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Racial Diversity in the Schools: A Necessary Evil?

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White teachers see racial diversity in the schools as a “necessary evil.” Common beliefs are that a) Black students are saved by nurturing White teachers and well-behaved White children, and b) White students learn from “disadvantaged” Black children the dual lesson of empathy and gratitude.

Introduction

Research finds that White teachers generally hold the belief that Black families are more dysfunctional than White families (Heinze, 2008; Laughter, 2011). Interestingly, even though White teachers see Black families as problematic, they tend to embrace the idea that schools should possess a racially diverse student body (Nieto & Jenlink, 2005). How can White teachers simultaneously hold the belief that Black families are problematic yet support racially diverse schools?

In this article, the authors use interviews with two preservice and four in-service teachers to help unpack this seeming contradiction using Bonilla-Silva’s concept, new racism. Bonilla-Silva (2009) argued that Whites generally use a color-blind ideology that ignores institutional discrimination in favor of blaming any differences between Whites and African Americans on their respective cultures. Thus, those holding this ideology believe that if African Americans are poorer, they must not value hard work as much as White Americans. This ideology also holds that if African American children do worse in the public school system, they must value education less.

Applying Bonilla-Silva’s concept, new racism, our interviews reveal that White teachers support racial diversity in the schools in spite of seeing Black families as inferior because they view racial diversity as a necessary evil. In this view, White teachers and students can provide Black children the positive role modeling they do not receive in the home and Black students

can teach White children both empathy for those less fortunate and appreciation for all they may take for granted.

Racial Diversity in the Schools

Interestingly, even though many White students still remain racially isolated in their schools, the national student body is growing in diversity. Indeed, in 2007, 40% of students were non-White (Yen, 2009). The increased racial diversity in the student body stands in stark contrast to the race of most K–12 teachers, 84% of whom are White (Feistritzer, 2011). Having White teachers in classrooms with racially diverse student bodies is of concern, given that many White teachers today perceive themselves as color-blind and do not believe race is a relevant concept for contemporary society (Furman, 2008; Winans, 2010).

To complicate the issue of racial diversity in the schools even more, findings also show that even while White teachers perceive themselves as color-blind, they tend to believe that Black families are more problematic for schools than White families and that a racially diverse student body in the schools is important (Furman, 2008; Hill-Jackson, 2007; King & Howard, 2000). How can White teachers, who claim to be color-blind, say they value a racially diverse student body even while they view Black families as more problematic?

The New Racism and Racial Diversity in the Schools

Like most critical race theorists, Bonilla-Silva (2009) argued that race is not a characteristic of people, but rather that race is a characteristic of social systems. A racialized social system organizes economic, social, and political power in a way that benefits Whites as a group over people of color, a system called White privilege. White privilege allows Whites to control the dominant rules of society. So, for example, the present rules of the U.S. educational systems allow schools from

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White areas to have higher property taxes, more diverse curriculum offerings, more rights to exclude via tracking or gifted programs, and rights to better reputations (King & Howard, 2000; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

Applying Bonilla-Silva's concept, new racism, our interviews reveal that White teachers support racial diversity in the schools in spite of seeing Black families as inferior because they view racial diversity as a necessary evil.

The main thesis behind Bonilla-Silva's notion of the *new racism* is that Whites generally deny the benefits they reap from the structural system of White privilege (Chubbuck, 2004; Gordon, 2005). Indeed, they deny the entire existence of White privilege. Though Whites as a group are likely to acknowledge that African Americans, for example, are more likely to live in economically depressed areas and make lower wages compared to other groups, they tend to argue that such inequalities exist because of characteristics within African American culture (Duesterberg, 1999; King & Howard, 2000; Vaught & Castagno, 2008). With the new racism, Whites never have to use biology as an explanation to understand social inequality. They can use the seemingly power-neutral concept: culture.

Many schools and teachers support the new racism using a set of racist justifications that work together to mask, ignore, or deny the structural rules within schools that create social inequality (Weiner, 2000). Weiner (2000) called the justifications a "seamless ideological web" and this seamless web embodies the following myths: culture best explains social inequality; schools are merit based; racism no longer exists; schools need to assimilate children; and standardized tests are neutral (Cochran-Smith, 2003; Weiner, 2000). Teachers bring these myths into the classroom using a versatile set of ideological tools that help them interpret reality outside of power relationships (Picower, 2009). The ideological tools are behavioral performances and ideological rationales that simultaneously support White privilege, yet deny its existence.

In this article, we argue that teachers see racial diversity in the schools as a necessary evil, and they use two well-documented ideological rationales to simultaneously hold this belief while not viewing themselves as racist: a belief in color-blindness (which is perceived by many as socially appropriate) and a belief that Black families

are deviant (which is generally expressed less directly) (Weiner, 2000). When teachers view Black families as the problem and White families as the solution, then these teachers view racial diversity inside the school as a necessary evil.

As stated above, a powerful ideological rationale used by many teachers is the claim of color-blindness (Allard, 2006; Chubbuck, 2004; Laduke, 2008; Picower, 2009; Vavrus, 2010). White teachers claim not to notice race, and in fact do not see themselves as having a race. As a result, they are able to ignore the advantages they receive because they are White (Picower, 2009). A second major ideological rationale used by many teachers is seeing Black families as deviant and the cause for inequality, even when evidence and logic say otherwise. For example, White teachers are not likely to acknowledge that Whites control the curriculum, rules of behavior, standardized testing, and even the culture of meritocracy, a culture which suggests that the achievement gap is caused by racial/ethnic individual differences in effort rather than structural power arrangements (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

In sum, White preservice and in-service teachers tend to see themselves as color-blind, yet blame the achievement gap between Whites and students of color on "deviant" African American family values. These two ideological rationales help us understand the contradiction White teachers hold with their view that Black families are problematic, yet that racial diversity in the schools is important.

Research Methods

We are two White researchers who began a pilot project in the fall of 2010 to study how White preservice teachers think about racial diversity education and experiences with racial diversity. The pilot project duration was one semester and focused on students' experiences in their required field experiences. For the project, we recruited two White participants, Autumn and Chloe, studying to be elementary school teachers within the Curriculum and Instruction Program in the School of Education. We chose White participants given the racial composition of teachers in the United States. Further, because the majority of non-White students in the area are African American, our interview questions asked specific questions about African Americans.

For this study, we used three main data gathering strategies to uncover preservice and in-service teachers' perceptions of racial diversity. First, we interviewed Autumn and Chloe four times during the semester, once per month beginning in September. Each interview lasted between 1½ to 2 hours.

Second, we interviewed the four White in-service teachers with whom the students were placed for their

field training. Each student had two different placements during the fall semester, and the placements differed in the ratio of White students and students of color. In the first placement, Chloe observed in Mrs. Wheeler's room, a third grade classroom. Autumn was in Mrs. Boxer's room, a teacher who taught seventh grade math. In the first placement for each preservice teacher, students of color at the schools were one-third to one-half of the population. In the second placement, however, Whites were a definite majority. Chloe went to Mrs. Manning's kindergarten class, a class with no students of color. Autumn was placed in Mrs. Reagan's class, a fourth grade classroom with only six students of color. Each interview with the in-service teachers lasted between 45 minutes and 1½ hours.

Finally, we made weekly observations at students' field experiences during a 13-week period, for a total of nine visits by the first author and ten by the second author. Each visit was generally about two hours in length.

The majority of data for this article come from the interviews we completed with the preservice and in-service teachers. However, in places, we do insert information from our observations to provide more context for the comments the preservice and in-service teachers made about their perceptions of why racial diversity is important.

This study used qualitative methods, informed by case study (Stake, 2000) and grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) traditions. Initial stages of analysis used a recursive process whereby we extensively memoed about each interview transcript and set of observation notes and used these preliminary themes and interpretations to frame future interview questions in order to determine their validity, a process that served both as theoretical sampling and as a form of member checking (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Ultimately, to analyze the data we used the constant comparative method of comparing incident to incident and then, based on that comparison, organized the data into meaningful concepts (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) via open coding and axial coding to develop themes and conclusions.

Using the above method, we began with ten codes for which we created three themes. We collapsed codes like, "I'm not racist," "I don't see race," and "I teach everyone the same" into the *Color-blind* theme. We put codes like, "Black families are violent," "Black communities are violent," "Black parents don't care about education," and "Black parents are negligent" into the *Black Families as Deviant* theme. Finally, codes about "White teachers help Black children," "White children are good role models for Black children," and "Black children help White children develop appreciation" we developed into the *Diversity as a Necessary Evil* theme.

Findings

Through our interviews, we found that the preservice and in-service teachers agreed with the common wisdom that racial diversity is valuable in the school setting. However, preservice and in-service teachers in the study had distinct logics for why racial diversity was valuable, with the logic depending on the race/ethnicity of the student. They believed that diversity in the schools was good for Black students because it exposed them to nurturing and positive role modeling, which they did not receive in their families. On the other hand, they also believed that diversity was valuable for White students in the class because it provided them a chance to develop two important life skills: empathy for people who have less and appreciation for what they do have. We call the teachers' perceived benefits of diversity outlined above a "necessary evil" (though teachers never used such an expression) because preservice and in-service teachers implied the following beliefs: While Black children and their families might cause problems in the classroom, their presence is necessary to help both Black and White children develop important skills that will help them succeed in life.

Teachers as Color-Blind

As previous studies have shown (Heinze, 2008; Hill-Jackson, 2007), we also found that the participants we interviewed did not perceive themselves as racist. We observed that one aspect of the seamless ideological web (Weiner, 2000) that supported the denial of racism rested on the teachers' ethic of individualism. For them, racism was an individual level characteristic—something that only bad people did.

From the participants' perspectives, good people are not only free from racism, they also do not notice race. We asked the preservice and in-service teachers whether they practiced a "color-blind" philosophy or whether they felt that race affected us all in ways that we do not realize, thus we should think about race in the way we teach. All but one participant, Mrs. Boxer, embraced the color-blind philosophy, arguing that, for the most part, it is better just to ignore race/ethnicity than to notice it. Here are three examples:

Mrs. Manning: Well, because if I notice someone's skin color then I'm singling them out and letting everyone know they're different.

Autumn: It's better to ignore race and act as if it's no big deal.

Mrs. Reagan: I try to stay away from the race factor.

The reason most of our interviewees embraced the color-blind philosophy was because they assumed that people who *did* notice differences were bad. The following quote by Mrs. Manning, the kindergarten teacher, showed how uncomfortable participants felt about the concept *difference*. She said:

The reason most of our interviewees embraced the color-blind philosophy was because they assumed that people who *did* notice differences were bad.

Like with MLK day . . . I have to talk about these things that don't exist anymore and the kids don't understand and you try to explain. This year it's easier because nobody with a different skin color was here in this class. But last year I had one African American person. I was worried about hurting her because I didn't want her to feel different.

Mrs. Manning eloquently stated what many of the participants felt: discussing issues related to race is unnecessary and problematic. Such discussions, participants believed, point out that people are different, and differences are bad.

In sum, when the participants aspired to color-blindness, most of them felt that being different was somehow an insult, something for which students should hide. A good color-blind person should treat everyone the same, ignore differences, and consequently, deny White privilege (Bonilla-Silva, 2009; Weiner, 2000).

Black Families as Deviant

It may seem contradictory that preservice and in-service teachers who purport to be color-blind might in the same breath imply that Black families are deviant. Yet underlying their responses to interview questions that pertained to race were beliefs that fit inside another aspect of the seamless ideological web, blaming culture for social inequality (Weiner, 2000). These views hold that African American families are more violent; African American parents and schools care little about education and their children; and African American parents and children are difficult to manage.

Many of the preservice and in-service teachers associated African American families with violence. For example, when we asked Chloe how it was going in Mrs.

Wheeler's classroom, a racially diverse classroom, she said:

First walking in, it was very different, not shocking or anything, but I was out of my comfort zone and from what I knew in elementary school. My teacher told me all the trouble she's had. She said that one of the dads said something about physically harming a student over something he had said. Instead of saying, let's talk it out or tell a teacher or tell somebody, it was just right away to physical violence.

It was telling that when we asked Chloe about racial/ethnic diversity generally she immediately discussed an example of an African American dad expressing violence, a stereotype often associated with Black men.

Although research shows that African American and White families value education similarly, many teachers, when asked, say White families are much more likely to see education as a necessary road to success (Bonilla-Silva, 2009). The participants whom we interviewed shared the same belief, claiming that Black parents valued education less. Mrs. Boxer stated, "But then the value of education is different in a Black family than in a White family."

The participants felt both that Black parents value education less and that Black parents make their jobs harder. This was because they believed that Black parents cared less about their children than do White parents. Mrs. Wheeler said, "You can only reach those kids for so long, and you can only keep them after school for so long, until you have to send them home."

Our participants stated that receiving training about racially diverse classrooms would be helpful, but only because such training would teach them how to manage the problematic behaviors of African American parents and children better. They did not mention that such information might enable them to question the racialized structure of their schools. Indeed, they lacked any critical understanding of how their schools might be racialized. Our findings confirm Bonilla-Silva's (2009) research in that teachers felt that poor parenting was the only way they could make sense of two contradictory ideas they hold: Racism does not exist, yet African American parents are more likely to be poor and live in poor communities.

Diversity as a Necessary Evil

Because "diversity as a necessary evil" is a central theme to our findings, we describe two sub-themes and provide evidence for each.

White Teachers and Children Save Black Children

The idea that Black families are challenging led to the “necessary evil” belief that White teachers who teach in racially diverse settings are valuable and necessary as they can “save” children from their difficult family situations. Thus, we saw another aspect of the seamless ideological web (Weiner, 2000): the belief among Whites that Whites need to save people of color. For example, a couple of participants mentioned that teaching in a community of color is a heroic act on the part of White teachers as children in such communities need them more. Mrs. Manning, who had no students of color in her class, said this about a neighboring community with a majority of children of color:

They’re just really poor and the kids look forward to coming to school because they don’t get a lot of attention at home. And the teachers, the kids look for teachers for loving because they don’t get that. But they get that here. There’s not a lot of parental involvement there. Not like here. Sometimes I wish I could teach there because then I could make a difference in a kid’s life.

The two White teachers who taught in schools where they have larger amounts of racial/ethnic diversity mentioned that their students need them while the two teachers who had little diversity in their schools regretted not being needed more by their students.

Most participants did not feel their White students needed the same nurturing and positive role modeling that their Black students needed. As Mrs. Wheeler said, referring to the all-White school where she had done her student teaching, the students were “just little country kids, you know pigtails and overalls and really cute” where “everybody’s perfect, and all the kids are so good.” She went on to say that such communities were not at all like the racially/ethnically diverse communities where she has since worked. She told us that when she went to a predominantly Black school after her brief stint in the White community, she said to herself, “I’m like oh yeah, here’s real life” where children misbehave and do not listen.

Because participants felt that White children were generally better behaved, they also believed that White students had a role in saving Black children as well. Mrs. Wheeler said:

So here’s this 8 year old at home by himself at night, with his sister. She had, that morning, thrown up on him and gone to the bathroom on him, and he didn’t have time to change because he had to get the bus. Mom was in and out, which is how a lot of these parents are. They kind of come and go as they please. He moved to Chaplin

[predominantly Black school], and I thought, “Oh, that’s not a good thing for you.” Not that they don’t have good teachers there, because I know some good teachers in Chaplin and I know that they’re wonderful too, but I knew that being in our atmosphere with our kids—you know, he was still with enough kids who were like him but enough kids that were different that maybe he could see and kind of move towards them.

Mrs. Wheeler here echoed the belief, mentioned many times in her interview, that families who live in the predominantly Black city of Chaplin are dysfunctional. By stating, “Oh, that’s not a good thing for you,” she let us know that she felt part of her role was to nurture her students. Further, she saw White children as valuable mentors, too; she believed that by following the model of the White children with the valuable skills of good behavior the Black child could have a chance for success in the world. She also believed that sadly, at the predominantly Black school, the child’s chance of success would be seriously hampered.

Black Children Teach White Children Empathy and Gratitude

The participants believed Black students are saved through racial diversity in the classroom, but what did they think the White students receive from the “necessary evil” of racial diversity? The message underlying these participants’ responses was that White children get the dual lessons of empathy and gratitude. Again, here was a story from Mrs. Wheeler:

Some of my other kids who are from well-off families, they wouldn’t see what other kids have to go through, so they wouldn’t build that character that comes with it. They wouldn’t have that empathy for them, or that want of helping other kids. So just to see the other kids, it does, I think it builds character.

Though we had asked Mrs. Wheeler to tell us how White students benefitted from diversity, she did not use the same language back to us. Specifically, she did not use the terms White and Black, but distinguished race/ethnicity by using social class terms. The other participants also used this common code (Bonilla-Silva, 2009; Picower, 2009), as well as the urban/rural dichotomy to avoid having to use terms pertaining directly to race/ethnicity. Their message was clear though, whether they used *poor/urban* or *rich/rural*, they believed that when White kids are around Black children, White children build character.

A final story adeptly illustrates that participants also perceived that White students could learn gratitude from

Black children. Mrs. Reagan, the teacher who had a small number of students of color in her class, told a story one day to her class while one of the researchers was observing. The teacher knew that we were observing her class to more fully understand the preservice teacher's experience with diversity. Thus, it was possible that the teacher conveyed this story to her class purposefully to show us that she thinks about diversity. The following quote was from our field notes:

Mrs. Reagan tells them that last night she went with some friends to South Hampton [predominantly Black community] to a "very, very rough neighborhood called The Projects." Kids as young as three or four were there and the oldest was about 14. They came out to the bus by themselves, with no parents. It was their only meal. She stressed how these little kids were all by themselves:

We gave them food because they don't get food. We had chili and hot dogs and buns that we gave them. They don't have a family like yours that are fortunate enough to have food. And every one of the kids said thank you and please. Often when I give you guys stuff you don't do that because you always get food. But they don't get that, they don't get a meal like you guys do. So I want you guys to think about that.

With this story, Mrs. Reagan conveyed several important perceptions about racial diversity: (a) Black communities are dangerous; (b) black parents are bad as they send their children to a bus alone and fail to provide food for their children; (c) the teacher and her friends are good as they are willing to go to this dangerous place to help children; and, most importantly, (d) children like them are lucky because they have safe neighborhoods with good parents. The teacher emphasized that the children in her class often do not say please and thank you because they lack gratitude. The children to whom she served dinner, she believed, understood how to be deserving.

Conclusion

Given current ideologies about new racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2009), it is not surprising to find that none of the preservice and in-service teachers in our study believed they were racist when they labeled Black culture as problematic because, for them, culture was about individuals choosing how to act and believe rather than about differential power arrangements within a society. Further, our participants reasoned that if culture was about individuals within a group making similarly poor choices, then racial diversity would be important for shifting the bad choices individuals make. Indeed, all

of our participants felt that racial diversity could help both White and Black students by teaching them which cultural values to emulate.

The problem, of course, with relying on culture as an explanation for inequality is that culture is *not* a power neutral term. Cultures exist inside power relationships. For example, job discrimination, unequal school funding, and environmental degradation affect communities dominated by African Americans more than communities dominated by Whites. This means that not everyone who values "merit, hard work, and adherence to the rules" reaps similar rewards (Chubbuck, 2004, p. 306). Yet because Whites use a seamless ideological web of justifications for racism (Weiner, 2000), they generally believe that White *culture* is neutral and groups that do not succeed inside the spheres of school, work, or politics are blamed for their lack of success.

The problem, of course, with relying on culture as an explanation for inequality is that culture is *not* a power neutral term. Cultures exist inside power relationships.

Though our study found that all participants applied the new racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2009), the sample size was small. We feel that future research would benefit from not only increasing the number of interviews, but also uncovering whether White teachers in different racial populations and in different geographic settings also perceive racial diversity as a necessary evil. Are White teachers, for example, likely to use the same ideological tool kit when teaching Latino or Native American children? Further, in the relatively rare case of White teachers who do acknowledge structural racism, what factors led them to a structural understanding and what sets of ideological rationales do they use to make sense of racial diversity in the schools?

Though many schools of education within universities provide a multicultural curriculum, the reality is that the new racism and the seamless ideological web that justifies the new racism exist beyond the university (Duesterberg, 1999; Horton & Scott, 1998; Vaught & Castagno, 2008): in our families, in the economy, inside political systems, and in our religious institutions. Thus, continued research needs to uncover how to dismantle the structures and ideologies behind racism so that teachers may confront White privilege and understand how cultures are embedded within very real power dynamics.

Only when we do so can racial diversity move from a necessary evil to a necessary good.

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