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# WHITE PRIVILEGE AND SOCIAL STUDIES PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS

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## Abstract

*This article explores the dynamic of the Silenced Dialogue within a graduate-level, teacher preparation diversity course by analyzing student-created reflections about Peggy McIntosh's article regarding White privilege. The paper compares themes that emerged in White vs. Black student reflections, male vs. female student reflections, and those of students preparing to teach social studies compared to those preparing to teach in other disciplines available in the program. Social studies candidates had complex responses to race. They seemed to feel comfortable with the topic, but were also world-weary and likely to dismiss current racism as being less than it used to be, and therefore, not much of a current issue. As compared to candidates in other disciplines who were surprised by the readings on White Privilege and felt challenged to act on their new understandings, social studies candidates were more likely to place current race relations in a historical context and emphasize the improvements made in recent decades, rather than changes that may still need to be made. This paper concludes with the problematic implications of social studies teachers who see racism as real, but largely a problem of the past.*

## White Privilege and Social Studies Pre-service Teachers

*“Whites are taught to think of their lives as morally neutral, normative, and average, and also ideal, so that when we work to benefit others, this is seen as work that will allow ‘them’ to be more like ‘us.’”*

*--McIntosh (1988) White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack, p. 9*

In 1988, Lisa Delpit published the seminal article “The Silenced Dialogue,” referring to the lack of communication dividing Black and White educators when it comes to issues of race. In this article, Delpit argues that there is a lack of communication between Black and White teachers and teacher educators, especially when it comes to the question of educating Black children. When Black educators speak, the article suggests, White educators nod their heads in sympathy and then continue the conversation as though the Black educators had never spoken. Nearly a quarter century has passed since this article was written, but research on the attitudes, beliefs, and experiences of both Black and White educators seems to indicate that “the Silenced Dialogue” Delpit described continues to exist in teacher education programs as well as in the wider world of the American Education system (Dickar, 2008; Hayes & Juarez, 2012).

As a diversity course instructor and a social studies educator in a teacher education program, I began to wonder where my students and I fit into this dynamic of the Silenced Dialogue. My own informal reflections on my teaching indicated that students struggled the most with conversations about race, especially during the lessons covering the topic of White privilege. Why was this? And did all students struggle with this topic, or struggle in the same ways? While I have wanted to do a case study examining these questions for years, I ran into an intractable problem: up until the Fall 2013 semester, I had never had more than two Black students (out of about 20 total) registered in any of my graduate-level diversity courses. This is, of course, a common problem in Teacher Education, where the majority of our students are White, just as the

majority of teachers are White (83% White, according to the National Center for Education Statistics). Finally, in fall 2013, I had eight registered Black students out of 45 total students enrolled in two sections of my diversity course. The eight Black students were especially vocal on the issue of race. In fact, in these classes, if these students were not heard, it was a case of selective hearing as opposed to there being no Black students to hear.

This research project sought to answer my questions about how the Silenced Dialogue played out in my diversity course by making them more specific: 1. How did race and gender shape the nature of racial talk in pre-service teachers' reflective journals after reading an article about White privilege? 2. How did the reflections of social studies pre-service teachers compare thematically with those of pre-service teachers training to teach other disciplines? The first of these questions was explored in-depth in a previous publication (Curry, 2013) and will only be briefly summarized here. The focus of this paper is the analysis of the data comparing the reflections of pre-service teachers intending to teach social studies with pre-service teachers preparing to teach other disciplines.

### **Literature Review**

The central concept of this paper is "White privilege" primarily because the reflective journal entry most directly dealing with race that the pre-service teachers were required to submit was a reaction to Peggy McIntosh's (1988) article "Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack." This article provides an introduction to the idea of White privilege and lists unearned privileges that McIntosh herself believed she encountered on a daily basis. In addition to this article, students took part in class activities exposing them to a fuller conception of race as a historical concept and unearned privilege as the result of a history of physical and social domination of Whites over other races (Richardson, 2000). Situating McIntosh's piece within this historical context is necessary to ensure that "White privilege" does not appear to White students as an accidental, disembodied concept for which no White person is actually responsible, but as a purposeful effect of White supremacy (Leonardo, 2004).

It is certainly clear that teaching future teachers about White privilege is challenging, given prevailing beliefs about racism—namely that racism is over and that discussions of racism are irrelevant and unnecessary (Vaught & Castagno, 2008; Williams & Evans-Winters, 2005). Williams and Evans-Winters (2005) demonstrated with heartbreaking clarity that not only were students reluctant to receive the message that White privilege exists, they were especially reluctant to accept this message from these particular (in this case, Black and female) "messengers." Another study that examined reflections of McIntosh's article also found that pre-service teachers resisted the message, using a variety of strategies—including arguing for meritocracy and denying the existence of White capital—to refute the truth of White privilege (Solomona, Portelli, Daniel, & Campbell, 2005).

This is not to say that pre-service teachers do not recognize race and racial issues, it is just to say that "race and race issues" are ascribed only to non-Whites. Lander (2011), for example, used data from an annual survey of newly qualified teachers to demonstrate how White privilege allowed new teachers in England to describe racial minority students in terms of Otherness, describing their "scary" encounters with the non-White students. Indeed, the strength of the message of the "racial realists," who argue that racism is over and that any lingering disadvantages Black people face are their own fault, has become so popular that the President of the Society for the Study of Social Problems felt the need to reaffirm the very existence of White privilege at an annual meeting (Renzetti, 2007).

Because this paper is interested in how social studies pre-service teachers reacted to discussions of White privilege, it is also instructive to look at how Whiteness and White privilege are addressed in typical social studies textbooks that these incoming teachers will use as resources in their classrooms. Well-known critiques of American History textbooks' dealings with

“controversial” content such as race, class, and women’s rights abound (Loewen, 2007; Moreau, 2003; Zimmerman, 2002). Loewen’s (2007) is particularly useful because he addressed the lack of any notion of White privilege or complicity in tragedies of American History. This research on social studies materials indicates that social studies classrooms are not particularly conducive to an examination of White privilege, despite what would seem to be an ideal combination of disciplines from which to examine the social constructs of race and Whiteness and attempt to lessen their grip on future social and political life in this country.

A more recent analysis of 19 recent US History textbooks found little improvement in this regard (Brown & Brown, 2010). Textbooks now include examples of racial violence directed towards African-Americans, but such violence is still presented largely as the work of a few bad people instead of as endemic to an institutional racism from which all White people benefit. The way textbooks treat “Whiteness” as a concept tends to propagate White privilege. In one case, an examination of history textbooks in Canada reveal a subtle privileging of White, Western values as “moral” while de-emphasizing the decidedly less moral (and often racist) actions of those states (Montgomery, 2006). Hughes (2007) describes the process of how one American History textbook written in the 1960s that had a surprising amount of discussion of the concept of “Whiteness” later became watered-down during the rise of conservatism in the 1970s. Although many social studies pre-service teachers in my diversity course may have been exposed to more critical analyses of Whiteness and White supremacy in their college careers, it is important to note that these students (who obviously enjoyed social studies in high school enough to want to teach it), were likely not introduced to such ideas in their high school courses.

Fortunately, other studies complicate this picture by exploring the texture of White privilege. If the definition of “Whiteness,” for example, shifts from a combination of racial characteristics to the characteristics of privilege (Marx & Pennington, 2003), then it becomes possible to see how White privilege is also a malleable and evolving social concept. Laughter (2011) examined the concept of “Whiteness” by comparing two White pre-service teachers and their stories of racial development. He concluded that “White” pre-service teachers were not a monolithic block with identical levels of socially-constructed “Whiteness,” and that, as a result, the teachers found different paths toward understanding and pushing against White privilege. Likewise, Leonardo (2004) argues that the purpose of introducing the concept of White privilege is not to elicit White guilt, which is harmful to the project of actually ending racism. “White guilt blocks critical reflection because Whites end up feeling individually blameworthy for racism. In fact, they become over concerned with whether or not they ‘look racist’ and forsake the more central project of understanding the contours of structural racism” (p. 140). The purpose of introducing these ideas, rather, is to encourage critical reflection of race and to acknowledge the role that White supremacy has played in the development of current facets of White privilege.

Social studies pre-service teachers need to understand these ideas because they will be tackling the teaching of history, and they are uniquely positioned to either encourage this critical engagement from their students or to continue the pattern of teaching White supremacy. Readings alone, however powerful, are unlikely to alter the ideologies present in students. After all, as Kagan (1992) pointed out, “candidates tend to use the information provided in [diversity] coursework to confirm rather than to confront and correct their preexisting beliefs” (p. 154). In my diversity course, the discussion piece is a vital component of this lesson. The experiences of both Black and White students often challenge certain conceptions of a post-racist world held by other students. The question is—in the privacy of their own reflective journals, where students are asked to reflect on course content, did the social studies pre-service teachers appear to understand the messages being sent by their readings and their colleagues on the subjects of racism and White privilege?

### **Setting and Methodology**

## Social Studies Pre-Service Teachers

Data for this study was collected in two sections of a graduate-level diversity course taught in a medium-sized southern university containing a total of 45 pre-service teachers; students were disproportionately White and female, which fits the profile of American teachers overall (Institute of Education Sciences, 2012). Students in the program earn bachelor's degrees prior to acceptance into the program. Based on their degrees, they may enter one of six graduate-level pre-service teacher program disciplines, which include: Social Studies, English, Science, Math, Art or Music (See Table 1 and Table 2 for demographic information).

**Table 1:** Participant demographics analyzed in this study

<b>Demographic</b>	<b>White</b>	<b>Black</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>Female</b>	22	6	28
<b>Male</b>	15	2	17
<b>Total</b>	37	8	45

**Table 2:** Disciplines participants were being prepared to teach at the secondary level

<b>Discipline</b>	<b>English</b>	<b>Social Studies</b>	<b>Science</b>	<b>Art/Music</b>	<b>Math</b>
<b>n=</b>	17	14	7	5	2

These small numbers constitute a major weakness in this study for the purposes of generalizability, but it should be clarified that generalizability was not the purpose of this study. This is a case study; the bounded unit consisted of a cohort of students taking a diversity course (Yin, 2002). Qualitative research methods were used for the purpose of greater understanding of a particular phenomenon (White privilege) within this particular group of students.

Both diversity courses used Banks and Banks (2010) as their primary textbook, and the course cycled through a variety of social categories, including socio-economic status, race, gender, special education status, and sexual orientation. Along with each new social category, the pre-service teachers were assigned an extra reading to help orient them to the continuing importance and relevance of the topic, and one written reflection for each week. Readings included Delpit's "Silenced Dialogue" (1988), McIntosh's "Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack" (1989), the chapter "Gone with the Wind" from Loewen's *Lies my Teacher Told Me* (2007), as well as contemporary articles and books chapters on schools in Finland (Partanen, 2011), "Girl World" (Wiseman, 2009), the status of homosexuality in Hollywood (Harris, 2012), and the political impact of the increase in the Latino population (Scherer-Phoenix, 2012), among others.

For the purpose of this paper, I gathered each candidate's complete journal entries into a single document for the candidate and then imported them as Microsoft Word files into NVivo 9 software. I classified each individual journal by the race, gender, and academic discipline of its author. Using NVivo, I ran word frequency queries at a broad-based level to begin to understand the themes that emerged throughout the journals. Next, I ran text search queries on the most popular themes to understand how they were used in context. Finally, I combed through each candidate's journal and coded their responses using the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), beginning with open coding, and then generating broader concepts and some categories. I allowed the words of the pre-service teachers to serve as code and concept titles and grouped similar phrases together into the same concept. Finally, some codes were grouped into categories because although different words were used, the general message was the same. Other concepts did not require grouping because the concept itself was broad and sufficient for analysis.

## Findings

Detailed discussion about findings when comparing journal authors along racial and gender lines can be found in Curry (2013). Tables 3 and 4 summarize the findings.

**Table 3:** Top 10 journal themes for White and Non-White Students

<b>White</b>	<b># ref's/density*</b>	<b>Black</b>	<b># ref's/density</b>
1. As a teacher, I intend to do something about racism	48/129.7%	1. As a teacher, I intend to do something about racism	10/125%
2. White privilege is real	38/102.7%	2. I have personally experienced racism	10/125%
3. I had never really thought about racism	24/64.9%	3. Not much has changed in 15 years (since article released)	7/87.5%
4. White people do not know White privilege exists	20/54.1%	4. White privilege is real	7/87.5%
5. White privilege is less than before	19/51.4%	5. White people do not know White privilege exists	6/75%
6. White privilege is exaggerated or unreal	11/29.7%	6. Racism is just a part of life	5/62.5%
7. I've experienced reverse racism	9/24.3%	7. White people choose to ignore White privilege	5/62.5%
8. Race is a subject that's hard for me to discuss	9/24.3%	8. Whites are the culture of power	3/37.5%
9. Refusal to feel White guilt	6/16.2%	9. I had never really thought about racism	1/12.5%
10. Whites are the culture of power	6/16.2%	10. I've experienced reverse racism	1/12.5%

*\* Density=all of the thematic references present in the journals of a certain demographic of students divided by the total number of journal entries written by students in that demographic. Because the number of students in each demographic is uneven, the tables use this measure to compare how common a theme was across the journals written by different demographics of students. The more common the theme, the higher the density. The density can be above 100% as the number of journals could be less than the number of occurrences of the theme.*

Table 3 compares the Top 10 themes for White students to the Top 10 themes for Black students. While the first theme (“As a teacher, I intend to do something about racism”) is the same for students in both demographics, the list diverges sharply from there. The second most common theme in the Black student journals is “I have personally experienced racism” while the third most common theme in the White journals is “I had never really thought about racism.” This stark contrast—having experienced racism versus having the privilege of never even thinking about it—demonstrates clearly the insidious nature of modern racism. The top 10 themes in White journals are representative of the common combination of thoughtful consideration of the topic (example: “I disagree that those who experience white privilege do it in an unconscious

manner. I think most are quite aware of the circumstances, but feel they have little control over it and doing so would go against instinct”) and denial or downplaying (example: “I think in the year 2013 not many people get ahead just “because.” If you succeed in this economy and in this state of our nation, it is due to your hard work and perseverance. I think we have moved beyond the times of white people getting ahead in life just for being white, while all of the minorities are left behind”). The top 10 themes in the Black journals illustrate extensive experience with racism and race talk (example: “The reactions of my classmates were not shocking: the discomfort, discredit, and innocent guilt. I never really talk to my White friends about the discomfort, anger, and confusion felt when denied the “white privileges”. Because I am a Black woman with several White friends, I find myself representing, defending, and contending for my race. Always. A lot of it is internal; I am a woman at war with myself. There is always a conflict within the black psyche: a war between what should be and how it is; a cry for what is right and what is real; and the desire to step forward when we’re stuck in the past”). While White student journals were sometimes written by students who had their eyes opened to racism during class discussions (and said so), and sometimes written by students who remained dubious about the existence of White privilege (and said so), Black student journals were heartbreakingly consistent in their message.

**Table 4:** Top themes emerging from journals written by females compared to the same themes in journal entries written by males

Response	# Female Response	Density (F)*	Ratio	Female: Male	# Male Responses	Density (M)*
1. As a teacher, I intend to do something about racism	40	142.9%	1.3	1.0	18	105.9%
2. White privilege is real	28	100.0%	1.0	1.0	17	100.0%
3. White people do not know White privilege exists	19	67.9%	1.6	1.0	7	41.2%
4. I had never really thought about racism	18	64.3%	1.6	1.0	7	41.2%
5. White privilege is less than before	14	50.0%	1.7	1.0	5	29.4%
6. I have personally experienced racism	11	39.3%	3.3	1.0	2	11.8%
7. I've experienced reverse racism	8	28.6%	2.4	1.0	2	11.8%
8. Race is a subject that's hard for me to discuss	8	28.6%	4.9	1.0	1	5.9%

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9. White privilege is exaggerated or unreal	8	28.6%	1.6	1.0	3	17.6%
10. Not much has changed in 15 years (since article released)	7	25.0%	1.4	1.0	3	17.6%
11. Whites are the culture of power	7	25.0%	2.1	1.0	2	11.8%
12. Racism is just a part of life	6	21.4%	1.0	1.1	4	23.5%
13. White people choose to ignore White privilege	5	17.9%	1.0	1.3	4	23.5%
14. Refusal to feel White guilt	3	10.7%	1.0	1.6	3	17.6%

\* *Density*=all of the thematic references present in the journals of a certain demographic of students divided by the total number of journal entries written by students in that demographic. Because the number of students in each demographic is uneven, the tables use this measure to compare how common a theme was across the journals written by different demographics of students. The more common the theme, the higher the density. The density can be above 100% as the number of journals could be less than the number of occurrences of the theme.

Table 4 demonstrates how females simply had more to say than males about the topic of White privilege overall (see the higher densities of nearly all themes in the female journals compared to the males), and they were more willing to address and modify their own prejudices as a result of course content. Even though males tended to be blunter in their race-specific language (which seemed to indicate comfort when dealing with racial topics), the females were actually more likely to delve into their own personal reactions to the topics. Even when journals contained negative responses (“White privilege is less than before,” “I’ve experienced reverse racism” or “White privilege is exaggerated or unreal,”) they also contained, side-by-side with this, reactions that demonstrated some dawning of understanding (“I had never really thought about racism” was often following with a “BUT” statement). Female responses were more complicated, contradictory, and longer, which therefore demonstrated more thought about the topic of racism overall than their male counterparts.

Turning to a comparison of social studies pre-service teacher journals compared to those of students training to teach other disciplines (table 5), the data reveal a complex understanding of race and racism by the future social studies teachers. Future social studies teachers’ journals demonstrated that they had, in fact, learned about race and racism in their undergraduate careers prior to enrolling in the teacher education program. Unlike their colleagues from English and science (the only other cohorts large enough to compare with the social studies group, see Table 2), the social studies pre-service teachers did not claim that race was a subject that was hard for them to discuss (in fact, not one of the social studies student journals said this), and very few of them claimed that they had never really thought about racism. Indeed, they were less likely than other groups to claim that White people do not know that White privilege exists (instead arguing that somewhere deep inside, all White people in this country are actually aware of their privileged positions), and more likely than other groups to assert that White privilege is real.

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**Table 5:** Comparison of the density of themes common to social studies candidates to the density of the same themes in the journal entries written by candidates preparing to teach English or Science

<b>MORE common among social studies candidates (Social Studies density vs. English and Science density), with examples from Social Studies.</b>	<b>LESS common among social studies candidates (Social Studies density vs. English and Science density), with examples from multiple subject areas.</b>
<p>White privilege is real (114.3 vs. 94.1, 85.7)</p>	<p>Race is a subject that's hard for me to discuss (0 vs. 41.2, 14.3)</p> <p>E: "One of the biggest problems with racism is that it is such a touchy subject that no one wants to talk about it which leads to people being ignorant and uneducated"</p>
<p>White privilege is less than before (71.4 vs. 47.1, 14.3)</p>	<p>Racism is just a part of life (7.1 vs. 29.4, 42.9)</p> <p>E: "It's life for me. I would love to have a privilege, but I do not."</p>
<p>Not much has changed in 15 years since article released (28.6 vs. 23.5, 14.3)</p>	<p>I had never really thought about racism (35.7 vs. 52.9, 100)</p> <p>E: "For the most part, growing up in the South, I was never truly aware of the discrepancies because I was not physically around many African-Americans."</p>
<p>White privilege is exaggerated or unreal (28.6 vs. 23.5, 14.3)</p>	<p>White people do not know White privilege exists (42.9 vs. 64.7, 57.1)</p> <p>SS: "One thing that I noticed about this reading is that there are a lot of black people who notice these privileges, but not many white people notice that they exist. A lot of white people will not even admit that this exist because they are not aware."</p>
	<p>As a teacher, I intend to do</p> <p>E: In my classroom, I want to not only acknowledge that</p>

something about racism (114.3 vs. 129.4, 228.6)	racism exists, but educate and challenge stereotypes, all with the goal of coming closer to breaking this cycle of hatred by ensuring that my students are informed.
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That said, there also emerges from this picture a kind of world-weariness about the topic of race from the social studies pre-service teachers—they are familiar with racial conflict and racial themes and feel comfortable speaking about them, but they also appear to feel as though their prior studies have taught them to be less concerned about current racism and about their need to do something about racism in their classrooms. They were MORE likely than other cohorts to claim that White privilege is less than before, and/or that it is exaggerated or unreal, and LESS likely to say that as a teacher they intended to do something about racism. Although, to be fair, the density of this latter theme was still very high, as can be seen by the density of this statement in Table 5. This is a disturbing conclusion, as it seems to indicate that social studies pre-service teachers' greater awareness of racial issues did not press them toward more desire for social justice, but it instead pressed towards an undue complacency and belief that because things have been getting better, they will continue to do so without apparent effort on their part.

Williams and Evans-Winters (2005) had this to say about pre-service teachers in their diversity course:

They believe they know enough about race, class, and gender discrimination, and want to leave discussions about race and racism out of discussions about education...somehow they have come to believe that teaching and learning, except for that short period between 1865 and 1954, are disconnected from discussions of race and racism. (p. 212)

The future social studies teachers in this cohort definitely had an understanding of race, and for whom being able to discuss the topic represents significant progress over pretending that racism does not exist or does not matter was clear. However, it is distressing that in their efforts to situate racism historically, some of them have come to the conclusion that racism in the past was so horrific that we should be celebrating today's race relations instead of continuing the work of abolishing racism.

### **Conclusions and Implications**

First, the hopeful: this course did seem to provide a space for students to grapple with their feelings toward White privilege. Students overwhelmingly agreed that racism did in fact exist, and that they wanted to create safe spaces in their classrooms where racism—overt and covert—would not exist. Largely this was the result of class discussions, as several White student journals included references to conversations they had with Black classmates that cracked some of their previous understandings about race. While many students remained dubious about the full extent of White privilege in society, there was clear softening at the edges. Call it the Semi-Silenced Dialogue—my White students heard the message, and they spoke of their new understandings, but they had not fully internalized the message. One of the limitations of this study is that the journal entries were all written immediately following the class period in which these discussions took place, and it is possible that a deeper understanding simply took more time and reflection than is demonstrated in this project.

Second, the challenge: while journals were evidence of a journey made by these candidates toward greater understandings of peoples differences from each other, they clearly

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showcase the gulf between White and Black conceptions of racial topics such as White privilege. Even social studies students, with their demonstrated awareness and comfort discussing race and racial themes, failed to appreciate the extent to which White privilege impacted the daily lives of their non-White peers.

If the end goal is to reach all pre-service teachers with the message that White privilege and White supremacy continue to plague race relations in this country, it appears that social studies pre-service teachers present particular challenges due to their prior education. In order to fully comprehend the reality of modern racism, social studies pre-service teachers may require readings more specifically grounded in the present. For example: (1) A scientific examination (using methods from the social studies disciplines of Sociology, Psychology, and Political Science) of current race relations in this country, and (2) An equally scientific article arguing that erasing White privilege is possible and desirable. Social studies is the most logical place in the curriculum for sensitive discussions about race, racism, and White privilege to occur, but only if social studies pre-service teachers possess the ability and disposition to lead them.

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