

Understanding & Dismantling Privilege

The Official Journal of The White Privilege Conference and The Matrix Center for the Advancement of Social Equity and Inclusion.

“Too Many White, Female Teachers: One White, Female Teacher’s Experience as the ‘Other’”

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Abstract

Based on one particular internship experience and the reflections stemming from it, this self-study research is a systematic and critical examination of actions in the context of a youth activist camp. Analysis of journal entries written during the experience and further reflections arising from presenting these experiences to a variety of audiences further contributed to this research. Themes emerged in terms of “lessons learned” and reflections based on journal entries suggest a growing understanding of racial identity and the impact of this understanding on one White female teacher’s classroom practice. In this way, a form of self-study that contributes to a more consciously driven mode of professional activity has been conducted (Samaras & Freese, 2006).

Keywords: Self- study; White female teacher; Reflective practice

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Introduction

In the summer of 2009, I had the opportunity to attend a youth activist camp located in the southeastern United States. This camp was geared toward Black and Latino youth and their adult allies who want to learn activist strategies that will further their organizational goals in their home communities. I chose to participate in this camp while I was working on my Ed.D. in School Improvement and had specifically tried to align my studies and research in issues of social justice and equity for English language learners. At the time of my application to be an intern with the summer youth camp, I thought that I was uniquely qualified for such a volunteer position. The experience I ended up having at the youth camp completely changed how I now perceive those “qualifications” and how my new perceptions shape me as an educator.

Theoretical Foundation of this Study

Based on one particular experience and the reflections stemming from it, as well as the further reflections arising from presenting these experiences to a variety of audiences, this study is a hermeneutical approach to self-study research. Hermeneutics as a research process allows the researcher fluid movement backward and forward through a specified set of data. Unrelated ideas and part-to-whole relationships are discovered, analyzed, read, and reread with no predetermined assumptions (Samaras & Freese, 2006). I conducted a systematic and critical examination of my actions not only in the context of the internship, but also in the context of the various presentation attempts I have made to different audiences since the internship. In this way, I am participating in a form of self-study that contributes to a more consciously driven mode of

professional activity (Samaras & Freese, 2006).

Data Collection and Analysis

My initial experience was recorded in journal entries before, during, and after the internship. This data was used to prepare one follow up presentation to a graduate level social work class as required for the independent study. This presentation was later used in addition to the original journal entries to further explore the experience and perceived lessons learned. A second presentation was developed and presented to a different audience of pre-service, English Education majors based upon these second reflections and also a rereading of the original journal reflections. The presentation was further refined based on reflections about the efficacy of both presentations and final rereadings of the original journal reflections. A final iteration of the presentation was delivered at the *Journal of Language and Literacy Education* conference held at the University of Georgia in February 2014. This paper is a narrative attempt to explore the internship experience through a reflective, phenomenological lens with “lessons learned” as an emerging theme from the data analysis.

Background

I grew up in the '70s and '80s, graduating from a large, suburban, racially integrated high school in 1987, just a few years after the published report *A Nation at Risk* hit the news and instigated a new wave of reform efforts. I went to a small liberal arts college near the very diverse city of Boston, Massachusetts, and majored in English and Secondary Education. Yet it wasn't until 1995 that I taught my first class, and that would not be on United States soil. Finding an advertisement to live and teach

in South Korea, I jumped at the opportunity to travel and see the world. I lived and taught English in South Korea for two years, experiencing in very real, tangible ways what it feels like to be the “other.” These experiences laid the rich foundation for who I would become as a teacher in the United States. I set about earning my master’s degree in applied linguistics/TESOL and made teaching English as a second language my career path. Since then, I have taught ESL to all age levels in multiple settings, including intensive English programs, K–12 public schools, private homes, and my local library. I have also taught mainstream middle school reading, language arts, and gifted classes.

Before leaving the classroom to teach at a university, I considered myself a culturally competent teacher, at least theoretically, and enjoyed creating lessons that not only would appeal to students from diverse backgrounds, but would also expose students to cultures outside of their own. I won’t say I didn’t have my struggles from time to time understanding my students, and they me. However, I know that I was aware of my students’ backgrounds and either their congruence or incongruence with mine. As time went on, I continued to learn more about culturally relevant pedagogy and worked to raise my awareness of issues surrounding race, ethnicity, class, and privilege in the classroom and educational system. I started noticing the overflowing “silent lunch” tables of Black and Latino males, started paying attention to my seating charts and questioning my decisions regarding where I placed students in the room, listened to myself speak to students and assessed my efforts to address issues of discipline and fairness.

It wasn’t until I was in my doctoral program that I was exposed to research and

writing on the topic of White privilege, and as soon as I was, it resonated with me on personal and professional levels. I understood that the concepts of White privilege were evident in my life and the institutions in which I worked and lived. I remember that not long after I read the term “White privilege” and read the seminal article by Peggy McIntosh (1989), I was standing in line at the grocery store with the strange combination of a bag of dog food and a block of tofu when I realized that I had forgotten my wallet at home. I did, however, have my checkbook, and even though I knew the store policy was not to cash a check without proper identification, I got in line for customer service to ask for an exception. I remember thinking two things: I was a teacher in the community, and I was buying dog food and tofu. On some level these two factors gave me confidence to make my request, and as luck (or privilege) would have it, the manager on duty made an exception for me. As I turned around to leave I noticed the racially diverse people in line behind me and I wondered if they would be as fortunate with their requests.

As my new awareness of White privilege grew, I continued to read and think about issues of social justice and education. My new lens allowed me to be a more thoughtful and reflective teacher of English Language Learners (ELL) and all students. I started thinking even more about how I could further understand the cultural issues at work in the classroom; I wanted to experience more discussions on the topic and I wanted to learn new ways of thinking and teaching. When I saw the information about a social justice camp for activist youth, I made it my priority to be included. I worked with my doctoral advisors to set up this camp experience as an independent study and initiated my requests with the

camp administrators. And here is where the story really begins.

Gaining Entry

Lesson Learned: Just because you want to be involved, does not mean there is a place for you.

In hindsight I think I can safely say that I pushed my way into the camp, although to me at the time I remember how pleased I was with myself at being assertive, not a natural strength of mine. I requested to be part of the camp and was twice turned down before my third email of request was finally met with agreement (I imagine it something like this, “*Alright. Come!*”). I really thought that my desire to be at this camp meant that there was a place for me at this camp. I couldn’t imagine that a social justice camp for activist youth to hone their leadership skills would not have a place for an experienced teacher (albeit White and female) who so desired to be there and join in solidarity with students of color! I suppose I should have been able to see the writing on the wall, but it is only after revisiting my reflections written during the camp that I see some obvious signs that I might not have been welcome and that I misunderstood my role:

I finally made it to [the camp]. It was a difficult process, rife with slack communication that kept me in the dark most of the time as to expectations. Communication was most assuredly lacking and haphazard. I had to push and push to have emails or calls returned. This is not a good first impression. Perhaps it is me in my hyper alert “get things done” mode that being at the end of my doctoral coursework has created, but I found this lack of attention to

the processes of communication very disheartening. I knew coming in based on my communication experiences that I would need to have a “what can I do, let me get started” attitude. I did not want to sit around and watch others work, yet I was a little uncertain as to the welcome I would receive; I did not even know if they got the email saying I was coming on Wednesday.

There are several assumptions evident in this journal entry: (a) My communication style is clearly superior to theirs; (b) I would need to show initiative to fit in to the camp; (c) I did not feel welcomed, and welcome is evidenced by prompt, inquisitive communication that supports your notions of who you are and your place in the program.

A few weeks before the start of the camp, I participated in a phone conference with the director of the camp and all of the youth allies from the various participating organizations who would be bringing their youth leadership to the camp. In addition, there was one other doctoral student, a Black man, who also would be an intern. I remember listening in on the phone conversation and being very nervous. I am a shy person by nature and have worked hard in my life to overcome a debilitating stutter, so participating in a phone conference with unknown people about an unfamiliar topic was a stretch for me. I was glad it was not a webcam conversation, so I could pace freely. The only thing I “knew” was that I should come into the meeting with ideas. Big ideas. I should have a voice and be heard. I’m not sure now where that came from, but it was powerful for me. I think much of it was related to my passive, shy nature combined with my feelings as a doctoral student that I should have ideas. It could also have stemmed from class and

educational privilege. I don't think it was an underlying notion of my race — that as a White person, I would be the minority, and would have something to prove. I don't think that, but it is possible — especially now in hindsight and now that I have reflected on the statement made to me at the camp, “White people always want to come in and take over.”

So, there I was, listening in, and the question came to all of us: “How would you like to contribute to the camp?” I remember thinking very quickly, *oh, boy, I'd better have some good ideas*. I am sure I suggested some art-based activities where we could explore our hidden selves and our public selves, the selves of life, the selves of the classroom: topics of my interest at the time. I might have suggested some sort of a workshop on school improvement, a topic on which I wanted to be considered an expert, considering that it was my doctoral program title. At any rate, I had ideas, I was a go-getter; I wanted to be involved. My colleague, on the other hand, said, “Oh, whatever you need,” or something equally vague. *What!?* I thought. *You can do better than that! Where are your ideas for involvement?* And here another lesson, given in a statement made later to me by the director and other leaders in the camp during a late night discussion about what was going wrong in the internship for me: “White people always want to come in and take over.” In hindsight, I could see that I should have been more deferential to the leadership of the camp. *But, but, I protest in my mind, that is not me! I am not that controlling White person! You don't really know me! You don't know how hard it was for me to be assertive, to speak my opinion, to muster my voice. I don't want to take over!* And yet, and yet. I had to have ideas; I had to claim my place. I didn't know that I was supposed to step down, step back, step aside,

and be the learner. I didn't know that then, and honestly, it has taken me several years for this insight to finally come to light after my experience. I finally see how I pushed my way in, declared my worth, expected praise and gratitude, perhaps wanted to be seen as the expert I thought I was. And while in this circumstance, stepping back was the lesson learned, I am still learning that being silent and listening does not have to be the exclusive response to a complex cultural situation; I can contribute without taking over.

Arriving and Getting Started

Lesson Learned: Our perceived strengths and weaknesses must be contextualized

Nevertheless, wanted or not, I went. I recall being pretty excited about the upcoming experience and telling my friends and family about it, not really having any idea what it would be like, but feeling perhaps a bit proud that I was making this trek to experience something that no one else I knew had thought of trying to experience — a camp to teach minority youth how to stand up in their communities and have their voices heard. I did not delve much into why this was such an unheard-of idea in my generally White, middle-class community. I knew only of the mission and vision of the camp and my own personal mission and vision of myself. My reflective writing of the time revealed my personal goals from camp participation:

What do I hope to get from this experience?

1. An authentic experience in popular education and how to set up the conditions for a democratic learning experience.

2. An opportunity to be around youth who are organizing in their communities for change.
3. A deeper and more workable understanding of the effects of economics on our educational and judicial systems and the impact on youth.
4. To learn how to have a better voice in discussions where these issues are evident but go unsaid.

Interestingly, upon reviewing these stated goals, I see that I was actually able to achieve them through the experience of being at the camp. At the time of the camp, though, I couldn't really see the goals being met, and, in fact, the goals shifted quite a bit from the start of the experience to the end. Myles Horton, a pioneering advocate for social justice said that "goals are unattainable in the sense that they always grow.... I think there always needs to be struggle.... You die when you stop growing" (Jacobs, 2003). This is true in my experience. My goal of having an authentic experience in popular education became *surviving* my authentic popular education experience; my goal of being around youth who are organizing in their communities became *listening to the voices* of those youth; my goal of having a better voice in discussions about education and race became *having better ears for listening* to others' experiences, and my goal of gaining a sense of myself as a leader became *understanding when being a leader meant following* and learning from others.

I am a reflective person. I knew myself going into this camp experience, and in hindsight, I think I was developing a new sense of myself as a strong, confident person who understood my strengths and

weaknesses. My reflective journal suggests an emerging sense of efficacy about my skills as a teacher and as a change agent:

After all, just as Kat Mills sings, "People say that I'm doing good work." I am a fine, upstanding member of my community: I know my neighbors, I volunteer at the local library and help feed the hungry in my community, I am a respected teacher at my school, have a 4.0 in the doctoral program, have led workshops and professional development to multiple groups. I remember when I was trying to get acceptance to work at [the camp] this summer, while not sure I would be invaluable, I at least thought there would be room for me. When I got here, I realized that my skills, abilities, perspectives, opinions were not what was needed or wanted.

Yet, in spite of my growing sense of efficacy, the people around me whose opinion I valued, did not seem impressed. I expected affirmations of my ideas, questions about how to implement activities, perhaps even repetition of my ideas to others in the planning mode. If anything, responses were the opposite; they were neutral, they were dismissive. I noticed eyes avert when I suggested an idea for a camp activity; there were few positive responses and no queries as to more details about my ideas. This was very shocking for me. I felt misunderstood, slighted, even betrayed. I have worked very hard in my lifetime to overcome what I consider to be fairly significant obstacles, and who were these people to not accept me; I who so much wanted to be there? One of my journal entries, written in the form of a poem starts out expressing this idea:

I am not

I am not

I am not

Who you think I am

occasions and practically forcing myself to respond to the meal calls and friendly gatherings of the campers, allies, and staff.

In some ways I feel like I got hit by a tsunami this week. I won't lie; it was a difficult week.

Participating as the "Other"

Lesson Learned: Observing and listening are contributions, too.

When the youth and their adult allies began to arrive, I could already tell that things were not going as I had planned:

So, getting here I felt and still feel a little off-balance. My role as facilitator in the [camp] is unclear to me still and the little input I have offered as to workshops or ways I felt I could participate have been subtly ignored. Some of my identities (white, above age 35, educator, educated) do not necessarily feel accepted or valid, but I think that might be my own problem. I will have to continue to work toward forming my voice in the midst of discussions.

I was uncertain as to my role even after the initial precamp planning sessions, but I was still in my active mode of being involved and seeking acceptance into this group. I recall very serious feelings of despair, disconnect, isolation, and stress. Having lived in another country alone, not speaking the language of that country fluently for two years, I think I recognized these feelings as culture shock, but they were so unexpected and happened in such a condensed time period that recognizing the similarities of these experiences was as far as I could get. I was in panic mode and could barely participate in daily activities. I remember being close to tears on several

It was a very difficult time and I thought about leaving on more than one occasion. I think a big part of the difficulty was how unexpected it was. I was so sure that I was the perfect fit for this camp. So sure that I could contribute to the dialogue, that people would value my perspective, and perhaps even be grateful to me for being there. And I felt all of this even in hindsight, as my reflection shows.

Had someone told me: [name omitted], come on up to [this camp] for an intense cross-cultural experience in which you will have no control over your role or participation, will be the only white staff adult, and all workshops and conversations will be focused on empowerment from or lack of access to the privileges associated with your identity (white, heterosexual, female, middle-class teacher in public schools) I am sure that I would have said, "Great! I am totally up for that experience. It will be a great exchange." I would have never considered that I did not have the tools or experience to survive such a week.

Throughout my notebook, I have doodles of the words, "Observe," "Listen," and the Spanish equivalent, "Escuchar." On some level I understood that this was truly the only thing I could do, that if I planned to stay, this would be my one and only contribution. That was enough, though, to

allow myself the space to step away from any perceived role I had with the camp. And that was the only reason I could stay.

Choosing to Stay

Lesson Learned: “Whenever you take a position, you’ve made a decision.” – Myles Horton

I remember the night I chose to stay at the camp. I was in serious distress and felt that I could not stay another day. I did not fully understand what was happening to me, and the “fight or flight” particularly the “flight” instinct was strong.

Perspectives. This week has been about perspectives for me. Context. And situation. I have had a raw experience this week of being the Other; one that while I am sure is not a finished experience, I know I will be able to drive away from in just a few short days. Privilege to leave. Or privilege to choose to stay. Privilege to keep on the path or not. Privilege. Defined: unearned benefit. White privilege. Middle-class privilege. Teacher privilege.

I stayed up late to talk with two of the camp facilitators. We shared a cabin, and I felt that I could at least explain to them what was happening to me and how I felt. I was very conflicted about what would be best. I did not feel as though I was holding up my end of the deal, did not feel as though I was “contributing” in any way, and I was very unhappy. Honestly, I barely remember what I said, only that I was thinking of leaving. And I remember they told me: “Every year White people come to this camp and leave before it is over.” I am still surprised they told me that. It really struck me. I am not the only White person to have felt that way.

These are normal feelings. Strangely, hearing these words did not make me feel better about the idea of leaving early; they did the opposite, as reflected in a journal entry:

I did not want to be one of those White people. I chose to stay in this uncomfortable place and situation in which my role was unclear.

Driving Home

Lesson Learned: Escape from adversity is not an option for everyone.

The camp did finally end. I remember my relief when the cars began rolling out of the parking lot; when all of the newly revitalized youth and their allies drove back to their towns and schools, ready to change the world. I was simply ready to leave, to get back to my life that was not distressing, that did not ostracize me, that felt comfortable. The only thing I can safely say that I did in those weeks at the camp was “stay.” I did not provide any services, I did not share expertise, I did not make collaborative inroads into the world of social justice, I did not make any lasting friends or connections, and felt no trace of a chance that I would ever return to the scene of the camp, a place that I had long idealized as a place where I could belong. Strangely, I did not belong there.

However, even as I drove away myself, I understood on a deeper level that my escape from this adversarial place, this place of discomfort and isolation, was an escape of privilege. Not everyone can escape situations that are difficult and uncomfortable, and this was an important lesson for me. As a teacher in a diverse classroom, I could now see events and environments from a different angle. No

matter how much I wanted to believe that I created a welcoming environment for everyone, there is no way I can plan for the perceptions and felt experiences of the students in my room. Students in today's classrooms have very little power unless a teacher works hard to provide opportunities for students to have power — and even that is not inherent power, but acquired power based on a teacher's ability to loosen his or her grip on power. Seating charts, bathroom breaks, opportunities for expression are often governed by the teacher and there is little room for a student to take action for him- or herself to relieve social, educational, or physical discomfort.

Four Years Later

Lesson Learned: "Wanting is not enough to change the world." – Paulo Freire

Over the years since this experience at the social justice camp, I have often reflected on the situation, my reaction, lessons learned, and its impact on me as a teacher. My consciousness was raised to a very high level in working with diverse students in my classroom. Small changes were easy: My seating charts changed from purposefully separating students of like culture in an attempt to "promote diversity" to purposefully creating spaces for students to be near other students of similar culture, thus providing a safer, more welcoming, inclusive environment. I looked for alternate ways to address disciplinary issues rather than assign silent lunch; lunchtime being one of the only social times available to students. Larger issues took greater effort and did not always equate with me looking good in the end. I remember one first day of school teaching one of my gifted classes. There happened to be several Black males in this class, which in my particular county was unusual. I was happy about that, but I

remember the first day of class, one boy in particular continually shouted out his thoughts trying to make everyone laugh, and without thinking, I came down on him. I don't remember what I said, I just remember being a little overly harsh on that first day of class when I should have been learning names and allowing personalities to shine. On reflection later, I wondered if I had done this because the boy was Black, and I didn't want him to gain too much social power too quickly. I thought about that interaction a lot over the next few months as I worked to regain that student's and other students' trust. Paulo Freire (2005) suggests that wanting to do the right thing is not really good enough and will accomplish very little. Knowing and learning about that want and how to act based on it is what is important and is what will make a difference.

Lisa Delpit (2006) says that "we must learn to be vulnerable enough to allow our world to turn upside down in order to allow the realities of others to edge themselves into our consciousness" (p. 47), and this camp was a very vulnerable experience for me. By stepping back from the façade of the facilitator's role and acting on my impulse to listen, observe, and inquire, I think that I honored the process of the camp while gaining valuable insights about the struggle for social justice. Delpit (2006) goes on to say that teachers are in an ideal position to open educational dialogue about race. She advises that initiating this dialogue requires seeking out alternate perspectives, learning to hear those perspectives, understanding one's power and the source of that power, and being unafraid to ask difficult questions about discrimination and voicelessness. My experiences, while difficult, were eye-opening for me. As a new teacher educator, I hope these experiences will translate into effective pedagogy in working with pre-

service teachers at various levels. Good intentions are not enough; action is required.

Six Years Later

Lessons I am Learning: Context matters.

It's now 2016, and race punctuates the headlines in ways not seen in decades. Protests, verbal outcries, violence, police killing Blacks, Blacks killing police, Black Lives Matter, Blue Lives Matter, All Lives Matter; it seems it's all coming to a head in the here and now.

In spite of much progress and many good intentions, policies, procedures, and laws still do not seem to have brought about equity and justice (Wolf, 2014). Current headlines routinely tell of minor incidents escalating into Blacks dying at the hands of police officers, and police officers being assaulted and killed in angry vigilante retribution. This is reflected in my life. I meet and talk with people of color who tell me about how they are pulled over by police officers for minor infractions. These same infractions I have also freely committed without incident (driving with a cracked windshield, speeding, etc.). Yet many White, middle-class people are intent on declaring that racism is over and privilege does not seem to be an easy topic of discussion for them. However, to deny that White privilege still exists does little to address the systemic issues that have contributed to such feelings of disempowerment evidenced in the news. To ignore the systemic, institutional, and now raw and current wounds of racism is to deny hope of understanding and solution.

Knowing that my experience is not everyone's experience and acknowledging the context of people's experiences allows me to stay open to various viewpoints and

work to find avenues for expressing mine. Toward that end, I have sought opportunities to discuss these experiences and have conversations about the implications of race in classrooms because I believe that promotion of open dialogue is key.

As a White, female teacher educator, it is never more paramount that discussions of race and racism occur in my graduate and undergraduate classes. I have presented about this experience in pre-service teacher education courses and national conferences, and I make a point to discuss this experience in my graduate-level courses annually. While talking about race can be difficult or uncomfortable, I believe my experience of being the "other" resonates with other teachers and future teachers in a way that challenges them to consider issues of race, privilege, and power in their own classrooms.

Conclusion

On a planned graffiti wall designed for anonymous writing from camp participants, I saw scrawled, "Too Many White, Female Teachers." Stopping to stare at that, I took the pen and in response wrote, "Where would you like us to go?" At the time it felt like a decent query, one that could be followed with, "Who will replace us?" Of course, statistics support the truth of the original scrawl, with 82.7% of teachers in 2011–12 being White, and 76.1% female (Goldring, Gray, & Bitterman, 2013), and postsecondary institutions continue to train a predominantly White, female teaching force (Deruy, 2016). Yet, demographic trends suggest that the student population is continuing to become less White (Crouch, 2012). This, in addition to increasing the number of teachers of color, poses unique and important challenges for teacher preparation programs: Recruit more students

of color into colleges of education; train future teachers to be culturally responsive; provide ample opportunity to explore not only race, class, and gender as cultural differences, but the deeper issues of racism, classism, power, and privilege in classrooms and schools; mentor and coach these future teachers toward a reflective mindset that allows them to adapt and adjust teaching styles and responses in the classroom to meet the needs and backgrounds of the students in their charge. Morrell (2010) suggests, as well, that an additive stance can be taken with many White, female teacher candidates who are living, working, and studying in more diverse sections of the country, which has given them an initial appreciation for diversity that does not need igniting. Furthermore, the current teaching force will benefit from professional development regarding cultural competence and working with diverse populations. As classrooms across the country, and not just in urban settings, continue to grow more diverse both culturally and linguistically, teachers must be responsive, seeking first an active understanding, then cultivating practical avenues for effective application. Open responsiveness, active understanding, and practical application, are the three pillars that define the plane upon which we might hope to advance our understanding of race, both from our own personal viewpoint, and that of the other.

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