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# Exploring Teacher Development through Racial Discourse

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**Abstract**

In reviewing the book, Making Meaning of Whiteness, by Alice McIntyre, I discussed the author's examination of whiteness through the lenses of white female, student teachers. I underscored how McIntyre employed a Participatory Action Research methodology (drawing on feminist theory), as a way to understand how her participants made meaning of whiteness. The study's findings reveal that for the participants, their "whiteness" is normal, which may serve to hinder their capacity for developing culturally responsive teaching practices.

**Keywords**

Collaborative, Feminism, Participatory Action Research, Transformational

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*In reviewing the book, Making Meaning of Whiteness, by Alice McIntyre, I discussed the author's examination of whiteness through the lenses of white female, student teachers. I underscored how McIntyre employed a Participatory Action Research methodology (drawing on feminist theory), as a way to understand how her participants made meaning of whiteness. The study's findings reveal that for the participants, their "whiteness" is normal, which may serve to hinder their capacity for developing culturally responsive teaching practices. Keywords: Collaborative, Feminism, Participatory Action Research, Transformational*

Alice McIntyre courageously embarked on an exploration of white racial identity with white student teachers in her book, *Making Meaning of Whiteness*. McIntyre's interpretive study stimulates renewed thinking on the complexities of race discourse in education; imaginably bringing comfort to readers with a degree of anxiety about race conversations in educational spaces. The theme of "discourse" was highlighted prominently in the book, and interwoven in ways that exploit how the author's participants made meaning of their "whiteness." Rather than rely on conventional notions of discourse to illustrate participant meaning making, McIntyre (1997) informs us that discourse is language that should be multidimensional, and something that can be "created, shaped, reproduced, and contested" (p. 172). In her genius, I sense that the author's reframing of discourse essentially forces the reader to think critically about ways to construct information across the intersections of racial identity, race, racism, and the meaning of whiteness.

What I learned from researching McIntyre's background is that she is an accomplished educator, and has developed a niche as a researcher specializing in Participatory Action Research (PAR). In her book, she describes how she employed a PAR methodology with thirteen white undergraduate female student teachers; all whom were members of a teacher preparation program at a private northeastern university. Similar to the custom in which interpretive researchers rationalize their research design choices, McIntyre contended that PAR was an appropriate methodology for exploring how the participants in her study made meaning of their whiteness. She made clear that her study on whiteness was grounded in research literature on education; stating emphatically that much of the literature offers "new and improved suggestions for training teachers about multicultural education" (McIntyre, 1997, p. 18). Interestingly, the plethora of reviewed literature did not preclude McIntyre from bemoaning. She expressed discontent about the lack of ground-breaking "research into the relationship between white racial attitudes, beliefs, and how white teachers make meaning of whiteness and its relationship to multicultural education" (McIntyre, 1997, p. 18). Given her expression, one can reasonably intuit that McIntyre (1997) brushed off her dismay, and saw this research gap as an opportunity to reframe racial identity in her study as a social activity "that is constantly being created and recreated in situations" (p. 18). McIntyre's comment, however, is contrasting to the usual constructs of racial identity. She highlights per the literature how this construct is often entrenched within developmental models "consisting of statuses and various transitions to the formation of a healthy racial identity" (p. 18).

McIntyre's study was guided by a feminist framework, an approach that views gender as "a basic organizing principle that shapes the conditions of [female] their lives" (Creswell, 2007, p. 26). This approach readily aligns with the author's aim in examining how white female student teachers make meaning of whiteness across their teacher training experiences. McIntyre's understanding of feminist research as transformative allowed her to strive toward an understanding of how white racial identity and whiteness shape educational practices. Consistent with PAR, McIntyre freely "joined" with her participants in a collaborative examination of white racial identity and whiteness. Her actions evinced how feminist research seeks to "place the researcher within the study so as to avoid objectification" (Creswell, 2007, p. 26). Notwithstanding the significance of communal discourse, this transforming process allowed McIntyre and her participants to view themselves as white; a relatively new phenomenon to most of the participants.

In light of McIntyre's bonding with the participants, I would be remiss for not discussing her data collection strategy, which essentially legitimized meaningful discourse on whiteness. The author conducted semi-structured interviews, a data collection technique common to interpretive research. The interviews were taped, and the information from the tapes was crucial for McIntyre (1997) to understand how "participants made meaning of their whiteness" (p. 24). The interviews mainly gave McIntyre an opportunity to assess the participants' ideas about how being white functions within the field of education. McIntyre also collected data from carrying out what she labeled as group talk sessions. These sessions allowed the participants to discuss and share stories about their teaching experiences in relation to the subject of race. Important to McIntyre from these sessions, and certainly something that readers and educators could appreciate, was that the participants "engaged in a consciousness-raising process that involved critical dialogue and the naming and analyzing of the participants' realities around the issues of whiteness, white racial identity, race, racism, and teaching" (McIntyre, 1997, pp. 24-25).

McIntyre (1997) offered insights into how she analyzed the rich data she obtained, stating that she "listened, and relistened, to the session tapes, identifying the codes (i.e. themes) and concepts" (p. 152) heard after each interview and group talk. The data supported her theoretical aims "regarding the relationship between language and how the participants made meaning of whiteness" (p. 151). In one particular instance of her analysis, McIntyre coined the term "white talk." She explained in detail that this phenomenon insulates white people from examining their individual and collective role(s) in the perpetuation of racism. Although "white talk" was a central component to this study, it did not overshadow the author's interest in "documenting the interruptions, overlaps, silences, and ways that participants both challenged one another, and colluded in uncritically accepting problematic race talk" (McIntyre, 1997, p. 152). McIntyre's effort in examining these nuances was equally important to the dialogues she held with the thirteen participants.

The author noted that the conversations during group sessions were indicative of the participants having had little, if any, opportunity to talk with persons outside of their race. Hence, it comes to no surprise that the participants' sources of exposure to people of color came from a variety of media sources, family members, peers, and textbooks (McIntyre, 1997). Additional analysis contained data evidencing the pervasiveness of white racism and the lack of awareness that white people have concerning their own racism. Perhaps the most intriguing finding from McIntyre's (1997) study was that for "young white females, being white is normal, typical, and functions as a standard for what is right, what is good, and what is true" (p. 135). This likely suggests that during the course of their lived experiences, the participants had reified whiteness as normative. And to some extent, there exists among them some degree of conformity with the "dominant white Eurocentric discourse that underlies white society's ways of thinking, living, and relating with people of color" (p. 135).

Rightfully so, McIntyre acknowledge having fundamental concerns about the discourse of race in education, and the complexities of tackling issues of race in schools, given these and other findings.

Overall, this particular study allowed McIntyre (1997) to examine white identity, to critically think about whiteness, race and racism, and to consider what whiteness means to practices in education. The methodological and transformative nature of PAR includes tenets of social change," collective investigation, education, and action at different moments throughout the research process" (McIntyre, 1997, p. 20). Notably, the book enhances the way readers think about elements of human subjectivity and consciousness, and how these elements intertwine in creating knowledge in PAR methodologies. An important lesson to be learned from McIntyre's book is that when researchers employ PAR methodologies, they must be responsible for ensuring that participants are active in their reflection, and that they commit to engaging in actions and behaviors that might lead to significant growth and transformation. Further, the researcher should position themselves in their own research. McIntyre evidenced this by positioning herself in her research as a white female dealing with whiteness. By all means, her action was central to both PAR, and to the goal of feminist research in establishing collaborative relationships (Creswell, 2007). I gained an appreciation for how the author acknowledged that her research may never end. She contended that there are still "roadblocks and detours of our own racial histories, lived experiences, and positionalities in the system of whiteness (McIntyre, 1997, p. 134). In the end, this speaks to the notion that all PAR studies may not reveal the transformative response that many would expect, especially when the participants in her study perceived being white as normal and typical.

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## Author Note

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