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How Should We Teach Diverse Students? Critical Race Approach to Explore Diversity Issues in the US K-12 Schools

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Abstract

Given the increasing trend of student diversity, assuring equitable educational access and environments have become an impending issue in the US K-12 schools. As race has been a huge determinant of the equal educational access for long time, this paper explores how the race influences the educational equity in the school building. The paper also addresses the issue of teacher quality; how would it be possible to educate teachers that know how to teach racially, linguistically and socioeconomically diverse student populations.

Keywords: racism; K-12; US; critical race theory

¿Cómo Debemos Enseñar al Alumnado Diverso? Aproximación Crítica de Raza para Explorar Cuestiones de Diversidad en las Escuelas K- 12 en Estados Unidos

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Resumen

Dada la creciente tendencia hacia la diversidad del alumnado, el asegurar el acceso equitativo a la educación y su contexto se ha convertido en un problema inminente en las escuelas K-12. La raza ha sido un gran determinante del acceso equitativo a la educación durante mucho tiempo, este artículo explora cómo la raza influye en la equidad educativa en la escuela. El artículo también aborda la cuestión de la calidad del profesorado; ¿Cómo sería posible educar a los profesores para saber cómo enseñar a una población estudiantil racial, lingüística y socioeconómicamente diversa?

Palabras clave: racismo; K-12; Estados Unidos; teoría crítica de raza

Given the increasing population of racial and cultural minority groups among school-aged children, issues surrounding student diversity have gained attention in educational settings in the US. For instance, in K-12 schools, some scholars have noted a trend toward increased diversity of students' racial, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds (Zeichner, 1996; Sleeter, 2001 & 2008; Villegas, 2008). The proportion of racial minority students attending K-12 schools in the US currently stands at more than 40% and it is reported that the number has almost doubled within the past four decades (Villegas, 2008). This trend of increasing diversity is expected to continue: it is estimated that more than half of the student populations in K-12 schools will come from racial minorities by the year 2035 (Villegas, 2008; Zeichner & Melnick, 1996). Whereas the increasing trends in student diversity, teacher populations are more likely to stay racially, culturally and linguistically homogenous and less likely to start teacher education programs with experiences of diversity (Sleeter, 2001; Villegas, 2008). Some scholars already raise concern that this racial and cultural gap between teacher and students could bring in or perpetuate educational inequity (Boyle-Boise & McIntyre, 2008; Sleeter, 2008; Villegas, 2008). The next section explores how this racial gap could shape educational inequity in the school building, particularly through the practice of racialization.

Racialization of students of color

Racial diversity has been present in US K-12 schools since the *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court case in 1954 legally mandated the racial desegregation of K-12 schools (Chism, 2004; Clotfelter, 2004). Some analyses highlight that there has been an increasing trend toward racial minority students attending schools (Clotfelter, 2004; Villegas, 2008). It is also reported that the ratio of racial minority students in K-12 schools has doubled in the last four decades, and currently, non-White students make up more than 40% of the K-12 student population (Villegas, 2008). This increasing trend toward student diversity is expected to continue and it is estimated that racial minority students will be the numerical majority by the year 2035 (Villegas, 2008; Zeichner & Melnick, 1996).

Regardless of this increasing trend toward student diversity, teaching forces, as well as the K-12 school system, mostly remain racially and culturally homogeneous. Some authors have noted that the vast majority of pre-service teachers entering teacher education programs are from White middle-class families, and tend to have neither international nor domestic cross-cultural experiences: most pre-service teachers have not even entered communities where non-White residents predominate (Boyle-Boise & McIntyre, 2008; Sleeter 2001 & 2008; Villegas, 2008). Scholars have expressed concern that this means that pre-service teachers will start teaching racial minority students in their future classrooms without the opportunities to familiarize themselves with the sociocultural realities in which the students live and with which they identify (Boyle-Boise & McIntyre, 2008; Murrell, 2001; Sleeter, 2008; Villegas, 2008). What is even worse is that both pre-service and in-service teachers still tend to have negative racial beliefs about racial minority students' academic achievement (Boyle-Boise & McIntyre, 2008; Pollock, 2004, 2008; Sleeter, 2008). In other words, most teachers start their careers without understanding some students to the same degree with the other students, and with negative stereotypes that students from the particular racial backgrounds are not as academically capable as other students.

Given that most K-12 schools (which have been racially integrated since the *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court case decision in 1954) were primarily for White students, the school curriculum and teaching methods were designed based on the assumption that "all" students are from White families (Chism, 2004; Clotfelter, 2004). It is therefore not surprising to observe White cultural practices embedded and perpetuated in the system, and the subsequent cultural gaps between the schools and their racial minority students.

This cultural gap between racially diverse student bodies and the schools and teachers has not been well addressed. For instance, Ladson-Billings (1994) points out that it tends to be problematic that teachers' expectations for racial minority students are based on cultural assimilation. Ladson-Billings (1994) explains that the term "assimilationist teachers" refers to those with a perspective that invalidates African-American culture, which could lead to assimilationist teaching, "a teaching style that operates without regard to the students' particular cultural characteristics. According to the

assimilationist perspective, the teacher's role is to ensure that students fit into society" (p. 22). Given the societal inclination to invalidate the cultural practices of racial minority groups, these assimilationist teachers could perpetuate dysconscious racism, not being racist in conventional ways or intentionally disadvantaging some students. However, they are also unconscious about some students being advantaged in the classroom, while others are disadvantaged due to cultural incongruence (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Sleeter, 2001, 2008). Accordingly, they teach all students with the pedagogies that work well with certain students and expect all students to achieve academically by working hard, rather than considering how cultural differences influence teaching and learning in their classrooms.

This results in stark disparities in students' academic performances. Achievement patterns tend to be racially skewed because of the cultural influences upon learning (Ladson-Billings, 1994) and the way in which the school system itself functions as a racialized social system (Bonilla-Silva, 2001; Pollock, 2008). Regarding cultural influences upon teaching and learning, some scholars have noted that learning is socially situated: to learn something, learners must know how to participate in and identify with the practices in which they are situated (Vygotsky, 1978; Ladson-Billings, 1994). In other words, as Ladson-Billings (1994) and Villegas (2008) point out, if learning settings and pedagogical practices are not culturally responsive, learners are more likely to disengage from learning because they are not familiar with how to participate in the practices. Given the history of racial integration and the fact that most US K-12 schools were designed for White students, it could be assumed that cultural diversity among students needs to be better incorporated into pedagogical practices to assure equitable learning settings for ALL students (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Pollock, 2008; Villegas, 2008).

Studies have also pointed out how racialization practices—the societal practices of sorting actors based on race labels—privilege some students while disadvantaging others. Pollock (2008) presents some examples of racialization in schools: racially disproportionate special education placements, racial patterns among students in gifted classes, and high school tracking that often leads to the over-representation of White students in higher tracks with access to Advanced Placement (AP) and experienced teachers in resource-rich classrooms, while racial minority students tend to

be in the lower tracks without access to advanced course contents such as AP, with unskilled and inexperienced teachers in under-resourced classrooms. Bonilla-Silva (2001) further clarifies that the school system functions as a racialized social system, in which

economic, political, social, and ideological levels are partially structured by the placement of actors in racial categories or races...the placement of actors in racial categories involves some form of hierarchy that produces definite social relations among the races...[t]he totality of these racialized social relations and practices constitutes the racial structure (p. 37).

In other words, it can be assumed, as Pollock (2008) states, that through the abovementioned racialization practices students are constantly categorized as race group members within schools. These practices produce and reproduce race relations as well as subsequent structural racial inequity within schools.

To address the issue of racialization and ameliorate institutional racial discrimination, colorblind policies, such as Proposition 209 in California, which does not allow individuals in the educational field to refer to a student's race in public, have been embedded (Pollock, 2004). As a result, inside the school, people have stopped discussing race when others are around. Nevertheless, the racialization practices in the actors' mindsets have not changed. As a result, people tend to resist talking about their students' race labels within the school buildings, but racialization practices are deeply embedded and influence the ways in which they see their students. According to Pollock (2004),

People at Columbus [FS: the name of an US K-12 institution] seemed socialized to frame one another daily at race-group members...they also tended to resist this very socialization. Calls for "colorblindness", for proceeding as if we do not see people in racialized terms, have for over a century been a key trope in American equality discourse, and colormuteness—active resistance to describing people as racial—was as central to daily race practice at Columbus as was the act of framing people racially (p. 44).

Pollock (2004) points out that actors in the K-12 educational system tend to frequently engage in racialization practices; however, they resist them when it does not seem appropriate or when there is risk of being labeled as racist. These colorblind/colormute teachers, who claim they do not see the differences among their students and ignore racial and cultural diversity existing in the classroom, tend to racialize their students behind the closed doors when equality discourse does not matter (Pollock, 2004). This implies that embedding colorblind policy is more likely to perpetuate racism through racialization practices behind the closed doors rather than disrupt it. Accordingly, to educate diverse students, teachers need to be able to step out of the assimilationist view, see the racial and cultural differences among students, and choose the most effective pedagogical approaches to all students in their classrooms.

In sum, racial diversity has remained present inside US K-12 schools following the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court case decision. However, most White teachers are not familiar with the sociocultural practices of racial minority groups that influence their students' learning styles and mannerisms. Accordingly, they expect racial minority students to behave and learn in ways similar to their White counterparts, without considering how to acknowledge and respect cultural diversity and address diverse learning needs.

In addition to teachers' ignorance, it has become clear that the societal inclination to invalidate particular cultural practices of racial minority groups influences teachers' perception of racial minority students and their academic achievement as well as the ways in which the school system is organized. As a result, some students are privileged in the current school structure and institutional and pedagogical practices, while others are disadvantaged. To minimize the inequality and better accommodate diversity, it is necessary to provide opportunities for teachers to become familiar with the sociocultural realities and practices of racial minority groups, which could potentially help them change the ways they perceive and teach racial minority students and become allies to minimize structural and pedagogical inequality in the US K-12 system. The next section explores the steps taken in US K-12 schools to address diversity issues.

Measures to better accommodate diversity

After racial desegregation was mandated in 1954 by the *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court case, racial diversity has been present in US K-12 classrooms (Chism, 2004; Clotfelter, 2004). As the achievement gap had been an issue for many years, in 1979, the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) mandated multicultural education coursework for all candidates attending university-based teacher education programs (James, 1978). This attempt was aimed to prepare future teachers with the necessary skill sets and knowledge to teach racially diverse students.

Nevertheless, as some authors have noted, it has not been clearly proven that multicultural education coursework promotes pre-service teachers' efficiency in developing the necessary skills to teach diverse students (Sleeter, 2001 & 2008). In addition, it has also been reported that multicultural education coursework tends to be sidetracked in teacher education programs without a connection to the course content of other methodology classes (Boyle-Boise & McIntyre, 2008; Sleeter, 2001 & 2008; Villegas, 2008). As a result, many teachers are likely to face difficulty in incorporating their learning from multicultural education coursework into their pedagogical practices in the classroom (Boyle-Boise & McIntyre, 2008; Sleeter, 2001 & 2008; Villegas, 2008).

To address this limitation of the “multicultural education coursework only” approach to diversity issues, a few university-based teacher education programs in the US have started to incorporate community-based field placements. The field placement is considered helpful as it sends pre-service teachers, as a part of the required placement, to volunteer in communities predominantly occupied by racial minority groups, and helps them become more familiar with the sociocultural realities and practices of these communities by spending time and socializing with local students, parents, and residents (Boyle-Baise, 2002; Boyle-Baise & McIntyre, 2008; Sleeter, 2008).

Some studies, nonetheless, also note that community-based field placements alone carry the potential risk of reinforcing negative stereotypes among pre-service teachers, as cross-cultural experiences in the communities, full of unfamiliar incidents, may confuse them, and they could

be challenged in properly understanding what they have experienced (Boyle-Baise & McIntyre, 2008; Murrell, 2001; Sleeter, 2008). To assure that community-based field placement are effective in helping pre-service teachers to learn about racial and cultural differences, some scholars have pointed out the importance of mediation of community experiences (Boyle-Baise & McIntyre, 2008; Murrell, 2001; Sleeter, 2008). As pre-service teachers could experiences extensive cultural shocks or confusions during their field placements, guidance and information from community-culture experts can help them assign meanings to their community experiences in a culturally sensitive manner and “digest” what they have experienced (Murrell, 2001; Sleeter, 2008).

This mediation is also helpful because it can provide pre-service teachers with opportunities to understand their own cultural backgrounds that have led them to assign meanings to their community experiences in particular ways. Given that various authors have noted the importance of developing awareness of teachers’ own cultural backgrounds for the development of capacities to understand different races and cultures (Boyle-Baise & McIntyre, 2008; Murrell, 2001; Ryde, 2009; Shimomura, *In Press*; Sleeter, 2008), this mediation should be helpful in raising awareness of what influences pre-service teachers’ own meaning-making processes. Awareness of their own cultural identities also helps pre-service teachers become more aware of the cultural practices they identify with, which in many cases normalize the unequal power distribution among the racial or cultural groups, and accordingly, could justify the perpetuation of particular forms of inequities including sexism, racism, and xenophobia (Ryde, 2009; Sleeter, 2008). Accordingly, it is possible to claim that community-based field placement and the subsequent mediation have great potential to help pre-service teachers step out of cultural encapsulation and the assimilationist perspective by providing them with opportunities to experience different cultures, properly understand these differences, and raise awareness of their own cultural backgrounds.

What should we do to improve the accommodation of diversity in K-12?

Reviewing the literature on diversity issues highlights that US K-12 schools function as a racialized social system, in which students are categorized by

race labels to determine their placement within the social hierarchy. Accordingly, some students are sufficiently privileged to have access to advanced course content, seasoned teachers, and resource-rich classrooms, while other students do not have access to the same privileges. This racialization is clearly embedded and remains a dominant practice inside K-12 schools. To disrupt this racialization practice that perpetuates structural inequity against racial minority students, some states, including California, have embedded colorblind policies such as Proposition 209, which requires all faculty members in educational institutions to not refer to students' race inside the school and treat all students equally without considering their cultural differences (Pollock, 2004).

Given that assimilationist teachers have done harm to racial or cultural minority students by not properly acknowledging and respecting racial and cultural differences, it is possible to claim that the colorblind policy does not appropriately address diversity issues. In fact, Pollock (2004) identifies that the policy has simply created circumstances in which teachers become "colormute," not talking about their students' race labels in the presence of outsiders. In other words, in the US, there is a school system that advantages students from particular racial backgrounds. The colorblind policy, which seemingly disrupts the structural inequity, in fact perpetuates it by helping those inside the school to avoid looking at the factors that perpetuate structural inequity. As Ladson-Billings (1994) and Pollock (2004) note, teachers need to be able to identify how the system advantages some students while disadvantaging others, and must serve as allies to minimize the structural inequity by adjusting their pedagogical practices. To do so, teachers need to know more about the sociocultural practices and realities in which their racial and cultural minority students live and with which they identify.

This also highlights the need for teachers to be prepared differently, as well as the need to transform the school system to assure that all students are treated equally and have access to quality education. Given the increasing trend of racial minority students attending US K-12 schools (Villegas, 2008), the need to prepare teachers for diverse students should be immediately addressed. In the US, to better address this teacher quality issue, university-based teacher education programs have already begun offering community based field placements with mediation. Because it

provides teachers with opportunities to familiarize themselves with sociocultural practices and realities and reflect on their own cultural biases through mediation, community-based teacher preparation seems to have great potential to help pre-service teachers step out of the cultural assimilationist perspective and prepare efficient teachers for diverse students (Boyle-Baise & McIntyre, 2008; Shimomura, *In Press*; Sleeter 2001, 2008). Given that the quality of mediation of community experience influences learning from community fieldwork, asking how mediation coursework is helpful in this regard and the types of changes that need to be embedded to make the placement more productive is a further avenue for investigation.

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