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## White Teachers, Race Matters

Ellen Bigler

Rhode Island College, [ebigler@ric.edu](mailto:ebigler@ric.edu)

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# WHITE TEACHERS, RACE MATTERS: Preparing Teachers for the New Millennium<sup>1</sup>

Ellen Bigler  
Rhode Island College  
U. S. A.

Abstract: Educational anthropologists address in their works the legacy of an enduring history of racial oppression in the United States. Drawing on observations from teaching courses on multicultural education I examine the ideologies of future white teachers forged in particular racial and class locations. Students' faith in the existence of equality of opportunity emerges as significant in shaping their receptivity in interrogating the status quo. Course activities provide contrary evidence, permitting greater engagement with anthropological theories.

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Twenty years ago Ogbu put forward (1978), and subsequently elaborated upon (1987, 1998), an explanation for minority group variability in school performance that emphasized the significance of the socio-historical experiences and the perspectives of "caste-like" minorities in explaining unequal educational outcomes. "Involuntary" minorities, he said, are those incorporated into the United States against their will and whose perspectives are forged in minority communities with a shared history of oppression. Their reference point is the more successful white mainstream, and they are therefore skeptical of the widely held article of faith in the United States that education is a stepping stone to upward mobility. For such groups secondary cultural differences that have arisen since their incorporation into the United States (e.g., style or dialect differences) may take on political significance and become markers of identity in school settings. "Involuntary" minorities who abandon these markers of identity in conforming to the expectations of the dominant culture may be seen as "acting white" and risk being belittled by their own peers (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986).

"Voluntary" or "immigrant" minorities, on the other hand, have as their reference point not others in the U. S. society, but those in their home societies. They accept as an article of faith that educational success in the United States fosters opportunities for upward mobility. While these newcomers may also encounter prejudice and

discrimination, they view them as part of their “dues” to be paid. And if all else fails, they still have the option of returning to their homelands. As an outcome of these differing experiences and perspectives immigrant minorities, who may in fact differ culturally and linguistically from mainstream Euro-Americans more than involuntary indigenous minorities, typically outperform their American-born peers in school.

Ogbu’s (1978) penetrating insights into the significance of the socio-historical experiences of involuntary minority groups provided a welcome addition to the then-dominant focus in educational anthropology on cultural difference, or “cultural mismatch” between students and teacher, as the central explanatory variable for minority school performance. This micro-sociological analysis, while valuable, typically paid inadequate attention to the legacy of a history of racial division and the continued persistence of discrimination and inequality for educational outcomes. In addition, Ogbu’s (1978) explanation for why immigrant groups may have different perspectives and different responses when encountering prejudice, discrimination, and cultural difference in schools also undermines notions of the cultural superiority of the more successful groups resident in earlier “cultural deficit” explanations (Heller, 1966). While the explanatory power of Ogbu’s (1978, 1987) work has been critiqued on varying points<sup>2</sup> (Davidson, 1996), his attention to the political nature of school-community relations in a racially divided society has served anthropology well and produced a number of valuable ethnographic studies (Ogbu & Simons, 1998). Ogbu’s (1978, 1987) insights enrich our understanding of related issues such as some minority parents' distrust in schools, the importance of attending to the negotiation of identities in schools (Davidson, 1996; Erickson, 1993), and the value of a curriculum that incorporates minority perspectives and better addresses the history of racial inequities in the United States ( Banks, 1997; Kohl, 1994).

In this paper I assert that while Ogbu’s (1978, 1987) work illuminates essential understandings for educational anthropologists and education majors, the cultural orientations of many of the education students make problematic their ability to benefit from such insights. I outline an approach that I find valuable for teaching a course on diversity in public schools, given these students’ perspectives. I also explore the limitations for such courses on “multicultural education.”

### **Future Teachers and Race Matters**

At the heart of it, Ogbu’s (1978, 1987) theoretical orientation represents a challenge to ethnicity theory which assumes that all groups undergo similar challenges and experiences in their integration into the American mainstream.<sup>3</sup> “Race” when considered synonymous with “ethnicity” lumps African Americans and other involuntary minorities together with Irish Americans or Italian Americans, and the ideology of equality of opportunity in the United States remains unexamined. Yet the forced incorporation of involuntary minorities and their former “caste-like” status, extending over many generations, differentiates them in important ways from European immigrant groups. Their differing experiences enhance the likelihood of forming an

oppositional social identity that can have a bearing on their relations to schools and ultimately their educational achievement.

Such understandings will not challenge anthropologists of the American scene who focus on “race matters,”<sup>4</sup> but these same assumptions profoundly challenge the belief systems of many of our Euro-American students. The undergraduate students I teach in a required “Diversity in the Public Schools” course at State College, which educates the vast majority of the state’s teachers, are a case in point. Our students come primarily from the overwhelmingly white communities that ring Capital City, Rhode Island. My white students are likely to describe the College, with its twelve percent minority enrollment, as “very diverse” or the “most diverse setting (I’ve) ever been in.” This perspective stands in stark contrast to the responses of my students of color, who come primarily from racially diverse urban communities and frequently comment on the very *lack* of students of color on campus.

Almost two-thirds of State College enrollees are first-generation college students, earning the institution bragging rights for being “the college of opportunity.” These young people are typically third and fourth generation descendants of the early twentieth century immigrants from southern and eastern Europe or French Canadians who came to work in the region’s factories. Their grandparents, closely connected to that immigrant generation, came of age during World War II and the economic boom of the post-war years. They entered blue-collar professions and established themselves as community members and homeowners. However, the relatively secure hold on economic prosperity that so many of these white working class adults achieved in the post-World War II years proved more tenuous for their offspring, the parents of my students. The parents were the early baby boomers who did not attend college in the later 1960s and 1970s. As working-class young adults in the 1970s and 1980s, my students’ parents were vulnerable to the consequences of spiraling inflation, economic recessions, de-industrialization and downsizing, and the flight of good-paying union jobs. This generation of white working class Americans, baffled by the changing economic scene, has struggled to make sense of their inability to get ahead despite higher wages and growing numbers of women entering the workforce. Not infrequently their anger has been directed at the “special favors” they feel minorities receive (Rubin, 1994).

Many of these same parents now accept that a college degree is essential for their children to get ahead. While my students are admonished to go to college, unlike their middle class peers they are expected to pay much, if not all, of their expenses. Over 90 percent of State College students live at home and commute, juggling classes, jobs, and oftentimes family responsibilities. They rightly perceive themselves as having to work harder than many others to attend college and not having things handed to them “on a silver platter.” Despite the low tuition (\$3260/year), over 80 percent of our students hold jobs and 72 percent receive financial aid.

As members of the white working class (not a category my students would put themselves in because, like most Americans, they view themselves as middle class),

their more tenuous economic situation increases the likelihood of them resenting various entitlement programs. They tend to resist the idea that federal government programs have oftentimes disproportionately benefited white Americans (e.g., the GI Bill, post-World War II low cost home mortgages, etc.). Sensitive to what they perceive as unearned benefits, including affirmative action and financial aid programs for minority youth, they see themselves at the same time as a generation that rejects the racial prejudices of older white Americans.

A teaching degree for my students represents a stepping stone to the more economically stable middle class. They typically want to return to their home communities to teach and believe—oftentimes correctly—that being from the community enhances their employment opportunities. Many of the young women view teaching as the career of choice because they love children and assume teaching is a career compatible with childrearing. These young women, having witnessed the struggles of divorced women in their mothers' generation, also view teaching as a career they can fall back on should their own marriages dissolve.

Most of my Euro-American students ascribe to the belief that hard work is the guaranteed key to success. Minority status is not seen as the barrier that it once was to achieving the American Dream, and the visible successes of Asian Americans and well known African Americans such as Colin Powell, Bill Cosby, or Maya Angelou are believed to attest to that fact. Their belief that racial barriers to success in the United States have been struck down is one widely shared by white Americans, as the findings of other social scientists also confirm (Hochschild, 1995; Rubin, 1994). The power of their belief in equality of opportunity is tangible; minorities are seen as comparable to white ethnic groups. These students are “color blind,” or perhaps more appropriately what Frankenberg (1993) terms “color evasive.” They are uncomfortable with the idea of talking about racial discrimination (“I don’t want my (minority) students to feel bad,” “I don’t want to give any of my students ideas...”) or bringing attention to racial differences. They are perplexed by what Frankenberg (1993) terms “race cognizance”, which refers to the emphasis on race in the discourse of minority communities and scholars that evolved in response to the earlier racial essentialism and the failure of ethnicity theory to account for the persistence of racial inequality. They are likely to express concerns that emphasizing racial struggles and awareness “just foster more separations between people” and might discourage minority students. They want to put race aside and treat all their students “the same.”

My students' academic studies oftentimes fail to challenge their assumptions about race. The State Education Department requires only one year of United States history and one of any other social studies course to graduate from high school.<sup>5</sup> It would be reasonable to assume, based on my students' lack of multicultural awareness, my observations in many of these same schools, and others' research (Loewen, 1995), that few of their teachers addressed the profound consequences of racial inequality in the course of the nation's development. Not surprisingly then, my students' understanding of the history of United States race relations, not to mention the global context, is oftentimes limited to a cursory knowledge of slavery and the Civil Rights

Movement. Not infrequently they are taken aback at not having learned about the treatment of the Chinese in the United States, Japanese American internment, or the injustices that fueled the Chicano Movement, let alone the persistence of racism to the present day. My students also lack the critical awareness of how media images shape our understandings of the world around us (Chideya, 1995). They are oftentimes apprehensive about their 10-hour tutoring requirement in an urban school setting because of their negative stereotypes of city schools and communities. Those few students who do enter the program with a better grounding in these areas typically trace their awareness of the history and ongoing presence of racial inequality to a course they took in college or some life experience.[6](#)

### **Challenging Students' Views**

Helping these students understand the perspectives and experiences of minority communities and multicultural educators presents a significant challenge.[7](#) The first essential step in the required class, "Diversity in the Public Schools," is to challenge students' beliefs that racial discrimination is a thing of the past and to help them to understand how "race" continues to affect one's life chances today. They *know*, albeit superficially, that racial discrimination marred the past; however, they are likely to believe that it is not significant today and that when it does occur it consists only of individual acts of racism.

After a discussion of "culture" and the social construction of "race," which includes the discussion of how groups such as the Irish and Italians were defined as "non-white" at one time ( Ignatiev, 1995; Roediger, 1991), we begin with films and readings documenting the persistence and institutionalization of racism and its relative invisibility to white Americans. They view a Frontline TV special entitled *True Colors* (Harvey, 1992) which captures the differing experiences of a similarly qualified black male and a white male as they search for employment, consumer goods, apartments, and finally a taxi. Students read articles from the local paper about racist actions that take place daily in their communities. They examine McIntosh's (1998) argument of "white privilege" that she labels as an "invisible package of unearned assets...like an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, assurances, tools, maps, guides, ... and blank checks" (pp. 76-77). They look for evidence of white privilege in class readings and in their own experiences.

Whites typically do not see themselves as "raced"; rather, they accept themselves as the norm, the unmarked category (Frankenberg, 1993). This phenomenon is one that other teacher educators have noted (e.g., Sleeter, 1995) and that recent works in "whiteness studies" affirm (Fine, Powell, Weis, & Mun Wong, 1997). It is McIntosh's piece that forces them, albeit gradually, to acknowledge that regardless of their economic situations they share privileges as whites in this society that give them a pronounced edge over their minority counterparts. One student's comments are illustrative: "Reading this article has been an eye opener for me. I never realized what I have all along taken advantage of.... [I have] been so oblivious to what is happening in today's society. Racism I thought, is a problem that has been improving [and all but



disappeared].” The concept of “white privilege” becomes an effective cornerstone piece to discuss its presence in schools, in the knowledge bases and assumptions of the teaching staff, the curriculum, and school organization.

My students are most receptive to this sort of information when they do not feel that they are being personally attacked in the process. I strive to illustrate how people’s world views are shaped in particular socio-cultural locations, grounded in their own limited experiences, but are *also* mutable. We read *White Teacher* (Paley, 1979), in which author and educator Vivian Paley traces the process by which she came to realize how she had been taught to ignore differences. Ignoring differences, which on the surface sounded so fair and right to her as a white teacher, in turn feeds into white privilege although she does not term it that. This recognition, a product of her reflections on her interactions with students, parents, and teachers of color, ultimately leads her to reframe her assumptions about what constitutes effective teaching and to welcome into her classroom the diversity of her students and their communities. Students also read excerpts from my fieldwork research in an upstate New York city (Bigler, 1996, 1999), in which the views of Euro-American white ethnics are contrasted to those of a growing Puerto Rican community and the origins of these differing worldviews are examined. They watch the movie *Skin Deep* (Reid, 1995), which richly illustrates diverse college students’ differing perspectives on racial matters. We examine the pervasiveness of stereotyped images of African Americans in the media after taking a “Test Your Racial Issues IQ quiz” (Chideya, 1995) and deconstructing their responses. Students write reflections on their experiences growing up in monocultural environments, and explore the implications for their teaching. I find it also useful to draw on my own past experiences as a white teacher [8](#) and my growing awareness over the years of such issues. I want them to understand that more important than “knowing” all the answers are being receptive to new information and new insights and remaining willing to interrogate outcomes of their interactions with parents, community, and students.

These experiences set in place the sort of scaffolding that provides students the means to understand *why* students of color might develop oppositional social identities and perceive their cultural styles as markers of that identity in school settings. How schools themselves might contribute to that resistance then becomes a topic of discussion as we read “I Won’t Learn from You” (Kohl, 1994), which documents Chicano students’ resistance to history texts that depict whites as the first inhabitants of the Southwest. We view the film *Chicano Park* (Mulford & Barrera, 1989), which illustrates how a Chicano barrio came together to resist the encroachment of junkyards and rally around the Chicano artwork and elements of Chicano culture that gave pride to community members. Chicanos in the film testify to their ambivalence toward the schools and the mainstream society, and students hear the diverse voices and learn something about the history of Chicanos in the process.

Students can now more readily address the question of whose knowledge belongs in our classrooms and recognize how traditional curricula and school practices might contribute to alienating minority youth while leaving all students with a limited

understanding of the multicultural world they inhabit. The required ten-hour experience tutoring and observing in urban classrooms and schools, in turn, provides a valuable opportunity for observation and reflection. Many of the related issues we take up, from the inequitable funding of schools in poor communities to the issues around tracking and standardized testing, can now be related to this growing understanding of how schools and society work in ways that favor some groups over others. The different cultural model of the U.S. society that involuntary minorities may develop is more likely to be perceived as legitimate when grounded in such new understandings. In addition, State College, with the President's strong support, has recently instituted campus-wide "diversity" initiatives that further address such issues and reinforce my teaching. The greater media coverage of race-related issues in recent years (e.g., "driving while black" ) further lends legitimacy and credibility to what I have been teaching.

Do these exercises *guarantee* that students come to question their views of the United States as a colorblind and meritocratic society and accept the need to alter school practices to make them more "culturally responsive" (Ogbu & Simons, 1998)? Decidedly not; however, I have found a greater degree of success in accomplishing my objectives by utilizing this approach. There are, of course, potential dangers. My students, for instance, are prone to stereotyping and may see Ogbu's (1978, 1987) theory as applying to all members of involuntary minority groups. I am, however, cheered by their final reflection papers and anonymous course evaluations.

I remain, uncertain of the long-term changes in my students. I do not have an entire semester to explore these issues; they share center stage with other worthwhile issues now subsumed under "diversity in the public schools," ranging from addressing sexual harassment and "gay-bashing" to modifying lessons to better meeting the needs of second language students. The extent to which these issues are incorporated in to other education classes or their student teaching experiences is also highly idiosyncratic. When these students *do* become teachers, the likelihood of their being asked to incorporate such understandings into their teaching remains relatively small, given the slow pace of change in public schools.

### **Beyond "The Diversity Course"**

There are changes in our teacher preparation programs that I believe would be beneficial. All teachers need to be well grounded in the history of race relations in the United States and the significant body of scholarship in educational anthropology that sheds light on how it may enter into educational outcomes. We also need programs in place to diversify the nation's future teaching force, which is currently almost 90 percent white. Educators from diverse backgrounds are valuable role models and may bring valuable perspectives to our nation's classrooms, as they have to my own classes. One young Cambodian man, for instance, talked of his memories of fleeing Cambodia and the low expectations for him as an ESL student in local public schools. Another young African American man patiently explained to his peers, who had recently returned from team teaching in the very urban school that he had once attended, that urban students greeting them with "Yo man" were not necessarily



intending to be disrespectful of their authority. Fortunately, “culturally relevant” teachers, as a recent overview of the ethnographic literature suggests, “need not come from the same ethnic minority group as the students they teach” (Osborne, 1996, p. 289).

The nascent understandings students leave my course on diversity with must continue to be nurtured in later coursework and student teaching. We need more time in our traditional training programs to accomplish such objectives and opportunities to mentor new teachers. One promising possibility might also be to reinvent something like the National Teacher Corps model of the 1960s and 1970s, which took teams of ethnically diverse liberal arts graduates and put them through a two-year program where they lived and taught in minority communities while acquiring a master’s degree in education. Such a program has the potential to bring together the insights and methodologies of anthropologists with on-site learning experiences.

Ultimately, if we want to seriously address the profoundly unequal educational outcomes that persist across race and class lines, we need teachers who are willing to question the assumptions that they have grown up with and to rethink the very schools that served them so well. This, alongside a commitment to eradicate the disparities in public school funding that have for so long given credence to minority communities’ views that their children are being written off, represents a step toward a more equitable and just society for the 21st century.

### **Endnotes**

1. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 98th American Anthropological Association Annual Meeting in November 17-21, 1999.
2. John Ogbu takes up some of the misunderstandings that have arisen around his work in a recent article (Ogbu and Simons, 1998).
3. See Omi and Winant (1994) for a detailed analysis of ethnicity theory.
4. The phrase “race matters” is drawn from Cornel West’s book entitled *Race Matters* (1993).
5. Individual districts may hold more stringent requirements.
6. With the exception of the social science secondary education majors, there is no requirement that they take courses that address issues of race.
7. Since my students have far less difficulty of recognizing and accepting that “cultural mismatches” can contribute to school difficulties, I concentrate here on the difficulties they have with the sorts of understanding that Ogbu’s theory rests upon.

8. I taught secondary social studies in New York for 14 years before commencing my graduate studies in anthropology.

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***Ellen Bigler***, is an associate professor at Rhode Island College where she holds a joint appointment in Anthropology and Educational Studies. An educator in New York State schools for fourteen years, she also served as a consultant to the New York State Department of Education on its k-12 Latino curriculum project, "Latinos in the Making of the USA: Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow." She is also the author of *American Conversations: Puerto Ricans, White Ethnics, and Multicultural Education* (Temple University Press, 1999) (She may be reached at [ebigler@ric.edu](mailto:ebigler@ric.edu))

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