White Silence in Preservice Teachers

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Note: This is a work in progress, not yet completed. We welcome any and all feedback as we work this piece towards publication.
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Classrooms across the United States are continuing to grow in diversity while the teacher force continues to be predominantly white (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2021). With practices in antiracist and multicultural education growing, the lens through which students are encouraged to read the world is still mainly white, monolingual, and middle class, similar to that of how their teachers view the world (Sleeter, 2017; Thomas, 2015). These lenses can be influenced by what happens in the classroom. One way that antiracist and multicultural education can continue to grow is through race talk. Race talk is an opportunity for classroom teachers to normalize the importance of different backgrounds that make up the student population of a school’s community. However, the process of developing racial identity and facilitating race talk is not often prioritized in teacher education for preservice teachers (Berry et al., 2020).

In 2022, the state of Alabama has three proposed pieces of legislation within the House of Representatives that would prohibit public K-12 schools and public institutions of higher education from teaching concepts regarding race and sex. The bills suggest that no employee or course should examine differences in race, sex, ethnicity, color, or religion (HB 8; HB 9; HB 11). Each individual bill highlights its’ own stipulations. For example, if HB 11 is put into effect, it would be prohibited for PK-12 teachers to discuss student’s racial and ethnic differences. This would have lasting effects on teacher education programs in the context of higher education. Preservice teachers would be discouraged to think of themselves as racial beings. This could prevent teachers from examining their own racial identity which is essential for working in diverse classrooms. Teacher education employees, such as instructors and professors, could be terminated for discussing racial inequities of both the past and present in education.
In this time of pervasive “anti-Critical Race Theory” policies and law, in Alabama and across the country, it is imperative that we consider: 1. What kinds of conversations teachers – preservice and practicing – need to have about race and racism amongst themselves as well as with their students, and 2. How this climate has a chilling effect on these conversations across educational institutions.

Given this policy context and the robust research about the growing racial diversity of classrooms, the lack of racial diversity among teachers, and the needs for educators to engage in explicit, anti-racist practices, we set out to explore the imagined race talk of a sample of white preservice teachers. We wanted to know what they would imagine saying in a series of racially loaded personal and professional contexts. We wanted to know how engaging in said conversations would make them feel and how those feelings contribute to their white racial identity development.

**White Racial Identity Development**

Janet Helms (1990) developed a model of stages white people go through when examining their own racial identity. The first stage is contact where a white person does not discuss or acknowledge race as an issue. At this point a person may not have much contact with people who are a different race and do not understand their privileges as a white person. Once the person has a new experience interacting with People of Color, they must confront their prior conception of race with the new information they have gathered. This could lead to feelings of guilt and shame. Once these emotions are felt the person reaches a reintegration stage where the privileges they receive as a white person are deserved and that they are superior to minorities. At this stage if the person can confront and combat these feelings, they can move onto the pseudo-independence stage. The pseudo-independence stage is the first of positive racial identification.
During this time a white person turns to a Person of Color to help uncover and confront racism. Although it should not be the Person of Color’s job to work through racism with or for a white person, this is the first time a white person balances the identity of being white and an anti-racist. When a person attempts to work on their white identity with deep concern and connects with other white people who are dealing with issues of racism they are in the immersion/emersion stage. The last stage that may never be met is autonomy. The white individual understands the positive connection to their white identity while pursuing acts of social justice.

**Emotionality**

Being the dominant race, white people have a different process of coming to terms with the trauma and pain their race has caused People of Color. They feel their emotions are valid when discussing race and they should not be confronted about the privileges they have because they are white (Matias, 2016; Picower, 2009). Discussions of race where white individuals are brought to terms with racism can cause feelings of guilt, shame, anger, and denial (Bonilla-Silva, 2019; Matias, 2016). White people often repress their racial knowledge due to the fear they will lose the love they receive from their white community. It is imperative that white teacher candidates examine their own race before attempting to understand what People of Color are experiencing. Matias (2016) suggests white educators who claim to be about antiracism education must “do the emotional work” of deconstructing their discomfort in whiteness. In other words, they must confront their own individual whiteness and think about what it means to be white.

**Avoidance/ Evasiveness**

White teachers use different language to avoid race talk when discussing their students or school systems. White people justify color evasiveness to safeguard their interests without
sounding racist (Bonilla-Silva, 2013). By minimizing racism or claiming they don’t see race, white people suggest discrimination no longer affects minorities. Alternative language has been seen in education to avoid race talk. Watson (2012) studied the use of the term urban to describe schools that had mostly students of Color and the term suburban for prominently white schools. Teachers associated urban teaching with lower reading levels and more behavioral issues. These practices provide white teachers the false belief that their talk and behavior is not racist.

Research suggests that white teachers are often evasive in situations where race is discussed (Epstein, 2019; Jupp et al., 2016). This evasiveness caused teachers to hide behind their school’s curriculum and colleagues as an excuse for avoiding race talk. White teachers also minimized the importance of race fearing negative aspects of race talk with students of different cultural backgrounds (Bonilla-Silva, 2013; Epstein, 2019; Sue, 2013). While school staff members can avoid public decisions about race, they may continue to struggle in private with different race-based questions, tensions, and dilemmas (Buehler, 2013). These struggles may arise more frequently after experiencing racialized interactions with students and colleagues such as….

Similarly, preservice teacher’s biases and white privilege can bring up feelings of guilt, anger, and shame (Matias, 2016; Sue, 2013). These feelings can lead to white silence rather than engagement in race talk.

**White Silence**

White silence is when white individuals are silent in discussions of race, “keeping their racial perspectives hidden and thus protected from exploration or challenge” (DiAngelo, 2012, p. 5). There has been a plethora of research exploring the reasons for white silence and the overall effects of it. Some white individuals reinforced white silence in race discourse because they feared disapproval from others and wanted to avoid conflict (Case, 2012; Case & Hemmings,
2005; Mazzei, 2008). This fear came from the thought that whatever they said or contributed would not be the right thing to say or would be perceived as racist (Miller & Harris, 2005). In addition to this, a common response was that white people felt their comments or contribution would not be impactful or matter in any way (Case, 2012) or that they were not qualified to speak in these discussions about race and racism because they were white (Miller & Harris, 2005).

When considering white silence in an educational context, previous research on teacher education classrooms suggests that there was a lack of engagement among preservice teachers in conversations surrounding race and racism (Case & Hemmings, 2005; Pennington, 2007). Ladson-Billings (1996) outlined how white silence in classrooms can be used as a weapon, representing oppression or resistance. It could also be seen as a reflection of the power structure that white people benefited from. In other words, by staying silent, they were leaning on their own power and privilege that they had just for being white. In order to work towards dismantling or interrupting white silence, white people need to be more willing to speak up in conversations about race and racism. They can do this by engaging with their own racist thoughts and behaviors in order to analyze the everyday racism they contribute to (Case, 2012).

If there is silence in discussions of race, educators can incorporate more individualized tasks, like reflective journaling, or use smaller groups to encourage white individuals to engage with their whiteness and overall silence (Ladson-Billings, 1996; Norris, 2016). Using reflective journaling may allow white students to open up more about the topic at hand and share more experiences in relation to it (Norris, 2016). By doing this introspection, white people can begin to move towards becoming anti-racist allies. White educators need to challenge themselves and
their white students to push through the perceived uncomfortable topics that make them feel like they cannot speak up, thus reinforcing silence (Mazzei, 2008; Wattsjohnson, 2003).

**Present Study**

The purpose of this study was to determine when white preservice teachers could imagine themselves participating in race talk. We aimed to identify how students would engage in race talk with different stakeholders in their lives and when they would stay silent. This included in-class discussions with their peers, coworkers, and students as well as discussions with friends or family. We then wanted to find out how the potential of these conversations made them feel. To analyze the responses, we used Critical Whiteness Studies as a guiding theoretical framework.

The present study was guided by the following research questions: In what ways do white preservice teachers imagine themselves in situations when race is discussed? How would they respond to hypothetical situations in which race talk occurs? And how would those hypothetical conversations make them feel?

**Critical Whiteness Studies**

Critical Whiteness Studies (CWS) is a theoretical framework that critically examines the social construction of the white race and whiteness. Whiteness can be defined as “a racial discourse, whereas the category ‘white people’ represents a socially constructed identity, usually based on skin color” (Leonardo, 2002, p. 169). The tenets of CWS have evolved over time, with more recent tenets being conceptualized as whiteness as property, whiteness as assumed racial comfort, whiteness as ontological expansiveness, whiteness as epistemologies of ignorance, and whiteness as color evasiveness (Cabrera et al., 2016). The first tenet, whiteness as property, refers to the ways that white people are enacting their whiteness as if it were physical property (Cabrera et al., 2016). Within this tenet, whiteness is the property that is being protected by
society. The second tenet, whiteness as assumed racial comfort, highlights the discomfort that white people face when discussing topics of race and racism (Cabrera et al., 2016). Whiteness as ontological expansiveness focuses on how white people move through spaces in a privileged way (Cabrera et al., 2016). This tenet helps to uncover the ways in which white people believe they have a spot in all spaces. Whiteness as epistemologies of ignorance refers to the ignorance white individuals exhibit when witnessing racial oppression. Within this tenet, this ignorance “allows the contours of contemporary systemic racism to remain uninterrogated” (Cabrera et al., 2016, p. 21). The final tenet, whiteness as color evasiveness, is more than just about a racial identity. Bonilla-Silva (2003) argued that it is also a racial ideology in which white individuals believe the cause of a given situation is anything but racism occurring.

This theoretical framework was constructed to dismantle white privilege and challenge racism. It aims to reveal the invisible structures that continuously produce white supremacy and privilege (Applebaum, 2016). This theory suggests that white people must be vigilant in examining their own race and how white privilege is connected to complicity in racism.

**Methods**

**Positionality**

It is important for researchers to reflect on their own biases which can relate to the social phenomenon they are seeking to understand (Schwandt, 2015). For this purpose, we as researchers to explain our position in relation to this study. All three researchers are white women with higher education classroom teaching experience. We are each on our own journeys and in different stages of racial identity development and anti-racism. We understand that racial identity development will be a lifelong learning experience.
Participants

To recruit participants, we reached out to professors at a predominantly White research university in the Deep South who teach an undergraduate course on diversity that is offered to pre-service teachers. These professors distributed a link to the anonymous survey to their students. Once the participants opened the link to the survey, they were prompted with an information letter that described the nature of the study, the risks of the study, their rights as research participants, and what they could expect should they choose to enroll in the study. Participants continuation beyond the information letter indicated participants’ consent to participate in this study. Six pre-service teachers opted into the study. Five participants identified as White, and one identified as Black or African American. For the purposes of this paper, we focused our analyses on three of the White participants. We selected these three participants based on the completeness of their responses for the open-ended questions.

Survey Instrument

We created a survey through Qualtrics, an online software provided through the university with which we are affiliated. The survey was comprised of 23 items, including one demographic question asking participants to identify their race. There were three, grouped Likert-type items where participants answered questions about their experiences discussing race with their family, friends, and classmates. Following each of those items, there were three open-ended questions where they could respond on why they might be silent in conversations about race with family, friends, and classmates.

The remainder of the survey included eight vignettes in which race was a topic of discussion. Vignettes, or hypothetical situations, provide a valuable technique for people to reflect on and explore their perceptions and beliefs (Barter & Renold, 1999). As Ladson-Billings
(1996) and Norris (2016) suggested reflection can offer a white individual the space to engage in their whiteness and address their silence. Vignettes have been previously utilized to help participants imagine themselves in situations where their race and class biases are challenged (Haider et al., 2015). For this study, we asked the participants how they would respond to the situation and how that conversation would make them feel. Like the previous items, these vignettes were in context of conversations with family, friends, or in an educational setting (e.g., in classrooms, meetings with colleagues, etc.). See Appendix A for a list of all items included in the survey.

**Analysis**

To analyze the data the authors extracted information from Qualtrics and organized the answers based on participant. Since this study examined hypothetical reactions to imagined situations of race talk the authors concentrated on the open-ended questions. The authors read through the responses with two passes each and created memos interpreting the data in relation to previous readings on Critical Whiteness Studies, white silence, white identity development and feelings in relation to race talk. These interpretations were compiled in a narrative to create participant profiles. Case study research involves the study of cases within a real-life, contemporary context or setting (Yin, 2014).

**Findings**

The findings section of this paper is organized by participant. The purpose of organizing the information in this way is to assist the reader in capturing a fuller picture of each individual participant. Each participant had unique qualities and reactions to each vignette and their emotions while imagining participating in conversations about race. The pronoun “they” is used in each vignette because no questions were asked of participants regarding gender.
Alex

Alex was open to having conversations about race with their family. They felt their views on race align with their family although discussions of race do not take the main stage at family gatherings. However, they are not afraid to speak up when talking about race with their family. When imagining a situation in which a parent believes that if you have a black friend, you can’t be racist Alex stated, “Racism also goes farther than the surface level definition than most people recognize.” Alex identified themselves as a White person so “most people” could be considered other White people. A Person of Color may not consider racism to ever be “surface level”. They explained that if their parent said this statement the parent may not realize the systemic racism that occurs in America daily.

Alex has also talked about race with their friends. They have started conversations regarding race in a group, but it hasn’t happened frequently. They explained that “there is more work to do” when talking about race and solidarity with their friends. This response of having others be taught more about race and racism was brought up throughout their situational responses. They often felt they should do the teaching while other times they hoped others could be exposed to conversations at a young age.

Alex reported mixed emotions when imagining talking about race in a school setting. In the classroom, Alex felt cautious in conversations about race. In a large group they chose to be silent because they didn’t feel they are educated enough on the subject of race. Alex also did not feel like their classmates had the same views on race. When imagining confronting a student on a racist comment, Alex imagined talking about how people benefit from oppressive and racist systems. They used words such as frustrated or mad to describe how they felt when considering discussing race where the other person is being close minded on terms of diversity and inclusion.
Kris reported that they started conversations about race with their family. However, their views on race did not align. In addition to this, Kris reported that they rarely talked about race at family gatherings or at all. An assumption from this observation is that they do not talk about race because their views are different from that of the rest of their family. They alluded to this by writing, “My parents and grandparents are still under the belief that equality has been achieved and race means nothing now.” Thus, Kris was silent when race was brought up at family gatherings because of their differing views. Kris needs to continue to put in the emotional work to deconstruct the discomfort of their whiteness (Matias, 2016). By pushing through the discomfort and engaging in conversations about race with people who have different views Kris could break their own white silence (Mazzei, 2008; Wattsjohnson, 2003). This first step can help prepare them to feel more comfortable in discussing race with others in the future.

When asked about whether they talk about race with their friends, Kris reported that it is sometimes a topic of conversation. They also “somewhat agreed” that their views on race align with the views that their friends have. When the focus turned to classmates, Kris reported that conversations about race do not happen often with them. They were neutral when asked about whether their instructors’ views on race aligned with their own but reported that their classmates did not have the same views on race. Kris wrote, “We live in Alabama and my views are too liberal for most of them.” (Related to Deep South context/bring in bills potentially?)

When they were asked to imagine how they would respond in situations where race was brought up, Kris reported that they were “upset”, “infuriated”, and “angry” by the ignorance people possess when discussing race. They expressed their frustrations with how “the older generations view these issues” of race and racism. When given an opportunity to respond to a
student in a hypothetical situation about representation, they expressed discomfort in not knowing how to explain their response. Nonetheless, they gave a potential response to how they could approach the situation. They wrote that they felt “grateful to educate others” when the opportunity presented itself among these hypothetical vignettes.

*Sam*

Sam does not often talk about race with friends and family. They do not often discuss race with their family although they felt they had similar views on the subject. They suggested that their dad and sister have very strong views on race, and they dominate the conversations, so Sam does not often participate in these discussions. When imagining their parent saying they're not racist because they have a Black friend Sam mentioned that it was rude to point out that someone is a different race from them (find more sources about this).

Sam explained that they are mostly exposed to conversations about race in their course work. They do not feel like their classmates have the same views on race as they do. Sam wants to listen to their classmates' opinions and is concerned that their point of view may offend someone in class. When imagining confronting a classmate about a racist comment they said, “150 years ago, your family might have owned slaves and you just don't know about it. it was the normal back then. And it’s not the normal now, but we still have to acknowledge the past's reality.” This is taken from a White perspective. Sam admits they feel personally attacked in class when race is discussed because she is White.

Throughout the responses Sam often resorted to name calling. They used the words, “idiots” and “ignorant” on more than one occasion. Sam suggested fatigue from imagining race discussions stating, “I am tired of talking and thinking about it.” However, they feel like none of
the classes they have taken in their teacher education program has prepared them to have conversations about race with students. Sam also finds showing solidarity on social media with BLM as “irritating” and “confusing”. They seem to have had some conflicting views with their own racial identity.

Discussion

In the current climate of education in the United States race talk and teaching is an extremely touchy topic. From the bills in our state which aim to ban information about racism and sexism, to the hesitation participants in the present study experienced with hypothetical race talk. Reflection through journaling could be a useful tool in allowing white preservice teachers to explore their racial development and share their experiences in talking about race (Norris, 2016). Some of our participants described feelings of nervousness or fear as a reason for not participating in race talk, so journaling may create a space in which they can begin to do that work privately.

(As mentioned on the title page, this is a work in progress. We are continuing to work through fleshing out this discussion section and expanding our thoughts in others. We welcome any and all feedback as we continue to move this piece forward to being ready for publication. Thank you for your time.)
References


Appendix A

1. I would consider my race to be
   a. American Indian or Alaska Native
   b. Asian
   c. Black or African American
   d. Native Hawaii or Other Pacific Islander
   e. White

2. Family (Likert-type items ranging from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree)
   a. I talk about race with my family.
   b. I start conversations about race with my family.
   c. Race is a main talking point at family gatherings.
   d. My family and I have the same views on race.

3. When talking about race with my family, I might stay silent because...

4. Friends (Likert-type items ranging from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree)
   a. I talk about race with my friends.
   b. I start conversations about race with my friends.
   c. Race is a main talking point when hanging out with my friends.
   d. My friends and I have the same views on race.

5. When talking about race with my friends, I might stay silent because...

6. Classmates (Likert-type items ranging from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree)
   a. I talk about race with my class.
   b. I start conversations about race with my classmates.
   c. Race is a main talking point when in the classroom.
   d. My classmates and I have the same views on race.
   e. My instructors and I have the same views on race.

7. When talking about race with my classmates, I might stay silent because...

Your parent makes the comment, “I am not racist. I have a Black friend.”

8. How would you respond to your parent?
9. How does this conversation make you feel?

The topic of the day in your teacher education class is racism in education. The discussion centers in on the inequities of people of Color and the privileges that white people have in America. One white student interrupts the conversation and exclaims, “But I am not a racist! It’s not like my family has slaves.” The classroom is quiet.

10. How would you respond to your classmate?
11. How does this conversation make you feel?
Your professor is discussing critical race theory. A classmate raises their hand and shares, “I think critical race theory should be banned because it is making people racist towards white people.”

12. How would you respond to your classmate?  
13. How does this conversation make you feel?

A student in your third-grade class just moved to the area. The school is predominantly white and the new student is Black. One student asks you, “Why is their skin darker?”

14. How would you respond to your student?  
15. How does this conversation make you feel?

A Black student in your classroom comes up to you during quiet reading time. They ask, “Why are there only two books in the classroom library with people who look like me?” You follow them to the library and they show you a book about Martin Luther King Jr. and one about Rosa Parks.

16. How would you respond to your student?  
17. How does this conversation make you feel?

Your friends in a group text discuss posting a black square on their Instagram page to show solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement. Once your post is up you are getting a lot of comments asking: “Why is everyone posting a black square?”

18. How would you respond to these comments?  
19. How does this conversation make you feel?

At a grade level meeting one of the teachers brings up that they are signing up for a multicultural education workshop series. They ask if anyone else would like to join them. You work at a school that provides curriculum to the teachers and is driven by test scores. One teacher says, “No thanks, it’s not like we work at an urban school.”

20. How would you respond to your colleague?  
21. How does this conversation make you feel?

In a board meeting for a school system made up of predominantly white faculty and staff members, the superintendent shares that they are working towards hiring a more diverse faculty and staff amongst their schools. A teacher responds, “So white people won’t get hired if they apply? That’s discriminatory and racist.”

22. How would you respond to your colleague?  
23. How does this conversation make you feel?