



White Disadvantage: The Effects of Racial Isolation on

White Pre-Service Teachers

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Abstract

This paper examines the preconceived attitudes toward cultural and racial diversity that pre-service teacher education students at a primarily white southern research institution bring with them to class and how those preconceptions may impact their teaching and ability to integrate into a school environment that is culturally different from their own. Using qualitative research methods, the authors collected and analyzed written reflections from students throughout twelve sections of an educational foundation course. The authors found evidence that pre-service teachers had little understanding of the culture and behavior of African-American school children and were at a disadvantage when working with this group. We call this “white disadvantage.” On the basis of these findings, the authors make recommendations to increase the students’ exposure to diverse environments (in which they are not the majority), in their academic programs or through professional development in their teaching positions in order to meet the state standards on teaching quality.

Keywords: White Privilege; pre-service teachers; diversity education

Fifty years after school desegregation, white middle class students are still being raised in racially segregated schools (Orfield, & Lee 2007), attending

segregated social and religious institutions and having little or no experience with members of other racial groups. When they arrive at predominantly white higher education institutions such as the one in this study, they find even greater opportunities to share their preconceptions, reinforce their

stereotypes and continue avoiding other cultures rather than utilizing the opportunities to familiarize themselves with other perspectives. These pre-service teachers' (PST) attitudes about and comfort with diversity are influenced by the experiences they had growing up, yet not much research has focused on this aspect of their development according to Hollins & Guzman (2005).

What happens when these white students graduate as teachers and are placed in school environments in which they are the minority? Do these teachers thrive? Do the majority of the students in those environments succeed? How can a course be designed to prepare teachers to thrive with a diversity of learners and settings to help ensure that the answers to the previous two questions are 'yes'? This article attempts to look at how home environments, personal attitudes, individual biases, and myths limit the effectiveness of white pre-service teachers in such a way as it may resemble a disadvantage, a type of professional disadvantage we come to call *white disadvantage*.

Pre-service teachers most naturally bring their life experiences and prior classroom experiences as students into their initial teaching practice. It is at this point

where their life experience (how things are) and prior classroom experience (how they were taught) are dominant in governing their behavior. In this study, the service-learning environments were populated by African-American students, led by African-American educators and administrators, located in low income predominantly African-American communities, or met all three of the preceding conditions. These were

environments with which, very few of the white, middle class students had any experience.

Since their previous mostly segregated life experience guided their thinking and performance of their assigned pre-teaching task they find that they are not as successful as they expected or hoped. The school children seemed to behave, in what was for our pre-service teachers, unpredictable ways. Their supervisors in their assigned service locations did not seem as accepting of the pre-service teachers as they had come to expect. How they saw the world and ultimately how they will teach the children that they come into contact with, was challenged by the cultural and social reality of those students, that they are unprepared to comprehend.

Literature Review

There is existing literature on what is termed as white privilege or white advantage. Peggy McIntosh in her essay "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack" (1988) identified White Privilege as "an invisible package of unearned assets that I (as a member of the majority) can count on cashing in each day, but about which I was meant to remain oblivious. White privilege is like an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, maps, passports, codebooks, visas, clothes, tools, and blank checks" (McIntosh 1988 p.1).

Others agree with McIntosh's assertions about the benefits of whiteness (Fine & Weiss, 2003; Tatum, 1997). Liu, Pickett Jr. & Ivey (2007) further refined the idea as "white middle class privilege" to differentiate the members of this group from poor whites and extremely rich whites.

Given McIntosh's and Liu, Pickett Jr. and Ivey's definitions of privilege and considering the benefits and life chances afforded members of the majority group in American society when operating within their own group as a majority, it should follow that when whites leave their own group's environment and venture into non-white organizational environments where they must function as professionals, they may find it more difficult to communicate, achieve credibility and establish leadership. "Too often the culturally ignorant pre-service teacher becomes a culturally insensitive in-service teacher who equates diversity with deficiency" (Scott, 2003, p. 212).

Sirin, Brabeck, Satiani and Rogers-Serin (2003) also point out that negative perspectives of certain cultures can prevent teachers from respecting their students. Early national studies of Federal Programs observed cross-cultural classroom behavior and noted that white children were given more access by white teachers while children of color were kept away (Stallings, 1980), these findings were confirmed in a 2012 U.S Department of Education study that outlined harsher punishments for minority students (Niederberger, 2014) as well as less access to resources and advanced courses (Klugman, 2013).

Ladson-Billings (1992) encourages white pre-service teachers to develop self-concepts and understandings of their students that are based on historical facts and current events and avoid thinking of their students of color as victims of slavery and other forms of discrimination.

Mitchell's (2009) work points out that white teachers reflect their cultural perspectives and beliefs in their relationships with students and ignore their students' cultural differences. This phenomenon also can be seen in schools that serve low-income

populations that are also white and in African-American environments and increasingly in Latin, Asian and Middle Eastern populations. There's recurring evidence that teachers are entering classrooms cross-racially incompetent; meaning they have never had significant experiences with students from different racial backgrounds (Burke-Spero, 1999; Milner & Woolfolk Hoy, 2003).

In order to offset the negative impact of *white disadvantage*, Carter (2008) suggests that "... requiring [the same type of reflective exercise that exists in the course we studied] is a step in the right direction". Some research suggests that community-based cross-cultural immersion projects are potent experiences heightening students' cultural awareness and sensitivity. Milner (2003) highlights the importance of pre-service teacher reflection regarding race with the goal that pre-service teachers "move toward racial competence, an unobtainable goal, but a goal that all teachers of diverse students should strive toward" (p. 193). He does not suggest that there is a 'one size fits all' method for teachers, but a number of approaches to be considered. "Pre-service teachers may need to reflect on their racial identities to work towards liberating themselves from confines (biases, prejudices, shortcomings) that may prevent them from reflecting on these

issues"(p.194). Milner (2003) further states that "race reflection can be seen as a way to uncover inconspicuous phenomena; it can be a process to understand hidden values, biases, and beliefs about race that were not to the fore in a teacher's thinking prior to conscious attempts to think about race (p.196)."

Methodology

We examined 218 student reflection essays from all students enrolled in a Foundation of Education course during one Spring semester. The course is designed to provide an equivalent of two units of classroom discussion and a one-unit internship, to deal with the topic of “diversity in students and settings.” This is one of the first courses education majors are required to take at the University. The essays we studied were a requirement of the course and therefore needed to be completed in order for students to pass the course. The researchers looked for demographic information, evidence of attitudes towards diversity, the semantics of the language used, and common themes found throughout the essays. As part of the course, students were given the following guidance on writing a reflection. (See Appendix A)

The course described in this study was both classroom-based and field-based. Students were placed in schools and school-like environments where students performed a service learning activity. This was a required course for certification as a teacher in this state. More specifically, the Educational Foundations course focused on eight goals for pre-service teachers. Those goals included an historical overview and a review of contemporary issues of multiculturalism in educational practice and policy. (See Appendix A for the complete list of goals). Students were also required to submit essay reflections of their field-based experiences.

The student essay data from their field experiences were coded using ATLAS.ti, a computer program that helps researcher identify qualitative themes. The researchers chose a qualitative approach

because these kind of “studies have a quality of ‘undeniability’ ... [they] have a concrete, vivid meaningful flavor” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 1). Harper and Kuh (2003) posit that using qualitative methods for research are in fact valid methods for making meaning of data and experiences.

Many of the reflections referred to the personal life and upbringing of the pre-service teachers themselves. The reflections also discussed the communities that the writers were from, including their education, and social experiences prior to enrolling in the teacher education program.

The sample that was observed consisted of all students who identified as and presented themselves as White, consisting of 218 students. The Spring cohort also contained 17 non-white students who are not part of the sample. A great majority of the students (83 per cent) in the course were women. The diversity in the class consisted of some regional diversity, but most of the students were from the Southeast United States, specifically, Alabama and Georgia, coming from mostly homogeneous primarily white middle to upper class communities according to their essays.

Results

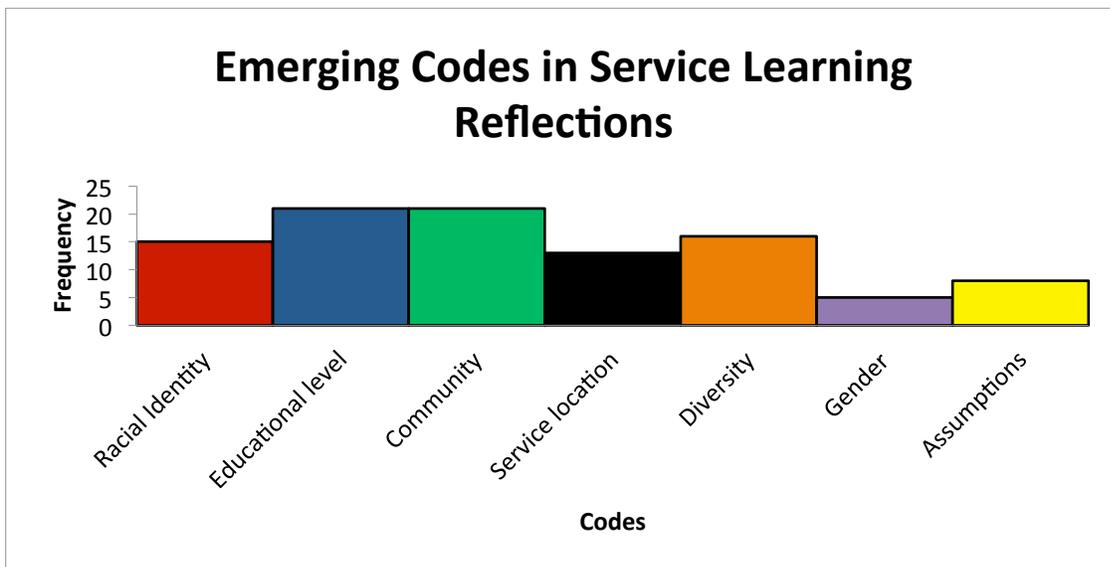
Graph 1 shows the frequency with which the most common themes appear in aggregate in the reflections that were reviewed for this project. These codes emerged from the reflections and help the researchers understand how students view themselves, others and the communities that they are from and have worked in. The perspectives and ideas that pre-service teachers share in these reflections give

insight into their knowledge and awareness of cultures that differ from their own.

The codes that emerged were based on how this group described their experiences. Racial identity, education level, community, service location, diversity, gender, and assumptions, were the most commonly identified themes. The common themes were then pared down further to examine how these themes might contribute to the emerging theory on *White Disadvantage*.

Pre-service teachers' service learning reflections give even greater insight to their attitudes about people who do not share their background and experiences. Students referred to some of the people that they worked with based on stereotypes that they

may have learned in their various communities. A majority of the students found it hard to empathize with the some of the people that they worked with and maintained a "them versus us" mentality, evidenced by some of their comparisons across racial lines and the use of words like "them", "those people", "American" when referring to themselves and related terms that create clear divisions between the pre-service teachers and the people they worked with on their service learning projects. Examples of the qualitative themes that emerged from the students' reflections are highlighted in Table 1.



Graph 1

The preceding themes can be whittled down even further to illustrate how *white disadvantage* emerges in pre-service teachers. All of the qualitative themes that emerged can fall into three categories: Perceptions of Community, Perceptions of

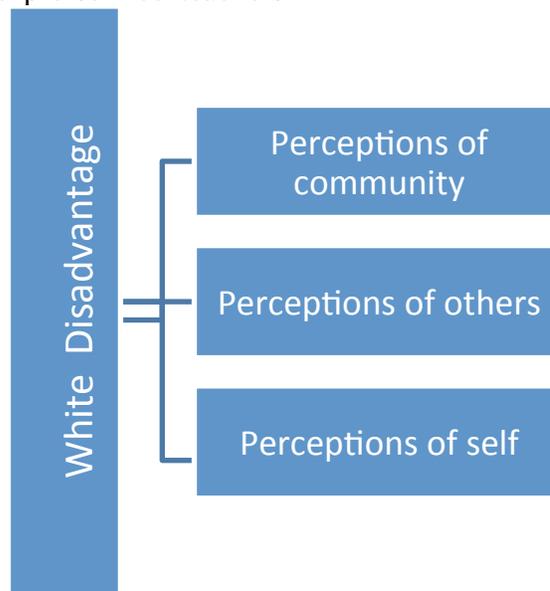
Others, and Perceptions of Self. These three themes have become clear through some of the quotes found in the reflections. The following conceptual model (Model 1) attempts to outline how *white disadvantage* manifests itself.

A typical example of lack of awareness of how the *invisible knapsack* is indeed unapparent to a large number of our sample can be found in the following quote in which a student describes their privileged middle class upbringing on one hand and takes for granted that they would not have been impacted by a less affluent lifestyle. The students said “but take it all away and I would be the same person I am today. Maybe I would not drive a nice car or attend an out of state university, but my morals and values would be the same.”

The preceding quote from a student provides some insight into how pre-service teachers experience white middle-class privilege. The writer assumes that she would still have

the same morals and values if her life experience were different. An assumption like this can hamper one’s ability to understand cultural and experiential differences that may exist among their future students. Among the perspectives heard in the classroom and at the heart of this study was the idea that the pre-service teachers’

material wealth came from their faith in God and a strong work ethic, thereby equating the service learning schools’ obviously poor community as lacking faith and lacking a culture of hard work. These perceptions may have limited the extent to which the pre-service teachers were able to understand the populations who they served. These perceptions also placed the university students at an educational disadvantage as they served in facilities that were run by people from a different race, income level and culture. The pre-service teachers’ misconceptions about the site workers appear to have prevented them from learning from these experienced teachers and para-professionals.



Model 1

While many students suffered from *white disadvantage*, not all have shared the same life experiences. The following quote (echoed in a small number of reflections) provides some evidence that supports the idea that varied life experiences contribute to greater appreciation of diversity. One student discussed how grateful they were for their upbringing because it seems to have helped them avoid the phenomenon of *white disadvantage*.

“From kindergarten through eighth grade I attended a Catholic school, where the majority of students were white. I am so grateful that my parents decided to send me to a public high school because it opened my eyes to so many different views and cultures.”

It is important to try to understand pre-service teachers through both their classroom experiences and through their own words in their reflections to get a comprehensive understanding of this population. The language that students used to describe service learning reflections reveal that some of these pre-service teachers are not comfortable with their ability to relate to and teach children from diverse backgrounds. One student said, “I would classify 8 out of the 9 students I worked with as “others” because they were not white like me. I am not a racist, nor have I ever considered myself to be one, but that does not mean I have not stereo-typed people of other races or backgrounds.” This and some of the other comments relate their experiences to those of the school children they supervised, as different from theirs in ways that characterize the school children as suspicious as a result of their diverse cultural background. These differences yield

to apprehensions about “the other” which limit the teachers’ ability to relate to them.

Recommendations

If pre-service teachers do in fact suffer from what we call *White Disadvantage*, then it could be argued that they are not able to meet the standards set forth in the state Quality Teaching Standards, and should technically not be licensed to teach in this particular state. Given this conundrum, Colleges and Schools of Education, like this one, may want to consider studying further how they can bring about change in the way that they educate pre-service teachers that have grown up inside the bubble of sameness that renders them less than competent to work as teachers in non-white environments.

The students providing reflection essays confirm demographic variables as well as some themes that are highlighted in the literature. These pre-service teachers tend to gravitate towards other white people in order to feel comfortable in their environment as evidenced by their choice of college and their self identified groups of friends. Ironically, this group is also aware that they will have some problems teaching diverse students according to their essay reflections. One student indicated that they would be able to teach black kids “even though these kids go through this and have no hope of getting out (of poverty) at anytime.” Another student said “some of the challenges I faced was I could not really communicate with some of the individuals there. I really tried very hard to help them in everyway possible”

Liu, Pickett Jr. and Ivey (2007) argue that the experiences of White middle-class should be taken into account when advising

these students and should be addressed because of their shared experiences and lack of exposure to diversity. Their education while already including a field-experience should also include simulations, games or self-learning experiences that would highlight their role in furthering the impact of negative stereotypes and low expectations on students. If at the end of a field experience like this one, we have evidence that the student has not succeeded in overcoming this disadvantage, they should be counseled into additional work in this area with programs that involve them with diverse communities throughout the balance of the last two years in school. All courses and in particular diversity courses should use multiple measures to determine the degree of success starting with a simple pretest-posttest assessment of every objective (Ladson-Billings, 1991).

Pre-service teachers should also be exposed to multiple diverse populations in their practice and service learning experiences. Educations programs should facilitate more developmentally appropriate service learning, and require professionally relevant service learning with observation components before students can earn their license. Baldwin, Buchanan, and Rudisill (2007) found that with more structured reflections and more instructors' presence at the service learning sites, these same students at this university can show some movement towards cultural competency in their teaching. White Disadvantage not only affects diverse student populations in a negative way but also keeps pre-service teachers who experience the phenomenon from becoming the best teachers that they can be.

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Table 1.

Emerging Qualitative Themes	
Qualitative themes	Example Response
White privilege- an invisible package of unearned assets that...(White) members of the majority can count on cashing in each day, but about which (Whites) were meant to remain oblivious (McIntosh 1998 p. 1).	“I can't remember anyone not having a birthday party. Most of us get a car when we turn sixteen, and everyone graduates from high school. It is rare for someone not to continue on into college. The youth of my community are often called spoiled, brat, and rich, and although it is certainly true for some people in the area, I don't consider it the case for most people. For example, I grew up with everything I ever needed. I took great vacations with my family, I had new clothes and supplies for school, and I had my own room filled with great toys. But take it all away and I would be the same person I am today. Maybe I would not drive a nice car or attend an out of state university, but my morals and values would be the same.”
Protestant work ethic-the notion that you must work humbly and hard in order to earn the rewards that you are owed, the idea that hard work is the only thing that moves one from their condition to a better station in life.	“I was not handed anything as a child. I had to earn everything and I learned quickly the value of a dollar and the work it takes to provide for a family the way my parents provide for me. Most kids in Alpharetta have chores and they usually all get a job at sixteen.”
Assigning responsibility for financial success to a “higher power” within a set religious structure.	(in class): “God helps those who help themselves. I feel pity for these children who do not know how God wants them to be.”
Pity- sadness or shame directed at someone deemed to be less fortunate than one's self	“The people I helped tutor were so far behind in school it made me sad.”
Perspective shift	(in class): “I never met anyone like you (referring to a professor from another ethnic group) and I suddenly realized that there maybe many more like you.”

Appendix A

Service Learning Reflection Exercise

This course incorporates a great deal of information and perspective on the components of a classroom and of a society. You will see these things in action throughout your Service Learning experience this semester. Please respond to three (3) of the following prompts or quotes as they relate to your personal experiences this semester. Each response will include at least one personal example of something or someone you *saw*, *did*, or *worked with*. **Do not** give a chronological description of your experiences or recount your duties. Instead, provide in-depth integrations of specific SL experiences and class content (e.g. inequalities in the availabilities of resources, importance of re-educating “white America,” at-risk students, gender roles, white privilege, etc.).

Prompts

Please answer these two questions:

1. Describe the culture of the place where you grew up—what was the dominant skin color/ethnicity? Religion? Food? Holiday traditions? Compare that to the culture of your service learning site.
2. “Diversity is not a choice, but our responses to it certainly are” (Howard, 1999, p. 2). What responses to diversity (yours or someone else’s) did you see at your site this semester that impressed you? What responses to diversity did you see that were unimpressive?

And choose ONE of the following:

3. James Kielsmeier (2000) points out that one goal of service learning is to “challenge the existing roles of teachers, parents, and other members of communities by demanding new levels of involvement and shared responsibility” (2000, p. 652-653). How was this goal met or not met through your SL placement? What challenges did you face? What challenges were you expecting to face? What surprised you?
4. In the book, *We Can’t Teach What We Don’t Know*, Gary Howard points out that “dominant groups tend to know very little about those whom they define as ‘the other’” (2006, p. 61). What “others” did you encounter this semester? How does society mark them as an “other”? What did you learn about the “others” that was surprising or new to you?
5. How does public policy (Individuals with Disabilities, Property Tax, any law/regulation, etc.) influence the people at your SL site? What effects did you see in action—positive or negative? Please cite or paraphrase the legislation as well as examples of what you saw in your response.
6. Find an idea or a quote from one book or article that you read this semester for FOUN 3000 that was meaningful and relevant to your SL site. Tell me what the quote is and explain its relevance to your experience. Be sure to include the reference information in APA or MLA format.

Appendix B

Educational Foundations 3000 Course Learning Goals

1. Ability to state and understand major historical forces shaping American education.
 2. Ability to state and understand major social and cultural forces that contributed to the movement for equality of educational opportunity in American education.
 3. Ability to state and understand the interrelationship of cultural, historical, and social forces that contributed to the desegregation of American education.
 4. Ability to state and understand the educational construction of exclusion, oppression, and subordination in educational settings.
 5. Ability to state and understand the educational construction of freedom, opportunity, and social hope in diverse communities.
 6. Ability to state and understand contemporary issues of racial discrimination in educational practice and policy.
 7. Ability to state and understand historical and contemporary issues of Native Americans in educational practice and policy.
 8. Ability to state and understand contemporary issues of multiculturalism in educational practice and policy.
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