

**Culturally Responsive Education, The Panopticon, and Cultural Wall:  
A White Teacher's Reflection on Identity**

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**Abstract:** The dynamics of White teacher identity are analyzed through the tenets of Foucault's Panopticon, as a physical and metaphorical structure for knowledge and power. The Panopticon illustrates the complex manifestation of White vigilance and societal position permeating even teacher identity. This study delineates a White teacher's identity and the unconscious barrier, *cultural wall that* impedes full consideration of their identity and their ability to connect with culturally and linguistically diverse students. This study serves to add to current literature to promote dialogue about the need for better pre-service and professional development regarding reflective practices for teachers working with multilingual and multicultural learners.

**Keywords:** culturally responsive education, power, multilingual, Foucault, consciousness, Panopticon, culturally and linguistically diverse

## Introduction

In the Fall of 1992, I was completing my student teaching on the Shoshone-Bannock Indian Reservation in Idaho. I will never forget something a Sho-Ban teenager asked me, “What does it feel like to be White?” I had no response. I had never thought about being White not to mention what that might have meant for an indigenous youth. I had earned my teaching degree from Idaho State University and the education courses at that time never addressed learning about student background, experiences or cultures, never mind my own. You were told to just get out there and teach. Thirty years later, after teaching English language learners in public schools and various countries overseas, I can state with confidence that it would have been advantageous early in my career to have had a deeper understanding of my own identity in order to work with culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students. There were never any conversations in education classes about how White people’s background and experiences impact their multilingual and multicultural students on significant and varying levels. For many White teachers taking a multicultural education course or required “cultural competency training” in their workplace, is the only time they may encounter a direct and sustained challenge to their racial understandings. But even in this arena, not all multicultural courses or training programs talk directly about racism, much less address White privilege (DiAngelo, 2018). Whiteness is rarely defined in these courses; even in general society, many White people are not informed about the impact and significance of their racial and cultural identity. Frankenberg states that Whiteness, “is a location of structural advantage, of race privilege. Second, it is a ‘standpoint,’ a place from which White people look at ourselves, at others, and at society. Third, ‘Whiteness’ refers to a set of cultural practices that are usually unmarked and unnamed”(1993, p.1). Most teachers in the United States are White; they make up the vast majority of the teacher workforce. Their White collective identity is many times viewed as “unmarked” or “unnamed” yet they are engaging with students from People of the Global Majority, whose identities

are marked and named. How White teachers process and increase inclusive teaching experiences that reflect the needs of a diverse student population is critical. This study illustrates the unpacking of a White teacher's identity who instructs English language learners in rural Idaho; it sheds light upon the need for White teachers to acknowledge their identity and culture when teaching multicultural and multilingual students so as to effectively capture moments of inclusivity for diverse students. Uniquely, the utilization of Foucault's Panopticon as a lens to filter this insight is integral to the overarching, ever-present, nameless structures of race, power and privilege embedded in society.

### **Literature Review**

Geneva Gay states, "Culturally responsive teaching can be defined as using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant and effective for them. It teaches to and through the strengths of these students. It is validating and affirming" (2010). In this vein, culturally responsive education is cultural knowledge; it is identity knowledge. Hanley states, "it enables ownership of learning, which stimulates curiosity and imagination... an appreciation of what students already know can motivate further learning by validating the idea that the students are learners and always have been"(2009). Gramsci stated in the 1970's, if culture defines the value system for which groups of people exist, race and its enactment through racism and white supremacy is how groups of people are structured within a society that maintains a hegemonic power (Gramsci, 1971). Thus, without a racial analysis of the purpose, positioning, and liberating employment of culturally responsive education, we inadvertently silence the main societal problems of education. For White teachers to become culturally responsive teachers, they must first understand the context that gives them privilege. One way to do this is to embed critical Whiteness studies with culturally responsive and critical race literature. Matias states, "White teacher candidates need to first learn about their white-selves... Too often teacher education becomes insular"

(2013). Becoming a culturally responsive teacher is more than learning about the cultures of the students. Culturally responsive education is about connecting Self and one's relationship to society as well as identifying effective practices to link to the CLD students. In order to get White teachers to attain such awareness, there must be self-development through reflective practices. Reflection on teaching and learning is considered one of the most essential elements of teacher development. Culturally responsive education intends to honor multilingual and multicultural students' cultures, backgrounds, languages and communities; their education should connect academic learning to their lives, passions, and struggles outside of school. Yet, it is void of significance if teacher reflection is not incorporated as a key component in instructing teachers how to engage in culturally responsive education; reflection on teaching and learning is considered one of the most essential elements of teacher development (Ryken and Hamel, 2016; Chubbuck & Zembylas, 2008; Matias, 2013). For White teachers to become culturally responsive, however, scholars have argued that they must also examine how Whiteness perpetuates racial supremacy in urban schools across the United States. The imbalance between the racial identities of teachers and students in the American school system is significant. Howard and Milner (2014) state, largely White teachers "are not being well prepared to teach in urban schools across the United States, which is directly connected to their performance in these schools" (p. 200). In addition, Whiteness operates as invisible to a majority of White teachers while visible to many students of color (Taylor, Gillborn, & Ladson-Billings, 2023). As such, Whiteness, though socially constructed, is an ideology, epistemology, emotionality, and psychology that often produces concrete systemic racism by normalizing these elements as invisible (Picower, 2009). Whites dominate the field of education thus White teachers have two options in their role within the racial structure of culturally responsive education. First, they can say nothing, maintain a false colorblind ideology, and refuse to learn about race and Whiteness, which ultimately defaults to maintaining White racial dominance.

Secondly, they can revolt against a supremacist school system when they choose to self-initiate anti-racist endeavors, a process needed to become White allies and thus effective culturally responsive teachers (hooks, 2003; Tatum, 2009). Culturally responsive education for White educators is not a simple intellectual revolution. It is a rationally-emotional revolution based on the humanizing project of racial justice for all; and not just about the cultures of Black and Brown students but about how these students were racially positioned in a racist system that made and continues to make culturally responsive teaching an avenue for fighting back (Matias, 2013). Because Whiteness is socially constructed (Frankenberg, 1993, Fylkesnes, 2018) it is linked to institutionalized power/knowledge hence to privileged White people (Chubbuck, 2004, Gillborn, 2006, Roediger, 2010). However, as Leonardo (2009) and others have stated, the critical study of Whiteness should not only be concerned with privilege but also with detecting and deconstructing actions that conceal White racial hegemony (Gillborn, 2006). Importantly, White racial domination, the discursive power/knowledge processes that sustain the hegemonic ideology of White supremacy, resides (to the “surprise” of most liberal Whites) in “the domain of average, tolerant people, lovers of diversity, and believers in justice” (Leonardo, 2004, p. 143). This, because Whiteness, as a discursive ideology of White supremacy, does nothing to disrupt these good people's “business-as-usual” behavior (Delgado & Stefanic, 2023) that maintains their status quo. White educators who utilize culturally responsive education to work with multicultural and multilingual students must be willing to consider what their racial and cultural identities signify for their students as well as when advancing culturally responsive education.

### **The Panopticon & Foucault**

It is at this juncture that the Panopticon, as understood through the writings of Foucault represent the surveillance, power, and privilege a teacher maintains over their classroom. Foucault addressed issues related to power, knowledge, and social control to the Panopticon. It is a study about prisoners and

control based upon Jeremy Bentham's prison system called the Panopticon: it was a social control mechanism that would become a comprehensive symbol for modern authority and discipline in the western world (Semple, 1993). The Panopticon is described as "an annular building; at the center, a tower; this tower is pierced with wide windows that open onto the inner side of the ring; the peripheric building is divided into cells, each of which extends the whole width of the building; they have two windows, one on the inside, corresponding to the windows of the tower; the other, on the outside, allows the light to cross the cell from one end to the other"(Cherry and Rojas, 2016). Bentham also states about the Panopticon, "all that is needed, then, is to place a supervisor in a central tower and to shut up in each cell a madman, a patient, a condemned man, a worker or a schoolboy"(Cherry and Rojas, 2016). Foucault relates the idea of the Panopticon to a symbol of social control that extends into everyday life for all citizens, not just those in the prison system (Foucault, 1979). This symbolism of internalized social control is related to a citizen monitoring their own actions and adhering to a set of rules even if there is no authority figure present to observe the action. Foucault postulates that this internalized self-monitoring keeps people at all levels of society as a part of a self-disciplined whole to the extent that the "security guard in the tower" is no longer needed; the sole presence of the tower as a physical structure is enough for people to engage in self-monitoring practices. Julius states, "the Panopticon is a machine for dissociating the see/being seen in the peripheric ring, one is totally seen, without ever seeing; in the central tower, one sees everything without ever being seen"(1831). For the purposes of this study, the Panopticon symbolizes the power of a system that emulates from a central tower. It represents the omnipresent vigilance of a teacher over their domain. Exploring White teacher identity through the Panopticon has significant implications for issues of equity and educational and social advancement for the majority White teacher workforce in the United States. In addition, Morgan states (2017), teacher identity represents "a key source of agency for social change" (p. 206). Albeit teacher identity is a

resource in promoting teacher agency; it can also serve as an obstacle to the promotion of socially just education. Teacher identity work emphasizing the agency and transformative power of teachers (Lauwo, Accurso, & Rajagopal, 2022) is critical to its progress in the 21st Century. In essence, if most of the current teacher workforce is White working with students from People of the Global Majority, then a critical review of what the implication of the physical and metaphorical structure of the Panopticon represents must be considered in its entirety in this study.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this research is to examine the experiences and reflections of a White teacher from rural Idaho who teaches English language learners. This investigation was accessed through the teacher engaging in reflective practices to understand their cultural and racial identity. The second aim of the study is to increase awareness about teacher preparedness and their ability to connect to culturally and linguistically diverse students through self-reflection. A tertiary aim of this study is to add to current literature regarding the need to improve pre-service teacher programs and professional development in order to effectively employ the overall intent of culturally responsive education.

### **METHODS**

The qualitative data in this research is based on autoethnography as a reflexive stance on one's own culture; inductive analysis was an emergent strategy through the practice of open coding. I utilized memo writing to keep track of my inquiry process. This running memo is where I read through data and developed and applied codes. The data collection tools for this research are the Participant Questionnaire and Identity Journal. The participant questionnaire data was initially edited for correct English and clarity yet upon further reflection for authenticity the participant's verbatim responses were incorporated in the research.

## Participant

The participant lives and works in southeastern Idaho and asked that their identity be concealed using a pseudonym as well as the school. \*Mrs. Roberts is fifty-five years old. The participant was born and raised in a farming community in eastern Idaho and attended Idaho State University in Pocatello, Idaho. Idaho State University (ISU) is a public university. ISU has approximately 11,766 students; 74.1% White, 12% Hispanic, 5.6 Unknown, 2.9 Multi-ethnic, 2.3 International, 1.8 Asian and 1.3 Black (Idaho State University Diversity: Racial Demographics & Other Stats, 2023). The participant has a twenty year career as a high school English language learner teacher in a pull-out program. The school is a rural high school with a population of 660 students; the English language learners population is 23 students. The data collected took place during various intervals to discuss their background and experiences. The most crucial element for the selection of the participant was their self-identification as a middle-class White female teacher and self-identified as a member of “normal” (participant’s word) American society. Data was collected via Google meet and in-person (pre-covid pandemic). This participant engaged in reflective practices that painted a picture of their identity as a White English language learner teacher; the community where the school is located is based on agriculture. The guiding research questions were embedded in the Participant Questionnaire and Identity Journal which served as focal points to gather and examine data points about the participant’s background and experiences as a White individual and teacher working with English language learners. Each session entailed the following data collection tools:

1. Participant Questionnaire (See Appendix A)
2. Identity Journal (See Appendix B)

Data was analyzed for validity and reliability regarding the participant’s responses to the open-ended research questions. The participant responded to seventeen questions for the Participant



Questionnaire yet only responses to questions 1, 5, 10, 11, 15, 16, and 17 are listed in the Participant Questionnaire section (see below). The recording of interviews data was recorded in the researcher's running memos.

### **Participant Questionnaire**

1. Tell me about your childhood.

Well...uh (sigh) my childhood ... it was uh was kinda boring. Ya know there were eight of us kids...hmmm... we lived on a farm...grew potatoes. ...weren't rich, I guess we struggled ya know the family. Hmmm...we all played with the same kids (pause) all the time...let's see uh we all went to church together. I guess uh my family looked like everyone else (pause) just...well... regular Americans.

5. Were there ever any social taboos or restrictions growing up?

Well...hmmm...be home by a certain time...no alcohol alcohol or smoking. We uh stayed with people we grew up with. We uh well didn't mix with outsiders. Parents controlled TV time.

10. How were people different from you treated in your community?

Let's see, not too many differences...everyone was White. Second thought, there were (pause) farmworkers or sheep shearers around...uh migrant workers too I guess. Well, they had kids who went to school...they kept to themselves... no one paid much attention (pause) to them, I guess.

11. How would you describe yourself?

Geez...not exciting (laughing). I'm Mormon...uh a woman. I guess, you know, blonde... blue eyes like my mom um...fair skin...hmm...a mom and wife...a teacher.

15. Describe how you learned to work with culturally and linguistically diverse students either in your teacher training classes or your student teaching experience.

Like being (pause) a teacher was about teaching you know. Just teach content and uh well help them uh you know fit in. Hmm...I mean now... we learn about their cultures uh now not ignore it. Like ages ago in the education classes those things were never well uh discussed. You know? Like I don't know why it just was not talked about. Being an ESL teacher (participant's words) was about teaching them English and like helping them be uh um American.

16. Describe your current English language learner (ELL) class and difficulties you encounter.

Hard to get parents involved; I speak a little Spanish, not very good uh though. Like students move around a lot you know they uh work in agriculture like potato harvest, etc. You know.. I think they don't get me, you know, like we are in a classroom together but like uh worlds a part...I uh guess it's like really relating with them beyond just straight teaching is well hard.

17. How would you describe your cultural identity? Does your cultural identity help you or hinder you in connecting with culturally and linguistically diverse students in your class now?

Never thought I had a culture (laughing). Well, hmm...I'm just White...we have our ways in Idaho I guess. ... I'm lucky in America everyone learns my ways and English not like uh my students.

### **Identity Journal**

How would you describe being White?

Well being a normal American ...well, let's see I guess not too many other types of people around. White is just a regular American I guess.

How has any form of discrimination impacted your life?

Discrimination? Never. I mean it hasn't. Well uh hmm on a mission in Ireland and I did feel like I was shut out ...not accepted.

Is being White advantageous?

Probably, never thought about it. Let's see, just didn't have to I guess. It was (pause) almost 100% White where I'm from. Ya know like I think I have lots of opportunities that many non-Whites (participant's word) don't but well you know I never knew that back then.

## Findings

The examination of coded data resulted in categories of power/Self and Other/outsider. These categories gleaned from the data allowed for particular understanding of the participant regarding their cultural and racial identity. The themes of Self and Other reveal that although the participant is trained to work with English language learners, there is still a sense of a limited understanding of their own identity and background experiences that could serve as a strong connection to multilingual and multicultural students. I have coined this as a *cultural wall*. The *cultural wall* functions as an imperceptible barrier, it operates to keep the individual "blind" to aspects about themselves but also as an impediment to bridging to the "Other". The participant's cultural identity as White served as a *cultural wall*. The participant's position within Whiteness placed them in a figurative manner in a central tower of observance over the Other in cells below. The theme of power/Self was gleaned from coded data that showed the White participant correlating to a dominant, mainstream identity while students correlated to the theme of outsider/Other. The findings demonstrate how the *cultural wall* is significant because it serves as a shield from the White teacher's awareness of their societal and cultural mark. The *cultural wall* serves to maintain a sense of impunity or liberty. The *cultural wall* does not act in the same manner as DuBois's double consciousness and the veil, where African Americans have knowledge about their own lives and about the activities of those who live on the other side of the veil (DuBois, 1903). The findings reveal the participant, a White female teacher, is able to reflect upon their culture and racial identity through reflective practices yet connections to "Other" are limited due to the *cultural wall*. The findings demonstrate how Whiteness does not necessitate an

outreaching or understanding of the “Other”. A teacher is a guide and a living embodiment of their experiences, traditions, and worldview; these elements are consequential in the learning and lives of their students. The analysis of the participant’s identity reveals not only a *cultural wall* but a camouflaged insight about the possible impact of their identity as quantified through background experiences, cultural knowledge, socio-racial positioning (to name a few) in order cogently apply culturally responsive education.

### **Discussion**

Culture is a kaleidoscope of sophisticated and concealed elements. From culture emerges identity that simultaneously encompasses power and the absence of power. The Self exists along altering points in reference to the Other. The process of the participant engaging in contemplative practices revealed the participant’s sense of an insular, unknowing Self and its relation to “Other”. The participant, a White teacher, is the manifestation of the unuttered norm of Whiteness; if White teacher identity is an aphonic, unvoiced state then their authentic Self with all of its background experiences and knowledge is an untapped resource for teaching and learning. To this end, the participant’s identity notably intersects with Foucault’s concept of power and vigilance through the lens of the Panopticon.



“Whiteness” is something they are born into and have no control over and it simply awaits them like a “cell” as does anyone’s station in life. Yet the correlation of the guard in the tower to Whiteness is that eventually the guard is no longer needed; it is absorbed and its capacity of possible existence still maintains a level of power. Whiteness or the White participant in the central tower represents a norm that is unspoken. This sense that Whiteness is the norm is significant for the majority White teacher workforce instructing students of the People of the Global Majority because teacher awareness about their own background/experiences/cultural and racial identity is invaluable; this awareness allows for teachers the opportunity to recognize similarities between themselves and their culturally and linguistically diverse students. Such awareness contributes to the generation of open, honest dialogue, participation, sharing, and learning. This research adds to the richness about the academic literature on culturally responsive education and White teachers in that the cultivation of dialogue about White teacher identity cannot be restricted or taboo.

### **Implications**

The implications of this study on future research are multifarious. This research is significant because it focuses on a lens of culturally responsive education that is often given as an afterthought to its implementation: focus on White teacher identity who instruct multilingual and multicultural students in rural areas. This study demonstrates the need to support White teachers in rural areas with better professional development opportunities to increase their ability to practice CRE. It also exposes the need for better pre-service and teacher training development for this cohort of educators. Teachers who are taught to critically reflect upon their identity, culture and experiences will positively impact classroom dynamics with culturally and linguistically diverse students.

### **Limitations and Strengths**

The limitation of this study is that it is not representative of the total population of White female teachers. Also, the sample size is restricted to one teacher. Another limitation is the researcher's personal bias in executing the study which may have skewed the results. A strength of the study is that it provides a detailed description of a form of qualitative research about an unique perspective on the topic of culturally responsive education; there is an obligation of the education community to create dialogue about the role of White teacher identity in multilingual and multicultural classrooms.

### **Conclusion**

In closing, the research presented in this paper demonstrates value in the consideration of a White teacher's background and identity as related to culturally responsive education and the Panopticon. If teachers are expected to engage effectively with multilingual and multicultural students and connect with students' backgrounds and cultures then they must know who they are as cultural beings. If culturally responsive education is meant to increase critical thinking related to student experiences and background so as to advance positive academic and social growth, it is clear that it includes the creation of dialogue about White teacher experiences. Teacher self-knowledge has profound implications upon their ability to instruct culturally and linguistically diverse students. This study focuses on the identity of a rural White female teacher which is significant for modern day education. Madeline Will states "Who is the average teacher? A 43-year-old White woman, with nearly a decade and a half of teaching experience"(2020). If this is the profile of the average teacher then it is imperative that steps are taken during teacher training and pre-service courses to create dialogue about the importance of reflecting upon their identity and culture. King states, "good teaching is not a function of the color of our skin. It is much more closely related to the temperament of our mind and the hue of our heart. We did not choose *whether* to be White, but we can affect *how* we are White" (2000). Ultimately, identity is not a state of

nothingness; understanding it is an esteemed resource for academic and social exchange and growth in education. Over the years, I have taught graduate classes in education in universities as an adjunct and when teacher identity and culture is discussed; it always amazes me that People from the Global Majority actively discuss their culture(s) and traditions, stories, and struggles and invariably most White teachers sit in silence. More than once I have been approached by White teachers stating they did not feel like they had any culture to talk about or they felt embarrassed about negative aspects associated with White people. Sometimes there was even aggressive backlash from graduate students for mentioning Whiteness. Space must be created for real discussions about White teacher identity in multilingual and multicultural classrooms in order to decrease possible cultural segregation, promote inclusiveness, and increase teacher contributions within culturally responsive education; it can be a place of honesty and revitalization toward an ethical vision in education.

### **Researcher Reflective Subjectivity**

Reflexivity is tied to the researcher's ability to make and communicate nuanced and ethical decisions amid the complex work of generating real-world data that reflect the messiness of participants' experiences and social practices (Finlay, 2002). As a researcher, I have engaged in fieldwork and research in Vietnam, Indonesia, Papua New Guinea, Dominican Republic, Israel, and Japan as related to culture, language, and identity. I earned my PhD. at the University of Arizona from the Department of Language, Reading, and Culture. My dissertation is entitled: *Ethnogenesis, Identity, and the Dominican Republic, 1844-Present*. My career in education started in a room at the then tribal center that also served as the alternative school for the Shoshone-Bannock Reservation in Idaho. Being a White teacher was not an asset in that scenario, the students needed to see teachers who looked like them and understood their socio-cultural identity and heritage and none of my education classes helped me to bridge a connection. Luckily, I did have native friends who assisted from time to time and I did Rodeo so the connection



through horses was valuable. From there, I taught middle school on the Sonoran border in San Luis, Arizona where the student body was ninety-nine percent Mexican/Mexican-American and being a White teacher was again, I felt, not an asset even though I speak Spanish. I moved on to work in the Dominican Republic, Indonesia, and finally Long Island, New York. I have continually explored the nuances of being a White teacher; I have grappled with challenging assumptions about Whiteness through an emic perspective while simultaneously employing an etic lens. As a researcher, it is formidable to critique Whiteness as a field of study when one is White; there is always this inauspicious sense that one is missing something that one resides within their own *cultural wall*.

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[data-on-the-teaching-profession/2020/04](https://fs.blog/the-panopticon-effect/)

## Figures

Figure 1 <https://fs.blog/the-panopticon-effect/>

## Appendix A

### Participant Questionnaire

1. Tell me about your childhood.
2. Describe the type of food you ate growing up.
3. Tell me about your immediate and extended family.
4. Describe your friends growing up.
5. Were there ever any social taboos or restrictions growing up?
6. What were your experiences like in K-12 schooling?
7. Describe a typical classroom from your youth (from whatever grade).
8. What holidays did you celebrate at home and/or school?
9. Describe the demographic make-up of your school(s) growing up.
10. How were people different from you treated in your community?
11. How would you describe yourself?
12. How did you interact with people different from yourself in K-12 schooling?
13. Tell me about your best and worst experiences at university.
14. Describe what you learned in your teacher training program at university.
15. Describe how you learned to work with culturally and linguistically diverse students either  
in your teacher training classes or your student teaching experience.
16. Describe your current ESL class and difficulties you encounter.

17. How would you describe your cultural identity? Does your cultural identity help you or hinder you in connecting with culturally and linguistically diverse students in your class now?

## **Appendix B**

### **Identity Journal**

How would you describe being white?

Is being white advantageous?

How has any form of discrimination impacted your life?

How would your life have been different if you had not been born White in America?

How would your life have been different if English wasn't your first language?

How do you think it is different for your students not being White or English-speaking?