You Think You Know, But You Have No Idea: An Autoethnography of the Actualization of Privilege

Wendy Scott
Virginia Wesleyan University

Abstract

This autoethnography was written as a self-reflection on my actualization of White privilege as a White, middle-income educator with the hopes that my story can illuminate the need for a new approach to close the cultural gap between students and teachers. My methodology was guided by standards set by experts in the field of autoethnography including Ellis, Bochner, Douglass, and Moustakas. I analyzed my journal entries, memos, and working and formal papers, including my dissertation. Then I borrowed from the heuristic tradition to identify patterns. Ultimately, the patterns are reflected in four realizations that I detail in the paper. Our classrooms are increasingly diverse, but our teacher population remains homogenous. Eighty-four percent of teachers identify as White (Feistritzer, 2011). I realized that for me to be an effective teacher, I must stand with my traditionally marginalized students as an ally. This evocative autoethnography does not solve any problems or make any claims, but it is written with the intention to create dialogue focused on creating a more inclusive education system.

Keywords: white privilege, autoethnography, cultural gap, educators

Wendy Scott, PhD is the founder and director of Tidewater Collegiate Academy (TCA) at Virginia Wesleyan University (TCA). Also, Wendy is an assistant professor at Virginia Wesleyan University in the Education Department. More information about TCA can be found at www.tidewatercollegiateacademy.com

You think you know, but you have no idea….

You have no idea how many people they have seen get shot.

You have no idea how much hurt they have bottled up inside.

You have no idea how much abuse they have witnessed.

You have no idea how much abuse they have experienced firsthand.

You have no idea of the loss they have experienced.

You have no idea about the drugs they have felt the need to experiment with.

You have no idea about when they have felt scared.

You have no idea when the stuff that was scary just became normal.

You think you know, but you have no idea.

Journal entry, Summer 2013

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As an experienced and rigorously trained educator, it is easy for me to assume that we have all the answers and know-how to help every student be successful. However, there is a cultural gap that is inhibiting our ability as educators to close the achievement gap. The student population in public education is becoming increasingly more diverse (Banks, 2009), while 84% of teachers identify as White (Feistritzer, 2011). The Center for Public Education (2014) stated

that "trends in birth rates and immigration indicate that soon there will be no majority racial or ethnic group in the United States – no one group will represent more than 50% of the population." Therefore, the challenge is to prepare new teachers identifying as White and middle income to reach a diverse population and work to close the achievement gap between traditionally marginalized students and those students from mainstream White, middle-income culture (Banks, 2009). As teachers, we are taught about different cultures and exposed to strategies that represent culturally responsive pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1994), perhaps what is missing is an understanding of how traditional social power structures created the gap in the first place. Therefore, the goal is to position White, middle-class teachers—not as those prepared to swoop in and save young people from the clutches of whatever keeps them from the American dream—but as allies with traditionally marginalized groups to challenge privilege and break the cycle of oppression. The first step in solving a problem is to thoroughly identify the problem.

Consequently, this personal essay is a product of an autoethnographic study, which documents my realizations about my privilege as a White, middle-income female while studying the challenges for under-resourced youth in education as a doctoral student. This project sought to make the invisible visible, and the tacit conscious (Boyd, 2008), while providing a therapeutic opportunity for me to reflect on my transformation over the three years I spent as a graduate student (Douglass & Moustakas, 1985; Ellis & Bochner, 2000). Atkinson (2006) cautioned the research community to guard ourselves against the implicit assumption that self-transformation is the main outcome of autoethnography.

Yet this project documents my self-transformation with the belief that my story may resonate with other educators and challenge them to consider their own social position in order to move towards education reform (Ellis, 2000). When White, middle-income educators acknowledge their participation in a damaged education system created by traditional hegemonic policies and values, then perhaps all education stakeholders can move forward together to brainstorm solutions that are respectful, humanizing, and truly provide an equal opportunity for every student to reach their potential.

Autoethnography

Autoethnography is a method used by anthropologists, sociologists, and educators to describe their own cultures (Chang, 2008). Prior to my experiences as a doctoral student, I did not recognize my own cultural identity but simply saw myself as neutral (Lucal, 1996). This autoethnography is a journey to share my lived experiences as a means to gain a better understanding of my own cultural identity (Ellis, 2006; Jones, 2013). Through introspection and retrospection, I began to link my identity to other social worlds (Boyle & Perry, 2007). I connected everyday experiences with larger phenomena and social practices (Boyle & Perry, 2007). I challenged myself through this autoethnographic study to look back on experiences through new lenses and extract meaning (Bochner, 2000) in order to open up a conversation about the position of privilege in education reform.

Recently, autoethnography has been divided into two camps: analytical autoethnography and evocative autoethnography. Analytical autoethnography is committed to analyzing data and developing theoretical models

(Anderson, 2006; Atkinson, 2006). *Evocative autoethnography* is focused on a narrative that seeks to provoke an emotional response from the reader (Ellis, 2000). I chose to write an *evocative autoethnography* because I am not in a place to develop a theory or make a claim about privilege because my journey has not ended. I share what I learned through a narrative that is emotionally engaging because my journey has been emotional (Ellis, 2000). I gained agency through writing my testimony that has helped me understand my position as a White, middle-income educator, and the opportunity I have to promote education reform through social justice. I hope the narrative promotes dialogue and future reflection and action by other educators (Bochner, 2000; Ellis, 2000), but I did not come to a final conclusion about the privilege that fits neatly into a theoretical model (Anderson, 2006).

I worked to maintain rigorous standards through methodological practices that are consistent with previous studies (Duncan, 2004; Holt, 2003). I began with my personal life and paid attention to my physical feelings, thoughts, and emotions through systematic sociological introspection and emotional recall (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). Then I borrowed a three-step process from heuristic inquiry (Douglass & Moustakas, 1985). I immersed myself in self-searching, indwelling, and exploring the question of my own privilege (Douglass & Moustakas, 1985). Then I engaged in data collection and reflection through intuition, self-dialogue, and self-disclosure (Douglass & Moustakas, 1985). My data consisted of my journal entries recorded over the three years I was a doctoral student, reflective memoing in my course work notebooks, two working papers that were completed during course work but not published, and four formal papers (including my dissertation) that were

presented at local or national conferences at different intervals on my journey as a doctoral student. I identified broad patterns and sought exemplar data from the literature that told a story (Hays & Singh, 2012). Finally, I synthesized the realizations that emerged. The process was not guided by strict methodological rules but was not a causal process. The power of the process was in disclosing the truth (Douglass & Moustakas, 1985). The process was a private, introspective look into my own experiences, thoughts, and writings to seek understanding about my own privilege and how it impacts my actions as an educator. "This checking and judging and accepting that together constitute understanding are done by me and can be done for me by no one else" (Bridgman, 1955, p. 50). The result of the process is a private narrative made public, organized into four realizations in the hope that other educators may consider how their own positions impact their students.

Who Am I?

I am a 35-year-old White woman who grew up mostly in suburban America. I spent my early years in "Smalltown U.S.A." in a rural community with one corner store, two churches, a post office, an ice cream parlor, and no stoplights. My grandparents and great-grandparents were farmers. My mom and dad were high school sweethearts and have been married for 36 years. Just before I started first grade, my mom and dad moved my younger sister and me to a suburban community outside of a large metropolitan area, and I have been here ever since.

I spent most of my young adult life working to serve the poor and marginalized without understanding how my own privilege played a part in the cause of the problems. I volunteered and worked with nonprofit groups helping to bring resources and create safe places for under-resourced youth. I became a full-time history teacher right out of college and continued to serve and volunteer. I taught a high school elective course on serving the community. I volunteered in soup kitchens and gave money to those who were homeless. I gave up a teaching job working in one of the most affluent and highly respected schools in the mid-Atlantic region for a job teaching at a high-needs school known for violence and low test scores. I co-founded a community outreach program with a pastor from my local church designed to help under-resourced youth finish high school. I represented the standard for a "nice White lady" serving the community.

In the high-needs high school that I transferred to, I was introduced to a world of social challenges that I did not know existed and was grossly unequipped to handle as an educator. I began to catch a glimpse of the fact that the educational system that I loved and devoted my career to was broken and creating problems for many students, especially those from disadvantaged groups. I left my social studies classroom after 10 years of teaching because I was frustrated with the inequities in public education. I decided to pursue a doctoral degree in education at a nearby university to learn more about how I could help students in poverty perform better in school and reach higher academic success. I entered the program thinking that I would read about new education models for under-resourced students, dialogue with experts in the field about the possibilities of education reform, and research effective teaching practices so that I could return to my classroom more prepared to make a difference for students living in poverty. I assumed it would be a clean and straightforward process, albeit

academically challenging.

Context of My Story

Leaving my classroom as a teacher to become a student again created a schedule that allowed me to become more involved in the community outreach program that I helped to start while I was still teaching. The community outreach program was hosted by a local church and was based on the Christian faith. Since I was not in my classroom all day, I spent a great deal of time in an economically depressed neighborhood plagued with drugs, poverty, and violence, visiting families, and working with students between the ages of 14 and 22. Most of the families that I worked with were African American. I tutored students in libraries sitting at tables next to people who were homeless. One day I was working with a student who came back from the bathroom quickly. When I asked what happened, the student said she would "have to wait because someone was getting high in the bathroom." On another day, I visited a family and was invited into their home. I sat on the floor because they had sold all their furniture in order to make rent. As I sat on the floor with the mom, I realized that there were mug shots of her two older children hanging on the wall. They were the only pictures she had of her boys. She spoke about how much she missed them, loved them, and hoped they would be able to leave prison safely one day. I had entered a whole new world that was just 15 minutes from my home.

In the evenings, I spent my time in graduate class and working on course assignments. I was introduced to the work of Delpit, Gay, Ladson-Billings, and other researchers dedicated to working with traditionally marginalized groups and advocating for educational reform to close the achievement gap. I took classes about social justice and attended conference sessions focused on working with students in poverty. My own research for my dissertation took me deeper into learning about the culture of poverty and marginalization. The combination of being immersed in the culture of poverty physically and intellectually led me to struggle with my own identity issues in terms of my own race, class, and faith. The realizations that follow focus on my own actualization of privilege in terms of class and race.

Realizations

Before I started my journey as a doctoral student, I looked at the world in a way that made sense to me based on my own experience, socialization, and prior education. Drug dealers are the bad ones. Church people are the good ones. The police keep the drug dealers from hurting the church people, and the church people take care of those left in the wake. As an educator, I believed it was my job to make sure that everyone was educated so they could go to college and become good church people, stay away from drugs, and make good financial decisions. I saw the world as a Disney movie: There are good characters and bad characters. People run into conflict and make choices, and in the end, everyone lives happily ever after. It was not until I began working on my PhD that I was challenged to question this worldview.

The change in my worldview is captured in this autoethnography by describing four realizations that occurred over a three-year period. There were moments when I wanted to be "Superman" and save students from their own lack of knowledge and experiences. There were moments when I recognized the disjuncture between the lived

experiences of traditionally marginalized students and my own experiences. Then there were glimpses where I recognized a power structure that places me near the top of a social hierarchy as someone who is part of the current dominant social group. Still, there are other instances that acknowledged an opportunity to be an ally to those in poverty and traditionally marginalized groups. The realizations are recorded insider reflections that speak to my own self-awareness of privilege over time, but not in a linear pattern (Ellis, 2006).

Superman Mentality

However, there is a group of people lingering in the shadows almost invisible; almost silent that has a clear view of the purpose of education. They are on the front lines. They have firsthand knowledge of what content is relevant. They are experts in what defines and identifies an effective teacher. They are imaginative, compassionate, courageous, and full of hope. Hope that the schools they attend and the teachers they encounter will save them from a world that is plagued with corruption and prepare them to be positive agents of change in a world that is changing exponentially.

Working Paper: Lessons Learned from "Waiting For Superman," Fall 2011

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Therefore, students that do not have the background knowledge necessary to keep up with their peers get left behind because they are constantly playing catch up trying to learn double the amount of new material without the "mental Velcro" to build on.

Working Paper: Education Reform Beyond the Classroom, Fall 2011

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The first academic paper I wrote as a doctoral student was a review of the documentary entitled "Waiting for Superman." I name this realization Superman because I believe that the notion of Superman is relevant to how I perceived my role in society. I believed that educators needed to be like Superman and come to save the day for marginalized students that were challenged by social ills and often ignored. My Superman mentality was reflected in my desire to help students "catch up," "fill in the blanks," and "save students from a corrupt world." I was full of empathy and a desire to help others but without a full understanding of the complex factors impacting under-resourced populations, including the impact of invisible oppressive acts by the dominant culture, which I represent. My Superman philosophy was based on the need for self-gratification and to help those "less fortunate."

My Superman mentality is reflected in White privilege research known as the "missionary face of whiteness" (Warren & Hytten, 2004) or "white savior" (Aronson, 2017). Those that identify as White who "see themselves as information providers ready to spread their vision of how the world should be" fit into this category (Warren & Hytten, 2004, p. 327). Boyd (2008), who identified as a White, middle-class, male, Christian pastor, noted his recognition of his missionary face while he was enrolled in a course called "Building Community Between Justice-Seeking Christians: Bridging Race and Class Gaps" sponsored by the Alternative Seminary in Philadelphia. He wanted to help create a more connected,

peaceful community, so he was shocked when one of the African American female members of his class said, "When he speaks, he sounds like Hitler like he knows it all." He was troubled and hurt to hear how other people perceived his desire to help and motivation to act quickly. I can identify with Boyd's desire to help others and self-asserted swift action based on blind assumptions. Boyd's story challenged me to acknowledge my own missionary stance. However, my actualization came from reflection instead of a hurtful encounter like the one described by Boyd (2008). I realized that I wanted to be like Superman, a hero that would save the day for my students by providing the education and resources they needed to have a "better" life.

I became more aware of my missionary or White savior perception over time as I engaged in academic dialogue, researched for my professional work, and became more connected to the youth and their families that I was tutoring and serving in outreach programs. There was not one single flash of brilliance that unveiled this notion of acting as a missionary. It was a gradual process of becoming more aware of my own social position and motivations.

Recognition of Disjuncture

I am thinking that this whole idea of semiotics makes a lot of sense in the real world. The idea that something is right or wrong doesn't really make sense. God created a gigantic universe full of millions of combinations, so to assume that life can be categorized into just simply binary ideas only is a testimony to our own limits and not a reflection of reality. The families that I meet and work with challenge me and show me this in so many ways, and I am continually humbled by the blessings

that I have experienced in my life and reminded of my own inadequacy to save a world that is really so much more than me. Not to mention the fact that my ideas of saving don't really make sense in other cultures. Why do people that eat with their hands have to be taught to eat with a knife and fork? What makes one more dignified than another? Why must everyone get a college education? What makes a person with or without a college education more dignified or successful than another? What makes kids on the corner selling drugs less dignified than a pharmaceutical rep pushing an experimental drug? What makes thugs in the hood smoking dope more criminal than hippy, granola type people smoking marijuana at a coffee house? What is the difference between a donation and a gift? What is the difference between elitism and bigotry?

The world is messy. How do we sort it out?

Journal entry, Fall 2012

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The goal of a social constructivist is to be able to identify and explain "truth" from a variety of different perspectives. Upper- and middle-class students are equipped with one set of experiences and knowledge, but students in poverty are equipped with a different set of experiences and knowledge; therefore, the goal is to explore how these perspectives could be different and identify strategies that are effective with this specific population of students.

Paper entitled "Active Citizenship in Urban High School Social Studies Classrooms" presented at the College and University

Faculty Association for Social Studies Educators, Graduate Student Forum Round-Table, Fall 2012

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Although I worked with traditionally marginalized students before graduate school, I did not realize that everyone's normal didn't look like mine before becoming a doctoral student. Before graduate school, I was on the outside of the situation looking in. I knew that young people faced challenges that I wanted to "fix." It did not occur to me that people have different perspectives that are grounded in a different view of truth than my own. As a student, I became aware of the differences between my own experiences and how they impacted my view and others' experiences and how their views were impacted. There is a difference between the way I view the world and the way the under-resourced students with whom I work see the world. Rubin (2007) discussed the disjuncture between urban students' experiences and American ideals in her research on civic typology. As an example, she explained that often social studies teachers teach constitutional rights as if everyone has the same equal liberties, but some students might have experienced an infringement on their rights, such as being searched without a warrant. These experiences cause a disjuncture between American ideals and student perceptions.

Before, it was easy for me to dismiss under-resourced students' views as wrong or misguided until I began to look at the world from their perspective. I began to realize that it was as though we were looking at the world through different shades of sunglasses. They looked at the world and saw one color, and I looked at the world and saw a completely different color. Levinson (2012), a White, middle-class teacher, noted shock when her urban students immediately assumed that the attacks on September 11 were based on an American conspiracy. She explained that as the events of the day went on, her students were convinced that the American government was behind the attack. Levinson explained that, although she did not believe that her students were correct, she believed that her interpretation was grounded in her perception of the facts based on her experiences growing up and living as a White, middle-class, native-born American citizen with an Ivy League education. Contrarily, her students believed they were right because of their interpretation of the facts grounded in their perception based on their experiences growing up as non-White, poor, first- and second-generation immigrants in de facto segregated schools (Levinson, 2012). Levinson's example resonates with my own recognition of disjuncture. Experiences that are varied depending on your class, race, education, and other social variables can impact your interpretation of the world, which makes it hard to establish who is right and who is wrong.

Recognition of Power Structure

I think there is a fundamental mix-up about the situation of poverty. A young African American male father looks tirelessly for employment. Turns in application after application. Seeks consultation on his resume, but alas, he is unable to find work. His newborn baby is hungry, so he calls a church in an affluent, White neighborhood for help. The church says they cannot help because it might lead to a racket, and too many other people might call looking for a handout. So he finds a friend who cuts him in on a deal to sell drugs so he can make the money he needs to feed his

baby. When the church and this young man reach heaven, what do you think God will say to the young man who sold drugs to feed his baby and the church who kept their money in the bank to avoid a racket?

Journal entry, Spring 2013

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I used to be sad when a student messed up. Then as I walked a little further, I became confused when the "system" created to preserve justice and equality seemed a bit skewed. Today, I have moved to anger. I'm angry that we cry because kids made bad choices, but no one was willing to fight to make sure they had a choice to make, to begin with. To be beaten or get beaten is not a choice. Where were the crying do-gooders, when the kid needed a warm place to stay? Where were the crying do-gooders when the kid needed someone to count on, encourage them, love them, teach them? Where were the crying do-gooders when the kid needed a sense of security, purpose, autonomy, and place? Where were the do-gooders when a white-washed government decided to put all the poor people in stark, cinder block buildings isolated from technology, transportation, employment, business, or any other sort of chance for opportunity? Why is everyone's first response to be sad about someone else's mistake instead of recognizing that we might have had a part in creating the problem to begin with?

Journal entry, Spring 2014

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It is easy to believe that equality, justice,

and freedom have finally arrived decades after the Supreme Court ruled on Brown v. Board of Education *and during the presidency of the first African American in the United States. Yet, the climate within and surrounding our public schools tells a different story. When you lift the "veil of ignorance," there is evidence to show that inequitable standards and outcomes for traditionally marginalized students and institutional racism is still pervasive (Marshall & Olivia, 2006). There is still a need for conversations about social justice, and there is an opportunity for educators to promote transformational social justice through liberation, empowerment, and uplift (Beachum, 2008).*

Paper entitled "Climbing the Mountain: A Qualitative Study of Successful Urban Students" presented at the Journal of Language Literacy Education Social Justice Conference, Spring 2014

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I did not write the word "White privilege" in my course notebooks until my last year as a doctoral student. Although I was aware of the social challenges of under-resourced students earlier and the disjuncture between my own experiences and my students' experiences, I did not recognize the power structure and social hierarchy that created many of the problems I was trying to address. "My schooling gave me no training to see myself as an oppressor, as an unfairly advantaged person, or as a participant in a damaged culture" (McIntosh, 1988, p. 6).

We are taught about racism, which puts others at a disadvantage, but we are often not taught to see how privilege puts others at

an advantage (McIntosh, 1988). Lareau (2003) explained that middle-class children celebrate when they hit a home run, but they do not realize that they started on third base. As a White, middle-income woman, I was born with many advantages that were invisible (McIntosh, 1988). I grew up in a home without worry about electricity or food at the dinner table, which gave me the chance to focus on school and extracurricular activities. My parents, my grandparents, and my great-grandparents had the opportunity to attend quality schools, live in above-standard housing, and apply for employment in a variety of growing occupations, unlike some groups that were denied these luxuries because of the color of their skin or economic position. I did not do anything to be born into a middle-class family wearing the color of the majority group any more than the students I worked with did anything to be born into poverty wearing a color seen as inferior to many (Bonilla-Silva, 2003). Yet, I do believe that the invisible knapsack of privilege (McIntosh, 1988) provided me an advantage to find success and my own piece of the American dream. It is easy to fall into a false sense of meritocracy without a clear understanding of the invisible layers and complexities that are embedded in the social power structure (Nenga, 2011; Hays & Chang, 2003). I believed that anyone that worked hard had the same opportunities and chances of success in realizing the American dream as anyone else.

Realizing that the people that I wanted to reach out and help were struggling because of some of my own participation in the perpetuation of negative stereotypes and discriminatory policies was a hard realization. I did not see myself as part of the political and social forces that shaped other marginalized identities (Gallagher, 2000). Then I began to become aware of de

facto examples of segregation based on race and class, as well as social practices that perpetuate the cultural gap. Social practices, such as school policies, are not consonant with certain groups' schedules, beliefs, or values, and some everyday examples of discrimination towards traditionally marginalized groups are more obvious than others. The disillusionment was not something I went looking for in my research or my studies. The realization found me, and it caused me to rethink my position and purpose as an educator and as a researcher. How does the dominant social group use their power and their advantages? How do I use the unearned assets that were afforded to me (McIntosh, 1988)?

Critical Democrat

My prayer is that you will weep and be disrupted from comfort … restless to serve.

My prayer is that you would have the same compassion and connection to your brothers and sisters in Christ who may not live in your neighborhood, look like you, or speak like you, as you do for your own family.

My prayer is that you would weep when you hear how a young person has chosen to sell drugs to feed his family; instead of judging.

My prayer is that you would weep when you hear that a young person has joined a group devoted to violence to fill his excruciating need to feel secure and belong somewhere; instead of judging.

My prayer is that you would weep when you hear that your sister in Christ doesn't come to church because she doesn't have the "right" clothes; instead

of judging.

My prayer is that you would weep when you hear that a young person has turned to use drugs so the world will make a little more sense; instead of judging.

My prayer is that you would weep when you hear that a brother or sister in Christ is without food, water, shelter, or clothing: instead of judging.

Then, after you weep, I pray that you will be disturbed to the point of action. I pray that you will be convicted to no longer be comfortably miserable and will recognize your purpose in life is not to judge, but to love. Not the kind of love that is just a word, but the kind that leads to sacrifice.

Journal entry, Summer 2013

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Paris (2011) stated, "Others will judge, but I can control how I represent the youth as I argue for change and understanding as a result of what I learned from them" (p. 145). I am proud of the work I have done that situates myself as a bridge between academia and those that academia exists to serve, the people within communities. I have made choices from the start of this project that some may view as inconsistent with rigorous research practices. Yet, each choice was made with purpose and intentionality to create a credible research project with findings that contribute to the community of practice while not steamrolling over the participants' words or disrespectfully minimizing their voice to simple codes to be analyzed. As researchers, when we

chose methods that respect the voice of our participants, then we can only add to the credibility and authenticity of our work because our work becomes true reflections of those that we worked with instead of our own interpretations.

Finally, although my relationships with the participants are strong, I recognize that I am still an outsider to the community they are a part of. One of the participants explained one evening as we were talking that traveling to my neighborhood was like coming to an "imaginary world." I didn't tell him, but that is how I felt when I first went to his neighborhood. I felt like I was in the middle of a movie because it was hard to believe that some of the conditions that the participants lived in were real. I will always be a White woman with a middle-class background from the suburbs; however, now I live with a critical consciousness that the participants taught me. I am so grateful that they chose to open their lives up and share their community with me because I have learned so much about strength, hope, resiliency, and perseverance. I have learned that as researchers, we have a responsibility to make sure that our work does not perpetuate stereotypes that make the world more challenging for urban youth and harder for us to be a united community. And I have learned that as researchers, we have an opportunity to respond to a call for action by developing work that moves towards and delivers social justice. I cannot think of more valuable work as a researcher than to join as an ally with amazing young people that are working to make the world a better place.

Dissertation: An Appreciative Look:

Examining the Development of Urban Youths' Civic Identity In and Out of the Social Studies Classroom, Summer 2014

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My final realization acknowledged my role as an ally to traditionally marginalized groups. I did not come to this understanding before experiencing guilt about my own privilege, but I realized quickly that guilt was not going to help anyone. The critical democrat finds a balance between the spaces of tension between reflection and action, speaking out and listening, guilt, and agency to adjust the ways they live, their own sense of fairness and justice, and to reconceptualize their roles (Warren & Hytten, 2004). Therefore, I found myself in a place balancing my sadness and the need to take action. I realized that I was a participant in a damaged world, which did bring about a sense of guilt, but I wanted to take action in a new way than before. I was not interested in remaining in my position of social power so I could swoop in and save the day. I began to recognize that I was not in the position to do the saving. However, I was in a position to walk alongside my students who had been disenfranchised and work with them and for them to help challenge and resist traditional dominant mainstream views that are perpetuating a cycle of oppression. At the beginning of my doctoral program, I saw my job as learning ways to solve the problems of under-resourced students in education through different teaching strategies. However, as I completed my degree, I began to see my role as a listener, ally, advocate, and to challenge traditional views and practices by the dominant culture that perpetuate the legacy of oppression for marginalized groups.

Challenging privilege was not an easy

response. Nenga (2011) interviewed 40 affluent youth volunteers and identified four responses to privilege. Some responded with evading class and speaking about being colorblind. Others discussed the challenges of reverse discrimination or touted meritocracy. However, volunteers that participated in training specifically about structural causes of poverty and engaged in sustained long-term interactions of community groups in economically depressed areas challenged privilege. Individuals challenging privilege spoke up against racial injustice, became activists, and served as an ally to people of color (Nenga, 2011). I can hardly call myself an activist. I believe that title is left for people like Rosa Parks and Mother Theresa; however, I do see glimpses of an effort to be in allyship.

As an ally, I was determined to ensure that my dissertation treated the urban participants with respect and that they were given a chance to not only be heard but to inspire action and change. Therefore, I made intentional research choices in an effort to privilege their knowledge and experiences in the hopes of acknowledging their agency in academia. First, my dissertation explored how urban students develop civic identity from their point of view and what they believe social studies teachers should do to empower positive civic identity development. I wanted to focus on the point of view of those that had been previously silenced in research. Second, the participants were given a chance to not just review their transcripts, but to help create conceptual categories that were used to generate a grounded theory model. A grounded theory model is the product of a process of examining data with inductive logic and comparative inquiry (Charmaz, 2011). The model was a reflection of the participants' values, beliefs, and principles instead of a conglomerate of outsider perspectives.

Third, I tried to write my dissertation with a Freirian perspective of critical consciousness (Freire, 1973) that challenged me to consider how to minimize my own view from a dominant culture perspective and privilege the knowledge of the urban youth that participated in the project. Fourth, I chose to use the critical indigenous paradigm to encourage me to filter all my research decisions through a lens that was created to disrupt traditional power structures and encourage community and respect (Smith, 2012). Fifth, the participants created and produced a video with their own ideas and language that was shared with other educators directly. I was conscious of my position as an outsider but worked to do research that would make a difference *with* the participants instead of *to* them in allyship. I realized that perhaps the best way to help my students was to stop telling them how to fix their problems and start listening with an open heart to hear even the hard truths.

Conclusion

Whiteness is not a monolithic idea (Gallagher, 2000). It is full of complexities, as are other constructs of privilege, such as class. Therefore, this story is not meant to be a representation of all realizations that those that live with privilege should or have had. This story is a reflection of my own journey and self-transformation based on experiences that were mine, and mine alone. However, I do hope that my story will evoke conversation about how privilege impacts the ways teachers teach students that have been disenfranchised.

My journey and self-transformation made it impossible for me to return to work in public education. The realization that I was a part of a broken system that was, at the minimum, implicitly hurting a group of young people that I love dearly was just too much for me. Instead of returning to public education after graduation, I started my own laboratory school that serves about 50 low-middle income PreK–12th-grade students from a variety of different religious, economic, and racial backgrounds. About 70% of our students live below the poverty line. The school is designed based on research from my graduate studies to facilitate the development of global citizenship equipped with twenty-first-century skills ready to make the world a better place. It is far from perfect, but every day we make choices based on a social consciousness that I hope acknowledges the agency of our students and brings awareness about the challenges that those that have been a traditionally marginalized face. Our first priority at the school is to support, equip, and nurture our students, but the second priority is to teach others in the community about the importance of reimagining an educational system that truly respects and honors all types of students from all types of backgrounds.

G. Gay said that we inherited a dark and ugly world (personal communication, April 28, 2014), but we have an opportunity to heal wounds caused by centuries of injustice by looking inward, seeking the truth even when it is hard, listening to others, and refusing to accept the status quo. It is unacceptable to allow young people to go on thinking that they are disadvantaged because of something they did or did not do. It is unacceptable to allow young people to graduate or drop out without an understanding of possibilities of their potential based on their unique gifts and talents. It is unacceptable to allow young people to go on believing the misconception that they are less than anyone else because of where they live or the color of their skin. Therefore, as educators, we have a

responsibility to teach with a critical consciousness that challenges us to be aware of our own bias that stands in our way of joining with our students in solidarity for transformational social justice (Beachum, 2008). Social justice that empowers, uplifts, and brings liberation from the "isms" that plague our world, such as racism and classism (Morcom & Freeman, 2018).

Acknowledging our bias is a constant process of reflection and action. The realizations I shared demonstrate a progression of thought from believing I could be a hero and save the day to a humbling understanding of my role working in allyship. However, I did not share the realizations in a linear fashion to allude to the fact that my understanding of privilege does not constantly move forward in a straight line. Like other forms of identity development, my concept of privilege swings like a pendulum (G. Gay, personal communication, April 28, 2014) that has not found a resting place yet. My concept of privilege and its consequences continues to develop in a dynamic fashion.

Although my realizations demonstrate a strong focus specifically on white privilege, they also reflect the influence of class privilege. I chose not to delve into the issues of faith, gender, or other identity factors that impact my perspectives and contribute to other aspects of privilege. The intersectionality of different points of privilege are important and warrant further study, but my class and race were the identity constructs that were the most poignant for me to reflect on personally at this time. They are the identity constructs that I believe impacted my own context as an educator the most because I worked with predominately African American families in an economically depressed area.

As I started to look back at what I wrote academically and privately, I was worried about what I would find with a critically conscious eye. Would there be examples of unintended discrimination or language that perpetuates negative stereotypes of traditionally marginalized groups? The answer to both of those questions is yes. However, I am grateful for the opportunity to gather my thoughts in a way that will hopefully help other educators discover misconceptions, unacknowledged bias, and/or their own unearned assets that may keep them from authentically and honestly connecting with the students in their class.

As I wrote the autoethnography, I wondered how to write about my new awareness and experience with privilege without sounding self-righteous. I suppose to some, I failed miserably, and you are finishing this article with a sense of annoyance or perhaps mild anger. I hope that others have felt my groaning with the struggle of privilege and recognize my true sincerity. Either way, this project was intended to evoke emotion that would lead to discussion and open conversation, so as long as it does that, this project has served its purpose.

It is a daunting challenge to equip educators who closely identify with their white, female, middle-class, privileged lives to teach in diverse classrooms. Hence, I believe that the need for reconciliatory education has never been greater. We need an education workforce that is prepared to identify inequality and has the capacity to advocate for change (Morcom & Freeman, 2018). "Reconciliatory education is dedicated to teaching through love, respect, and an unyielding commitment to honoring, speaking truth, and building wisdom" (Morcom & Freeman, 2018, p. 809). Yet, I believe that the first step is for those of us in

privileged positions to recognize our privilege and our part as oppressors or at least as bystanders that have watched as archaic systems continue to perpetuate oppressive policies and procedures. Then we can all begin the process of reconciliation together.

Dear past students:

I'm sorry for not taking the time to listen to your ideas and perspectives.

I'm sorry for not valuing your experiences and knowledge.

I'm sorry for looking over you and through you—instead of at you.

I'm sorry for judging and assuming.

I'm sorry for pushing you towards my own ideas of success without acknowledging your own unique gifts and talents.

I'm sorry for the legacy of oppression that you have had to endure.

You inspire me with your resiliency, compassion, integrity, and loyalty to your family and your community.

I hope that we will meet again someday and walk together side by side towards a world of love, dignity, and peace.

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