
Multicultural Education and the Protection of Whiteness

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This article explores how teachers in one urban district understand and engage multicultural education in two very different school contexts. My data highlight how teachers' understandings of multicultural education vacillate between what I call "powerblind sameness" and "colorblind difference." In the end, I suggest that our everyday engagements with powerblind sameness and colorblind difference protect whiteness, but also that whiteness prevents us from working toward equity, justice, and democracy.

Over the past 40 years, scholars and educators have advocated multicultural education as an educational approach with the explicit purposes of improving the school experiences of students, increasing learning and achievement in diverse school contexts, and ultimately bringing about greater equity. Critically-oriented scholars have also suggested that multicultural education is one way to challenge the persistent and pernicious "whiteness" in both the educational system and society at large (Banks 2001; Banks and Banks 1995; Nieto 2004; Sleeter 1996; Sleeter and Grant 2003). Whiteness refers to the structural arrangements and ideologies of racial dominance within the United States.¹ Racial power and inequities are at the core of whiteness, but all forms of power and inequity create and perpetuate whiteness. In this article, I illustrate how teachers in one urban school district understood and engaged multicultural education in ways that legitimate the status quo, keep inequity intact, and protect whiteness. There is a tension between what multicultural education should be and what it actually is, and this tension is centrally mediated by whiteness.

Although I draw on a number of scholars to make sense of whiteness, I center on Dyson's explanation of whiteness as an ideology and an institution

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(Dyson 1996; see also Chennault 1998). Whiteness serves as a “pervasive ideology justifying dominance of one group over others” (Maher and Tetreault 1998, 139). The ideology of whiteness also serves as “a form of social amnesia” that allows White people to forget or ignore how we are implicated in the maintenance of systems of privilege and oppression (McLaren 1998). As a system of ideologies and material effects (privilege and oppression), whiteness is a well-entrenched structure that is manifested in and gives shape to institutions. It has thus become a norm against which others are judged but also a powerful, if sometimes unconscious, justification for the status quo (Fine et al. 1997; McWhorter 2004; Owen 2007; Thompson 2003). As a location of structural advantage, whiteness serves as “a discursive regime that enables real effects to take place” (McLaren 1998, 67).

Whiteness functions to produce multiple inequities, including the savage inequalities in schools (Kozol 1992), persistent achievement gaps, and growing educational debts (Ladson-Billings 2006) in this country. Furthermore, my data suggest that whiteness shapes the specific iterations of multicultural education we see in schools. Specifically, educators’ constructions of multicultural education as both powerblind sameness and colorblind difference protect whiteness by normalizing majoritarian perspectives and knowledge; obscuring or ignoring race, structural arrangements, and inequity; and failing to pursue social change.

Research Methods

This article draws on data from a year-long critical ethnography (Anderson 1989; Carspecken and Walford 2001; Castagno 2012; Foley and Valenzuela 2005) of multicultural education in an urban school district in the state of Utah. As a critical ethnographer, I was particularly interested in the dialectic between local practices of multicultural education and more global patterns of dominance and marginalization, as well as between structured institutional patterns and the agency of individuals to act within those structures. My familiarity with the literature on multicultural education and its lack of data-driven analyses prompted this research focus. I conducted passive and participant observations in two of the district’s eight secondary schools. I observed 12 teachers in each of the two schools, facilitated both formal and informal interviews with the 24 teachers and all of the administrators at each school,

and attended faculty meetings and other school-wide events. I also interviewed 11 district-level administrators; attended district-level professional developments and board meetings; and reviewed pertinent policies, reports, and district and school publications.

Teachers and school administrators self-selected into the study following my written and verbal invitations to the entire faculties at both schools. In these invitations, I described my research goal as wanting to learn how teachers think about and integrate multicultural education and issues of diversity. Of the 24 school-based participants, three were people of color, two of whom had immigrated to the United States within the past 8 years, and six were men. This group was representative of the teaching faculties at each school in terms of gender, race, ethnicity, years of experience, and subject-area focus. Throughout the data collection process, my observations focused on one teacher from each school for 4 weeks, and I varied the days and times I spent in their classroom in order to capture the range and variation of their experiences. My observations cast a wide net; I noted as much as possible about the classroom context, student and teacher dialogue and behavior, curricular emphases and materials, and pedagogical strategies. Toward the end of the 4-week period, I conducted structured interviews with the teachers. My interview questions asked teachers to articulate their definitions of, examples of, and facilitators and barriers to implementing multicultural education; their participation in multicultural education-related conversations, workshops, and trainings; how they believed multicultural education impacted their students; and the nature of the larger context related to multicultural education within other classrooms, their school, the district, and the community. I then moved on to two new teachers (one from each school) for the following 4 weeks and continued this pattern for the year.

I took detailed field notes of my observations and conversations, and I audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed all of my interviews. I analyzed these data by searching for patterns; making comparisons; categorizing using codes developed from my research questions, the extant literature, and the data themselves; and seeking alternative explanations and disconfirming evidence for my emerging understandings (Bogdan and Biklen 2007; Glesne 1999; Schensul et al. 1999; Spradley 1979; Strauss and Corbin 2007). As an ethnographer by training, my approach to data collection and analysis was fluid and iterative, and my coding was largely inductive. I used a qualitative data analysis software program to help organize, sort, and retrieve my data as I was working to make sense of them. I enhanced issues of trustworthiness by searching for disconfirming evidence, triangulating data sources, comparing my coding and analyses with small sections I asked colleagues to code and analyze, and member checking my understandings with a few key participants.

This article focuses on my conversations with teachers and classroom ob-

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servations that explicitly illustrated how teachers engaged the construct of multicultural education. The findings and conclusions here are a subset of those from the larger ethnography, but they draw on the entire data set. Ethnographic research allowed me to immerse myself into the cultural context of the district, schools, and classrooms—thus yielding an incredible bank of data from which to draw.² Importantly, my project was explicitly a critical ethnographic one, which meant I was (and am) particularly focused on using the examples, data, narratives, and insights as windows through which to better understand larger patterns of dominance within schools. As such, my work here couples ethnographic data with a heavy dose of theory and conceptual analysis. I am less interested in the research participants as individual actors (though their identities as such and their agency are clearly valued) as I am in what they can teach us about patterned, persistent, and at times unobvious mechanisms of power.

Research Context

The Zion School District was an illustrative place to conduct a study of multicultural education because of the relatively recent dramatic increase in racially and linguistically diverse students within the district, the politically conservative community in which the district is located, and the fact that this particular district espoused a commitment to multicultural education and larger issues of “equal education for all students.”³ Although the district served over 40% English-language learners (ELL), 50% students of color, and 60% low-income students, most schools were far more internally homogenous, and the vast majority of educators were White, English-dominant, and middle to upper class. My identity as a White woman in her late twenties who was familiar with the community norms proved beneficial in establishing rapport relatively quickly with most of the participants.

The two schools in my research were representative of the two extremes of schools within the district: Birch served almost 80% ELL, 90% students of color, and 100% low-income students, while Spruce served approximately 15% ELL and 25% students of color and low-income students. Across the district, over 75% of ELLs were Latino (overwhelmingly of Mexican origin) and dominant Spanish speakers. I selected Birch and Spruce because of their location as “opposites” within the district and because I assumed there would be significant differences in how teachers in these two very different contexts understood and engaged multicultural education. Instead, I found multiple similarities. As I illustrate in this article, whiteness is protected by the same iterations of multicultural education in both schools. The presence of such similar patterns in both a predominantly White, middle-class school and a

racially and linguistically diverse low-income school points to the pervasiveness of whiteness and the “common sense” nature of the iterations of multicultural education that result in the protection of whiteness.

All the teachers in my study expressed interest in multicultural education and self-identified as engaging multicultural education with their students. Thus, my data illustrate common sense and commonly held notions about what it means for a largely White teaching force to engage multicultural education in two very different school contexts.⁴ Indeed, the pervasive interest in and affiliation with multicultural education reflects an important iteration of whiteness: ascribing to multicultural education presumably shelters teachers from being perceived as discriminatory, racist, or simply uncaring and thus deflects responsibility for change elsewhere. Whiteness is thus protected since its dismantling requires systemic change.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framing

In this article, I draw on substantial bodies of literature in the fields of both multicultural education and critical race/critical whiteness studies. Since the first framework of approaches to multicultural education was developed in 1976 (Gibson 1976), most of the major figures in the field have published their own typology or definition of multicultural education (see, e.g., Banks 2001, 2004; Banks and Banks 2001; Gay 2000; Gibson 1976; Kincheloe and Steinberg 1997; Nieto 2004; Sleeter and Grant 2003; Vavrus 2002). There are similarities across these various typologies, and some of the most common themes map closely onto the data I provide in this article regarding teachers’ engagements with multicultural education. Specifically, most scholars identify a range of approaches to multicultural education that facilitate assimilation, enhance human relations, encourage bicultural awareness, and work toward greater social justice. While this work on laying a conceptual foundation is important, the continued focus on the theoretical underpinnings of multicultural education has contributed to the severe lack of attention paid by scholars to the nature of multicultural education in actual schools and among real teachers.

Wills et al. (see also Grant et al. 1986, 2004; Grant and Sleeter 1985) note the absence of ethnographic studies of multicultural education in classrooms and schools; they convincingly argue that “the lack of ethnographic research on multicultural curriculum practice empowers us to continue proposing and theorizing what multicultural education should be, without being able to state with any confidence, supported by a body of ethnographic case studies, what multicultural education actually is in . . . classrooms” (Wills et al. 2004, 168). The extant literature is also silent on how multicultural education is taken up in predominantly White school settings. The second edition of the *Handbook*

of *Research on Multicultural Education* (Banks and Banks 2004), which is regarded as an important and comprehensive text in the field, does not include any chapters on White students or multicultural education in predominantly White schools. My study, therefore, makes an important contribution by considering how teachers engaged multicultural education in both a racially diverse and a predominantly White school.

The educators in my study were predominantly White, and previous research examining White teachers' understandings of race and difference have been largely consistent: Schofield (1986) found that White teachers adopted a colorblind stance and thus ignored institutionalized patterns of racism, and Sleeter (1992) found that even after focused professional development on multicultural education, White teachers continued to embrace a colorblind perspective, deny the significance of race, and favor assimilation goals for their students. In her work with White teachers who had been identified as being aware of race and racism, Johnson (2002) found that moving past colorblindness in order to gain an understanding of race and racism was largely the result of developing close relationships with people of color, working in interracial organizations for social justice, and/or experiencing marginalization in their own lives. Most White teachers, however, do not have or avoid these types of opportunities and therefore never develop the kind of knowledge and awareness held by teachers in Johnson's study. Furthermore, awareness of culture, race, and power is not sufficient for challenging whiteness (Vaught and Castagno 2008). This article extends these earlier studies by highlighting the nuances between colorblind difference and powerblind sameness and by connecting teachers' ideas and practices to larger patterns of whiteness in schools.

Although my work examines what multicultural education means to educators in K–12 settings, it is important to keep in mind that I understand multicultural education to be educational praxis that focuses on equity, culture, and power by requiring high academic expectations for all students; centering multiple perspectives, peoples, and worldviews into the curriculum; and equipping students with an understanding of issues of power, privilege, oppression, and ideas about how they might work toward social justice (Ladson-Billings 1995). I agree with other critically-oriented scholars that multicultural education ought to impact curriculum, pedagogy, policy, and overall school cultures and that its goals are to improve the school experiences and achievement of all students and to bring about greater equity (Banks and Banks 1995; Nieto 2004). This sort of education would begin to dismantle whiteness.

My work is also shaped by critical race theory (CRT). Critical race theorists begin from the premise that racism is permanent and pervasive, and we seek to both critically analyze the ways race and racism work in society and disrupt and change those everyday workings.⁵ Although this article is not explicitly embedded in this body of scholarship, it is highly informed by the insights from CRT—most

directly the idea that racism structures all institutions and institutional practice. Schools are no exception. Furthermore, although racism often operates without conscious intent, lack of intentionality does not translate into an absence of responsibility (Bell 1992; Gillborn 2007; Ladson-Billings and Tate 1995; Leonardo 2004). These points serve as a foundation for much of my analysis and are critical for understanding how it is that well-meaning teachers' engagements with multicultural education actually protect and strengthen whiteness.

Despite the growing body of scholarship and the rising numbers of educators who claim to engage in this thing we call multicultural education, our educational systems remain inequitable. When multicultural education is examined as it is practiced in real schools, what we find are nebulous explanations of what it is alongside “business as usual” (Sleeter and Grant 2003) practices that reproduce the very conditions multicultural education is supposed to change. In other words, multicultural education has become a weasel word⁶ to denote something that has to do with “diversity” and “equality” in educational contexts but which fails to challenge whiteness.

Data from the Zion School District illustrate how its teachers' understandings of multicultural education vacillated between notions of sameness and difference. Part of the paradox here is that the ideology and institution of whiteness encourages both a recognition and a denial of difference. Whiteness pushes us to acknowledge difference in certain small ways (i.e., colorblind difference), but overall it encourages sameness (i.e., powerblind sameness). In later sections, I explain and illustrate powerblind sameness and colorblind difference separately, but colorblind difference is actually a subset of powerblind sameness. Both ultimately erase and obscure at least some difference and thus center sameness. By uncovering how multicultural education is understood within schools, we learn how it is that whiteness is protected by this educational philosophy and strategy that is supposed to dismantle whiteness. Understanding whiteness as both an ideology and a set of structural arrangements (i.e., an institution) helps locate the ways in which multicultural education in the Zion School District actually reinforces, protects, and legitimates inequity.

Engaging Multicultural Education as Powerblind Sameness

Most teachers in my study held two general understandings of multicultural education that were both iterations of a concept I call powerblind sameness. I use the word “sameness” to reference the belief that all students are the same and do not possess any differences that matter for the teaching and learning process. Powerblindness takes the notion of colorblindness and broadens the scope to include particular elements of identity beyond race. In other words, powerblindness includes colorblindness but also includes other ele-

ments. Whereas colorblindness refers to our reluctance and avoidance of race and the role race plays in our everyday lives (Bonilla-Silva 2010; Delgado and Stefancic 2001; Frankenberg 1993; Gotanda 1995; Haney-Lopez 2007; Pollock 2004), powerblindness refers to our reluctance and avoidance of race, social class, language, gender, sexuality, and other politicized aspects of identity that are linked to power and the distribution of resources in the United States. The notion of power and the distribution of resources are crucial in that some aspects of identity are minimally (if at all) linked to one's access to public goods and power structures. By using the term "powerblindness," I mean to reference those identity categories that are intimately linked to access and the distribution of power. Thus, powerblind sameness refers to the denial of power-related difference, and it is one iteration of multicultural education.

Learning Styles

One of the most common ways teachers in Zion associated multicultural education with notions of powerblind sameness was in their reference to "learning styles." At both Spruce and Birch, teachers' explanations of multicultural education were peppered with phrases such as "different levels and styles of learning" and "my students don't all learn the same way." Teachers' explanations of multicultural education often reflected a tendency toward powerblind sameness through claims that "we are all just learners" who simply "learn differently." Ms. Howard summed up this sentiment well when she said, "Multicultural education to me means reaching a diverse audience as far as it comes to learning and teaching. There are so many different learning styles, so I just try to use a lot of visuals and check in with students and make sure they are getting it." The teachers also associated multicultural education with the necessity of using a variety of teaching strategies in order to best meet the needs of students with various learning styles. Much like Ms. Howard above, Ms. Pela explained, "There is a lot of hands-on and visual learning techniques where you can teach the same thing just in different ways, different strategies." Reflecting this same idea, other teachers talked about multicultural education in terms of "addressing kids on different levels" and using "different teaching strategies because of different skill levels."

Angelina E. Castagno (Author): So what does multicultural education mean? I mean, how would you explain multicultural education to someone who is unfamiliar with that concept?

Mr. Perry: Well I think it's just, because I've been teaching so long, that I just think it [multicultural education] is just part of it [good education]. Because I know there are certain kids that, I mean,

that's why I use the videos and the visuals because they can see it written and they can hear it but they don't know how to spell it. Because when I'm just doing things and dictating they have a horrible time, but when they see it up there, they are much more keyed in. . . . So I think you just try to hit everybody.

For Mr. Perry, multicultural education relates to the fact that students learn differently, and so his responsibility as a teacher was to employ various techniques to "hit everybody." Like Mr. Perry, "many teachers see themselves as responsible for helping students fit into the mainstream of American society. They believe that students who do not readily fit in because of cultural background, language, learning style, or learning ability require teaching strategies that remediate deficiencies or build bridges between the student and the school" (Sleeter and Grant 2003, 39). Mr. Perry also noted that he was not just talking about "kids who are multicultural"—by which he later explained that he meant students from other countries for whom English is not their first language—but rather any student, regardless of their background, language, or race who might struggle with particular styles of teaching.

Believing that multicultural education is really about learning styles and teaching strategies allows educators to maintain the belief that schooling is apolitical and disconnected from the social injustices outside the school walls. This is powerblindness at work. These beliefs, then, explain and justify the absence of educational practices that might begin to critique and change current social arrangements—thus protecting whiteness.

Scholars of the learning styles construct stress that everyone has a learning style; although we each have different learning styles, we all at least have some learning style (Brandt 1990; Dunn et al. 1989; Sims and Sims 1995). Much of the literature on learning styles also makes some connection between learning styles and diversity: one author notes that "the importance of having a thorough understanding of learning styles becomes more critical when applied to diverse populations" (Anderson 1995, 76), and another claims that "learning styles can help us in a practical way to value diversity" (Brandt 1990, 13). These assertions rely on a vague, and thus empty, category of diversity. As the teachers in my study illustrate, relying on concepts such as learning styles and teaching strategies allows educators to erase or at least ignore other meanings of diversity and focus on the commonality that everyone has "a learning style." Diversity here is disconnected from power.

Furthermore, if all students have a learning style, and if that is what is emphasized, the logical conclusion is that it is the primary role of the teacher to diversify their teaching techniques in an effort to reach those who learn differently. The role is not, then, to focus on race, gender, or any other form of difference among students, which is consistent with most White, middle-class teachers' preferences toward powerblind sameness (Johnson 2002; Marx 2006;

McIntyre 1997; Sleeter 1996). Spruce and Birch teachers' regular appeals to ideas about learning styles provided a way for them to avoid talking about power-related differences among their students and instead maximize the similarities between them. In other words, an important function of the learning styles discourse was that it allowed teachers to talk about students in ways that avoided reference to power-related aspects of their identities. This avoidance protects whiteness because race and structural arrangements of power are obscured.

Our conversations about how Birch and Spruce teachers think about and define multicultural education led to discussions about how they viewed the relationship between good education and multicultural education. Their explicit associations between multicultural education and learning styles and diverse teaching strategies led most teachers to the conclusion that multicultural education was no different from "good education." Teachers explained: "I actually think that all education is multicultural"; "I think it's the same because education in general, multicultural or not, is based on life experiences"; "Well, they should be the same thing actually"; and "I think they are kind of the same. You can't have one without the other." As these quotes illustrate, the tendency of teachers to equate multicultural education with good education was overwhelming.

Importantly, multicultural education scholars often promote multicultural education as "good education" (see, e.g., Banks 2001; Nieto 2004). They do this in order to make it more legitimate and palatable to teachers in a range of school settings. While this makes sense in theory, my data highlight how at least some teachers have taken up the language of multicultural education to describe what they do even though they do not ascribe to the meaning of multicultural education that most leading scholars have articulated. In other words, teachers have co-opted the name "multicultural education" to describe what they have always done.⁷ This, then, illustrates an important concern in packaging transformative educational strategies as "just good education." Whiteness encourages the co-opting of potentially disrupting philosophies and practices in order to maintain the status quo. Maintaining the status quo is a primary means of protecting whiteness.

Human Relations

The second way teachers in this study understood multicultural education as powerblind sameness was through a commitment to improving human relations skills. Over 75% of the teachers in my study believed that improved human relations was both the goal of multicultural education and the actual effect of engaging multicultural education. Teachers at both Spruce and Birch

talked about how they believed multicultural education would expand their students' worldviews and, therefore, lead them to be more respectful and accepting of diversity. Spruce teachers talked about the goals of multicultural education as exposing people to the "interesting" and "diverse and rich" cultures that are in Utah, expanding students' understandings of the world, and teaching students that everyone has a culture that is deserving of appreciation. These teachers also believed that multicultural education affects students by encouraging them to get along and treat each other better, creating more unity among people, and gaining a better perspective on life by recognizing that the world is bigger than they thought.

Angelina E. Castagno: What do you think the goals or purposes of multicultural education are?

Ms. Sean: I think students get along better. They treat each other better. I mean, they are happy; they just have a better perspective on life because they are not just thinking about themselves and they have more unity. They just, um, yeah, better well-being.

Birch teachers also referenced the goal of making students more well rounded by interacting with those who are different and the effect of students becoming more understanding of differences. In discussing the goal of multicultural education, Ms. Ramirez, for example, explained: "So I think that is the main idea that students should get: that their way is not the only right way. That there are many ways and they all could be right." She went on to talk about some of the effects of multicultural education: "I think it makes them more understanding of differences. It teaches them to be respectful of differences. To let them know that their way is not the only way." In a similar vein, Ms. Wendall noted that multicultural education is "very important and it makes us all much more well-rounded to meet people from different ethnicities, from different cultures."

In response to my requests for examples of multicultural education, teachers at both Birch and Spruce referred to the "Community of Caring" program. Community of Caring is a national program that the district selected to serve as a framework for their "character education" efforts. Most of the lessons I observed that were taken directly from the Community of Caring resource binder seemed overly packaged and disconnected from student interests. For example, one activity required that each student "write something nice" about every other student in their class; another asked students to write answers to a list of questions about "honest Abe" (i.e., Abraham Lincoln) and how he demonstrated the value of trust throughout his life; and still another directed students to "draw a cartoon illustrating one of the five Community of Caring values." While these activities are not necessarily bad, they highlight the limited nature of human relations approaches to multicultural education as well as

the ways whiteness both shapes the curriculum and is perpetuated by it. Similar to the learning styles construct, these sorts of human relations activities center on the individual and place a premium on ideologies associated with whiteness—in this case, meritocracy, equality, and politeness. Although human relations approaches are popular among teachers, and especially among White, middle-class teachers (see, e.g., Lee 2005; Perry 2002; Sleeter 1996; Sleeter and Grant 2003), they do little to pursue social change or advance educational equity and, as a result, fail to challenge whiteness.

This curricular emphasis on human relations was especially interesting because I found students at both Spruce and Birch to get along fairly well in class, work cooperatively in groups when that was required, and treat their peers and adults with respect. This is not to say the students were “perfectly behaved,” but it is to say that most of them already had a strong sense of the values human relations education tried to instill. What the students lacked, however, was knowledge “about their own position in the social structure and what to do about it” (Grant and Sleeter 1996, 83). Lessons aimed solely at human relations rarely, if ever, address these issues of the larger social structure, our place within it, what that means, and strategies for social change. In fact, I would argue that part of the appeal of human relations approaches to multicultural education is precisely that they do not require teachers to broach these complex and potentially threatening subjects. By focusing on personal values and how to get along, educators can believe that this alone will solve our social problems and, more importantly, they can locate the blame within individual people who are “immoral” rather than in everyone’s role in maintaining structural inequalities and relations of power. There exists a clear tension between the individualized, polite interaction called for in human relations and the collective agitation required for social change,⁸ and whiteness both supports and is supported by an emphasis on the former.

This notion of multicultural education as human relations is a common theme in the literature, and almost every published framework of approaches to multicultural education includes some reference to human relations. The goals of human relations approaches to multicultural education are working toward greater harmony in social relations among all students, encouraging students to learn about cultural differences while respecting others’ right to deviate from the norm, creating unity and tolerance among people, and reducing prejudice (see, e.g., Gibson 1976; Kincheloc and Steinberg 1997; McLaren 1994; Nieto 2004; Sleeter 1996; Sleeter and Grant 2003).

While these goals certainly have some value, a number of critiques have been leveled against human relations approaches to multicultural education, including that they fail to address the structural nature of inequality, can be assimilationist, implicitly accept the status quo, and are only concerned about diversity when it threatens the perceived established harmony and unity

(Sleeter and Grant 2003). Thus, while many teachers equate multicultural education with human relations, most scholars in the field argue that a narrow focus on human relations does not go far enough in working for greater educational equity, and ultimately, in challenging whiteness. I would add that a focus on human relations as a manifestation of multicultural education merely reinforces whiteness through its valuing of particular forms of politeness that are defined by the dominant racial paradigm and privilege the preferences of most White people to not talk about potentially conflict-laden topics such as discrimination, privilege, and oppression (Boler 2004; Castagno 2008; Howard 1999). In order to “just get along,” it becomes necessary to maintain this politeness in the face of often-times obvious and explicit marginalization and systemic oppression.

Protecting Whiteness through Powerblind Sameness

Whether they were psychologizing students by focusing on learning styles and teaching methods or humanizing students by focusing on human relations education, teachers maintained a strong loyalty to a powerblind ideology—an ideology that ultimately serves to uphold the status quo through its protection of whiteness. Engaging multicultural education as powerblind sameness protects whiteness in a number of ways. As both learning styles and human relations, teachers ultimately believed multicultural education was simply “good education” for all students. While I agree with other scholars that multicultural education is theoretically important for all students (Baker 1994; Nieto 2004; Powell 2001; Sleeter and Grant 2003), I am not convinced that in practice this discursive appeal to sameness and all students has the same meaning. Multicultural education is intended to highlight, and thus reduce, inequities, but the sameness discourse instead serves to hide such inequities.

Powerblind sameness also protects whiteness by assuming a White norm since the sameness implies that everyone is the same as “us.” By associating multicultural education with sameness, educators are adopting a powerblind perspective that erases any political or potentially threatening form of difference. In other words, good teachers respond to learners and help students get along, but they do not see or respond to things like race, social class, or gender. Getting along is not sufficient for challenging whiteness or producing equity. Instead, an emphasis on getting along typically leads to assimilationist goals and outcomes. This stance privileges the individual and relationships between individuals, and it offers little impetus to pursue social change.

Powerblind sameness is also intimately connected to ideologies of meritocracy and equality. Believing that everyone has the same access to and opportunities for success and ignoring the ways in which structural arrangements maintain

power hierarchies results in the reproduction and reinforcement of whiteness. By associating multicultural education with powerblind sameness, teachers in Zion failed to work toward the promise of multicultural education even though they had adopted its language.

But the teachers at Spruce and Birch, and indeed all of us, work within ideologies and institutions of whiteness, so whiteness shaped the very discourses and practices that I illustrated above. An emphasis on the individual rather than the structural, on harmony rather than equity, and on sameness rather than difference—this is what whiteness encourages; it is how we are expected to engage the world (Bell 1992; Bonilla-Silva 2010; Harris 1993). And the current context of schools simultaneously reinforces these emphases in educational discourse and practice (Koyama 2010; Kumashiro 2008; Lipman 2011; Vaught 2011). Standardization, merit-based pay, privatization, and market-style competition all bolster whiteness' ability to influence the degree to which teachers are able to disrupt the status quo.

Engaging Multicultural Education as Colorblind Difference

Whereas teachers' sameness discourse was powerblind and thus allowed them to avoid multiple important identity categories, their difference discourse highlighted particular identity categories that they were willing to see and name. Educators' associations of multicultural education with difference took two primary forms, both of which were related to ideas about the socioeconomic or language status of students. It is important to note that none of these appeals to difference were explicitly about race, although they were all coded for racial meaning. These difference discourses, then, ultimately rest on a colorblind ideology that ignores race and posits that race and racism do not matter in the lives of students and within our educational institutions. The way colorblindness allows teachers to avoid race is particularly important given the persistent racial achievement gaps in the Zion School District. Race clearly matters in this context, but even though educators at Spruce and Birch were making efforts to address the achievement gaps, they failed to consider how race matters in the very problems they were attempting to solve. Because race and racism form the core of whiteness, failing to acknowledge them also fails to challenge whiteness.

What distinguished educators' difference discourses of multicultural education from their sameness discourses was that certain categories of difference are permitted under the former. Although colorblind difference is a subset of powerblind sameness—that is, powerblind sameness includes, but is not limited to, colorblind difference—I discuss colorblind difference here separately in order to highlight the specific ways in which it is manifested at Birch and

Spruce. Illustrating how educators sometimes equated multicultural education with colorblind difference highlights how they sometimes recognized that students may possess certain differences among one another that impact the teaching and learning process. Importantly, however, engaging multicultural education as colorblind difference protects whiteness just as engaging multicultural education as powerblind sameness does.

Equating Multicultural Education with Low-Income Students

Ideas about poverty played a significant role in Birch teachers' understandings of multicultural education. This phenomenon is at least partly explained by the fact that almost every Birch student qualified for free or reduced lunch. Although over 80% of the students were students of color, when referencing notions of difference, Birch teachers generally avoided the topic of race and instead focused on the socioeconomic status of the local community. In response to my questions about what multicultural education is and why it might be important, one teacher explained how he had read and learned much more about how "living in poverty" affects students during his years of teaching at Birch. He noted that this information had "helped" him with being more likely to let things students say "go in one ear and out the other" because he realized that "they can say those things at home and that it's related to their low-income backgrounds." In a similar conversation, another teacher commented that "there's the culture of poverty and that's a lot of what's going on here at [Birch]." Like these two, most teachers I spoke with relied on their understandings of difference related to poverty to shed some light on student behaviors and attitudes that the teachers otherwise could not understand. Most teachers believed that they could be more effective when armed with what they perceived to be accurate and helpful information about "the culture of poverty."

A number of teachers at Spruce also referenced "poverty" as an important difference that informed their ideas about multicultural education. Throughout the year, I heard countless remarks from teachers and administrators about "the neighborhood kids" and the kids who were "bussed in." Although socioeconomic status was never explicitly named in these references, this was clearly what was meant and communally understood. Another example occurred one day during lunch when I mentioned an article in the morning paper that talked about how the state legislature recently passed a bill that could make Technology, Life Skills, and Careers courses optional in Utah schools. One of the teachers responded that she thought making these courses optional was a terrible decision because she felt "bad for the kids who don't have any role models at home." She wondered who

would teach them to “eat right and stay healthy” and concluded with “these kids need those skills.”

Other references to socioeconomic status as it relates to multicultural education were more explicit. In a conversation with one teacher about how her incorporation of multicultural education had changed over the past 10 years at Spruce, she explained: “We started to have a different population coming in that was a lot more poor kids and um . . . there were kids coming in that hated teachers. Their parents hated teachers.” Much like this teacher’s tendency to connect low-income status with “hating teachers,” a Spruce administrator talked about “poverty” as the “biggest factor in the school’s recent decline in test scores” and noted that “it’s been documented that drug use and neglect correlate to poverty”—alluding to the problems she believed they faced among the student body.

According to both teachers and administrators, most of their ideas about “poverty” came from reading groups and workshops related to Ruby Payne’s *Framework for Understanding Poverty* (1996). Payne notes that generational poverty “has its own culture, hidden rules, and belief systems” (64) and in discussing how to improve the academic achievement of children who come from “generational poverty,” Payne highlights a number of “cognitive deficiencies” that these children have. Overall, the text is very much based on the notion of a “culture of poverty” and argues that we are no longer able to “conduct school as we have in the past” because schools are enrolling more students “who bring the poverty culture with them” and are thus inherently deficient in a number of ways (79). This is clearly the sort of thinking that leads educators to conflate difference with deficit in ways that are both harmful to students and perpetuate and legitimate whiteness. Although this discourse around poverty is explicit about difference as it relates to social class, it makes no mention of race or how racism might be implicated in the ideas presented. Whiteness is protected not only because race and racism are presumed irrelevant but also because the structural arrangements that maintain social class hierarchies are ignored in favor of a deficit model that blames individuals for their class positions.

Equating Multicultural Education with “English as a Second Language”

Almost all the teachers in my study also made explicit connections between multicultural education and English as a second language (ESL)—so much so that they seemed to equate multicultural education simply with the education being provided in ESL-designated classrooms. This first struck me when I visited classrooms at the beginning of the year to introduce myself to teachers

who had volunteered to participate in my research. Although I had sent a letter describing my “research on multicultural education” that they all signed and less than a week earlier had introduced myself at faculty meetings and also described that my research was about “multicultural education,” almost every teacher at Spruce that I spoke with initially assumed I was only interested in observing the periods during which they taught ELL students. At least seven of the 12 teachers told me about their ESL classes and then hurried through the rest of their schedules with comments such as “the rest is just regular” math or language arts. They clearly and explicitly assumed that since I was interested in multicultural education, I would want to come to their ESL classes as opposed to mainstream classes during other periods.

Even teachers who did not teach ESL classes assumed that I was only interested in observing the ELL students in their mainstream classes. One teacher, for example, specifically pointed out to me who these students were and commented that “it might be interesting to see how they process differently from the other students,” and another teacher introduced me to a student by saying “she’s only been in the country a couple years so she might be an interesting student for you to talk to.” And still another teacher suggested that I attend a particular after-school program because English was the second language for almost all of the students in the program.

In a similar vein, at least half of the teachers in my study talked about the goal of multicultural education as being to “help” English-language learners gain better language skills and “get up to speed” with the mainstream population—thus basing their understandings of multicultural education on ideas about the differences among students and what is needed to be effective with these “different” students.

Angelina E. Castagno: What do you think the goals of multicultural education are, and how, if at all, do you work toward those goals?

Mr. Robeson: Ah, a lot of it is fairly basic. I mean, paying attention to the kids and if they have language problems and understanding and things like that, that you try to accommodate that.

Ms. Howard: Even with my multiculturals, I still do a lot of writing like vocabulary, because yeah, maybe they don’t get the vocabulary word but they are practicing writing, they are practicing spelling—even if they are not consciously realizing it.

Unfortunately, as these quotes illustrate, many references to “difference” also incorporate some reference to “deficit.” They also illustrate that many teachers are not actually colorblind despite their efforts to not see race.

At both Spruce and Birch, colorblind difference was especially evident in the tracking and lowered expectations of students from low-income and ELL back-

grounds. I regularly observed two Birch teachers, for example, say things to their “honors” classes such as “You guys can actually read so it makes it easier on me” and “I assume unlike most of my periods that most of you know how to spell your name and where you live.” And in another class the teacher regularly modified his teaching for his “remedial” classes to such an extent that they were rarely required to think on their own or even listen and take notes based on what they heard. Unfortunately, these sorts of lowered expectations fail to prepare students for high school (let alone college) and only serve to perpetuate their low academic achievement. The students certainly picked up on their placement in tracked classes, as was evident in student comments such as “We’re in remedial; we’re not supposed to do hard stuff,” and “I thought the whole point of remedial was that we got to go slower.” Thus, there was often a clear sense of difference between the classes and students in the classes.

The pervasiveness of tracking combined with lower expectations results in the systematic delivery of poor quality teaching for many students at both Spruce and Birch. Significantly, the students who are most affected are those who have been historically and consistently ill served by US schools—low-income students, English-language learners, and students of color. These practices serve to differentiate, sort, and Other students along social class, linguistic, and racial lines. Such system-wide marginalization of students protects whiteness by reproducing inequity, maintaining the current relations of and access to power, and failing to actualize the promise of multicultural education.

Protecting Whiteness through Colorblind Difference

Categories such as language and social class are certainly salient to students’ identities and experiences in school, but so is race, and many teachers exhibit a hyper-reluctance to see, name, and act according to that (Castagno 2008). A society in which race is irrelevant seems to be what many teachers strive to create in their classrooms—and many actually believe already exists—given their colorblind ideologies. But Frankenberg (1993) elaborates on why this colorblindness is problematic when she notes that “colorblindness, despite the best intentions of its adherents, in this sense preserves the power structure” (147). Although many of the teachers in this study were well intentioned when they strived for and even claimed a colorblind perspective, colorblind ideologies are neither possible nor desirable (Omi and Winant 1994). Furthermore, student learning cannot benefit from diversity when educators purport not to see race as one very important category of difference. Colorblindness protects whiteness by maintaining the belief that race does not matter. If race does not matter, then there cannot be inequity, privilege, or oppression based on

race and, therefore, whiteness neither exists nor is a problem worth examining and changing.

Colorblind difference also protects whiteness because educators’ focus on difference too often slipped into notions of deficit. A deficit model posits a strong and inevitable or natural connection between low academic achievement and students’ supposedly deprived family, economic, and social relations outside of school. For teachers who are well intentioned and truly believe they are doing all they can to “help” struggling students, the deficit model offers a kind of rationalization for the students’ continued lack of success and the teachers’ perpetual frustration (Lipman 1998). The deficit model protects whiteness by maintaining that inequity, privilege, and oppression are the fault of particular individuals rather than the result of purposeful structural arrangements.

It is easy to see how educators who possess a deficit framework are perpetuating inferior notions of traditionally marginalized students, but what might not be as obvious is the way in which a difference framework also results in the maintenance of hierarchies and systems of power and privilege. Consistent with this theme of difference in my research, difference is also a popular theme in the literature on education. Cultural difference theory has been prevalent for at least the past 25 years and is positioned in the literature as one explanation of why certain children tend to do poorly in schools (Erickson and Mohatt 1982; Philips 1982; also see Au and Mason 1981). The theory says that if a child’s home culture matches the dominant culture in schools, then that child is more likely to succeed in school, and vice versa, if a child’s home culture does not match that of school, they are more likely to fail and be disconnected from school (Erickson 1993; Heath 1983; Vogt et al. 1993).

My research points to a critique of how cultural difference theory has been taken up by some educators. Although cultural difference theory was developed in response to and as a critique of cultural deficit theory, I found that many teachers have co-opted the language of cultural difference in order to talk about deficit in ways that are more acceptable. In other words, I argue that notions of difference too often slide into a framework of cultural deficiency. Whereas a difference orientation assumes that people have different skills and cultural norms, a deficiency orientation assumes that those differences are inferior to the norm (see, e.g., Hess and Shipman 1965; Lewis 1966). I also argue that even when a deficit framework is not explicitly present, when a difference framework is translated into educational practice, it often results in the Othering of particular groups of students. Othering is the act of constructing someone as “the Other.” As Madrid (2004) describes, “Being *the other* means feeling different; is awareness of being distinct; is consciousness of being dissimilar” (25). Thus, Othering not only displaces an individual or group to

the margins, but it always implies a power difference between the person doing the Othering and the person being Othered. Ultimately, this Othering maintains power within and between groups of people and strengthens whiteness.

As I suggested earlier, however, whiteness works to influence teachers' discourse and practice in ways that reinscribe and relegitimate whiteness. Schools are clearly institutions that reflect and are shaped by the larger societies in which they find themselves. And the ethos within schools to get students through, stay on task, work in isolation, and prepare for the status quo further encourages the discourse and practices I have illustrated throughout this article. Because the daily grind of teachers' work and the rhythm of schooling frames so much of what teachers do and do not do, it would be a mistake to hold teachers solely responsible for the ways they protect whiteness. Whiteness prevents teachers from easily engaging work and ideas that are race-based and equity-driven. And, as I suggest in the final section, because whiteness is systemic, institutional, and ideological, its dismantling would require change at those levels—not simply change in individual discourse and practice.

The Ambiguity between Sameness and Difference

Although I have presented teachers' understandings here as fairly distinct and as either falling under the broad category of powerblind sameness or colorblind difference, it is important to remember that these appeals to sameness and difference were interwoven, simultaneous, and in constant tension. What is more interesting and significant than teachers' associations of multicultural education with powerblind sameness and colorblind difference is their persistent ambiguity and slippage between these two themes. In other words, teachers very rarely understood multicultural education as either about powerblind sameness or colorblind difference; instead, they shifted between these two concepts. The very same teachers who talked about "all students" also singled out their low-income students, the teachers who talked about learning styles also spent much time talking about "the ESL kids," and those who referenced the importance of human relations also explained how teachers should include certain information in their curriculum depending on the "culture" of the students sitting in their classroom. One teacher emphasized different levels and styles of learning in her discussion of multicultural education, but she also repeatedly slipped into dialogue about students from other countries. Another teacher told me, "I mean, like some of the things we are doing now . . . are just a lot of little things that you can do that just help all the kids. In some ways it's more focused on multicultural but in reality it's going to help all the kids if they pay attention" (emphasis added).

My interview transcripts and field notes from observations in both schools

indicated ambiguity between notions of powerblind sameness and colorblind difference, but none of the teachers indicated to me that they recognized the ambiguity between discourses of powerblind sameness and colorblind difference in their understandings of multicultural education. And why should they? Whiteness influences educators' discourse and practice and is subsequently protected and even strengthened by these discourses and practices. Put another way, ideologies of powerblind sameness and colorblind difference are not viewed as contradictory, ambiguous, or problematic because the ideology and institution of whiteness allows us to engage both simultaneously.

Closing Thoughts and Implications

In sum, then, I have illustrated how educators in the Zion School District overwhelmingly understood multicultural education in terms of both sameness and difference. Their notions of sameness related specifically to powerblind ideologies through their tendency to psychologize students as possessing various learning styles and humanize students as needing to improve their relational skills. Their notions of difference related specifically to the ways they Other students based on language and socioeconomic status but ignore race through colorblind ideologies.

My data highlight multiple ways in which multicultural education, as engaged by teachers in this study, results in the protection of whiteness. First, because majoritarian perspectives and knowledge are normalized, particular kinds of politeness are valued (so dialogue and action related to power and race are avoided), social harmony and unity are valued (so anything that might disrupt those goals is avoided), and meritocracy and equality are valued (so oppression is ignored and reproduction ensues). Second, race, structural arrangements, and inequity are obscured or ignored. This is achieved by centering on the individual and by Othering groups, perspectives, knowledges, and experiences that fall outside the norm. Third, social change is not pursued because schooling is neither critically examined, critiqued, nor seen as a politicized space and equity is not framed as a goal educators should pursue. Instead, assimilation to the dominant norm is pursued and potentially transformative philosophies and approaches are co-opted.

Overall, the way multicultural education is understood and engaged in the Zion School District is void of any connection to structural privilege and oppression. This absence is paired with assumptions of meritocracy and, therefore, results in a schooling system that sees students as individuals acting freely within a society that provides equal opportunities to all. These beliefs about the basic equality of our society are intimately linked to the ways in which deficit assumptions about students are present throughout teachers' under-

standings of multicultural education. Ultimately, then, Birch and Spruce teachers' understandings of multicultural education reflected an ambiguity between powerblind sameness and colorblind difference that works to reify the status quo and protect whiteness. Just as important, whiteness shapes and encourages teachers to engage multicultural education in precisely these ways—that is the power and “beauty” of the paradigm we currently find ourselves in.

Thus, when multicultural education was engaged by real teachers in the Zion School District, it became both everything and nothing. It was everything because multicultural education was used to describe the “good education” that most everyone seemed to be doing. But it was also nothing because it was void of any meaning related to greater equity and systemic social change. Rather than working to dismantle whiteness, multicultural education ended up protecting and thus perpetuating whiteness.

The implications of these findings are significant for teachers, teacher-educators, policy makers, and advocates of multicultural education. My data suggest that, perhaps unfortunately, the name “multicultural education” has been too far removed from its most progressive promises. This might mean that continuing to focus on “multicultural education” could result in further protecting whiteness in schools. All teachers, administrators, multicultural education scholars, and teacher/administrator educators need a better understanding and awareness of how multicultural education is understood by teachers in schools across the country. While there is much research highlighting the efforts of some teachers who seem to have embraced more critical forms of multicultural education, these teachers probably do not represent the majority of teachers in most schools.

Furthermore, whiteness is operating throughout society; it is a larger issue than educators can take on alone, but educators certainly occupy an important space for effecting social change. We must recognize that curricular and pedagogical changes will not change society, but that does not mean such changes should not be encouraged. Teachers need education that combines critical investigations of whiteness, race, and equity with an affective component in order to address the discomfort, guilt, and embarrassment that is likely to ensue from these investigations. Many scholars have found that White preservice teachers bring very little awareness and knowledge about race, racism, and power (Goodwin 1994; King 1991; McIntyre 1997; Su 1996, 1997), and my research indicates that practicing teachers are also lacking this awareness and knowledge. Sleeter's (2001) review of the research on preservice programs that attempt to prepare multicultural and culturally relevant teachers suggests that whiteness continues to predominate in teacher preparation efforts, so change must be undertaken in preparation programs as well as in districts.

Like districts across the country, although the Zion School District had a multicultural education policy and in-service opportunities addressing “diver-

sity” and had adopted the language of multicultural education, there is clearly much work to be done if the goal is to disrupt whiteness by improving the schooling of all students and ultimately bringing about educational equity. District leaders, principals, and teachers need clearly articulated plans for learning about and practicing power- and race-related discourse alongside equitable resource distribution. Teachers especially need to be supported in this work that will include mistakes, parental discontent, and community discomfort. This is not easy work, and it is an ongoing process, but it is both necessary and long overdue.

Importantly, most educators are well intentioned and want what is best for their students, but whiteness is protected despite (and sometimes through) even the best intentions. Part of the problem is that most educators are not aware of whiteness. But in addition to this lack of awareness, most educators are also invested in the status quo of whiteness (Lipsitz 1998). Educators' good intentions result in powerblind sameness and colorblind difference iterations of multicultural education—all of which privilege the individual; obscure or ignore race, structural arrangements, and inequity; and fail to work for social change.

In many ways, we should not be surprised by the findings I have presented. The teachers in my study were predominantly White, middle-class individuals who, for the most part, have little reason to disrupt the status quo and the current relations of power. Despite very different school contexts, teachers at Spruce and Birch engaged multicultural education in similar ways that both create and illuminate the ideological and institutional aspects of whiteness that run deep in US society. An almost perfect paradigm, whiteness both prevents us from working toward equity, justice, and democracy and is protected by our everyday engagements with powerblind sameness and colorblind difference.

Notes

1. Whiteness clearly operates outside of the United States as well, but addressing the global context and implications of whiteness is beyond the scope of this article.

2. See my forthcoming book, *Educated in Whiteness: Good Intentions and Diversity in U.S. Schools* (Castagno 2014), for a complete account of the ethnography.

3. All names are pseudonyms.

4. I do not mean to imply that all teachers in my study engaged multicultural education in the exact same ways. As I describe below, there were four primary ways multicultural education was understood by teachers. These four ways were not equally present in every teacher's classroom, but when analyzed collectively, they tell an important story about the relationship between multicultural education and whiteness. There were also a very small number of teachers in my study who stood as exceptions to the patterns outlined in this article, but I take up that conversation elsewhere (Castagno 2014).

5. Due to space limitations, a full articulation of CRT and the ways it informs my work is not possible here, but some of the key texts from which I gain inspiration include Bell (1980, 1992), Brayboy (2005), Crenshaw et al. (1995), Delgado and Stefancic (2001), Harris (1993), and Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995).

6. I thank Gaetano Scense for this illustrative phrase.

7. Despite common understandings of the word "co-opt," I am not convinced that it requires conscious intent on the part of the actor. In the tradition of Bell's (1992) work, I am more concerned with the effects of people's actions than with the reasoning or motivations driving the actions. This is similar to Gillborn's (2007) analysis of racism in the United Kingdom educational system and his use of the word "conspiracy" (which builds on a long history of African American scholarship on conspiracy).

8. For another discussion of the tension between a focus on individuals and structural racism within the dominant racial paradigm among teachers, see Vaught and Castagno (2008).

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Book Reviews

School, Society, and State: A New Education to Govern Modern America, 1890-1940 by Tracy L. Steffes. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012. 304 pp., \$40.00.

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Public schools in the nineteenth century were community institutions, governed by locally elected boards, financed through local property taxes, and deferential to parental demands. Parents determined when their children attended school and occasionally even what they studied. In rural areas, where the majority of Americans lived, tens of thousands of one-room schools dotted the landscape, heaving closely to a vision of American education in which small farming communities, under the district system, managed educational affairs. Given the local nature of American education, city-, county-, and state-level school administration barely existed. Many nineteenth-century Americans often jealously guarded their schools from any signal of outside government intervention. Others did not even bother, scoffing at the notion that state education departments, with their average number of three employees, could shape local practices if they tried.

By 1910, Tracy L. Steffes writes in *School, Society, and State*, this nineteenth-century world had disappeared. Urban and state school bureaucracies grew to include dozens, even hundreds, of employees housed within centralized administrative units. As cities and states placed increasing emphasis on enforcing school attendance, parents lost the autonomy over when and how they educated their children. Rural American education experienced equally profound changes. Legislatures provided equalization funds or grants to districts in order to offset disparities produced by the reliance on local property taxes. States also installed new administrative units at the county and township level and successfully encouraged waves of school consolidation. Larger primary schools and burgeoning high schools, in turn, introduced new subjects into the curriculum meant to equip students with the cognitive and vocational

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