

White Racial Identity and Anti-Racist Education: A Catalyst for Change

by Sandra M. Lawrence and Beverly Daniel Tatum

Although race and race-related issues permeate and influence every social institution, any White teachers currently teaching in schools have had little exposure to a type of education in which the impact of race on classroom practice and student development was systematically examined (Sleeter, 1992; Zeichner, 1993). Some teacher education

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programs have responded to this disparity by providing teacher education students with courses dealing with multicultural issues as well as with experiences in diverse classroom settings. Similarly, some school districts have provided school faculty with multicultural professional development workshops and programs. Despite these pre- and in-service attempts to address this "deficiency" in White teachers' education, few studies of these programs have been conducted. And because both undergraduate and professional development efforts to prepare teachers to teach in a diverse world vary greatly in substance and duration, the limited research that has been conducted on these endeavors shows mixed

results. While some findings reveal that White teachers have more positive feelings about people of color after participating in multicultural courses and programs (Bennet, Niggle & Stage, 1990; Larke, Wiseman & Bradley, 1990), it seems that few of these programs have had the ability to influence either prospective or current teachers' views about themselves as racial

beings or to alter existing teaching practices (McDiarmid & Price, 1993; Sleeter, 1992).

Even though the number of studies that point to successful multicultural and anti-racist courses continues to be low, we believed that what we were doing in our courses with our students was more successful than what we had read about in formal studies. Sandra's teaching in multicultural education with undergraduate students and Beverly's teaching with practitioners in an anti-racist professional development course were guided by a belief that anti-racist pedagogy based on the principles of racial identity development could bring about changes in teachers' fundamental beliefs about race and racism. This

article stems from that belief. What follows is a brief description of the essential elements of our teaching; as well as the results of our efforts to assess the impact of multicultural and anti-racist courses on White participants specifically.

Understanding White Racial Identity Development

Since much of our work with White teachers is guided by our understanding of Janet Helms' White racial identity development model (1990, 1995), it may be useful to briefly describe it here. In general, racial identity development theory refers to the belief systems that evolve in response to the racial group categorizations given meaning by the larger society. In societies like the U.S., where racial-group membership is an important determinant of social status, it is assumed that the development of a racial identity will occur, to some degree, in everyone. For Whites, the process involves becoming aware of one's "Whiteness," accepting this aspect of one's identity as socially meaningful and personally salient, and ultimately internalizing a realistically positive view of whiteness which is not based on assumed superiority.

Helms (1995) has identified six identity statuses (formerly called stages) which characterize a White individual's pattern of responding to racial situations in his or her environment. Though a

person may use more than one strategy or pattern in responding to racial situations, one pattern often predominates.

The first status, **Contact**, is best described as obliviousness. Being White is viewed as a "normal" state of being which is rarely reflected upon, and the privileges associated with being White are simply taken for granted. A shift from this pattern to the second status, **Disintegration**, is often precipitated by increased interactions with people of color and/or exposure to new information about the reality of racism, heightening awareness of White racial privilege and the systematic disadvantages experienced by people of color.

This greater awareness is often accompanied by feelings of guilt, anger and sadness. These emotions can lead to denial and resistance to this new learning, but they can also be a catalyst for action. People operating from this standpoint often try to "convert" others to their new way of thinking. Such actions are not always well-received and individuals may feel considerable social pressure to "not notice" racism, and to maintain the status quo.

The discomfort of the learning process and fear of social isolation can result in a psychological shift to the third status, **Reintegration**. Feelings of guilt and denial may be transformed into fear and anger toward people of color. Resentful

"blaming the victim" may be used as a strategy to avoid dealing with the uncomfortable issue of racism, as well as avoiding the struggle to abandon racist assumptions and define a new, anti-racist identity.

However, further development often takes place if one remains engaged in the personal examination of these issues. The fourth status, **Pseudoindependence**, is marked by an intellectual understanding of the unfairness of racism as a system of advantage and a recognition of the need to assume personal responsibility for dismantling it. The individual may seek to distance him/herself from other Whites, and actively seek relationships with people of color as a way of reducing the social isolation experienced earlier. These cross-racial interactions may heighten the individual's awareness of the need to actively examine and redefine the meaning of his/her own whiteness.

This process of redefinition is central to the fifth status, **Immersion/Emersion**. Actively seeking answers to the questions, "Who am I racially? What does it really mean to be White in society?," the individual needs information about White allies, those Whites who have worked against racism, as role models and guides for a new way to thinking about White identity (Tatum, 1994).

The last status, **Autonomy**, represents the internalization of a positive White racial identity and is

evidenced by a lived commitment to anti-racist activity, ongoing self-examination and increased interpersonal effectiveness in multiracial settings.

Though described as the last status, it is important to note that an individual may operate from more than one status at a time, and which status predominates may vary with particular situations. However, as one's cross-racial experiences increase and understanding about racism deepens, the latter statuses are more likely to be the ones shaping an individual's behavior. Because the ideology of White racial superiority is so deeply embedded in our culture, the process of "unlearning racism" is a journey we need to continue throughout our lives.

Design of the Courses

Both the undergraduate and graduate courses were racially mixed, though predominantly White. Of the twenty-four female students in the undergraduate course, there were two African American students and three Latinas. There was also one White man. Most students were from middle-class backgrounds with a few from low-income families. Of the forty educators enrolled in the in-service course, there were twenty-eight White participants, eleven African Americans and one Latina.

A major focus of both courses was to help these current and future educators, both White

and of color, become more aware of the effects of institutional as well as individual forms of racism and to prepare them to become agents of change by challenging racist practices and policies both in their teaching and in their daily lives. Topics central to the courses included: an examination of White privilege, the cultural and institutional manifestations of racism, theories of racial identity development for Whites and people of color (Helms, 1990) and the connections between racism and other systems of oppression.

Required readings included selections from books such as *Affirming Diversity: The Sociopolitical Context of Education* (1992) and *Freedom's Plow: Teaching in the Multicultural Classroom* (1993). Other readings central to both courses included "White Racism" by Christine Sleeter (1994); "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack" by Peggy McIntosh (1989); "Talking about race, Learning about Racism: The Application of Racial Identity Development Theory in the Classroom" (1992) and "Teaching White Students about Racism: The Search for White Allies and the Restoration of Hope" (1994) by Beverly Daniel Tatum; "Being, Not Doing" by Andrea Ayvazian (1990); and "Ten Quick Ways to Analyze Children's Books for Racism and Sexism" (1980). Since we continue to revise and update our course syllabi, more recent additions to the required reading list include,

among others, *The Dream Keepers* (1995) by Gloria Ladson-Billings and *Rethinking Our Classrooms: Teaching for Equity and Justice* (1994).

Class sessions were designed to be highly interactive and involved both discussion and written reflection. For example, films depicting the roots and manifestations of racism were usually followed by small or large group discussions; Films such as *Ethnic Notions*, *A Class Divided* and *A Tale of O* helped participants understand more fully the destructive ways in which subtle (and not so subtle) racist behaviors and attitudes influence the daily lives of children in and out of schools.

Specific group and individual exercises were also used both in and out of the classroom. For example, one classroom exercise that seemed to function as a turning point for many undergraduate White students in their understanding of racism and their own White privilege involved a read-aloud and writing activity (Lawrence, 1996) focused on Peggy McIntosh's "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack" (1989). During the class, students seated in a circle were asked to select an index card on which was written one of McIntosh's "privileges." Students were then asked to read aloud, one at a time, the statement on the card with one qualification. White students are asked to read the card as written while students of color are asked to

read the card with a "not" before the verb. Any student could "pass" if she/he wished. After all privileges had been read, students were asked to reflect in writing about their experience reading or listening to the read-aloud of "privileges." Oral sharing of experiences was then used to initiate class discussion, a discussion which, though emotional, enabled students to reevaluate their relationship to racism.

One particular exercise in the professional development course that was pivotal for many White educators involved a taped self-interview (Tatum, 1992). For this assignment, participants were asked to interview themselves near the beginning of the course according to a specific interview guide which assessed, among other things their prior experience and contact with people of color their attitudes about race and racial issues, their images of people of color and their personal identity in terms of race. Near the conclusion of the course, participants were asked to listen to their tape and then to compose a written analysis of their views as expressed at the time of the interview as well as any new perspectives on their responses.

Through this assignment, White participants were able to see the racism embedded in their attitudes, racism which previously was "invisible" to them. They realized that by avoiding thinking about their "whiteness" they had

been able to perceive racism as something external to their lives. They experienced a new recognition of themselves as race-privileged, capable of racist thoughts and behaviors. Some educators were able to move beyond feelings of complicity with racism, to recognize their need to take action to interrupt the oppression now so obvious to them.

Other curricula common to both courses involved weekly written reflection papers, analyses of classroom materials for racial bias and small group sharing of instructional practices and ideas. Through these and related activities, participants received feedback on their views either privately from the instructor in writing or orally from class members in small and large group formats.

Design of Studies

Not only did we design and teach these courses, but we also conducted separate research studies involving the participants of the courses. Specifically, the goal of both studies was to determine the impact of the multicultural and anti-racist courses on the racial identity development and related behavioral changes of the White enrollees. Because we believed that new learning about race is a process that develops over time, we wanted to see whether and how thinking changed and shifted and whether new thinking led to new behaviors.

In order to assess such changes, we used qualitative approaches to data collection and analysis. For one course, Sandra, with the assistance of one of her honors' students, Takiema Bunche, gathered and analyzed interview data and collected samples of student writing. They wanted to determine how and in what ways her undergraduate course in multicultural education influenced her White students' racial identity development (Lawrence & Bunche, 1997). Using a similar design, the authors collected interview and writing sample data from educators enrolled in the professional development course taught by Beverly in order to determine not only how teachers' racial identity changed throughout the course, but to what extent they acted on those changes in their classrooms with their students (Lawrence & Tatum, 1997).

Two sets of interviews were used for the studies. For the first interview, questions focused on prior educational experiences, family and community characteristics, previous experiences with people of color, and attitudes about race and racial issues in society and education. Interviews at the conclusion of the course involved the learning the students had experienced, the feelings they had during the course and their opinions of the course content. Other forms of data included samples of students' writing which focused on class discussions and required readings.

These data were coded, categorized and thematically analyzed according to comments, attitudes and behaviors detailed in Helms' six statuses of White racial identity development (1995).

Initial Characteristics of Racial Identity

Data from both courses reveal that pre-service and in-service teachers entered these courses at different stages of racial identity development. At the beginning of the undergraduate course, for example, White students tended to exhibit thinking consistent with the "contact status" of development: they generally thought of themselves as "prejudice-free" and believed they treated all people fairly, regardless of their skin color. Other White people were racist, but not them. In addition, undergraduates seem to lack awareness of the existence or effects of institutional racism; instead, they thought of racism in purely individual terms.

Many of the White veteran teachers entering the in-service course, on the other hand, presented attitudes characteristic of the "pseudo-independent status." They realized that people of color were treated differently than Whites; they were not "color-blind" and were genuinely concerned about the racial oppression that people of color experience in this country. But like the undergraduates, they had given little thought to their racial privilege or how their own

complacency in regards to racism could reinforce and perpetuate racist policies and practices. In fact, both groups of participants seemed to have a limited awareness of the pervasiveness of cultural racism, the extent to which they were influenced by stereotypes, or the degree to which people of color were invisible in the school curriculum. For example, few had thought about the racial implications of tracking, the educational system's overreliance on standardized testing for placement decisions or the ways in which cultural stereotypes could influence teacher expectations.

Moving Towards an Anti-Racist White Identity

Regardless of their initial racial identity "status," all participants moved along Helms' continuum through the course as they gained new insight into the differential treatment accorded to them because of their race and the ways in which experiences of people of color have been either distorted or omitted from the history of this country. For example, one of the most profound learning experiences for both teachers and teacher education students was acknowledgment of their own White privilege. Susan, one of the undergraduate students, reflected on this pivotal new learning in a response paper:

After the powerful realization that people of color do not have the same advantages as I, I am upset and angry. I realized that I,

like so many White women, decided that it was easier to be kept in the dark. As long as I did not think about the fact that grave oppression exists, I had no responsibility to take any course of action. This self-imposed decision was not a conscious one, but a decision nonetheless.

Pam, an elementary school teacher, remarked that she had never given her racial privilege any consideration:

I do admit that I have rarely thought of the position I hold because of my race. I have taken for granted the power and in most cases the security that my whiteness has given me.

Neither the graduates nor the undergraduates had previously examined the social power conferred on them because of their whiteness.

Many undergraduates and graduates alike were surprised to discover how "sanitized" their prior education had been and to what extent the experiences of Native Americans, African Americans, Chinese Americans and other people of color were left out of the social studies curriculum. One undergraduate was so "outraged that we spent so much time reviewing the ships that Columbus sailed on" in her private school education that she decided to write letters to her former teachers and administrators to inform them that her social studies education was "inadequate due to all the errors of omission in the social studies curriculum," so that other students

would not be as "miseducated in the future" as she believed she was. Teachers in the in-service course also acknowledged their "miseducation" and realized that they had a lot of catching up to do if they wanted their students to be more informed. As one middle school teacher remarked,

I am also trying to learn the history I was never taught in school. I am more questioning of the history I learned and more reflective on how issues and concepts are presented. I no longer believe everything I read!

Their new understanding of racial privilege and institutional manifestations of racism did not come easily, however. Many undergraduates, especially, struggled with feelings of guilt and shame which accompanied their new perspective. This discomfort, typical of persons in the "disintegration status," caused some students to retreat from the new information and become defensive. Tracey, for example, tried to minimize the burden she felt at recognizing her White privilege by returning to her view of racism as, individual acts of discrimination, which she too had experienced:

When we were learning about racism and discrimination and things, it seemed like the focus was on Black people or Puerto Ricans or other minorities that are discriminated against, but I've been discriminated against too and I'm a White person.

Tracey's inability to acknowledge the reality of institutional racism, combined with her selective perception of discrimination, is typical of thinking that characterizes Helms' "reintegration" status. Unfortunately, Tracey seemed firmly implanted in this thinking and by the end of the course did not seem to have experienced any further development of her racial identity.

Veteran teachers also experienced painful moments as they recognized their White privilege. Teachers, like Evelyn, repeatedly wrote about the "guilt associated with unearned advantages." But unlike some of the undergraduates, most teachers did not retreat from the burden of their feelings. Instead, they acknowledged their roles in maintaining institutional racism and recognized the need to do something differently. Rita captures this view of moving beyond awareness in a reflection paper: *I do indeed have a long way to go on this journey. Awareness is only the beginning, now I have to make real changes.*

Putting Words Into Actions

Many of the participants in the courses, both students and veteran teachers, were able to stick with the course content through the help and support of instructors and classmates. They were able to deal with their uncomfortable feelings and channel their need to "make changes" by

taking action challenge racism. Reading and talking explicitly about White "allies" and empowered people of color working as change agents helped pre- and In-service teachers see ways they could take responsibility to address the racism they witnessed in their lives. To further facilitate participants' thinking in this direction, we required the class members to design an "action plan" to address racism within their own sphere of influence. Cynthia, one of the undergraduates, wrote about how she felt she had been living "in blinders" referring to her obliviousness to racism. She resolved to continue learning about White racism and about how to be a better White anti-racist ally, and to come out of silence when she heard racist jokes and comments. In fact, by the end of the course she had already put her words into action:

I actually have people that I don't invite over [to my house] anymore. I like Jane, but her husband is a bigot, and I won't put up with it.

Like the teacher education students, veteran teachers also wrote action plans that involved further educating themselves and educating others. Since they were already working in classrooms, they also wrote about changing their teaching practices.

Throughout the course, many White teachers acknowledged that they seldom brought the issue of race into their teaching even though they taught in racially-

mixed schools. As their awareness grew, they sensed that students were eager to talk about race, but some still felt uncomfortable facilitating discussions that could be "emotionally-charged." With time and experience engaging in similar conversations themselves in the course, they came to realize that they too could conduct such discussions with their students.

Some of their action plans reflected their new race-conscious thinking about the importance of addressing issues of race both in classroom interactions and in the curriculum. Two middle-school teachers, for example, decided to address racial stereotypes with their students while they taught them the fundamentals of essay writing. They had students read and analyze a newspaper essay (one which they had read as part of the course) entitled, "Calling the Plays in Black and White," by Derrick Jackson, a Black journalist, which dealt with the stereotypical language used by sports announcers during professional sports events. Through the use of this essay, the teachers intended both to "raise students' awareness of racial stereotyping" and make their curriculum more inclusive by using models of good writing that included writers of color.

Greg, a third-grade teacher, also attempted to make his curriculum more inclusive after realizing that his current Euro-centric curriculum might be "sending messages that Black cultures are not important." One

way that might add a different perspective to his teaching is to use African countries to illustrate points and concepts in his geography curriculum instead of references to Europe or the United States. By teaching students that "Accra is on the coast as opposed to Boston on the coast," Greg felt that he would be validating cultures different than his own.

Reflecting on Our Finding

Not all the teacher education students nor all the teachers who enrolled in these anti-racist education courses experienced the same degree of movement along Helms' continuum as presented in this brief glimpse of our research and our teaching. While we believe that everyone's thinking shifted to some degree, individual factors such as initial level of resistance, previous exposure to the content and prior multicultural life experiences influence the amount of learning and change that can occur. Although one course can serve as a catalyst that helps White educators to progress through the statuses of White racial identity, we also realize that one course cannot do it all. In fact, both undergraduates and veteran teachers often spoke and wrote about their need for more information, more support and more time to help them to stay on the path of change.

We believe that teacher education students need not just one course in anti-racist education

but a series of courses where anti-racist and multi-cultural concepts build upon one another. Likewise, educators currently teaching need more than a one-semester shot of anti-racist professional development. Follow-up workshops and institutes would help those teachers committed to change to maintain their momentum and confront opposition from a society that denies the existence of institutional racism. Leadership at the school level is also an important factor in maintaining momentum. White educators working to alter the status quo need the support of others like them to discuss and evaluate their continued growth as anti-racist White allies (Ayvazian, 1995).

Our small-scale studies of our courses have confirmed for us our belief that anti-racist teaching built upon a sound blend of psychological and pedagogical theories can be instrumental in assisting White educators, both in development of their racial identities and in a re-visioning of their current curriculum. While we are certain that more is needed, we continue to be encouraged by the changes that we see in our pre-service and in-service teachers, and in ourselves as we work to prepare teachers who will challenge racist and ethnocentric school practices that may seem to benefit some but are, in reality, a detriment to us all.

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