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Combating White Resistance: What We Can Learn about White Educators Who Lean into Anti-Racist Training

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Combating White Resistance: What We Can Learn about White Educators Who Lean into Anti-Racist Training

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Statement of the Problem

In the United States, Children and Youth of Color comprise nearly half of the public-school student population while 82 percent of in-service teachers are white (U. S. Department of Education, 2016, p. 5-6), and 75 percent of teachers are women (Deruy, 2013). A lack of racial diversity in the teaching force, one symptom of systemic racism in education, has been shown to be related to a host of adverse educational experiences for Students of Color such as experiencing extremely punitive discipline outcomes in school (Crenshaw, Ocen, & Nanda, 2015; Ferguson, 2000; U.S. Department of Education, 2016). This has prompted discussions and debates about the importance of better representation in schools, both in terms of the identities of the teachers in front of the classrooms (Egalite, Kisida, & Winters, 2015) and in the materials, curricula, teaching methods, and assessments they employ in their teaching (Ladson-Billings, 2009).

Two common recommendations to address the racial mismatch between the student population and the teaching force are (1) to diversify the workforce by recruiting more People of Color into teacher education programs and (2) to provide racial literacy and anti-bias training for white pre-service and in-service teachers. Students of Color have greater academic achievement when they learn from teachers who share their racial and/or ethnic background (Dee, 2004; Enright & Rosen, 2018) and when instructors use culturally relevant pedagogies that reflect students' experiences (Dee & Penner, 2017). However, since the majority of teachers currently in the field are white, improved teacher education about race, racism, and culturally relevant pedagogy and curricula are essential.

White people operate with implicit bias against People of Color, and teachers are not immune to this (Young, 2016). These biases affect teacher-student relationships and lead to Students of Color receiving disproportionately punitive discipline measures compared to their white peers (Bates & Glick, 2013; Toldson, 2012). White teachers often lack the tools and education to recognize their own implicit biases, and as a result, Students of Color frequently experience racial microaggressions at school.

Bias and cultural misunderstanding can cause disconnects from white teachers toward Students of Color. White teachers frequently do not recognize or understand how the overrepresentation of white people in curricula and in the teaching force normalizes and privileges whiteness, while the underrepresentation (or absence) of People of Color in curricula inherently others the experiences of People of Color (DiAngelo, 2018). Underrepresentations and misrepresentations of People of Color in news and entertainment media create skewed images of People of Color for white consumers, who then develop deeply entrenched biases over time (Butler, 2014; Wise, 2010). White people may not readily recognize their biases because these images and expectations have defined that which is considered “normal” or “typical” in American culture.

White teachers are infrequently called upon to examine white privilege or to consider their roles and power as white teachers. This is beginning to change, however, as over the last several years many school districts have devoted time and financial resources to racial equity professional development for their teachers and administrators (Healey, 2016), but this training is oftentimes neither comprehensive nor supported with coaching (Jayaram, Moffat, & Scott, 2012). It appears that such workshops check a “social justice” or “racial equity” box on the

surface by discussing culturally relevant pedagogy, but many white teachers resist recognizing larger issues of systemic racism and the roles they play in maintaining those systems.

Matias and Zembylas (2014) discussed how white pre-service teachers' emotions about their students, such as care and concern, were actually racially-coded feelings of pity and disgust and that they became resistant or even combative when discussing the role their whiteness played in their classrooms. The authors called for a "pedagogy of discomfort" (p. 333) in teacher education, which gradually shifts white pre-service teachers' understandings of whiteness and racism rather than overwhelming them with feelings of guilt and shame all at once, which can lead to self-alienation from anti-racist work. Ohito (2016) further found that using a pedagogy of discomfort with white pre-service teacher candidates cultivated their openness to discussing race with a critical focus on whiteness and its role in education. More often than not, though, white in-service and pre-service teachers trudge through racial literacy work and resist its intended outcomes. Bohanaon (2018) wrote about *diversity fatigue* and indicated that mandatory diversity training could negatively affect inclusion, and she found that employees who were forced to attend such trainings were more likely to fear discrimination against themselves. Bree Picower (2009) found that white pre-service teachers used emotional, ideological, and performative "tools of whiteness" (p. 204) to not only resist building racial literacy but also to protect the dominant white discourse on race and racism.

The research has explored challenges to training white pre- and in-service teachers, and it has even identified effective pedagogies for teaching white teachers about race and racism. What the research has less frequently looked at are the white teachers who willingly seek out this training and who want to understand more about race and racism. What lessons can we learn from white teachers who volunteer for racial literacy development and anti-racism trainings?

What experiences have motivated them to seek out such training? How and where do they access resources? How do they believe such work has affected their teaching practices, their relationships with Students of Color, and their understanding of their own white racial identities? How do they acknowledge their whiteness in relationship to their roles as educators? My aim is to develop a stronger understanding of what motivates some white teachers to seek anti-racist and cultural literacy training when others are hostile to such work.

By looking at those white teachers who lean into this training, we can learn more about how to better motivate those who resist it. In understanding what inspires some white teachers to join in on this work, whether it be a training they attended that radically shifted their mindset, an opportunity to explore and reflect on a racist experience they had or witnessed, or an "a-ha" moment that started their journey, we can create opportunities or similar experiences which may propel more white teachers forward. This research can inform how we work with white pre-service and in-service teachers to change their mindsets about race, especially in acknowledging and grasping whiteness and the power they wield compared to Students of Color. Radically improving outcomes for Students of Color depends "upon the ability of those who have been empowered to transcend the previously oppressive power relations" (Meintjes, 1997, p. 66) and to recognize their roles in oppressive educational systems. By studying white teachers who lean into anti-racist training, we may be better able to activate those white teachers who would otherwise remain adverse, and in doing so we can improve outcomes and experiences for Students of Color in schools.

Background and Need for the Study

Public schools in the United States are living, breathing sites of structural racism (Leonardo, 2009), negatively affecting white educators' perceptions of the behavior of Students

of Color and their academic achievement. Students of Color, especially Black children, are vastly overrepresented in school suspensions and expulsions (Fenning & Rose, 2007), with Black girls in particular the targets of racism in public schools (Wun, 2016). A recent story from the New York Times described a Minneapolis superintendent's investigation into discipline referrals for kindergarten boys. She found that referrals described white boys as "gifted but can't use his words and high strung" while Black boys were described as "destructive and violent and cannot be managed" (Green, 2018, para. 18-19). Ferguson (2000, see chapter titled "Naughty by Nature") found that teachers described the conduct of white boys as typical naughty boy behavior, but they described similar behaviors in Black boys as criminal. Dumas (2015) wrote that fear of Blackness and Black bodies is a symptom of racism in education discourses. Internal biases of white educators and racist policies and practices have direct negative effects on Youth of Color and often subject them to disproportionate suspensions and time away from the classroom and learning. Zero-tolerance policies and other punitive measures push Students of Color out of classrooms and into the school-to-prison pipeline, with suspensions, expulsions, and referrals to the police for discipline issues occurring at wildly disproportionate rates compared to white students (Mizner, 2017).

Much about the public education system in America prioritizes white, Christian, middle-class culture, privileges native English language speakers, and employs a deficient mindset in considering students and families from Communities of Color (Matias, 2013). Oppressive learning standards, curricula, and assessments contribute to what is falsely termed *the achievement gap*. Ibrahim X. Kendi (2016) argued that determining achievement and academic success based on standardized test scores implies that a low score is caused by the test taker and not the test itself, creating a false racial hierarchy in education, with white and some Asian

students at the top and Black and Latinx students at the bottom. He posed the question, "What if the intellect of a poor, low testing Black child in a poor Black school is *different*—and not *inferior*—to the intellect of a rich, high testing White child in a rich White school?" (para. 14).

There is a great need for white teachers to confront their white racial identity in order to understand racial privilege and oppression in education. "It's really about removing the white, middle-class lens through which brown and black children are often judged" (Romo, 2016, para. 9) and equipping white teachers with the cultural literacy to do so. Because white women make up the vast majority of the teaching staff in American schools, better preparing them to understand race and power is a crucial step in changing learning outcomes for Children of Color. Through interviews with white teachers who lean into this sort of work, we may gain insights into how to better motivate white teachers who are otherwise resistant to racial equity training.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to analyze the perceptions and understandings of white teachers who have sought out training beyond what their school sites and districts require, in order to determine if and how voluntarily seeking out and attending anti-racist workshops has transformed them as educators. This research can help identify the most effective strategies for educating white teachers and administrators about racial literacy and oppressive power dynamics in their classrooms and schools. The research will work with white teachers who voluntarily participate in anti-bias and anti-racist trainings that aim to help professionals unpack issues such as identity, implicit bias, privilege, and power dynamics. Its primary goals are to identify the reasons some white teachers have sought training beyond what their school districts mandate, so that they may reflect upon racism and power dynamics and how they can interrupt those harmful dynamics in their individual classrooms.

Research Questions

This research seeks to determine why and how some white educators lean into professional development programs that teach about whiteness, power and privilege, and structural racism, specifically as they exist within American school systems. The inquiry will produce a case study of three white female teachers to explore the following questions: (1) What experiences motivated or guided these educators to seek out this sort of work? (2) How do they perceive and measure changes in themselves and their work because of participation in such training programs? and (3) What pedagogical tools did they find most successful in engaging them in personal growth and transformative teaching practice? Through interviews with white educators who have experienced professional development of this nature by choice rather than as a district requirement, the research will explore how to best motivate all white educators to participate in and welcome racial literacy development rather than resist it. It will give us insight into the trajectories that led these teachers to reject dominant hegemonic understandings of race and racism, which can inform our work with white educators in the future.

Theoretical Framework

As a white teacher and researcher, Critical Whiteness Studies (CWS) heavily informs my work. CWS is a field of scholarship that studies whiteness, white culture, and white privilege and connects them to racist social structures (Applebaum, 2016). Using CWS as a theoretical framework has influenced my own process of developing a white racial identity. White people are often averse to naming our whiteness and unwilling to admit the ways in which our race has benefited us socially, economically, and politically, both individually and collectively. By denying this, we remain complicit in upholding racist structures. By including CWS in teacher education and professional development programs, white teachers are better prepared to

understand white supremacy and racism in both larger social and political structures as well as in day-to-day interactions. It informs my research by providing a lens for me and the research participants to construct our own racial identities, which serves to interrupt the norm of neutralizing and erasing whiteness from discussions about race.

Using CWS, teacher-educators can employ pedagogies that move white teachers to deeper understandings of race in education. White teachers need coursework that explores the foundations of race and racism, employs self-reflection, builds stamina for race work, and relies heavily on the work of Scholars of Color (Matias & Mackey, 2016). Racial witnessing events, defined as "moments where an individual experiences a strong event in which they (or someone they care deeply about) were racialized, Othered, and/or treated differently (usually negatively) because of their racial group, racial affiliation, etc." build critical race consciousness of teachers (Necochea, 2018, p. 726). Instructors who intentionally create space for white teachers to share, reflect upon, and analyze racial witnessing events in their own lives or in the lives of their loved ones can deepen their capacities to recognize how whiteness has impacted and benefited their lives at the inherent expense of People of Color.

Critical Whiteness Studies is an imperative framework to develop white teachers' race consciousness and strengthen our emotional stamina for race work. Exposing white teachers to this can help us unpack our conditioning to white racial privilege and dominance, which can have an enormous impact in building our capacities as educators for social justice. I use CWS in my work because it places the onus on white teachers to explore and understand how our race affects our teaching, rather than framing race as something experienced only by People of Color.

Methodology

I created a case study of three white female teachers who have opted into racial literacy training in addition to that which has been required of them by their school districts. This study included semi-structured individual interviews with open-ended questions about the participants' experiences with race and education, as well as diving deeply into their experiences with racial identity and racial literacy development.

Restatement of Purpose

This research built three case studies of white female educators who voluntarily sought out racial literacy training and who currently teach in Northern California. As most public school teachers are white *women*, the research particularly focused on them. I collected qualitative data through one-on-one interviews and a focus group. This study explored why and how some white teachers lean into this work and the ways in which they perceive the shifts in their mindsets about their teaching practices and their students. A primary focus was determining the life experiences, "a-ha" moments, and/or pedagogical tools that initially led them toward identity work and anti-racist training, as well as how they overcame resistance to this work, in order to determine what is most valuable in influencing other white educators to lean into such work.

Research Design

I used criterion sampling to identify and recruit research participants. I connected with three white female teachers who have voluntarily participated in anti-racism/anti-bias trainings in Northern California. I conducted one-on-one semi-structured interviews as well as a follow-up focus group with the participants to collect personal narratives about their experiences with race and whiteness and how their racial literacy development has influenced their roles as educators. I collected qualitative data regarding how and especially why these teachers chose to participate in

professional development of this nature and how they believe it has influenced their practices and their relationships with Students of Color.

Research Setting

I interviewed two participants in person during after-school hours. Due to distance constraints, I interviewed the third participant over the telephone. After completing all three interviews, I conducted a focus group, which two participants attended in-person and one via FaceTime.

Participants

I contacted each interviewee via email to request their participation in the research. I have a previous work relationship with two of the participants, and I met the third participant at an equity workshop for educators. I used a combination of convenience sampling, due to the professional connections I have with each of the participants, as well as homogenous criterion sampling, as the study necessitates certain demographic boundaries for the participant pool (namely that they self-identify as: female, white, and teacher, and that they have experience with identity and race training). I selected these women because each of them has requested and attended racial literacy training beyond that which their school districts and school sites have required of them. Some of their voluntary training has been supported and paid for by their school districts, and some has been at their own expense and during off-work hours. Each participant has stated an express interest in furthering her understanding of race and racism in education and in building her own white racial identity.

Table 1. Participant demographics

Participants	Gender	Racial Identity	Grades/Subjects Taught	Years Working in Education
A	Female	White	3rd grade	3
B	Female	White	8th grade Humanities	22
C	Female	White	4th grade	16

Instruments

I collected qualitative data through individual semi-structured interviews and a focus group with all three participants, with an emphasis on collecting their narratives in regards to racism and their racial literacy as white educators (see Appendices A and B for the Interview and Focus Group Protocols). All interviews were audio recorded and later transcribed. During the interviews I took brief field notes on the protocol sheet, and I used clarifying and elaborating probes to gain more information and thick descriptions when needed (Creswell, 2012, p. 222). I designed questions to glean more information about what experiences led the participants to dive deeply into building racial literacy and developing their white racial identity as educators.

Human Subjects Approval

I sought research approval through the University of San Francisco's Institutional Review Board for Protection of Human Subjects. To protect confidentiality, the names of the participants and other identifying information were not included in the final research report.

Data Collection

I collected data through handwritten field notes and audio recordings of the interviews, which I later transcribed. I used a semi-structured interview and focus group process to collect each participant's personal narrative and reflections on the moments and experiences that led them to racial identity work.

Data Analysis

I coded qualitative data from the interview and focus group transcripts via hand analysis to sort and analyze themes. After labeling text segments with initial codes, I reduced the total number of codes to limit redundancy and overlap in the emerging themes. I utilized member checking with participants during and after the interviews and focus group processes to confirm that I had captured their meaning accurately and to improve the validity and dependability of the results of our case study.

Limitations of the Study

This research is limited due to the small sample size of the case study, which may restrict external validity, as well as the time constraints of the research window (one semester). While the case study provided insights into some white teachers' experiences with racial identity development and education, we must remember that individual contexts may not necessarily be generalized or transferred to all white educators. It is not large or broad enough of a sample to reach comprehensive conclusions about all white teachers. Further research could include more in-depth data collection from participants, in the form of observations, longer interviews, or journaling, as well as broader collection from more participants from a wider range of locations and work contexts.

Significance of the Study

White teachers are often unaware of what Zembylas (2017) termed *the colonial condition* and how it relates to educating Children of Color. White teachers need professional development that uses appropriate pedagogical practices to develop their critical consciousness (Meintjes, 1997). For white teachers to truly transform their understandings of their privilege and power, they need transformative education themselves. Successful training for white teachers of

Students of Color can improve teacher conscientiousness and self-reflection and create the safe and brave spaces necessary to foster opportunities for honest conversations and growth. Learning and thinking critically about bias and privilege is essential if white teachers are going to teach Students of Color successfully in their classrooms. Tansey and Katz (2015) wrote:

> As white teachers, we have a responsibility to examine and think critically about race, justice, and our own privilege, and most importantly—how these play out in the classroom as teachers. As educators for social justice, we need to be having these conversations with our white colleagues, too…. Before we can ever hope to be good educators inside the classroom, we have to educate ourselves outside the classroom. And we cannot rely on teachers of color to be our source of that education. It is not their responsibility to teach us about issues of race, privilege, justice, and oppression. We have to do that. We have to find resources, do research, ask questions, and challenge our own assumptions...because, quite frankly, if we're not doing all of this, then we're not doing our jobs. (para. 8)

In order to meet the needs of all students, and especially Students of Color, white teachers must be prepared to do more than teach multicultural units or have a few books about People of Color in their class libraries. We need to develop our understanding of our white racial identity and how our whiteness affects us as educators and affects our relationships with our Students of Color and their families. By studying how and why some white teachers choose to participate in anti-racist professional development when most reject it, teacher-educators can learn how to best support all white educators in building racial identity and racial literacy. Through this self-work, we white teachers can better educate all of our students, especially Students of Color.

Definition of Terms

in-service teachers: educators who have completed the credentialing process and are working in the education field

pre-service teachers: students who are in the process of earning teaching credentials, which may include interns, student teachers, and resident teachers

People of Color (and Students, Children, Families, and Youth of Color): an inclusive term for persons from a variety of racial and ethnic backgrounds including, but not limited to, Latinx, Black and/or African American, Native American/Indigenous, Asian and/or Pacific Islander. I do not use the pejorative term minority because it implies a lesser or inferior status of the group it describes, and as demographics shift in the United States, it is often not numerically accurate.

white: refers to people of European descent. I do not use the term Caucasian as it is rooted in race "science" of the 18th century that privileged whiteness as superior over other races. In the United States, white has been socially constructed as neutral or normal and is often used as an exclusionary term to define those who are not People of Color.

A note about capitalization: While various style guides offer differing recommendations about capitalization in regards to race, I opted to use lowercase for white and to capitalize Black. I do this to counter the historical choices of the white press and white publications to use *White* and *black* to maintain white supremacy, and to support the efforts of Black writers and activists, such as W.E.B. Du Bois, who have called for capitalization as a form of racial respect in the press and to recenter on the leadership, experiences, and truths of Black people and other People of Color. When directly quoting other authors, I maintained the capitalization choices they made.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

This work explores methods and efforts to educate white pre-service and in-service teachers, as well as college students in general and professionals from a variety of fields, about race and racism. First, I will explore research regarding areas of white discomfort and white resistance to discussions of race and privilege, as understanding the causes of this resistance is crucial to combating it through critical race education. Next, I will review literature about intergroup dialogue, a pedagogical framework for constructing racial literacy, with a specific lens of how it can be applied in teacher education. I will also review literature about cognitive growth models, specifically Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development and Kegan's Constructive-Developmental Model. The goals of this review are (1) to investigate areas of resistance so that teacher-educators can most effectively address and mitigate silence and inaction and (2) to explore current understandings of how to best instruct white teachers about systemic racism, its existence in the racist and racialized public education system, and the role that whiteness plays in maintaining that system.

Areas of White Discomfort and Resistance

Much has been written about white fragility and discomfort in regards to critical discussions about race and privilege. White fragility, guilt, and silence have the dangerous effect of centering whiteness and decentering the experiences of People of Color, even during trainings specifically intended to explore racism and anti-racist efforts. In order to overcome white resistance, we must understand and critically acknowledge it in anti-racist work with white

educators. White resistance affirms and maintains the centering of whiteness and negates imperative work to recenter Communities of Color.

In discussing centering, we must first critically analyze how we determine the site of the center, as *the center itself* is an inherently white space, and we must recognize that other groups and individuals have their own centers rooted in their own beliefs and value sets. Hitchcock and Flint (1997 and 2015) argued that "drawing people from the centers of their respective cultures into an otherwise unmodified and largely white center still leaves whiteness as central...The center should be changed, not that the margins should be centered" (p. 4). Rather than moving People of Color and their experiences into a white center, teacher-educators must move to a new center to ground their work.

White people often resist shifting to a new center in order to learn from experiences of People of Color because doing so disrupts the comfort, stability, and advantages that a white center provides them. Many scholars have written extensively on white fragility and discomfort in regards to race and privilege and white people's endeavors to relieve guilt and discomfort and recenter their own dominant experiences (Matias, 2014 and Picower, 2009, for example). One mechanism white people use to avoid recentering is a "Discourse of Individualism," which upholds the myth that an individual's choices and actions are the primary determinant of one's life trajectory, and disregards the larger social, political, economic and other factors which affect experiences and outcomes. DiAngelo (2010) wrote:

> We see Individualism positioning groups at the top of the social hierarchy (in the case of race, whites) as a collection of outstanding (and unraced) individuals who value hard work, education, and determination. Simultaneously, groups of color who have been

> consistently denied institutional access and thereby have not consistently achieved at the group level lack these values and ethics. (p. 6)

By privileging their experiences as individuals in a vacuum devoid of social and political realities, white people can deny the significance of race and racism while maintaining a belief in the myth of meritocracy.

Another tool of white resistance to anti-racist work is negative use of silence to disengage from conversations about race (Picower, 2009, p. 209). To be sure, white silence can be positive and appropriate when it is purposefully and thoughtfully used to yield white space and to create space for People of Color. In such instances, it is an important tool for listening and learning. Typically, though, white people use silence to deflect uneasiness and avoid grappling with uncomfortable discourse about whiteness and privilege. White people are socialized and conditioned to remain silent, and ultimately colorblind, towards race, but DiAngelo (2012) posited that "to challenge one's most comfortable patterns of engagement in a racial dialogue, while it may be counterintuitive, is necessarily to interrupt one's racial socialization" (p. 14). White people in general and white educators in particular must engage with race and racism in order to build racial stamina and racial literacy.

White teachers must actively and intentionally decenter whiteness and recenter the experiences of People of Color if they wish to truly transform their teaching and discontinue harmful practices which replicate structural racism in their classrooms. White teachers must necessarily shed guilt, fear, silence, and resistance in order to move to a new center. White resistance inherently recenters whiteness, so it is essential for teacher-educators to interrupt these recentering tools and push white teachers into uncomfortable but productive spaces.

Intergroup Dialog for Understanding Whiteness and Race

In my own observations as a participant in identity development and anti-racist workshops, discussions about whiteness have triggered discomfort at best and hostility and aggression at worst among many white participants, which created resistance to such work and blocked constructive dialogue. Teacher-educators and trainers must employ pedagogies that create space for all participants to share and reflect, as well as foster spaces for listening and empathy in order to develop white racial literacy. One methodology to create balanced dialogue space is intergroup dialogue, which uses deep listening, questioning, and multiple perspectives in order to build relationships and critical consciousness to promote social justice (Maxwell & Gurin, 2017). Zuniga, Nagda, Chesler, and Cytron-Walker (2008, p. 19) described intergroup dialogue as follows:

> In contrast to banking approaches to education, where knowledge is transmitted to students by the teacher expert, intergroup dialogue relies on student-centered pedagogies that assume students can cocreate knowledge through active learning processes that value learning from experience...Participants learn to name and describe their personal and identity-based experiences and worldviews. They use historical and conceptual frameworks to critically situate their experiences in the context of systems of power and privilege.

In studying university students using intergroup dialogue in their coursework, Muller and Miles (2017) found that after eight weeks students self-reported improved engagement in conversations about gender, race, religion, social class, and sexual orientation and were less likely to report colorblindness to racial privilege and institutional discrimination. Yeung, Spanierman, and Landrum-Brown (2013) used intergroup dialogue as a methodology for

approaching Critical Whiteness Pedagogy with white students. Their white student-participants reported feeling more open to self-reflection and discovery in understanding themselves as white in a multicultural society, "more open to learning about their privileged position in the U.S. racial hierarchy," and appreciative of in-class opportunities to hear from Students of Color about their experiences (pp. 22-23).

The implications for developing pedagogies with intergroup dialogue for white educators are substantial, as they can guide teacher-educators in creating anti-racist curricula in teacher education programs. Creating pathways to educate white teachers to understand race, whiteness, and privilege, particularly through open and structured dialogue, invites white students into social justice dialogues in new and nuanced ways.

Cognitive Growth and Development Models

In this section, I will review literature and research about the brain and cognitive development. In studying how we learn and in understanding how the human brain processes new information and makes meaning, we can better understand the best methods for transformative education for white teachers.

Zone of Proximal Development

A concept of seminal importance in teacher preparation programs is Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (1978). Vygotsky's work is widely cited when educating pre-service teachers about pedagogy and brain-development in children. The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) is a theory describing the space between what one currently knows and what one can achieve with appropriate supports. Educators consider the ZPD to be the "sweet spot" for academic instruction because it is an appropriate space to build upon what a student can already

do independently and what they will be able to do and learn with help. Once a student has mastered this new concept, their ZPD is recentered and expanded slightly outward.

Leonardo and Manning (2017) described the possibilities of a union between Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development and Critical Whiteness Studies (CWS). Working with the idea that white social development and the centering of whiteness and white value systems create resistance to racial literacy, Leonardo and Manning called for using ZPD as a framework for building white capacity and understanding about race (p. 24). Although Vygotsky's theory focused on *learning* new concepts and skills, Leonardo and Manning's applications of ZPD aimed for the *unlearning* (emphasis mine) of dominant white power structures and race pedagogies. They argued that "to learn anti-racism means to unlearn the implicit mediators that children inherit and internalize through white social development" (p. 25). The possible implications of this marriage between ZPD and CWS are profound. Teacher education programs and professional development models must be structured to guide white teachers to unlearn the white paradigm in which they are so deeply rooted. In breaking down deeply entrenched systems of maintaining white racial supremacy, we can begin to build white teachers' capacities for racial understanding, literacy, and competency, especially as it relates to their roles as educators.

Constructive-Development Model

Another useful tool for understanding race pedagogy through a lens of brain development is Kegan's Constructive-Developmental Model (1980). This model describes the manner in which a person makes meaning of new learning. Kegan's work leans heavily on Piaget's (1963, 1973) theories of childhood cognition. Kegan identified five levels of meaning making, which develop over one's lifetime as a result of applying new experiences and learnings to one's cognitive, interpersonal, and intrapersonal understanding of the world. Depending on one's

current developmental level, a person may or may not be cognitively prepared to make meaning with new learning.

Puchner and Markowitz (2016) utilized Kegan's framework to explain different responses from white students to the same education foundations course. They theorized that students in lower levels of Kegan's model experienced more difficulty and resistance to training about race and power, and that students in higher levels were more receptive to new learnings. They claimed that resistance to anti-racism education works in tandem with "a lack of capacity to understand any idea that requires one to see a self that is different from though related to and influenced by external sources, and to reflect on how context influences one's beliefs" (1056). By including a developmental model for understanding how students learn, particularly white teachers for these purposes, we can more successfully frame teacher education programs and professional development resources. Teacher-educators, however, must be mindful not to rely solely on cognitive development models when approaching anti-racist work with white educators, as doing so in isolation can create space for white teacher-learners to remain in positions of comfort and maintenance.

Summary

In this section, I reviewed several aspects of anti-racism education for teachers. First, I explored areas of white resistance to such training, including the myth of individualism and white silence. Then, I discussed intergroup dialog as a pedagogical framework that can be applied in teacher training programs. Lastly, I explored Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development and Kegan's Constructive-Developmental Model and the implications and possibilities when intersecting them with critical race studies. I use this work to inform my

research about how in-service white teachers respond to racial literacy training and perceive its effects on their teaching practices.

CHAPTER III

RESULTS

Introduction

I collected data for this research through qualitative interviews with three white female teachers to assess and determine: 1) what drew them into racial literacy work, 2) how they perceive changes in themselves and in their work as educators, and 3) what aspects of these trainings they found to be most successful in engaging them with this work in meaningful ways. Through in-depth interviews with each participant, I learned more about their experiences with race and racism, as well as how and why they became committed to critical anti-racist work which has influenced them both in their classrooms and in their personal lives. In this chapter, I will share significant findings and themes from the research.

In the first section I will explore the experiences that initially motivated and guided the women into the work, namely reflecting on their own experiences with adversity and building empathy, building closer personal and professional relationships with People of Color, and developing a drive to become explicitly anti-racist in their classrooms and to teach their students with anti-racist pedagogies, curricula, and content. In the second section, I will explain how white teachers who lean into racial literacy work often perceive shifts in their perspectives and understandings of race, racism, and whiteness, ultimately leading them to believe in the necessity of undertaking this work. This transformation began with being deeply embedded in the dominance of white culture, which connects to a denial of racism as a current and ongoing reality and a harmful belief in colorblindness, experiencing stages of grief and guilt when reflecting upon their complicity in replicating and perpetuating racism, and eventually a realization that they must lean heavily into this work to unlearn the dominant white narrative about race and

racism. Finally, I will discuss the pedagogies and tools that this group of white teachers believes best engaged them in this work, which include learning spaces and experiences that pushed them to engage with discomfort rather than avoid it and work environments that encouraged participation in racial literacy workshops and built a culture and community of anti-racism.

Findings

Experiences that Motivate White Educators to Seek Out Racial Literacy Training

In seeking to understand why some white educators have a desire to learn more about race and racism than others, I asked the participants to share about the events and experiences that they feel motivated them to do so the most. Several common threads emerged, including reflecting on their own experiences with hardship, developing authentic relationships with People of Color, fostering a desire to be actively and explicitly anti-racist, and striving to teach their students about race and racism accurately and effectively. These hopes and experiences were the stimuli that participants most frequently cited as inspiring them to explore race and racism more closely.

One common experience shared by the participants was that each identified various challenges and hardships they have fought to overcome in their lives, which helped them begin to build empathy for the difficulties that People of Color must confront and navigate regularly because of living within a system of white supremacy. Although they realized that their personal hardships neither align nor compare to living under racism, they did make connections to a sense of otherness and outsiderness relative to sources of power and privilege. One woman, who has significant visual impairments, described her experience as such: “I've definitely been in situations where I felt like I was the ‘only one’ my whole life, or when I felt excluded from something, or I couldn't participate in something, or my difference was highlighted in a negative

way." Having been in situations where she was treated poorly and unkindly due to her disability has made her feel othered, and the manners in which others have reacted to her disability have created barriers to her accessing certain activities, experiences, and educational opportunities, and these experiences helped her develop a sense of empathy for adversities that others face.

Another common theme from participants was that having more authentic experiences with People of Color and building relationships were key to increasing their desire to explore issues of race and racism. As children and teenagers, they were typically surrounded by white people and had very few interactions with People of Color, and they were taught that colorblindness was the antidote to racism. In building relationships with People of Color, however, whether they were friendships, romantic relationships, or professional connections, these women heard and learned about racialized experiences that were different from their own, and this motivated them to explore race and racism, and especially whiteness, more deeply. One participant cited dating her now husband, who is Black, as being particularly eye opening because of how strangers, acquaintances, and loved ones treated the two of them differently, and she began to understand the racialized context in which their relationship grew. She also noted vast disparities in their memories of school and that race was a substantial factor in their different experiences. She had never had to acknowledge or even notice the racist behaviors and constructs that surrounded her before, because as a white woman they had never negatively affected her. As her relationship with her husband developed, she realized she had to unlearn what she currently believed about racism and that she must lift the veil of colorblindness in order to begin understanding racist ideologies and constructs.

Another participant described facilitating a parent workshop at her school and noted that "Every single person in that room, except for me as the only white person, had a story, many

stories, of a time they didn't feel included in the school because of their racial identity." She explained feeling "so naive and stupid" for being surprised by what the family members shared, and she realized her work to learn more about racism would never be finished. In having an opportunity to connect with Families of Color from her school site, she was able to have deeper conversations that revealed more about their life experiences and challenged her to dive deeply into anti-racist trainings and workshops. These experiences mirror the findings from using intergroup dialogue, in that facilitated conversations and experiences with people from different racial groups can build a white person's capacities for raising critical consciousness about race and allows them to situate their whiteness within larger social and historical constructs.

All of the participants also named a desire to be explicitly anti-racist in their professional roles as educators as a significant factor in their drive to learn more about race and racism. One of the women explained that she feels "a responsibility as a white person to do the right thing and not just stand by," but rather to take an active role in disrupting racism against Students of Color. She stated that as a teacher, "I don't want to do that or let that happen to a kid, even if I'm not the one doing it. I'm going to figure out how to be anti, someone that's not just around, someone that's not just passive." Another participant similarly described that as a teacher she needed to be cognizant of modeling anti-racism with her interactions and responses, asking questions and calling out racist practices, being open-minded and continuing the work, and planting seeds of change even if she cannot directly change something herself. Another teacher explained that:

> It's been really motivating for me to continue to go to workshops and do this work because I see it reflected in my teaching in ways that are really, really powerful... Everything I do is layered with those trainings I've had and in my belief in teaching kids the truth.

She further stressed a desire to use culturally-responsive teaching in her classroom, to learn strategies to teach all students in the ways they learn best and honor their experiences and worldviews, and wanting to "teach children about the history of racism that led us here, how to be citizens within that, and how to change it." All three women acknowledged that their own worldviews, which are deeply entrenched in whiteness and white supremacy, are inappropriate and harmful as frameworks for teaching both Students of Color and white students, so they began to search for resources, trainings, and workshops to understand whiteness and dominant power structures, to improve their cultural literacies, and to learn tangible strategies for teaching anti-racism in their classrooms.

Through internalizing their own hardships and developing empathy for others, by making deeper connections through authentic relationships with People of Color, and in wanting to use anti-racist practices and pedagogies in their classrooms, each of the three teachers felt it necessary to further their education and build their competencies in discussing and understanding race. Over time, they described gradual changes in their understandings and mindsets, which I explore in the following section.

Shifts in Perspective and Understanding of Whiteness, Race, and Racism

Another aspect of the research was exploring the participants' self-evaluations of the effects of engaging in racial literacy training. As they undertook this work, what sorts of changes did they identify in themselves and in their understandings about race? In what ways did they experience growth in their mindsets and worldviews? Significant areas of transformation were initial realizations that white culture has been socially normed as neutral and that racism thrives in a system of white supremacy, experiencing feelings of grief and guilt when their worldview

was challenged, and working through discomfort to overcome those feelings in order to unlearn the dominant white paradigm and to recenter their worldviews.

A common experience for all participants, which also reflects my own early understandings of whiteness and race, was that we began our journeys raised and deeply entrenched in communities that reflected our whiteness and white culture back onto us and did not expand outward towards People or Color and their experiences. We learned to be colorblind and that racism only had overt manifestations. There was little to no early awareness that our whiteness carried unearned privilege and access. The women shared some insights: "I grew up in a very white area without knowing how white it was." "I was very naïve and not exposed to much more than that." "I didn't have much awareness around my whiteness because I didn't have to." "I was told, 'Racism is bad, but here's all the ways it was fixed. It's not a thing anymore.'" We rarely talked about race, and when it was discussed it was framed as something in the past and something that only impacted People of Color—whiteness was never a part of our race conversations.

Participating in trainings with racial identity work gave the women opportunities to grapple with whiteness for the first time. In being able to engage with others and listen to their experiences with race, each of the women identified a moment of awakening in which she realized that what she had been taught about race, both explicitly and implicitly, had masked her whiteness. One woman, who had been taught that racism was an issue overcome by the Civil Rights Movement, stated, "It was very strange to me, but that's when my eyes were open to the fact that people still thought this way." Racial literacy work challenged all of the women to consider their own race for the first time, because their whiteness had been neutralized and normalized. In lifting the veil of false neutrality, they were able to build their capacities for

understanding whiteness, racial power, and dominance. One woman described the change in how she viewed whiteness as such:

> Whiteness is more of a status than a race. Even my understanding of it historically has changed a lot, like how whiteness became a concept for economic reasons and how it has persisted because it keeps the people who were in charge in charge. I'm realizing it doesn't really have as much to do with the way we look as I used to think that it did, that it has persisted as a concept because of power.

Each of the women came to understand that the neutrality of whiteness is a myth that disguises racism, and that whiteness is a racialized experience that informs a white person's worldviews in harmful ways that perpetuate racism and inequalities.

As the women began unpacking whiteness and developing white racial identities, they identified experiencing feelings of guilt and grief. One described, "I learn something new, and then I have to go through the cycle of grief with myself in order to say, now I've been through that cycle, what am I going to do about it?" Another similarly compared her experience with progressing through the stages of grief: "You hit denial, anger, and bargaining. That happens with most people who didn't realize how much the world was different from the world they grew up with. But some people just get stuck in denial and never move past it." As they moved through grief and discomfort, however, they recognized the need to push through discomfort in order to continue their development and make meaningful changes in themselves. Much as Leonardo and Manning (2017) discussed unlearning systems that uphold white supremacy, the women described how their newfound understandings of whiteness and race have changed their perceptions of the world and that they feel the only option is to move forward to continue unlearning. Some of their explanations include "It's important work, and I have no other choice

but to keep doing it. My eyes are opened. I can't go back into ignorance. I don't have a choice but to move forward."

> I think if anything, what all these workshops and trainings have taught me is that I'm always going to be playing catch up. I'm always going to be trying to understand, and I'm totally committed to that. It's so complicated, it's so messy, everybody's story is different, and all I can do is a lot more listening than talking and always show up.
>
> Once you realize how whiteness controls everything, it's impossible not to think about in pretty much most situations. I feel like I am a completely different person. And I'm happy about that, and I have so much more work to do and growth to do, but I can't unknow what I know, and I say that knowing full well that I also can't experience this world as a Person of Color and that they have to know these things every day in a way that I never will. I guess part of it is knowing that I always will not know nearly enough.

In pushing past grief and discomfort, each of the women felt a cementing in her belief that in order to move forward she had to continue her learning by *unlearning* what she previously understood about race. They felt that remaining neutral and staying complacent would serve to perpetuate white supremacy and would undermine their efforts to be anti-racist in their personal lives and in their professional capacities as educators. This was a primary impetus in why they continued to seek and lean into racial literacy training, as they recognized that their learning process would never be complete. Next, I will review what aspects of trainings they found to be most successful in engaging them in this work.

Pedagogies and Tools that Engage White Educators

To understand why some white educators have leaned more heavily into racial literacy development than others, we must ascertain what about the trainings drew them in. When

interviewing each of the participants, I asked them to gauge and describe the pedagogical tools, learning frameworks, and training structures that they believe engaged them the most and built their sense of buy-in and commitment to the work. The women frequently cited the culture and community around the work as being paramount to their growth, specifically intentionally uncomfortable learning spaces and working with administrators who encouraged such training for their entire school sites. Each of these situations made the women feel deeply connected to the work and as though they had tangible skills to bring into their classrooms and school sites.

One of the primary factors each of the participants identified in engaging them in anti-racist workshops and trainings was purposeful facilitation to create learning spaces that rejected protecting their comfort as white women. As I described previously, the women identified feeling guilt and grief as they began this work, and working in spaces that challenged the racial comfort normally afforded to them propelled them forward into productive learning. Much in the way that Ohito (2016) described pedagogies of discomfort as crucial to developing white students' critical consciousness about race, successfully engaging white teachers in racial literacy work involves creating spaces for them to experience racial distress and move through it. One participant explained the value of discomfort: "The workshops put you in uncomfortable situations, in a way that it's structured and safe, but you deepen your own understanding of who you are in the classroom and how you can have a negative or a positive impact." Another explained, "These conversations were constructive and positive, in a way that was really meaningful. It was hard, but it was like they moved us through the phases of understanding our whiteness and our privilege in a way that felt sensible." (In discussing the comfort level of white women, I would be remiss if I did not address the weaponization of white women's tears. See Accapadi (2007), DiAngelo (2018), Hamad (2018), and Luvvie (2018) for further reading about

how protecting white women and their racial comfort derails important conversations about race, centers learning spaces on how white people experience race, and silences People of Color.) In the absence of discomfort, growth and learning is not possible, as white comfort is a tool for maintaining the status quo. Pedagogies of discomfort can catapult white women into discomfort and beyond to productive and meaningful race work.

In conjunction with intentionally uncomfortable spaces, the participants similarly described professional environments that supported their desires to build their racial literacies and capacities. Having opportunities to have discussions, make connections, and build relationships with others who have sought out training of this nature reminded them of their purpose and made them feel surrounded by supportive communities. They shared the following insights about how this propelled them forward:

> If I ever go to my boss and say I want to go to this workshop, not only do they encourage me and welcome it, but they will push you to do it. It's really part of the school culture to do this work.
>
> It is the connections with others who share these values, and it is hearing stories with similar themes from many people. This is a real need, making connections with others and knowing I that am not alone in this work.
>
> You go to this workshop, and you're with all these people. It's so motivating, you know? It's like, here's all the people in this room that are dedicated to this work just like I am, and that feels really exciting and motivating. Sometimes you can feel like you're on an island and it’s like, why are we doing this? You know, meeting all those people and just making connections is extremely valuable. I love the workshops that I've been to where people tell stories. They tell stories and help you understand their journeys and why they

> do what they do. That can be incredibly motivating and exciting just to keep the momentum going because I think it's easy to get complacent.

In finding others who shared their desires to learn more about race and racism and how they carry race into their classrooms, the women felt an increased sense of connection to the work and of being in community with others, which reignited their commitment to active participation and learning for racial equity.

Summary

In collecting data from a case study of three white female teachers, I hoped to learn more about their pathways into engaging with racial and cultural literacy, participating in trainings to explore racialized systems and constructs, and developing stronger senses of white racial identity. The participants candidly shared their own experiences with adversity, with listening to People of Color share their experiences with race and racism and participating in structures similar to intergroup dialogue, and the realization that they must be actively anti-racist in both their private lives and their professional roles in order to begin undoing the violence against People of Color that is inherent in systems and institutions built on white supremacy. The case study also explored the ways in which the women identified changes in their mindsets about race. Each described a dominant worldview that neutralized whiteness and only saw People of Color as being raced, and which taught them that racism existed only in overt and extreme words and actions. As they continued with training, however, they came to understand racism as systemic, structural, and institutional, and that it permeates small day-to-day interactions and experiences. Each described feelings of grief and guilt and a need to continue her learning process in order to *unlearn* what she previously understood about race and racism. Finally, I asked the participants to consider and share what aspects of the workshops and trainings they

attended were the most beneficial to supporting their growth and development. They identified facilitation that made them intentionally uncomfortable, as it interrupted the lifetime of racial comfort they have been afforded. They also named work environments that encouraged participation in these trainings and provided strong community and support for racial literacy growth and development.

CHAPTER IV

DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Discussion

The racial and cultural mismatch between educators and students in the United States is significant and has profound negative effects on all students, especially Students of Color. In addition to expanding supports and pathways to make teaching more accessible for People of Color to improve representation in classrooms and at the district level, there must also be systems in place to develop white teachers' positive white racial identities, build their cultural and racial literacies, and greatly expand their understandings of America's long history of racism and white supremacy and how it informs our current political, social, and economic landscapes. Without this context, white teachers cannot situate individual biases and ideologies within larger racist institutional frameworks, particularly within public education. White teachers have lower achievement expectations for Students of Color and use significantly more punitive discipline measures with Students of Color than they do with white students. Trainings and workshops that emphasize anti-racism and healthy racial identity development are critical for white educators because we must take on the lift of undoing racism in our classrooms. We must overcome the tendency to become mired in racial guilt in order to become truly anti-racist. As Audre Lorde wrote, "If [guilt] leads to change then it can be useful, since it is then no longer guilt but the beginning of knowledge" (1984, p. 130)

White teachers who have sought out anti-racism training provide us with some insight into what motivated them to lean into this work rather than resist it. The research participants shared important perspectives as to why they engage in such work, and their experiences may be valuable to teacher-educators so that they can guide future teachers to learn accurate historical

contexts of racialized educational outcomes, build healthy and positive white racial identities, and improve cross-racial and cross-cultural competencies.

Conclusions

White educators need to reject our commonly held notion that we are somehow helping or saving Students of Color simply by showing up and instructing them. Instead, we must deeply engage with racial literacy training and development so that we can critically acknowledge our racial privilege and positioning and emphatically reject the white racial privilege, racism, and racial violence we carry into our classrooms. We need to grow our abilities to examine our teaching practices with an accurate lens of how our race holds power in educational spaces. We must hold one another accountable for how we think about and discuss race and honestly assess how our race shapes our mindsets and classrooms and affects our students. How are we valuing and celebrating racial and cultural diversity? How are we interrupting and dismantling racism in education, both institutionally and in our individual classrooms? How are we modeling critical racial consciousness for white students, teaching them history accurately, and supporting their white racial identity development?

> White privilege pedagogy needs to draw White people into meaningful, critical conversations and dialogues about their role in perpetuating historically determined social relations that re-create a racial hierarchy with White people on top….This involved providing more time for White students to learn the history of racism in the U.S., their own location in a racist society, the real consequences of racism for People of Color, and what it means to take on the work of creating actively anti-racist curricula for K12 students. (Cann, 2016, p. 98).

Teacher education, both for pre-service college students and in-service educators, must emphasize positive white racial identity development. Anti-racism training for white people, without an emphasis on critically exploring and understanding whiteness first, can easily serve to cement a white person's belief that racism only affects People of Color. It can perpetuate the false notion that racial violence is a cause that existed only in the past whose effects we are working to undo, rather than correctly framing it as a present-day reality that we replicate in our classrooms in the ways we think about and interact with Students of Color and their families. White people, whether we are in education or in any other field, must take on the lift of anti-racist work, as it is our racist history that created systemic inequities and violence against People of Color. In order to make meaningful change within racist systems such as public education, we have to face our whiteness, recognize our individual roles in perpetuating discrimination against People of Color, connect individual beliefs and actions to collective racial power structures, and develop positive mindsets about what whiteness and being anti-racist allies can and should look like. Findings from this study demonstrate that when white people show up for anti-racist work and shed the fear of experiencing racial discomfort, we are more likely to see our whiteness and understand why whiteness matters when we talk about race.

Recommendations

Improving academic outcomes for Students of Color and ending violence against them in educational spaces requires white educators to radically transform our mindsets about race. University-level teacher prep programs and ongoing professional development for in-service teachers should use tenets of Critical Whiteness Studies and intergroup dialogue in order to push beyond white fragility and to avoid centering on white comfort. White educators and white people in general need to develop positive white racial identities, learn tools to recognize and

interrupt racism as it occurs, and understand what white allyship and participation in racial justice movements can look like.

In addition to fostering healthy and positive racial identity development among white educators, colleges, universities, school districts, and government education agencies should take actionable steps to diversify leadership, to review and rectify racist educational policies and academic standards, and to develop faculty and staff discourse about race and culture. Public educational spaces, as they historically and currently exist, are deeply situated within the pillars of whiteness, patriarchy, heteronormativity, and capitalism. We must stop relying on discourse and initiatives that claim to help Students of Color on superficial levels but in reality serve to reproduce oppression and perpetuate violence against them in educational spaces. Instead, we must strive for sweeping transformation of public education by breaking down the white power structures on which it was built.

Elementary and secondary schools should implement anti-racism development and training for all students at much earlier developmental stages. This may include rewriting history standards, textbooks, and curricula so that we can teach the history of race and racism in America accurately, having many more People of Color involved in developing and writing curricula and academic standards, and significant teacher training prior to implementation. By including and embedding anti-racism and positive racial identity development in social science courses, we have an opportunity to teach white students differently, so that they may grow into true advocates for social change. In order to lift up Children of Color so that they thrive in educational spaces, white educators must begin by dismantling the dominance and violence of white supremacy we carry with us into our classrooms.

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APPENDIX A

Interview Questions

1. Please describe your current role(s) as an educator.
2. What are some memories or experiences you have had that shaped your early understandings about whiteness, race, and racism?
3. Why have you sought out training for racial literacy development? What motivated you to seek out such work?
4. What has your experience been like with these types of trainings? What do you see as the most beneficial aspects of this work?
5. At any time during or since your training, have you felt resistant to the work? Have you had any experiences personally or professionally in which you've felt resistance from others?
6. In what ways have your understandings of whiteness, race, and racism shifted as a result of such training programs?
7. In what ways has anti-racism/racial literacy training affected you as an educator?

APPENDIX B

Focus Group Questions

1. Tell us a little about why you continue to show up for antiracist work. What motivates you to continue moving forward and to work through grief/guilt/discomfort?
2. What does it mean to you to be explicitly antiracist?
3. Was there a moment or experience in your past racial equity trainings that cemented your belief in the need for this work? How can we capitalize on those moments to invite other white educators (and white people in general) into this work with us?
4. What advice would you give to other white educators who are grappling with racial literacy and developing their white racial identities?