

Perpetuating Racial Inequities in Education: An Examination of Pre-Service Teachers' Interpretations of Racial Experiences

L. Octavia Tripp
Auburn University
& **Kimberly L. King-Jupiter**
Lewis University

Introduction

The challenges that African Americans experience in U.S. schools can be attributed to the dynamics of race. Winant (1994) contends that race remains “deeply fused with the power, order, and indeed the meaning systems of every society in which it operates” (p. 2). As such, people have come to believe that visible differences, or race, are linked to differences in “mental capacities, and that these innate hierarchical differences are measurable by the cultural achievements of such populations” (Montagu, 1997, p. 44). Wynne (2005) wrote “the political tenor of this country has turned towards a Nazi-like paranoia of all groups of children and adults who are comprised of anything that is not mainstream White Euro-centric” (p. 59). Such a climate is upheld by the nature and structure of the country’s educational system. This “Nazi-like paranoia” identified by Wynne (2005) is simply a more recent characterization of the white supremacist ideology prevalent in American society. The prevalence of such an ideology adversely influences a country’s efforts to achieve educational equity because the climate impacts teacher perceptions. The goal of this article is to examine the ways in which White supremacist ideology influences the education that African Americans receive. We do so by examining some of the scholarship on disparities in American education.

Review of Relevant Literature

The existence of a White supremacist ideology shapes the trajectory

of scholarship designed to examine and uncover strategies to improve the academic performance of students of African ancestry in the United States. As such, instead of an examination of the ways in which school practices, policies, and personnel create and perpetuate the underachievement of these students, we find that a significant amount of scholarship tends to focus on how to fix the student or chronicles the efforts of schools who believe fixing the student is the primary path to academic success. In *The Closing of the American Mind*, Allan Bloom (1988) charged that attempts to transform school curricula to incorporate non-Western thought and traditions under-minded the fabric of American society. Non-Western students should simply assimilate culturally in order to succeed. Hernstein & Murray (1994) argued that the academic disparities between African and European American students was due to black intellectual inferiority. Similarly, Sewell (1997) found that British teachers “pointed to African-Caribbean sub-culture as the main reason why the schooling process was not working” (p. 68).

John Ogbu (2003) asserted that African American students held high academic expectations but did not necessarily work to meet those expectations. He surmised that this, in part, perpetuated the existence of a Black-White achievement gap. While he acknowledged that students felt teachers did not demonstrate “caring,” he never examined how school or teacher practices shaped students’ to work hard. Furthermore, the dynamics of teacher-student relationships that enable students to adopt a particular work ethic was overworked. Thus, Ogbu’s (2003) work suggests that if African American parents supervised their child’s homework and if students worked harder, the achievement gap could be bridged. Assumptions such as these, that are not interrogated, inform the way that the school curricula, school and teacher practices produce African American children who are academically disengaged.

A line of inquiry has emerged which examines the ways in which school practices and teacher perceptions create inequities within the classroom. After all, teachers’ perceptions about race are a reflection of the broader society and inevitably how teaching practices are influenced. Pinar (1993) notes that school curricula marginalize the contributions of people of color while highlighting the accomplishments of those of European descent, thereby creating distorted national identities. Consequently, those with the power to claim themselves as part of the national identity are those who can chart their racial group’s contribution to the birth and development of the country. These distorted national histories are then used to justify the hierarchical placement of racial groups; the placement of Whiteness rests at the top of the racial hierarchy and is thereby juxtaposed to Blackness. The racial groups associated with

these designations find that schools are organized in ways to perpetuate the privilege of those who are located at the top of the hierarchy and the disadvantage of those at the bottom, which is why recognizing the prevalence of a White supremacist ideology is relevant to education. More specifically, schools are organized in ways that inherently promote the superiority of those of European descent, thereby promulgating the inferiority of African Americans and other racially subordinate groups.

Tony Sewell (1997), Asa Hilliard (1994), and later Jacqueline Jordan Irvine (2002) examined the impact that school and teacher characteristics played on student academic aspirations and performance. These authors cite a disconnection between students' culture and the culture of students as pivotal to the racial achievement gap. Joan T. Wynne (2005) wrote:

It is the silence of White women that particularly concerns and confounds me. . . . When 56 percent of the children expelled from Georgia schools are African American boys, yet they represent only 16 percent of the total school population, how can we remain silent about racism and pretend it isn't a factor? (p. 60)

Wynne's reflection simultaneously highlights the inequities experienced by African American students and the silence of a predominantly European American and female teaching force amidst these disparities. If the lack of cultural sync identified by Irvine (1990) contributes to the racial achievement gap, then silence on the part of European Americans perpetuates White privilege.

This article seeks to connect the discussion about the academic performance of African American students to the discussion and understanding of "White supremacist ideology," as defined by the authors. Research suggests that unless teacher preparation programs specifically address the formation of racist perceptions, teachers will remain a factor in the underachievement of African American students in United States. We utilize our teaching experiences at "Southern University" as a vehicle to discuss how White supremacist ideology is nurtured in the walls of the academy.

Racial Perceptions and What We Know About Teachers

Collectively we have taught more than 15 years at "Southern University." The students enrolled in our courses are overwhelmingly populated by European American women. In discussions about race, we have found that many students are more receptive to divergent perspectives if they can racially identify with the author. Consequently, we specifically highlight Sleeter's (1993) work because of her status as a European American woman. Furthermore, the students who populate

the class oftentimes adopt the same perspective which Sleeter (1993) encountered when working with European American teachers; the teachers embraced color-blindness. Color-blindness is problematic, according to Sleeter, because it allows them to use their experiences as European Americans to make decisions about the potential of students from racially diverse student populations. She characterizes this way of thinking as *ethnicity theory*. This theory is predicated on the belief that immigrants from Europe were able to come to the United States and succeed through hard work. It therefore follows that if African, Hispanic, and Native Americans continue to fail it is because they refuse to work hard. This way of thinking negates this country's history of racism and discrimination and the ways in which current policies, practices, and programs are designed to perpetuate the privilege of European Americans. In doing so, these teachers simultaneously deny and perpetuate racism and discrimination while protecting what Howard (1999) calls "White privilege." More recent scholarship adds to what we know about teachers' attitudes and its relationship to equity in education.

In *Because of the Kids*, Obidah and Teel (2001) examine the ways in which teacher success is tied to racial attitudes. In particular, although the author Karen Teel had a successful teaching career in a classroom populated by European American students, she encountered challenges when teaching a racially diverse student population. Teel's experiences in the classroom exemplify what Irvine (1990) refers to as "lack of cultural synchronization." Irvine (1990) wrote "this lack of cultural sync becomes evident in instructional situations in which teachers misinterpret, denigrate, and dismiss Black students' language, nonverbal cues, physical movements, learning styles, cognitive approaches, and world views" (*Introduction*). These challenges persisted because Teel had difficulty adapting her teaching to the cultural experiences of these students. While it was possible for her to overcome the challenges, doing so required establishing a mentoring relationship with an educator who shared the racial and cultural background of the students.

Sewell (1997) found that British teachers relied upon stereotypes of Blackness to inform teacher-student interactions. The result was an over-representation of African-Caribbean students among students expelled or failing in British schools. The racial characteristics of the teaching force and the student population, coupled with the challenges that European American teachers experience when teaching students so different from themselves, led Irvine (2002) to highlight the relevance of adopting a "culturally responsive pedagogy."

According to Irvine, there are five expectations for teachers who adopt such a pedagogy: (1) they should respect cultural differences; believe that

all students can learn, and have a sense of self efficacy; (2) they should be familiar with the culture that students bring to class and be aware of the classroom culture; (3) adopt an enriched curriculum accessible to all students; (4) build a bridge between “instructional content, materials and methods” (Irvine, 2002, p. 2) and students’ cultural background, and (5) when evaluating students, be aware of their cultural differences (Irvine, 2002). Hilliard (1994) contends that European American teachers can be effective teachers of African American students without being culturally sensitive if they have high expectations for these students’ academic performance.

The scholarship on the effectiveness of European American teachers working with racially diverse student populations leaves two options for teacher education programs: (1) promote the adoption of a *culturally responsive pedagogy* among pre-service teachers, or (2) promote the development of high expectations for all students regardless of race. Either option requires confronting the racial attitudes of pre-service teachers. This means that European Americans must develop an understanding of the constructs of race, racism, culture, lifestyles, learning styles, ethnicity, and diversity (Delpit, 1995; Sleeter, 1993). Without doing so, European Americans will find it difficult to adopt a ‘culturally responsive pedagogy’ or develop high expectations for students perceived to be inferior because of their race.

Are Pre-service Teachers Ready for Diversity in the Classroom?

In an assigned essay assignment for our students, we asked pre-service teachers to critique their potential to effectively teach a racially diverse student population given the messages that they received and the experiences they have had with the various racial groups. The course was designed to help pre-service teachers think about the nature of education in a democratic society. Six sections of the course are taught every fall and spring semester. The question was posed in four sections taught during fall 2001.

In the fall of 2001, ninety-eight students were enrolled across the four sections. Students were asked to voluntarily submit a self-assessment regarding their perceived ability to cope with diversity in their future classroom on a computer disk. Although 72 students submitted a computer disk, because of problems accessing computer files or omission of a background questionnaire, we were only able to access 58 responses. Fifty-seven respondents described themselves as European American and one respondent was African American. Forty-four of the respondents were female and fourteen were male. Exposure to nega-

tive messages about the racial “other” were prevalent; 57% of the male and 66% of the female respondents received negative messages or had negative experiences with African Americans.

While negative messages about African Americans were pervasive, pre-service teachers didn’t seem to feel that these messages would challenge their ability to teach equitably. In fact, 85.7% or 12/14 of the male and 72.7% or 32/44 of the female respondents felt prepared to teach a racially diverse student population. Consistent with Sleeter’s (1993) discussion regarding European American teachers’ beliefs about their effectiveness in the classroom, respondents wrote about the messages they received about African Americans yet disregarded the impact that these messages had on their ability to effectively teach a racially diverse student population. In our following discussion about our participants’ responses, the names of our students have been changed.

One pre-service teacher, Angel, reported never hearing anything good about African Americans yet believed that she could teach diverse populations with a “certain tact that doesn’t exclude the recognition of what race and class are, but how students can accept these diverse populations in their everyday lives.” Tyler admitted receiving negative messages from his mother, yet he wrote: “I know I will be able to effectively teach racially and economically diverse student populations because I am aware of my background and am also aware of the different perspectives involved with different races and classes.” Students maintained these naïve assumptions despite their participation in a course designed to have students reflect on the context of education and their ability to promote the tenets of democracy in the classroom.

Three students argued that while they received negative messages about African Americans, their capacity to effectively teach a diverse population was the result of more recent experiences. According to Daphne, “this paper has helped me to realize my personal beliefs and prejudices about others, and I sincerely hope that I will not hold any grudges against students for these reasons.” Of her ability to effectively teach a diverse student population, Diane wrote “[b]ecause of these experiences and this class, I will have the ability to effectively teach racially and economically diverse student populations.” While Sandy wrote:

Through this class, I have found that some things I feel should not come with me into the classroom. I think that because I am aware of these feelings, I can restrain myself from acting on them in my classroom. I know that my attitudes toward people follow me everywhere, and they will follow me into the classroom.... I admit that at times, I have had these thoughts, but through my experiences and people I have met, I know that they are not true.

Few respondents who acknowledged receiving negative messages about any racial group were capable of interrogating the degree to which these experiences would impact their effectiveness in the classroom. Furthermore, like Daphne, Diane, and Sandy, respondents often attributed their future effectiveness to the experience of writing the essay or their enrollment in the course, in which the data was collected. However, as researchers we were not convinced. Our skepticism, in large part, was due to their long-term exposure to the negative messages and our lack of confidence in the potential that a one-semester course could make such a significant impact.

Not Prepared for Diversity

Out of the seven respondents who felt unprepared to teach a diverse student population, two salient themes emerged. Respondents either believed they needed more exposure to a diverse population or that the negative experiences or messages they received were so significant that they needed to be re-educated. “[T]o effectively teach all my students, I think I need more exposure to all races, ethnicities, and social classes,” wrote Jonathan. This comment mirrored the comments of four of the seven respondents. The other recurring theme was the need to have exposure to different groups in order to expel negative stereotypes. Gail wrote the following:

I believe it would be difficult for me, as a middle class White teacher, to effectively teach racially and economically diverse students in the classroom. I have had both positive and negative influences, which have impacted my attitudes toward different races and social classes ... but I do know that the negative influences have had a lasting impact on my attitudes.

Another respondent—Elizabeth—questioned her capacity to overcome these messages. She wrote,

I also believe I have had enough negative influences regarding race and class to prohibit my ability to equally teach them in the classroom. [Sleeter’s] suggestion to have a more diverse group of teachers is very educated and should be considered.

Consequently, only seven of 58 respondents felt that the messages received about racial groups different from them had the potential to adversely influence their performance as teachers.

Uncertain about Preparation for Diversity in the Classroom

Of the 58 respondents, 7 or 12.07% either expressed uncertainty or

did not respond to the question regarding their capacity to effectively teach a diverse student population. Five of the seven respondents did not directly respond to the question. Instead, respondents discussed their potential with some distance. Tiffany described her childhood as racially segregated. Of her capacity to teach a diverse student population Tiffany wrote:

As teachers we have to learn how to teach the racially and economically diverse student population. We have to learn when teaching history as well as other subjects, to teach about different races' the things that have happened to them and about their cultures' verses teaching everything from a White perspective.

She managed to discuss what needs to be done to be an effective teacher of a diverse student population without assessing her capacity to adopt such strategies. Similarly Virginia wrote, "I know that I must understand and know what my personal stereotypes are in order to overcome them and to be an effective teacher within racial diversities."

The remaining two respondents expressed uncertainty regarding their ability to cope with diversity in the classroom. Sandra wrote, "I am still uncertain about how prepared I am to teach a racially diverse classroom." Kiya wrote, "After reflecting on these experiences, I can't say that I am completely confident with not showing any biases, but I will try my hardest."

Discussion

Hilliard and Hilliard (1994) and Irvine (2002) support the centrality of teachers' culture and race to their ability to effectively teach cross-culturally. Thus, both a 'culturally responsive pedagogy' and the ability to adopt high expectations for all students are predicated on the capacity of a teaching force that is largely European American to transcend messages about White supremacy and Black inferiority so that they can develop notions of student success that is equitable. The ability to do so is hampered by the inability of European American teachers to see the myriad of ways that messages about Black inferiority permeates our society and the messages conveyed by people or experiences they perceive to be important. This is clearly evidenced in the respondents' essays.

Although European Americans at "Southern University" tend to reside in racially isolated communities, these circumstances are not unlike suburban communities around the country. In efforts to avoid desegregation, European Americans fled inner city communities. Under the guise of "safety" or "better schooling," these environments provide would-be teachers with little contact with those hailing from a race dif-

ferent from their own. Their residential communities, the schools they attend and the churches in which they worship are racially homogenous. The lack of contact allows the messages of Black inferiority that permeates our society to abound unchecked. These messages are so subtle that respondents find it difficult to identify them. Consequently, several of the respondents identified experiences as late as middle school or high school as significant in forming their racial attitudes about African Americans. Few respondents recognized that racial isolation contributes to the formation of notions of White supremacy and Black inferiority.

What is most troubling about the respondents' essays is that their experiences would be conceivable in the early 1960s, but seem troubling given contemporary claims that we have overcome. Few in the 1960s would contend that racism didn't exist. The challenge was whether or not racism and discrimination was consistent with Americans' image of self. Conservative political thought contends that racism no longer exists and that racial groups who argue otherwise are whiners. More problematic are the ways in which liberal responses to charges of racism relegate the causes to the ignorance of some while failing to see the ways that racism and discrimination are institutionalized. No where is this more apparent than the fact that African, Hispanic, and Native Americans must rely on a teaching force that has difficulty discussing race and the ways that it influences those would-be victims.

Respondents able to identify receiving overtly racist messages from friends or family members oftentimes relegated the messages to "traditional Southern" or "redneck" attitudes that they reject. Yet they were unable to discuss the process or experiences that allowed them to transcend these messages. So, the authors were left unconvinced that these respondents could adopt an anti-racist posture. Howard (1999) argues that European Americans must undergo a period of immersion in order to understand the myriad of ways that they enjoy White privilege and the resulting disadvantages for other groups. If their home communities or families did not offer such an immersion and Southern University's campus offers few opportunities for such an experience, where would they have been encouraged to examine their own racial identities?

Some students contend that their experiences in our course provided the impetus for reflection. Yet, the courses rarely enroll students who are African, Hispanic, or Native American. Although both instructors are African American, could students really engage in the type of journey described by Howard (1999) in this one semester course? Furthermore, if the rest of the teacher preparation program fails to integrate opportunities for self-reflection, do we really generate a teaching force that doesn't contribute to the type of racial inequities plaguing American schools?

Sleeter (1993) contends that teachers were unable to see the ways in which their attitudes about students were shaped by the racist messages received long before they began teaching. We found that few respondents were able to conduct a self-critique of their racial attitudes while enrolled in a required course designed for them to do so. They could identify people and experiences that shaped the formation of their attitudes, but failed to connect these experiences to their capacity to teach effectively in a racially diverse classroom. This occurred despite exposure to course materials specifically designed to connect class discussions about American society to this country's legacy of racism and discrimination.

The majority of respondents were not critical of their ability to cope with a racially diverse population in the classroom. Respondents held overtly racist attitudes yet maintained at the end of the essay that these attitudes would not influence their teaching. They continued holding such beliefs despite the efforts of the instructors to get students to think critically about their experiences and the degree to which their attitudes would impact their effectiveness in the classroom. Respondents were more likely to believe that their racist attitudes would not impact their teaching. Similar to Sleeter's (1993) experiences with in-service teachers, respondents adopted a posture of color-blindness despite receiving overtly racist messages about African Americans. Given the overall responses by participants, we believe respondents were unable to be self-critical because it raises questions as to whether they can be a "good person" if they admit to racist beliefs. Such an admission also raises questions about their capacity to effectively teach a racially diverse student population.

Conclusion

A major challenge seen by educators today is preparing pre-service teachers of European descent to work with diverse student populations. Pre-service teacher programs bear a huge responsibility for helping pre-service teachers move beyond their known realities to embrace the diversity existing in schools (Hlebowitsh and Tellez, 1993). To respond to this challenge requires engagement in critical inquiry about issues of equity. It means that topics like tracking, ability grouping, learning styles, testing and family-school connections should be addressed in teacher education courses in order to sensitize future teachers to the challenges faced by racially diverse student populations.

The more opportunities pre-service teachers have to interact with different student populations, the more open they will be to accepting diverse student populations (Lowery, 2002). As a result of this interaction educators must ensure that pre-service teachers adopt teaching styles

and accommodate learning styles of students heralding from racial, class, and gender backgrounds different from their own; engage these future teachers in discussions about equity while also providing them with opportunities to work with students from diverse backgrounds; and, explore the contributions that racially diverse people have made to the development of civilization. These practices will help them interrogate their attitudes and beliefs about the racialized “other” while also facilitating the development of teaching philosophies that embrace equity for all students.

We believe that equity means making learning accessible to all students. This requires structuring lessons that engage, explore, elaborate, and evaluate the strengths and learning preferences of students from various backgrounds. However, when students enrolled in a science methods class were asked, “Do you need more support in teaching students from diverse backgrounds?” students expressed little confidence in the way ‘Southern University’ prepared them to cope with diversity in the classroom setting. Of twenty-four students, eighteen felt unprepared or under prepared. The following statements represent the range of their responses:

- “I could use more experiences and support; it will help me grow.”
- “I was raised in an upper class White neighborhood, so I want to learn as much as I can.”
- “I may not know certain things about their background, so I need to know more.”

Consequently, in spite of being advanced in their academic programs, the lack of exposure to diversity prior to enrollment at “Southern University” continued to challenge their ability to cope with diversity in the classroom.

Future teachers must leave education programs with an awareness ways in which students’ background influences their schooling outcomes. Preparing pre-service teachers to work in diverse classrooms rests on every educator. And given the racial and class homogeneity of the teaching force contrasted with the growing diversity of the student population, it is imperative that pre-service teachers successfully meet the challenge of teaching in a way that celebrates diversity. Otherwise, we are faced with a world wherein race continues to determine school outcomes.

Note

Individuals with questions regarding this article may contact L. Octavia Tripp at the following address: Department of Curriculum and Teaching, Auburn

University, Auburn, AL 36849-5638. Phone: (334) 844-5700; Fax: (334) 844-0515;
Email: tripplo@auburn.edu

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Table 1
Educational Background of Respondents' Parents

	Mother	Father
College of beyond	35	38
High school	22	17
Middle school	0	2
Other	1	0

*One respondent did not provide information on father's educational background.

Table 2
Coding Categories and Definitions

Code	Definition
Negative Experiences/ Perceptions about African Americans	Describes an experience with someone of African American descent that was characterized as negative.
Not Prepared for Diversity	Respondent hasn't had experiences with a racially diverse population and says they need more preparation for diversity in the classroom.
Positive Experiences/ Perceptions about African Americans	Describes an experience with someone of African American descent that was characterized as positive.
Prepared for Diversity in the Classroom	Respondent has had experiences with a racially diverse population and believes that he/she is prepared to teach a racially diverse student population.
Uncertain About Preparation for Diversity in the Classroom	Respondent isn't sure whether experiences have prepared them for diversity in the classroom.