



Equity by Design: On Educating Culturally Sustaining Teachers

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On Educating Culturally Sustaining Teachers

Rae Paris (who is an assistant professor of creative writing at Michigan State University) and I drove across the country last summer. On the way, and part of Rae's project of understanding "how we preserve the past and present, and how our fictions about the past inform and shape our disturbing and violent present," (personal communication) we stopped in Topeka, Kansas, and visited Monroe Elementary School, the Black school attended by children central to the Brown v. Board of Education Supreme Court Case.

KEY TERMS

Asset pedagogy (or asset-based pedagogy) - Refers to teaching and learning that centers and joins the strengths of students of color and other students whose languages, literacies, and lifeways are often systemically marginalized in schools. Deficit pedagogies or approaches are the opposite of asset pedagogies or approaches.

Curricularization of racism - Refers to the ways systemic racialized discrimination remains a central part of the explicit and implicit curriculum and teaching in the United States.

Cis-hetero (or cisgender and hetero-normative) - Cisgender (often abbreviated as "cis") refers to a person whose personal identity and gender corresponds with the sex they were assigned at birth (as compared with transgender or gender non-conforming). Hetero-normative refers to beliefs, practices, and policies that hold heterosexuality as the normative or preferred sexuality, leading to systemic discrimination. Cis-hetero, then, refers to the beliefs, practices, and policies that hold being cisgender and heterosexual as normative and preferred, leading to systemic discrimination against people and communities whose genders and sexualities do not conform to that narrow norm.

Ableism (or ableist) - Refers to practices, beliefs, and policies that systematically discriminate against people with dis/abilities.

As a Black, biracial person myself (my father is a Black Jamaican, my mother a White American), I thought a lot while at Monroe about the ways so-called "integration" has always been one-way, an assimilate into Whiteness (spaces and knowledges) or fail enterprise (they weren't busing White kids into Black schools and firing White teachers) (Walker, 2014). I was reminded while at Monroe of the great Gloria Ladson-Billings' comment a couple years back, "I'd rather have a real Plessey than a fake Brown." Such assimilate or fail models of education, theorized in Ladson-Billings' (1994) seminal work on successful teachers of African American students, persist for students of color in US schools. Indeed, a good deal of the past eighty years of educational justice research with students of color and their teachers could be characterized as looking to understand and disrupt such assimilate or fail models (as examples, Woodson, 1933; Du Bois & Aptheker, 1973; Smitherman 1977; Moll & Gonzales, 1994; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Lomawaima & McCarty, 2006; Gutiérrez, 2008; Lee, 2005).

Who is the Mainstream and Who are their Teachers?

During Spring 2016 when the Ford Foundation started the Twitter hashtag #InequalityIs, I tweeted: "#InequalityIs a schooling system serving a students of color majority remaining centered on White, middleclass, monolingual norms of success" (Paris, 2016). Unpacking that Tweet helps me situate where teaching and teacher education is and where I believe it needs to go.

Fall 2014 marked the first time students of color were the majority in U.S. public schools. ⁱ

In 1970, eighty percent of public school students were White; today just over fifty percent are students of color (Strauss, 2014). Within twenty years public schools are projected to be upwards of sixty-five percent students of color. These are massive national shifts toward an overall majority of color that reach far beyond schools (Taylor, 2014), and yet U.S. educational policy and practice continues to be centered largely on White, middle-class, monocultural, and monolingual (and cis-hetero-patriarchal-ableist) norms of educational achievement.ⁱⁱ How can we prepare teachers to enact pedagogies that meet the needs of the new mainstream; students of color characterized by multilingualism, multiculturalism, and the desire to strive toward equality in an unequal and shifting racially and ethnically diverse society? Who are the teachers already meeting those needs, how are they doing so and, crucially for the field of teacher education, how are they learning to do so?

It is important to mention that during this time of extraordinary racial, ethnic, and linguistic shift in schools and the broader population, the teaching force has not shifted significantly, but rather remains upwards of eighty percent White women, many who were raised middleclass, with only seven percent of teachers being Black, six percent Latina/o, and extremely small numbers of Asian American and Native American teachers (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2016). While it should be obvious that many White teachers can be and are extraordinary, sustaining teachers of students of color, and also that people of color, too, can internalize beliefs in the superiority of White, middleclass normed practices (Fanon, 1952; Smitherman, 1977; Paris & Alim, 2014), it should be equally obvious that we have an increasingly serious crisis of representation in the teaching force and, as well, in the faculty of teacher education programs.

Simply put, one major need for teacher education, and something that should be a

coherent mission across the field, is to develop programs, resources, and the will to foster a teaching force and a teacher education force that is representative of the racial, ethnic, and linguistic diversity of our schools. Among our colleagues in teacher education that are contributing to understandings of why this continued crisis and how to recruit and sustain more teachers of color into the profession are Irizarry (2011), Bristol (2015, 2016), Koli (2016), and Koli and Pizzaro (2016).



Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy and Teacher Learning

In thinking about these related issues of who learners are and will be and who teachers are and need to be, in my own work, I have been engaged with a collective of scholars in the conceptual and empirical project of culturally sustaining pedagogy (CSP) (Paris, 2012; Paris & Alim 2014, 2015; Ladson-Billings, 2014; McCarty & Lee, 2014; San Pedro, 2015). CSP describes teaching and learning that seeks to perpetuate and foster linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of the democratic project of schooling and as a needed response to demographic and social change. CSP takes dynamic cultural and linguistic dexterity as a necessary good, and sees the outcome of

learning as additive, rather than subtractive, as remaining whole rather than framed as broken, as critically enriching strengths rather than replacing deficits. Beyond the many teacher educators taking up CSP in their research and teaching, practicing teachers, too, are engaging the approach across the nation. In a recent two part series in Education Week Teacher (Ferlazzo, 2016), Travis Bristol and I joined educators in learning about the ways they enact CSP in their classrooms. As one teacher, Lorena German from Austin, Texas, put it, “CSP is not a teaching guide or a set of lesson plans. It’s an approach to the craft of teaching... CSP allows me to be the inclusive, socially just K-16 teacher I never had” (German, 2016).

CSP builds on decades of crucial asset-based pedagogical research that has countered pervasive deficit approaches, working against the backdrop of beliefs in White superiority and the systemic racism they engender, to prove that our practices and ways of being as students and communities of color are legitimate and should be included meaningfully in classroom learning. In the past twenty-five years, this asset-based pedagogical research has importantly included work on the funds of knowledge (Moll & Gonzales, 1992), the pedagogical third space (Gutiérrez, 2008) and, notably, Gloria Ladson-Billings’ (1995) seminal conception of culturally relevant pedagogy. Indeed, Ladson-Billings (2014) recently wrote, “culturally sustaining pedagogy uses culturally relevant pedagogy as the place where the beat drops,” it does “not imply that the original was deficient” but rather speaks “to the changing and evolving needs of dynamic systems” (p. 76). It is these changing and evolving demographic, cultural, and social needs coupled with the persistence and increase of deficit-framed policies and practices (e.g., K-12 ethnic studies bans, English-only laws, state and national standards based on monocultural and monolingual outcomes, wildly disproportional school discipline and push-out

statistics) that make a more explicit commitment to sustaining the valued practices and ways of being of students and communities of color so necessary in the current moment.

The Curricularization of Racism

One crucial starting place for moving toward culturally sustaining teaching and learning is to think deeply about how we are situated in systems and spaces that perpetuate the curricularization of racism.ⁱⁱⁱ The curricularization of racism names the ways systemic racialized discrimination remains a central part of the explicit and implicit curriculum and teaching of pre-K through University education in the United States.



It is easy to see the curricularization of racism in differences in school push-out and graduation rates between, for example, White, Black and Latina/o students in K-12 schools, massively disproportional discipline statistics and the school-to prison pipeline of which they are a part. As the 2012 U.S. Department of Education’s Civil Rights Data tells us, nationally Black students are three and half times as likely to be suspended as White students and seventy percent of students referred to law enforcement are Black or Hispanic. This is clear evidence of systemic privilege based on race as it plays out in educational settings, (and obviously, there are intersections always with class, language, gender identity, sexuality, disability).

Let me also mention the inadequate recruitment, graduation and retention rates for students of color on university campuses (Harper, 2015), particularly within teacher education, as reflected in the alarmingly low number of teachers of color I shared earlier. But beyond these sorts of raw and stark statistics, I am also interested in other ways, forms and spaces that curricularized racism remains a bedrock of pre-K through University learning.

For instance, the ways the racialized language practices of students of color are suppressed through policy, practice and ideology in Pre-K through University classrooms (think about the suppression of Spanish in the era of English-Only, of African American language, and of the languages of Indigenous peoples), or the ways canons of knowledge from literature to social science to science remain largely centered in White, middleclass, monolingual (and male, cishetero, ableist) norms of who, what, and how things can be known and done. These are often more implicit forms and spaces that racism is curricularized in educational institutions, how ways of using language, of thinking and believing, of acting, are actively silenced through what is studied and how; and the ways if you don't acquiesce to these racialized, classed, gendered (and so on) norms you are deemed deficient and unworthy of places in classrooms—be they elementary ones or university ones.


Preparing Teachers to Curricularize Equity

How are we, through our preparation of teachers, researchers, and teacher educators, disrupting this foundational racism, and instead fostering the curricularization of racial equity, where asset and strength-based approaches to teaching and learning become pervasive, an expected norm for teachers entering and across the profession?

We have a large body of research that illuminates the practices and commitments of teachers engaged in asset pedagogies that seek to disrupt the curricularization of racism. Much of this research builds on the aforementioned frameworks of funds of knowledge, the pedagogical third space, and culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy (Paris, 2012; Aronson & Laughter, 2015). As Alim and I (2014) recently argued in our loving critique, though, the ways asset-based frameworks have been taken up in practice have suffered from three pervasive shortcomings, including assimilative goals, a lack of understanding about the dynamic nature of culture, and uncritical approaches to meaningfully including the practices and beliefs of communities of color in classrooms. Worth focusing on for this paper is our first critique.

Asset pedagogies are often enacted in assimilative rather than sustaining ways, positioning the inclusion of cultural ways of students of color—be that through history, literature, literacy, language, science, math—as a bridge toward better dominant practices and knowledges, therefore not fundamentally shifting the curricularization of racism. This is not a failure of the frameworks themselves, but rather must be situated in the pervasiveness of beliefs in White, monolingual and monocultural superiority, which in too many ways go unchallenged in the field of teacher education. In essence, the social and political critique these frameworks were founded on have often been obscured in teacher education and practice in the name of less radical forms of “tolerance,” “diversity,” and “inclusion.”

One issue that has led to this lack of criticality and the continuation of assimilationist teaching is that we sometimes try to isolate teaching skills, strategies, and pedagogical moves from the political, ideological, and moral commitments on which such practices are grounded. Culturally



sustaining practices cannot happen if a teacher does not value young people of color, if they are working from deficit frames.^{iv} For me, then, a crucial element of educating culturally sustaining teachers, one that must be consistent across the field of teacher education, is how we support preparing teachers to value, to see as whole and human, the young people of color and communities of color they will work with. This must be done in concert with the learning how to teach generally forwarded in methods classes and student teaching.

When I survey the literature on what we know about contemporary educators engaged in what I would call CSP, from the former Mexican American Studies Program in Tucson, Arizona (Acosta, 2012; Cabrera et al, 2015) to required ethnic studies classes in San Francisco Unified (Dee & Penner, 2016) (both programs which, by the way, have proven in both quantitative and qualitative studies to increase student achievement even within dominant norms and measures), to McCarty and Lee's (2014) research on revitalizing and sustaining education with Navajo, Hopi, and New Mexico Pueblo students in the Southwest, to the teachers I learned with in the recent Education Week Teachers (Ferlazzo, 2016) series, I see five key and overlapping understandings possessed by sustaining educators of students of color.

- 1) An understanding of the systemic nature of racialized and intersectional inequalities and their own relative privileged or marginalized position within those systems.
- 2) An understanding that education participates in and often perpetuates such inequalities, though it can also disrupt them.
- 3) An understanding of the ways deficit approaches have historically and continue to perpetuate racialized inequalities, and an understanding of asset approaches and how to curricularize them.
- 4) An understanding that critical asset approaches do improve academic

achievement, but that current measures of achievement are narrow and assimilative and so not the sole goal.

As Ladson-Billings (1994) stated over twenty years ago in her seminal study of successful teachers of African American students, "Culturally relevant teaching is about questioning (and preparing students to question) the structural inequality, the racism, and the injustice that exists in society. The teachers I studied work in opposition to the system that employs them" (p. 140). Preparing teachers and teacher educators to work in productive opposition to a system that has failed and continues to fail vast numbers of youth of color, and so our society, remains a central challenge of teacher education.

Let me add a fifth element that holds across contemporary studies. Culturally sustaining educators possess:

- 5) An understanding that humanizing relationships of dignity and care are fundamental to student and teacher learning. That is, they engage teaching in ways that allow teachers and students to foster complex understandings about each other that disrupt damage-centered (Tuck, 2009) deficit views.

This fifth element builds off my work with Maisha Winn (2014) and our collaborators in Humanizing Research and harkens back (though in more explicitly critical, racial justice-oriented ways) to foundational understandings in our field about how teachers come to know the cultural communities of the students they serve, what Shirley Brice Heath (1982) called teachers as ethnographers and, related, what Cochran-Smith & Lytle (1999) understood as inquiry stance.

In my local work with teachers of color who are seeking to sustain the valued practices of youth

and communities of color in Michigan, these five elements have looked like veteran Anishinaabe school teacher Simon, who teaches his predominantly Anishinaabe 7th graders in the Upper Peninsula Anishinaabemowin language through conversation and a written curriculum he created, Anishinaabe history from Native perspectives, and Indigenous arts and drumming. Simon talks often about his modest goals for language and culture, where he traverses realities of only a handful of fluent speakers in the community, and of the continued silencing of Anishinaabe ways of being in the official state curriculum and policy.

And this has looked like early career English teacher Yvonne, herself of Black and Chinese heritage, working with her African American middle-school students in urban Michigan to restore the neighborhood park. Yvonne shared with me her goals for the park project.

Yvonne:

When you look at the neighborhood you wonder: “Do we have agency over our communities, over our houses?... The state is taking over the city. Do we have agency? And I guess if [students] are able to really understand it they would see that despite the takeover—the control over the Black community—we have to do what we have to do. And that’s creating our own gardens, having our own parks, fixing them, caring for it because if we don’t do it, no one else is going to do it (Interview, May, 2013).

For Simon and Yvonne, sustaining themselves and their communities has meant a productive opposition to the curricularization of racism, using the academic work of language, literacy, and performance in the service of individual and community renewal. And each came to these commitments along different paths. Simon himself had to invest in learning and

relearning the Anishinaabemowin language through a professional development program for Native teachers in northern Michigan as well as from elder speakers in the community. Yvonne pulled from her own socialization in Black activism, but needed to understand it in contemporary times, with contemporary youth, in a city she did not know (she herself is from California).



We must continue to think about the trajectories of teacher learning and enactment across these five commitments in a field where most teachers (and teacher educators) are White, most students aren’t, and all teachers and students are situated in a society characterized by pervasive practices and policies based in ideologies of White, middleclass, monolingual (and cis- hetero-patriarchal-able-bodied) norms of achievement. And yet in thinking about these commitments, we must not be focused solely on White middleclass teachers who are teaching in materially poor communities of color, as this would indeed be a privileging of Whiteness as the gaze through which learning to teach is filtered. We need as well to support teachers, like Simon and Yvonne, who are closer to that knowledge—often teachers of color—and make sure we have more such teachers. In this way, it is not always “relating to students across difference,” which is in many

ways a White centered framing, but is also teaching “within” cultural communities as well (Lomawaima & McCarty, 2006; Fisher, 2005; Hill, 2009; Irizarry, 2011; Kinloch; 2010; Bristol, 2015.)

Toward Spaces of Culturally Sustaining Teacher Education

To bring together the themes of the crisis of representation, the curricularization of racism, and the commitments needed to sustain the new mainstream, let me conclude with some promising facets of teacher education programs. I do not present these programs or initiatives as simply exemplary, but I do contend that they hold promise in at once working to increase representation of teachers of color, disrupting the curricularization of racism, and fostering critical commitments to racial equity among all teachers.

There are several teacher educators implementing innovative internships and student teaching placements with the goal of fostering growth for both teachers of color and White teachers in their learning to engage is asset-pedagogies. Michael Dominguez (2015) designed an immersive pre-service teacher placement within the Chicana/o studies and school of education programs, which brought Chicana/o youth and preparing teachers together to live and learn during the summer. For the White teachers in his study, it was the first time they had been within a majority of color environment (especially for twenty-four hours a day) where their norms of language and cultural practice were not centered. Dominguez traces how their social justice commitments were challenged and, ultimately, grew through the experience. For Chicana/o preparing teachers, the experience affirmed their choice to teach in their communities and equipped them with ever-more critical ways to do so.

Many other teacher educators are engaged in similar work of immersive placements in community organizations, arts programs, and schools that are home to majority Black, Latina/o, Indigenous, and Asian American and Pacific Islander communities. A few of note are Gloria Ladson-Billings (2014) at the University of Wisconsin, Madison and her work partnering pre-service teachers with the Hip Hop arts program, First Wave, Emery Petchauer at Oakland University bringing community Hip Hop artists together with mentor teachers within teacher placements, and the work Kris Gutierrez (2008) and her collaborators did for years in the summer Migrant Program at UCLA. In all cases the programs are designed to increase racial diversity among teachers, to prepare White teachers who have expressed a commitment to social justice work within communities of color, and to help all teachers disrupt racism as it continues to play out in schools.



At Michigan State University (where I teach), our Urban Educators Cohort Program, designed and run by Sonya Gunnings-Moton and Terry Flenbaugh, begins with students declaring very early that they intend to work with communities of color in urban contexts.

Students then take a sequence of courses and experiences across the first two years of undergraduate work, which focus on exploring issues of power and privilege in education and society paired with early placements in urban schools in Detroit, Chicago, Grand Rapids, and Lansing. Their yearlong immersive internship is also in one of these communities.


Also part of these urban initiatives at Michigan State University (MSU) are the summer scholars program for high school students of color from these same cities and, as well, the Urban Graduate Certificate program. Across the year, then, at MSU we have high school students of color, preparing teachers (still by far a majority White), graduate students working in the program as instructors and researchers (many of them students of color and also White students who are allies in the work) and many faculty of color and critical White faculty who teach and supervise various elements of the programs. I do not share these examples from MSU as simply exemplary, we have much work to do to deepen the initiatives—especially in terms of explicit work to disrupt the curricularization of racism— but they do offer some of the facets I think we need to prepare teachers with the commitments to do racial equity work in schools; specifically focused coursework about social and racial justice paired with sustained interactions with students communities of color. Furthermore, the initiatives can potentially recruit and sustain a more racially diverse and social justice minded student and faculty population into teacher education. We've seen this pay off most markedly in the graduate student and faculty ranks and are beginning a Future Teacher of Color program fall 2017 to work on recruiting and sustaining more teachers of color in the program. ^v

In these pre-service teacher initiatives across institutions, there are opportunities—really requirements—for building relationships of

dignity and care—for disrupting deficit frames— be those in traditional school classrooms, in arts programs, or summer immersion programs. In these programs preparing teachers are with students of color and in communities of color across their preparation—they are challenged to study the concepts of equity and learn to live them at once.



And because the examples I have provided are specialized parts of larger teacher education programs, there is still the question of different preparation for different teachers. Remembering that within twenty years approximately sixty-five to seventy percent of public school students will be students of color, there is certainly an argument to be made that all teachers need such preparation. And I do think a pervasive commitment to racial equity should permeate teacher education courses and fieldwork—this can no longer be relegated to the diversity course—it must be articulated across course work and field work. I also believe that it is important to take into account where people want to teach and why, in terms of programs focused on teaching with students of color. Indeed, if pre-service teachers express a desire not to work with students of color we might ask why they are going into teaching in the first place.



Taking this work up across programs would mean coming to terms with the ways we are all implicated in perpetuating the curricularization of racism. It would mean a real commitment to make the teacher training force and the teaching force more reflective of our society. I believe summits of teacher educators and teachers involved in such programs could be a starting place— we have far too few forums, like the TeachingWorks forum this paper emerged from, for synergy and field building.^{vi}

Joining the Movement for Racial and Educational Justice in Teacher Education

The vast demographic and cultural changes sweeping our nation and our schools present an opportunity and an imperative, but they are no guarantee of educational and social equity in the short-term. Indeed many indices of equality are going in the opposite direction as a backlash against the reality of our racially and culturally shifting future is in full effect.

I believe we are at a critical moment in racial justice work in education: Black Lives Matter (Garza, 2014) and other facets of the movement are once again cohering across popular culture (see the artistic and scholarly work being done around Beyoncé's *Lemonade*, for example) and educational institutions (in terms of institutions, I am thinking of the recent racial justice protests and ongoing changes across campuses from Missouri to Georgetown to MSU [Paris, 2014]). These facets of the movement, often youth generated and led in collaboration with adult allies, are unapologetically demanding racial justice across an increasingly racially and linguistically diverse society still marked by deep and pervasive systemic racism. As Jeff Chang (2014) recently argued in his treatise on the ways the arts have imagined and driven the political racial justice agenda over the past fifty

years, cultural change leads political change. A culturally sustaining teacher education can, joining with the work of young people, families, and those working in solidarity with them, be a small part of the ongoing movement for racial justice in education. It must be...

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Endnotes

I. In citing this demographic shift to a majority of students of color it is crucial of course to note that Indigenous communities have been living and learning, have been educating their children and young people for millennia on their lands, though U.S. public schooling for Native peoples has historically been one of the forced and violent loss of culture and land associated with the settler colonial nation-state (Lomawaima & McCarty, 2006, Tuck & Yang, 2014).

II. White middle-class norms of language and cultural ways of interacting demanded for access and achievement in school have been documented and contrasted with the norms of working-class communities of color across decades of scholarship. Regarding White, monolingual norms of “standard” or Dominant American English language use see as examples Smitherman (1977), Garcia (1993), and Lippi-Green (1997). Regarding White centered cultural norms of interacting (including language) see Valdés (1996), Romero (1994), Lee (2005), and Leonardo (2009).

III. am building off Guadalupe Valdes’ (2015) current work on the curricularization of Spanish in US schools.

IV. For a particularly salient critique of the ways U.S. teaching and learning are complicit with anti-Blackness and the suffering it promotes, see Dumas (2014).

V. For more on research for recruiting and sustaining teachers of color, see Irizarry, (2011), Bristol (2016), and Kohli (2016).

VI. There are already some such meetings for teachers and teacher educators of color, like U.C. Riverside professor, Rita Kohli, and her colleagues’ work with the annual Institute for Teachers of Color Committed to Racial Justice.



About the Midwest & Plains Equity Assistance Center

The mission of the Midwest & Plains Equity Assistance Center is to ensure equity in student access to and participation in high quality, research-based education by expanding states' and school systems' capacity to provide robust, effective opportunities to learn for all students, regardless of and responsive to race, sex, and national origin, and to reduce disparities in educational outcomes among and between groups. The Equity by Design briefs series is intended to provide vital background information and action steps to support educators and other equity advocates as they work to create positive educational environments for all children. For more information, visit <http://www.greatlakesequity.org>.

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