During the 2017 – 2018 academic year, the SSO section of JoLLE will feature essays by scholars such as professors, teachers, students, and administrators who are engaging with discussions around social justice issues and racism in education and in modern society. Please click here for more information about this ongoing series: http://jolle.coe.uga.edu/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/SSO-October-2017_Editors-Note_1.pdf.

Reaffirming Teacher Educators' Roles in Disrupting Racism in the Classroom

By ThedaMarie Gibbs Grey, Ohio University

Almost one year ago in November 2016 a video circulated in the media displaying a White middle school teacher in Baltimore with her Black students (Green, 2016; O'Sullivan, 2016; Ritter, 2016). It uncovers a classroom thick with tension between the teacher and her students. The video appears to begin after an unclear incident between a Black male student and the teacher. Viewers can see the teacher pulling the student by his hoodie and out of class. We can hear expletives from students in the background commenting on the teacher and what is occurring. The video continues with the teacher asking, "Who else needs to freaking leave?" Several students yell "Me!". Her frustration then escalates and peaks with her shouting, "You are getting zeros for doing nothing! I give you the work." At this point students continue to talk while she is yelling. She pauses and then continues. "You're idiots. You're not even trying to get an education. But you want to be a little punk ass nigger that's going to get shot..." She continues shouting as uproar begins in the class in response to her tirade. At the urging of another student to stop, the student filming the video ends and the camera cuts off.

Just a few months later a colleague who provides counseling support to k-12 students shared a classroom experience of one of her students, Paul, a Black male middle school student. During regular counseling sessions with Paul she worked to simply provide a safe space for him, understand what he was grappling with in school and at home, and also remind him of his potential for greatness. During a session, Paul shared a classroom experience with a teacher that remained etched in his memory. Paul's teacher felt he had not been performing to her expectations since he at times seemed despondent and disengaged in class. In response to what she labeled as "problematic behavior" the teacher declared to him, "You won't

grow up to be anything, just like your mother".

Acknowledging Racism in the Classroom

My immediate reaction to both scenarios contained a mixture of anger, disbelief, sadness, fear and helplessness. In the Baltimore teacher's moment of frustration, to seemingly "manage" her class, she drew from her reserve and pulled out a racial slur, a racialized word historically and contemporarily utilized to denigrate Blacks and maintain systems of oppression. "The word is inextricably linked with violence and brutality on black psyches.." (Lester, 2011, para. 3) and in this case on the psyches of Black middle school students. In addition to utilizing the word, the teacher forecasted her students into futures wrought with violence and their own physical harm. In the second scenario, while the teacher did not utilize an explicit racial slur, she utilized harmful language to cast Paul into a future of nothingness and then verbally attack his mother. The race of the teacher mattered, and more specifically her *whiteness* mattered. To be clear, the words uttered to Paul remain violent regardless of the race of the teacher. However, in this case the teacher enacted violent verbal and psychological power over Paul and whether conscious or not, her action exemplifies a form of *white supremacy* (Leonardo, 2009). Race also matters in these scenarios because of the historic, systematic and contemporary deficit narratives (Ladson-Billings, 2000; Perry, Steele & Hilliard, 2003) and *symbolic violence* (Coles, 2016) that deem Black students inferior, unable, and unworthy of achieving academically. Paul's teacher's comments serve as manifestations of these persistent racialized deficit narratives.

Both teachers' reactions are not simply random and aberrant, but they are demonstrative of an educational system built and sustained on inequity (Gilborn, 2005). Racism exists in schools just as it does in society. The reality is that when any human teaches another human or group of humans, race is all up and through the classroom whether we choose to name it, critically discuss it, and grapple with it or not. *Critical race theory* reminds us that racism is unfortunately an ordinary fiber woven into the fabric of society (Bell, 1993; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). If we ignore it, excuse it away, or walk away from it, it does not disappear. When we refuse to address racism and the ways it presents in educational classrooms, it not only enters into the classroom on its own, but it storms into classrooms, causing cataclysmic harm to all in the pathway.

JoLLE@UGA
JOURNAL OF LANGUAGE & LITERACY EDUCATION

Scholars
Speak
Out

December
2017

These negative classroom experiences inclusive of assaultive language can cause harm to students (Matsuda, Delgado, Lawrence & Crenshaw, 1993) and can have a deleterious impact on their academic performance and self-concept. This harm also continues to manifest itself in the form of racialized opportunity gaps and harmful disciplinary practices that funnel Black boys and girls out of classrooms and into the school-to-prison pipeline (Losen & Skiba, 2010; Morris, 2012; Raible & Irizarry, 2010; Winn & Behizadeh, 2011). Valenzuela (1999) reminds us that these spaces are examples of *subtractive schooling* and are erosive to students' academic identities. According to Steele (2009), in these situations students are at risk of *stereotype threat* where negative messages about their identity can threaten their academic performance. The threat of this negative impact is illuminated in the following sentiments expressed by a parent of one of the Baltimore students. "When you start calling us out of our names and things like that, that makes our children feel some kind of way" (Ritter, 2016, para. 5). The "some kind of way" includes psychological trauma, students' feelings of inferiority, and internalized beliefs that classrooms and schools are not meant for their success as is also illustrated in Paul's reaction to school. The impact of these types of cumulative forms of traumatic classroom experiences have fueled Paul's increasing preference to stay at home rather than attend school.

I share these stories not to simply highlight stories of pain. Listening to students' stories, as well as reading, thinking, and writing about their stories is painful. Yet, it does not parallel the pain I imagine the students must have felt and may still feel from enduring violent classroom spaces. I do not share them to characterize all teachers or in this case, White teachers, as the teachers in the two scenarios who utilized language to harm their students. Conversely, these stories are reminders of several important points. All schools are not safe spaces all the time for all Black students. It is because of this that addressing racism in education and teacher education is necessary and possible especially during moments of tension similar to those in the focal examples. Critical race theory compels us to seek justice and work to address racism in societal institutions including education (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004). Steele (2009) also offers several solutions for combatting stereotype threat and asserts that optimistic student-teacher relationships matter. Part of supporting these positive student-teacher relationships requires that teachers are committed and skilled in adopting teaching philosophies rooted in equity-based

pedagogical beliefs that acknowledge and affirm the importance of culture and race (Gay, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Paris, 2012). It is possible for educators to work toward transforming classroom spaces as is demonstrated in the work of scholars who provide guidance for teacher educators to address race and develop critical dispositions and teaching skills (Milner, 2010; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Research and experience in classrooms remind us that many teachers indeed value their role in positively supporting Black students through embracing these equity-based pedagogical beliefs in their teaching and relationship-building with Black students. As we move forward, how do we support all teachers in doing more of what we know works and abandoning practices that we know do not and harm Black students?

Critical Questions for Teacher Educators

As teacher educators, we must maintain a responsibility of not only providing prospective teachers with strong content knowledge, but also with the knowledge and ability to effectively teach Black students. We must move forward as faculty in departments of teacher education by asking ourselves crucial questions regarding our ability to effectively support prospective teachers to develop the knowledge, skills and dispositions to teach all students. What role do we play in equipping teachers with the skills and dispositions to address racism in our classrooms? Are the teachers we train and work with committed to and able to critically reflect on their beliefs and actions toward their students especially when their race and ethnicity differ? Do our departments of teacher education include multiple faculty with firm commitments and skills to address educational equity in teacher education? Do we explicitly teach prospective teachers strategies for engaging with students especially during moments of tension that are rooted in care?

Embracing Critical Approaches to Equity in Teacher Education

In returning to the two focal teachers and the language they used to communicate with their students, we must first address how their language is a manifestation of their beliefs and understandings about who their Black students are and how they value them. Their words did not randomly or all of a sudden appear. They were perhaps latent, but it is clear that our beliefs, hidden or known, impact what we do and how we move through the world.

JoLLE@UGA
JOURNAL OF LANGUAGE & LITERACY EDUCATION

Scholars
Speak
Out

December
2017

Whether teachers have latent or known negative beliefs about their Black students, their language, the way they teach, what they teach, and their overall commitment to their students' academic excellence will be compromised. This points to the importance of opportunities to critically reflect through coursework and service learning opportunities focused on addressing biases and misperceptions that prospective teachers may have before they enter the classroom (Carter Andrews, 2009; Gay & Kirkland, 2003; Howard, 2003). It is important to note that this critical reflection and critical teaching can only occur when teachers possess a desire to do so. As Howard (2003) asserts this includes ongoing opportunities through coursework to answer and reflect on questions that reach the core of prospective teachers' understandings about race and inequality, their personal histories regarding race, as well as biases, misperceptions or lack of information about their future students.

While teacher educators must remain committed to supporting the success of all teachers, we must also remember that we are not so desperate that teachers with deeply engrained and immovable racist beliefs will suffice (Kirkland, 2014). Recognizing this requires teacher-training programs to implement structures that provide intensive and ongoing plans of action to support future teachers' development when problematic beliefs and practices arise. It also means that structures are needed to prevent prospective teachers from entering the classroom and practicing teachers from remaining in the classroom when they lack interest or the capability to transform harmful thinking and teaching.

Establishing & Restoring Care and An Ethics of Engagement

In reference to the two focal classroom experiences, violent and racist language and behavior should not have a place in any classroom under any circumstance. We may assume that all practicing teachers and prospective teachers understand this as a given, but there is no safety in this assumption. Consequently, we must ask another critical question: As teacher educators, do we provide prospective teachers with explicit access to positive methods of engaging, supporting, and responding to students in their classrooms? The overwhelming response from many prospective and practicing teachers is often a resounding no. I have engaged in countless conversations with prospective, novice and veteran teachers who recognize this gap in their training and seek more explicit and positive classroom

management strategies. Providing such strategies supports teachers' ability to draw upon patience with students and pull from a reserve of positive tools that do not cause emotional, physical and academic harm. Doing so requires an ability to engage in accurate and non-bias assessments of classroom behavior to prevent harm. It would also mean that teachers are trained in trauma-centered care and recognize when students' behavior is rooted in trauma they are experiencing in their lives (Craig, 2015).

When negative experiences actually occur in the classroom, teachers must be equipped with a store of "engagement" strategies rooted in healing and restorative justice. Morris (2016) categorizes such strategies as "healing-informed responses to problematic student behavior" (p. 193). Doing so requires that teachers adopt ethics of care (Noddings, 2005) and empathy where they engage in perspective-taking about their students' experiences (Warren, 2013). Winn (2016) through her scholarship on dismantling the school-to-prison-pipeline advocates for teacher training programs to adopt restorative justice practices. According to Winn, *Restorative Teacher Education* requires "a paradigm shift" where teacher educators "prepare teachers to take pedagogical stances that signal to students they are valued citizens who are worthy of a high-quality education" (p. 6). Restorative Teacher Education intentionally provides teachers with strategies to nurture students in the classroom instead of engaging in excessive disciplinary diversions that force students outside the classroom. Teachers and schools would also respond to challenges that students face at home and in school not by punishing them, but by developing systems of support that provide them with counseling and positive behavioral planning (Skiba, 2014).

Expanding & Sustaining Commitments to Addressing Inequity

In order to address the aforementioned issues among prospective teachers, many teacher-training programs require one compulsory diversity course. However, do we take a one and done approach to addressing these issues, where prospective teachers lack additional and sustained learning opportunities both in and outside the classroom? Such courses can be extraordinarily useful in advancing prospective teachers' development, yet they must not serve as the singular opportunity to do so (Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Maintaining a commitment to equity and addressing racism requires that departments of teacher education commit to hiring faculty

JoLLE@UGA®
JOURNAL OF LANGUAGE & LITERACY EDUCATION

Scholars
Speak
Out

December
2017

trained in and committed to addressing educational inequities. DeCuir and Dixson (2004) remind us that when only one or two educators possess the desire and ability to teach against racism in educational institutions, the momentum and capacity of change can be slow and limited, but it does not have to be, nor should it be. This change also requires ongoing support and development for teacher educators who may lack the skills to effectively address equity, race and racism in their courses. Additionally, sustained professional development for novice and veteran teachers working in partnering schools is crucial (Everett & Gibbs Grey, 2016). Constructing and making available a range of sustained opportunities to engage in discussions and develop necessary pedagogical tools is also key. Theoharis & Haddix (2011) provide examples of how educators engage in this work beyond teacher education and inside the classroom. They illuminate commitments by critically aware White principals focused on combating racism in their schools, not simply through one-time and stand alone workshops. Instead, they engaged in sustained discussions of *white privilege*, study groups that support the critical analysis of texts that address inequity, and utilized student performance data to address race and inequities inside their own schools. These examples demonstrate the multiple critical ways that teaching against racism can occur during and after teacher preparation inside existing classrooms.

Healing Forward

As I continue to reflect on the experiences of Paul and the Baltimore students discussed in this paper, it is my hope that the memory of their classroom experiences will not leave a permanent and negative impact on their futures. Instead, I hope they know how worthy they are of categorically different classroom experiences that provide them with the tools and encouragement to succeed. I hope that school reconciles its relationship with Paul and becomes a place he is excited to attend because it nourishes his soul, instead of damaging it. I also hope the current and future teachers of the focal students believe in their success and utilize language and teaching to lift them up.

In regard to teacher-training, effectively addressing inequity and racism must become a sustained norm across departments of teacher education, teacher-training programs, and inside k-12 schools, instead of the exception. While I focus on Black students and racism in the context of

JoLLE@UGA®
JOURNAL OF LANGUAGE & LITERACY EDUCATION

Scholars
Speak
Out

December
2017

this paper, supporting this approach for all students who are marginalized based on race, class, religion, ability-status, gender and sexuality must take place. When this occurs, our teachers are more likely to possess a reserve or teacher toolkit that includes critical, healing and restorative teaching and engagement strategies, thus reducing or eliminating the perpetuation of violence and racism. With this critical toolkit, our teachers will utilize language not to assault, condemn or demean, but to support, encourage, uplift, and affirm students who are marginalized in educational spaces. Teacher educators must also continue to engage in lines of research that illuminate marginalized students' classroom experiences, and also provide models of what a sustained commitment to addressing racism looks like when teachers and school administrators utilize critical teaching strategies.

While we continue to do our part in education, change requires simultaneous societal and systemic forward movement since the social context in which our schools exist certainly matters. For the Baltimore students, context matters because their school is situated in a city that served as the site of the unnecessary and unjust death of Freddie Gray, a 25-year old Black man (Robinson, 2015). All Black students live in the midst of social, political and educational contexts that perpetuate violence against Black bodies and require constant reminders of why and how their Black lives, minds, and education matter (Baker-Bell, Butler, & Johnson, 2017). In spite of the challenges that lie behind us, in our faces, and in the future, it is possible to address the perpetuation of racism in classrooms and teacher training to ensure the success of Black students and other marginalized students. There is no other choice.

References

Baker-Bell, A., Butler, T., & Johnson, L. (2017). The pain and the wounds: A call for critical race English education in the wake of racial violence. *English Education, 49*(2), 116-129.

Bell, D. (1993). *Faces at the bottom of the well: The permanence of racism.* New York, NY: Basic Books.

Carter Andrews, D. J. (2009). "The hardest thing to turn from": The effects of service-learning on preparing urban educators. *Equity & Excellence in Education, 42*(3), 272-293. doi.org/10.1080/10665680903060261

Coles, J. A. (2016). Black lives, too, matter in schools: An exploration of symbolic violence against Black youth in America's schools. *Urban Education Research and Policy Annuals, 4*(2), 17-33.

Craig, S. E. (2015). *Trauma-sensitive schools: Learning communities transforming children's lives.* New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

DeCuir, J. T., & Dixson, A. D. (2004). "So when it comes out, they aren't that surprised that it is there": Using critical race theory as a tool of analysis of race and racism in education.   *Educational researcher, 33*(5), 26-31. doi.org/10.3102/0013189X033005026

Delgado, R. & Stefancic, J. (2012). *Critical race theory: An introduction.* New York, NY and London: New York University Press.

Everett, S., & Gibbs Grey, T. (2016). Creating inclusive excellence: A model for culturally relevant teacher education. *Urban Education Research and Policy Annuals, 4*(2), 72-88.

Gay, G. (2002). Preparing for culturally responsive teaching. *Journal of Teacher Education, 53*(2), 106-116. doi.org/10.1177/0022487102053002003

Gay, G., & Kirkland, K. (2003). Developing cultural critical consciousness and self-reflection in preservice teacher education. *Theory into Practice, 42*(3), 181-187. doi.org/10.1207/s15430421tip4203_3

Gillborn, D. (2005). Education policy as an act of white supremacy: Whiteness, critical race theory and education reform. *Journal of Education Policy*, *20*(4), 485-505. doi.org/10.1080/02680930500132346

Green, E. L. (2016, November 17). Baltimore teacher caught on video using 'N' word as she berates black students. Retrieved from: http://www.baltimoresun.com/news/maryland/education/bs-md-ci-teacher-video-20161117-story.html

Howard, T. C. (2003). Culturally relevant pedagogy: Ingredients for critical teacher reflection. *Theory into Practice*, *42*(3), 195-202. doi.org/10.1207/s15430421tip4203_5

Kirkland, D. E. (2014). "They look scared": Moving from service learning to learning to serve in teacher education-A social justice perspective. *Equity & Excellence in Education*, *47*(4), 580-603. doi.org/10.1080/10665684.2014.958967

Ladson-Billings, G. (1995). But that's just good teaching! The case for culturally relevant pedagogy. *Theory into Practice*, *34*(3), 159–165.

Ladson-Billings, G. (2000). Fighting for our lives: Preparing teachers to teach African American students. *Journal of teacher education*, *51*(3), 206-214. doi.org/10.1177/0022487100051003008

Leonardo, Z. (2009). *Race, whiteness, and education*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Lester, N. A. (2011, August 25). Straight talk about the N-word [Interview by S. Price]. *Teaching Tolerance*, *40*. https://www.tolerance.org/magazine/fall-2011/straight-talk-about-the-nword

Losen, D. J., & Skiba, R. J. (2010). *Suspended education: Urban middle schools in crisis*. Montgomery, AL: Southern Poverty Law Center.

Matsuda, M. J., & Lawrence, C.R., & Delgado, R., & Crenshaw, K. W. (1993). *Words that wound:Critical race theory, assaultive speech, and the first amendment*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

Milner IV, H. R. (2010). What does teacher education have to do with teaching? Implications for diversity studies. *Journal of Teacher Education*, *61*(1-2), 118-131. doi.org/10.1177/0022487109347670

Morris, M. W. (2012). *Race, gender, and the" school to prison pipeline": Expanding our discussion to include Black girls*. Los Angeles, CA: African American Policy Forum.

Morris, M. (2016). *Pushout: The criminalization of Black girls in schools*. New York, NY: The New Press.

Noddings, N. (2005). *The Challenge to Care in Schools, 2nd Edition*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

O'Sullivan, D. (2016, November 18). Baltimore teacher fired after using N-word. Retrieved from: http://www.cnn.com/2016/11/17/us/teacher-uses-n-word-trnd/index.html

Paris, D. (2012). Culturally sustaining pedagogy: A needed change in stance, terminology, and practice. *Educational Researcher*, *41*(3), 93–97. doi.org/10.3102/0013189X12441244

Perry, T., Steele, C., & Hilliard, A. G. (2003). *Young, gifted, and Black: promoting high achievement among African-American students*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

Raible, J, & Irizarry, J. (2010). Redirecting the teacher's gaze: Teacher education, youth surveillance and the school-to-prison pipeline. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 26*, 1196-1203. doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2010.02.006

Ritter, R. (2016, November 17). Video shows Baltimore city teacher calling students 'idiots', using N-word. Retrieved from: http://baltimore.cbslocal.com/2016/11/17/video-shows-baltimore-middle-school-teacher-calling-students-idiots-using-n-word/

Robinson, R. (2015, May 3). From justice for Freddie Great to undoing racism. Retrieved from: https://m.huffpost.com/us/entry/7197590

Skiba, R. J. (2014). The failure of zero tolerance. *Reclaiming children and youth*, *22*(4), 27.

Steele, C.M. (2009). A threat in the air: How stereotypes shape intellectual and identity performance. In E. Taylor, D. Gillborn, & G. Ladson-Billings. (Eds.), *Foundations of Critical Race Theory in Education* (pp. 163-189). New York, NY: Routledge.

Theoharis, G., & Haddix, M. (2011). Undermining racism and a Whiteness ideology: White principals living a commitment to equitable and excellent schools. *Urban Education*, *46*(6), 1332-1351. doi.org/10.1177/0042085911416012

Valenzuela, A. (1999). *Subtractive schooling: US-Mexican youth and the politics of caring*. Albany, NY: Suny Press.

Villegas, A. M., & Lucas, T. (2002). Preparing culturally responsive teachers: Rethinking the curriculum. *Journal of Teacher Education*, *53*(1), 20–32. doi.org/10.1177/0022487102053001003

Warren, C. A. (2013). The utility of empathy for White female teachers' culturally responsive interactions with Black male students. *Interdisciplinary Journal of Teaching and Learning*, *3*(3), 175-200.

Winn, M. T. (2016). *Transforming justice: Transforming teacher education*. Retrieved from: http://www.teachingworks.org/images/files/TeachingWorks_Winn.pdf

Winn, M., & Behizadeh, N. (2011). The right to be literate: Literacy, education, and the school-to-prison pipeline. *Review of Research in Education, 35*, 147-173.

ThedaMarie Gibbs Grey is an Assistant Professor of Reading Education in the Ohio University, Department of Teacher Education. Her scholarship centers on affirming the literacies of Black youth and supporting their literacy development at the secondary and post-secondary level. Through her research, teaching and service she is also committed to creating more equitable educational spaces for Students of Color both in and beyond school.