are among the most problematic impediments to effective instruction and management in culturally diverse classrooms” (p. 354).

Most of the recommendations with regard to positive classroom management in racially diverse classrooms are situated in the notion of community—in the classroom, in the school, and beyond. If students feel themselves to be a valued part of a caring, democratic community where they share responsibility for its successful functioning, and where competition and hierarchies are minimized, they will be more likely to commit to a positive involvement in that domain. In addition, they will be more inclined to help keep their fellow students constructively engaged as well. This notion of placing community at the center of classroom interactions is also quite relevant to recommended instructional processes.

**Instructional Processes**

As a result of her research into successful teachers of Native Alaskan students, Delpit (1995) concludes that what we need to bring to schools where we are teaching “other people’s children” are “experiences that are so full of the wonder of life, so full of connectedness, so embedded in the context of our communities, so brilliant in the insights that we develop and the analyses that we devise, that all of us, teachers and students alike, can learn to live lives that leave us truly satisfied” (p. 104).
Pedagogy

Highlighted here is the need to employ instructional strategies that foster active, indeed joyful, engagement with people, as well as with relevant materials and ideas. Groupwork, designed in ways that will minimize the potentially racist social phenomenon of “status generalization” (Cohen, 1994), has been found by many to be particularly successful in that regard (e.g., Au & Kawakami, 1985; Lotan, 2006).

Also implied in Delpit’s statement is the need to “begin where the students are” (Nieto, 1999), utilizing existing strengths as both the basis and means for further knowledge development and interrogation. White student teachers should thus become familiar with any research regarding noteworthy cultural regularities, always accompanied, of course, by the aforementioned caveats regarding individual variation. Even more importantly, White student teachers must be equipped with strategies for getting to know the cultural competencies of their particular students and their communities if they are to act as the “sociocultural mediators” they need to be; teachers who can “bridge between students’ differences and the culture of the dominant society” (Nieto, 1999, p. 115).

What is particularly apparent in this literature is the recognition that White teachers will only be able to do this if they have at their disposal as many different instructional strategies as possible, as well as the ability and freedom to select and adapt them appropriately: “Competent teachers know how to employ multiple representations of knowledge that use students’ everyday lived experiences to motivate and assist them in connecting new knowledge to home, community, and global settings” (Irvine, 2003, p. 46). The implication for teacher education is to provide candidates with both the abilities and the willingness to utilize a wide range of teaching strategies, including those sometimes seen to be in opposition to one another, like the whole-language versus basal-text techniques for early literacy education (Ladson-Billings, 1994). They must also become knowledgeable about how to determine which of these to use when and for whom, decisions that need to be influenced by the needs and interests of their students and families, as well as by the ongoing assessment and analysis of student learning. The form such assessment takes, according to the same authors, also needs to vary, in relation to the learners, the context, and the subject matter knowledge under construction—something else they need to learn to do.

Content

The virtually universal proposal for teaching students of color in a racist nation is for the expansion and sophistication of the curriculum in a number of important ways. First regards the inclusion of multicultural experiences, interpretations, and contributions via the literature students read (e.g., Gay, 2006; Lee, 2001) and the histories they study (e.g., Brantlinger & Danforth, 2006; Sleeter & Grant, 2003). Some essential qualifiers that accompany this admonition include the avoidance of what Banks (2001b) has referred to as the “heroes and holidays” approach. Instead, he and others propose a focus on the “life-chances [of various cultural groups] rather than on their life-styles” (p. 233). Furthermore, it would happen on a regular basis with all curricular topics, not just during Black History month or only with the subject matters of reading, English, and social studies, which is related to a second frequently supported means for transforming the curriculum.

Kumashiro (2001, 2002) asserts that antioppressive education “involves constantly looking beyond what it is we teach and learn” (p. 6). By this he means that while students are learning new knowledge they should simultaneously be engaged in critiquing that
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knowledge, since all, including science and mathematics, has been deeply influenced by the political and social context in which it was formulated. In doing so, they can also develop the understanding that they too can participate in the knowledge-generation process. The implication for teacher education is that candidates need to “be given the opportunity to construct concepts, generalizations, and theories so that they can develop an understanding of the nature and limitations of knowledge” (Banks, 2001b, p. 212), which represents a very particular way in which White student teachers can become the “pedagogical-content specialists” they need to be for students of color (Irvine, 2003).

A third suggestion for the expansion of the curriculum has to do with Delpit’s (1995) notion of the “culture of power” or the codes or rules for participating in power, which “relate to linguistic forms, communicative strategies, and presentation of self; that is, ways of talking, ways of writing, ways of dressing, and ways of interacting” determined by those currently in power (p. 25). She argues that children of color need to be taught these codes if they are going to be able “to participate fully in the mainstream of American life” (p. 45). At the same time, however, they must be helped to understand the arbitrariness of those codes, thus demonstrating that the codes they already possess are just as valuable; but given the current power realities in the United States, they need to know both, which is relevant to a fourth curricular endorsement.

Students of color need to develop a sociopolitical consciousness that will enable and encourage them to participate in the transformation of society in ways more consistent with the ideals of democracy and social justice. In addition to the previously described curricular revisions, they must be provided with the tools for political engagement, best accomplished by providing students with “opportunities to practice democracy and decision making” (Sleeter & Grant, 2003) and with engagements in “dangerous discourses” (Nieto, 1999, p. 120) where issues of race and racism in society and in the curriculum are made explicit and critiqued.

Concluding Thoughts

So, where does this leave us when it comes to preparing White teachers to teach children of color? We find ourselves cautiously hopeful. Every day in our work we encounter many new and veteran teachers like John—with whom we began—who clearly demonstrate determination to become excellent teachers of all children. They give us hope. We also realize there is much we can do to help prepare and support these teachers as they do their important work. Whereas there is considerable evidence that supports Hilliard’s contention that as a nation we lack the will to serve all children well—and we can see that there is much work to be done to address what Ladson-Billings (2006) calls the “education debt”—we feel we have school-based colleagues who have the will and commitment to do the work and make the changes we have described here. In addition, there is a substantial knowledge base that can inform the teacher preparation curriculum and agenda in this country. We can—and we must—draw on this knowledge base and incorporate into teacher preparation and teacher support ideas and strategies that will help teachers bring their African American and other students of color to high levels of academic success.

We are clear from our review of the literature that this process must begin with significant “race work” designed to help both White teachers and teacher educators understand and embrace their White identity and acknowledge their White privilege. Until teachers and teacher educators grapple honestly with the reality of race, racism, and racial politics in the United States—and own their role in perpetuating systems of oppression—we will not be able to dismantle these systems and create others that will lead students of color to experience more success in school. John can be a model for us in this way. He openly
and honestly acknowledged what he did not know about teaching African-American students and owned his role in their lack of engagement and success in his class. He began by struggling with how to account for the role of race in his ability or inability to do his job. His journey directed him to rethink where race fits into the professional he was able to be, and the one he wanted to become.

Essential to a holistic orientation to teaching students of color in a racist nation is the need to attend to the overall school–district context and not just the behaviors and beliefs of particular teachers in individual classrooms. Many emphasize—and we agree—that systemic transformation is essential. We recognize that we must not overly rely on the will and skill of what Haberman (1992) has referred to as “star” teachers. At the same time, we know that at the heart of what matters to children and their potential success in schools, are the teachers with whom they work every day. We have learned from this review that there is much we can do in teacher education to prepare and support White teachers—and White teacher educators—to work successfully within these transforming contexts. Our role as teacher educators is a necessary but not sufficient component of the larger change we are arguing for here. Teacher educators must help their students and themselves to understand how race and racism function to diminish the learning opportunities and academic attainment of children whose skin is black or brown. Only then will we have a real chance of “leaving no child behind.”

References


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