



JOURNAL OF CRITICAL THOUGHT AND PRAXIS

IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY DIGITAL PRESS & SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

Volume 6

Issue 3 *Everyday Practices of Social Justice*

Article 3

The White Savior Industrial Complex: A Cultural Studies Analysis of a Teacher Educator, Savior Film, and Future Teachers

Brittany A. Aronson

Follow this and additional works at: <http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/jctp/vol6/iss3/>



This article is distributed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License (CC-BY-NC). Users may reproduce, disseminate, display, or adapt this article for non-commercial purposes, provided the author is properly cited. See <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>.

The Journal of Critical Thought and Praxis is published by the Iowa State University School of Education and Iowa State University Digital Press. View the journal at <http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/jctp/>.

The White Savior Industrial Complex: A Cultural Studies Analysis of a Teacher Educator, Savior Film, and Future Teachers

Brittany A. Aronson*
Miami University – Oxford

This paper seeks to report the findings of a cultural studies project conducted in an upperclassman, undergraduate, teacher preparation course. With this paper, I explore the implications of a white savior mentality through the lens of three different, yet over-lapping, personal and social media: my own story as a beginning, white teacher in racially diverse school settings; popular texts that romanticize white teachers who come in to “save the day”; and the experiences of future teachers with whom I have worked to interrogate a White Savior Industrial Complex (WSIC). With this paper, then, I work to investigate the social institutions that animate the WSIC, which I position as a detrimental extension of a superhero teacher that perpetuates inequalities in schools if left unexamined. More specifically, to combat the structures of inequality that exist in our schools, I argue for critical race theory and critical whiteness studies courses as a potential space for white teachers to dialogue and come to terms with their understandings of white supremacy.

Keywords: White Saviorism | Teacher Education | Whiteness | Race | Cultural Studies in Education

In 2012, Nigerian-American novelist Teju Cole coined the term *white savior industrial complex* (WSIC) in response to a popular video blowing up on YouTube - “Kony 2012.”¹ The WSIC refers to the “confluence of practices, processes, and institutions that reify historical inequities to ultimately validate white privilege” (Anderson, 2013, p. 39). Essentially, as Cole explained, a WSIC involves a “big emotional experience that validates privilege.” Ultimately, people are rewarded from “saving” those less fortunate and are able to completely disregard the policies they have supported that have created/maintained systems of oppression (i.e. The U.S.’s exploitation in Haiti has contributed to poverty and corruption, yet Americans can feel good about their charity after the Earthquake). The rhetoric around how Americans often talk about Africa—as a continent of chaos, war-thirsty people, and impoverished HIV-infected communities, situates these countries as places in need of heroism. This mindset perpetuates the need for external forces to come

* Correspondence can be directed to Brittany Aronson at aronsoba@miamioh.edu

¹ “Kony 2012” is a short film developed by the NGO Invisible Children Inc., which brought attention to Joseph Kony, an African war criminal under arrest (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y4MnpzG5Sqc>). The lead filmmaker, Jason Russell was a young White, American activist who according to Cole, “reduces the historical complexities of present realities to a sort of white rescue mission that becomes legitimated by its appropriation of social justice language” (Anderson, 2013, p. 39).

in and save the day, but what gets left out of this conversation are the roles settler colonialism and white supremacy have had in creating these conditions in the first place (Smith, 2012).²

Distorted narratives that paint Africa and other developing countries in these ways allow for the hegemonic project of whiteness and white supremacy (Allen, 2001) to do exactly as intended: to create a need for white intervention for “emotional needs to be satisfied” so the opportunity for agency at the local or individual level becomes nonexistent (Cole, 2012). The argument is framed in such a commonsense manner that any opposition to a *white savior* coming in to save the day is deemed in a negative light. The WSIC creates a white savior who able to be emotionally rewarded about the contribution made to the cause and that he or she has made a difference in the lives of these poor unfortunate individuals with disregard for how as Cole described, “The white savior supports brutal policies in the morning, founds charities in the afternoon, and receives awards in the evening.” This broader project of white supremacy leads to a WSIC that continues to cause damage on American soil. Within the United States (and other colonized nations) these ideologies are passed down into our everyday practices - most notably education.

In addition to the problematic impact of the WSIC in mission work around the world, other elements of saviorism become part of future teachers’ consciousness and emotionality, in part due to these larger discourses (Matias, 2016a). The white savior narrative is “indoctrinated” in many of our pre-service teachers and educators who remain a predominantly white and female teaching force (Boser, 2014). These “well-intentioned” and “big-hearted” teachers are often swayed by romanticized notions of “good whites” in urban classrooms and will become “heroic liberal warriors who will save students of Color from failing” (Matias, 2016b, p .9; Vera & Gordan, 2003b), much in the same ways white liberals do mission work in Black and Brown countries to help. However, as Cammarota (2011) explained, this false assumption that students of Color are in need of saving “renders the misrepresentation of the potential of people of Color to resist and lead the transformation of oppressive conditions within their own social context” (p. 245). And as Cole asserts, “there is the idea that those who are being helped ought to be consulted over the matters that concern them.” What makes us, as white teachers, think that students of Color are in need of our services particularly given the violent – both physical and symbolic – history between whites and people of Color in America? As a teacher who never taught predominantly white students until I reached higher education, this was something I also needed to deeply interrogate within myself. For these reasons, I engaged my pre-service teachers in a cultural studies project that attempted to build upon my own experiences as a former public school teacher and now a teacher educator, and to explore the usefulness of explicitly teaching about the WSIC in a teacher education classroom. In addition, I use my personal progression in both my lived and learned experiences to consider how I can continue to work toward dismantling white supremacy for the humanity of Black and Brown lives today.

I begin this article by sharing a reflection I wrote in my first year of teaching to unpack the struggle to understand my own complicity in white saviorism. Within this I share a portrait of the journey of examining my positionality. I discuss how popular Hollywood films such as *Freedom Writers* often promote the development of a WSIC by illustrating

² It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss settler colonialism; for more see Andrea Smith’s chapter.

how “big-hearted” white teachers (including me) embody a “save the day” mentality that will lead Black and Brown children and youth to obtain a “successful” academic career and upward social mobility. To further enumerate, I share examples from an assignment conducted in a required educational psychology course taken by mostly pre-service teachers. For this special themed issue, *Everyday Practices of Social Justice*, I provide specific examples of how I approached teaching in this class revealing both the tensions and the messiness of engaging in critical social justice work, as well as my own self-critique to push myself further. I share this experience to highlight how this work has been a journey for me, one that I continue to embark upon. I conclude this piece by sharing lessons I have learned through my own journey and implications for teacher education.

March 2007

We'll call her the Optimistic teacher. It seemed like just yesterday she made the decision that would define her life. Little did she know the decision made, that ordinarily affected people's everyday lives- what they would do from 9 to 5, how they would pay their bills, how they would support their families- would be something far more powerful to her than she could ever explain.

She grew up in a white middle class neighborhood with very little exposure to suffering and the everyday obstacles that existed in this world. Sure she had her own problems- a father who was disabled, and a mother struggling to continue the role of superwomen while becoming a lifelong caretaker, but she never thought to herself, how will I feed myself tonight or I hope I live today. She just continued living her normal everyday life and was granted many opportunities that opened her eyes to all the changes she wanted to make in this world.

She began writing this memoir this evening to record the growth as a teacher and to hold on to for those moments when she knows she will face. Those moments when she feels like she's given her all and has nothing to show for it. She was inspired tonight by the motion picture “Freedom Writers.” She saw how one teacher can make a difference in children's lives and believe that it is far too soon for us to give up on this youth that will one day be leading this world. But how? How can we reach young America and show them how important they are to us? In this movie- everyone labeled these children as failures. They never believed they would make it past 10th grade- the year that they are legally allowed to drop out. But this teacher made a difference. The teacher believed in them with such passion that she had to work 3 jobs to pay for resources since the school didn't think the children would capable of using the resources they had for the “smarter” children. How will our children ever believe in themselves if we don't take a risk to believe in them first?

The optimistic teacher thinks the largest problem with our underprivileged youth is the lack of support they have from adults and the examples that have previously been set for them. They are taught that they must put up “barriers” to protect themselves and that the only way to make it through and to “stick” with their own kind. This limits them to learning tolerance and respect for human beings. We shut down the possibility to mold human rights leaders and promoters for peace. We instead further promote violence between one another

and hatred for people we don't know. The optimistic teacher came home tonight from watching this movie and when she turned on the television, there was a movie about South Africa. Sure enough, race has once again caused conflict among people. Her eyes started to swell and within minutes tears were dripping down her face. Her heart ached. She thinks to herself- wow, she has been cursed with a burden to care so much for the future generations. She thinks, how can people hate each other so much just because of the amount of pigment in his skin is different. It seems so frivolous. So ridiculous. But what does she know? She is merely another white know it all teacher who wants to "save" the youth. No. She won't accept that. She won't let anyone tell her she can't make a difference, she can't help those who already think they have no chance. She now knows without a doubt in her mind that passion is what drives success- not experience. And if the passion she feels in her heart is worth anything- one day there will be a student who knows how much she cares. She has always had more than she could ever need in her life- she knows its time for me to give back. She doesn't want anything else. She doesn't want a new car, She doesn't want new clothes, She doesn't want fancy jewelry or purses. She just wants to be somewhere where students truly need someone to believe in them. She wants to give them the support they have always wanted but never received.

This is the story of one teacher who had a dream to make a difference in the world. How exactly she went about that is yet to be determined. Who was affected by her presence is soon to be discovered. But one thing is for certain. She will make her presence known. She will put every last bit of energy into her calling (for it is not just a job). And for that one child (or hopefully many) lives will be better.

As I started my doctoral program back in 2010, I revisited this old journal entry I found as I was attempting to write a racial narrative in my Critical Race Theory course. I can vividly remember the night that I wrote this journal entry in 2007. I was in my first year of teaching third grade at a racially and linguistically diverse school in Miramar, Florida. I had just returned home from seeing the movie, *Freedom Writers*, on a Sunday night and I decided I wanted to write about my experiences teaching in this space in the way that the protagonist Erin Gruwell did about her teaching in an urban high school. Fast forward nearly three and half years later, and after four years of teaching public school in the Miami, Atlanta, and the Washington D.C. vicinities, I was asked to reflect upon my positionality through an intersectional lens including race/ethnicity, gender/sexuality, class, and more (Delgado and Stefancic, 2001). My own positionality includes the identity of a racially white, middle-class, heterosexual, Christian spiritual, cisgender woman, and former elementary teacher, now a teacher educator. It was not until I began this initial (and still ongoing project) of examining who I was to fully understand how I was complicit in the WSIC.

Hegemonic Project of Whiteness

Barker (2009) defined hegemony as, "a process of making, maintaining, and reproducing ascendant meanings and practices" (p. 10). It implies a situation where the historical *norm* exercises authority over subordinate groups. For me, the hegemonic project of whiteness

was embedded within my psyche and as a teacher, I believed my “good heart” and “good intentions” were enough to get through any obstacle I might have faced in the classroom. As time went on and my graduate education began dismantling many of the things that I thought I knew, I re-visited my memories to find myself reminiscing of how my emotional needs were satisfied in while teaching. This concerned me now that I was a teacher educator supporting the next generation of teachers.

I am indebted to my education and the people of Color who have taught me along the way (whether intentional or not), because I do not know where I would be, or what kind of teacher I would be now without these experiences. Through courses studied in graduate school and working in communities where I was often the only white person, I learned how I exhibited a dysconscious racism. King (1991) defined dysconscious racism as a “distorted way of thinking about race” in which one accepts dominant White norms, not even acknowledging all the privileges granted in their life (p. 338). It is through such realizations that researching teachers’ views on race and culture first interested me. This fed my desire for teachers to critically reflect upon their own racialized identities and how it will impact students in their classroom.

Even as I have progressed from the first time I thought about my positionality to now, my understandings of race, and particularly whiteness as a hegemonic project, have informed my teaching and the questions I ask pre-service teachers when I begin a new semester. Now that I have a deeper understanding of my own positionality and evolution in understanding it, I use myself as an example for my students to better interrogate how the WSIC colonizes many minds of our white teachers working in urban schools. Like Erin Gruwell’s character in *Freedom Writers*, there are many other white teachers like me who approached teaching very well-intentioned as I was in my above journal entry. However, had I not taken a class on Critical Race Theory that had asked me to produce a racial narrative, I wonder if I would have ever been able to see how the WSIC impacted my pedagogy. It is with this understanding that I became more intentional about how I would introduce concepts of white privilege and saviorism to the pre-service teachers I work with.

Methodology: Cultural Studies Approach and Pop Culture

The methodological context of this work is built upon critical social justice ideals³ as part of a larger cultural studies project. My own training in cultural studies during my doctoral program had an extreme impact on the way that I transitioned from being an elementary school teacher to teaching pre-service teachers. The most important lesson I learned was that within the field of cultural studies, courses in the social foundations of education – that is the philosophy, sociology, history, and policy studies – can benefit teacher candidates in between understanding how privilege and oppression operate in society. To set the stage for this research, I will give a brief overview of cultural studies and how I have applied this theoretical framework to teacher education.

³ Sensoy and DiAngelo (2012) extend the concept of social justice beyond a notion of fairness and equality for all people. I align myself with their term *critical social justice* to use as a lens in my research. A critical social justice, “recognize[s] that society is *stratified* (i.e. divided and unequal) in significant and far reaching ways along social group lines that include race, class, gender, sexuality, and ability. Critical social justice recognizes inequality as deeply embedded in the fabric of society (i.e., as structural), and actively seeks to change this” (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012, p. xviii).

Just What is Cultural Studies Anyway?

Handal Wright (1996) argued cultural studies is not simply a single discipline but rather, “multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary, postdisciplinary, and even anti-disciplinary” (p. 13). Nevertheless, he described the broad characteristics, which I have following in my own teaching praxis. Wright explained that cultural studies:

- is informed by theory and depends on praxis
- seeks to determine: *Who has power in society? How is it created, negotiated, or maintained?*
- is concerned with social justice regarding making the world a better place through a more even distribution of wealth
- examines identity politics
- deals with social difference and diversity (alterity, multiculturalism, racism, feminism, gay rights, politics, disabilities)
- is interdisciplinary (philosophy, history, sociology, anthropology, etc.)
- is flexible (the issues dealt with change over time)
- is praxis driven (twinning of theory and practice)
- will be somewhat different in each location or with each individual project
- is never “conforming” to one rule or procedure as “it”. It has to always remain elastic and society functions in this nature.
- is “always already” a contested terrain
- Pop culture is important (probably because of the enormous impact it has on people).
- Even these characteristics should be treated as negotiable. (“Notes on Cultural Studies;” Wright, 1995, pp. 3-4).

Within this cultural studies-informed project, I focus on power relations (between teachers and their students), social justice, difference, and pop culture (media). Specifically relating to education Hytten (2006) asserted, “among [cultural studies] goals are to understand the relationship between power and knowledge, to look at how power gets symbolically and representatively reproduced, to challenge disempowering social practices, and to provide resources for resistance and social transformation” (p. 234).

Furthermore, Hytten (1997) explained, “In the terrain of cultural studies, what is important to consider in this context is how certain inequalities and relationships of domination are constructed and maintained and how different populations are disempowered and marginalized in the process” (p. 43). Teachers working toward a critical social justice are aware of how the inequities of society are reproduced through the normalized processes of schooling and the curriculum. Enacting *cultural studies as social justice praxis* (Wright, 2003) encouraged a political agenda to do something about the disempowerment of historically oppressed students (Hytten, 1997). In a cultural studies project, “theory permeates all levels” of the study and “needs to be connected to specific issues and debates rather than explored solely in the abstract” (Barker, 2008, p. 12). I am interested in understanding how this type of research can contribute to the consciousness-raising about race, racism, and whiteness for pre-service teachers. My guiding research

question in this study stemmed from my own positionality and epistemological beliefs from unpacking my whiteness. I asked: *How does explicitly addressing the WSIC enhance pre-service teachers' understandings of white privilege and saviorism?*

Data Collection and Analysis

The method of analysis used in this study was based on document analysis (Merriam, 1998) and my own reflective journaling. Over the course of six semesters, 120 students shared reflections with me as part of an assignment in my educational psychology class. This particular article is focused on one of the classes consisting of 21 students. Holistic coding was used to analyze critical reflection papers. When coding holistically, the researcher reads to grasp basic themes or issues in the data by absorbing them by the whole rather than going through and coding line by line (Saldaña, 2016). I conducted a hand-coded analysis and then focused on creating conceptual clusters based on particular phrases used throughout the texts. The changes, or “actions” involved made in the curricula evolved from the first time I taught this class in Fall 2010 to the findings reported from this specific example from Summer 2013.

Context: Applied Educational Psychology

The course, titled “Applied Educational Psychology,” focuses on integrating learning theories and instructional strategies into classroom practice. As one of the mandatory courses pre-service teachers must take before their internship year, we were regulated by NCATE and INSTAC standards (now CAEP). In addition to the main focus on learning theories, all of the required teacher education courses must incorporate learner “diversity” into the curriculum. No separate multicultural or social justice education type of class is required for pre-service teachers to take at this institution, however, students may choose to take a class with this focus as part of their cognate during their internship year (fifth-year master’s program).

This project formulated out of my interest in enhancing the curriculum regarding the “Group Differences” chapter in our educational psychology text. The required text defines “group differences” as “*consistently* observed differences (averages) among diverse groups of students based on ethnicity or cultural background, gender, or socioeconomic status. The author of our text began the chapter stating:

If we are to maximize the learning and development of all of our students, we must be aware of group differences that may influence their learning and classroom performance. Our challenge is to keep these differences in mind without assuming that all members of a particular group fit typical group patterns. (Ormrod, 2010, p. 104, emphasis added)

The first year I taught the course (in 2010) I would use the above quote as a means to explain that while we can understand that groups differ, it is important not to generalize and try to fit every individual within a group. I thought it important to be *aware* as our text had put it and to challenge each other to keep these differences in mind. As I went through my own doctoral program in cultural studies and continued teaching the course, I realized

that I wasn't charging them to be critical *enough* and many of my students were not being exposed to other conversations on "diversity" in other teacher education classes, let alone the explicitness of race, racism, whiteness. Even more disturbing, the text had minimalized diversity to only include ethnicity, gender, and class and despite the author's attempts to not "stereotype" within the text, I had students giving presentations reporting "at-risk" data about students of Color and expectations we as teachers should have regarding gender (i.e. boys are better in math, girls are quieter). Furthermore, there were not conversations of dis/ability, gender identity and/or orientation, religion, or language.

It was during this time I became interested in the perspectives and reflections of my pre-service teachers throughout this unit to inform me about their own development. I had to think of a way to expose my students to more critical issues and to have them think of the social, historical, and political forces affecting schooling (the social foundations of education) in relation to race, racism, and whiteness. I decided to supplement the required chapter of the text book with outside readings and to expand the concept of "diversity" beyond ethnicity, gender, and class to also include religion, sexual orientation, language, ability, and whatever other interests the students might bring to my attention (for example, one group of students sought to explore working with Appalachian rural culture).

The Students

Twenty-one participants (17 females, 5 males) were enrolled in this educational psychology course in Summer 2013 at a large Southeastern university. Five of the participants in the study had already been teaching for one year and were fulfilling requirements to obtain their license. Three students had just completed their first years teaching secondary language classes. One teacher has just completed her first year teaching middle school science. Of the two secondary math students, one had just completed his first year. Six pre-service teachers were preparing to be early childhood/elementary teachers. Two pre-service teachers were preparing to be secondary social studies teachers. Two pre-service teachers were preparing to be special education teachers. One pre-service teacher was preparing to be a secondary art teacher. One pre-service teacher was preparing to be a secondary music teacher. Lastly, one pre-service teacher was preparing to be a secondary agricultural education teacher. In terms of ethnicity, 19 described themselves as White, one described herself as African American, and one described himself as Nigerian. During this particular semester, I wondered what my two students who identified, as African American and Nigerian were thinking and how this conversation influenced them, given I identify as a white teacher talking about race. However, while I remember actually thinking this while teaching this class in 2013, I did nothing at that time to learn more from my students of Color in the class regarding how they felt, and I worry about even making them feel "tokenized." It is important to note, since this class, I have taken a different approach to working with students of Color in my classes who are often out-numbered in predominantly white education classes and this varies each class depending upon the students and context.

The Assignments

When I first began to think about altering how I presented the “diversity” chapter, I went through course syllabi of classes I had taken in my doctoral program and pulled out works by Jean Anyon, Catherine Lugg, and Daniel Solórzano to name a few. Working in small groups, students also reflected upon their readings and provided any questions, critique, comments, etc. that they had. The students formed their own group based on their interests to read more in depth about the particular “difference” assigned and were to lead a discussion on their topic the following class in a seminar format. I was able to use these class discussions, online posts, and written reflections as integral parts of data collection. I facilitated discussions with the students and asked them to share their insights with each other in class comparing what they had read from their textbooks and what they have read in separately selected articles. However, for this particular study, I wished to go even deeper and explicitly make white privilege and saviorism apparent throughout the entire course with a goal to document students’ reactions throughout the semester leading to one final reflection paper which served as the main source for data collection.

Introducing the “White Savior Industrial Complex”

As I entered the classroom on the first day, I displayed a PowerPoint slide with three generic objectives:

1. Think about what it means to be a teacher.
2. Think about the importance of teacher professionalism.
3. Think about how teachers can utilize research within their classrooms.

My aim here was to stay aligned with then NCATE (now CAEP) standards regarding professionalism and research but also engage students in a more critical analysis of what professionalism might mean in different settings. I asked students what the role of the teacher was and received typical answers such as *motivator*, *guide*, *advocate*, and *role model*. I then had students think of three types of teachers: a famous teacher, their favorite teacher growing up, and themselves as a teacher to document describing qualities and compare them to each other (an assignment used by our instructional team). Most students thought of many of the famous teachers glorified in the media such as Mrs. Frizzle and the *Magic School Bus*, John Keating from *Dead Poet’s Society* or perhaps Cameron Diaz’s character in *Bad Teacher*. Some of them believed they shared qualities with these teachers while others highlighted their extreme opposites (e.g., *Bad Teacher*’s character shows movies instead of teaching, drinks and smokes marijuana at work, and cheats on the state standardized test).

As we moved throughout the conversation, I asked students to think about what their role is as a teacher and what kinds of responsibilities they believe they will have. Many of them mentioned things such as being organized, having time management and being able to multi-task. After this, I moved into my activity using a clip from the movie *Freedom Writers* (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HU_BueZZNd8). I was always cautious as I introduced this film to not romanticize the main character Erin Gruwell as a white savior who came into to “fix” the students in the film; rather I was explicit with students that our

purpose in watching this clip was to offer critique of what Ms. Gruwell *does not know* about her students. I began this segment by sharing with students the concept of the WSIC and a white savior and we read through Teju Cole's piece. I named myself as being complicit in this this category in my early years of teaching by sharing my diary entry from 2007 for us to critique together. I was explicit that a WSIC is something I dissect within myself and work against myself in my research and teaching. I hoped my vulnerability here would allow for a recognition that I too have had to work through these tensions and realizations of the role I play. I then attempted to make connections between the damage unexamined bias that white teachers hold can have on Black and Brown children through research about white teachers' views toward diversity and how this might negatively impact students of Color (Irvine, 1990; King, 1991; Sleeter, 2001; Valencia, 1997).

The negative impact white saviors impose is illustrated in this scene when Ms. Gruwell, who no doubt had a big heart and cared for her students, had to face the reality that she came to *help* students who did not want her help. When trying to teach a lesson on grammar, Ms. Gruwell hears snickering only to find a drawing with a derogatory image of one of the students being passed around the classroom. She scolds the students in a way that ultimately dismisses their everyday realities. Eva angrily tells her,

You don't know nothin'. You don't know the pain we feel, you don't know what we gotta do, you got no respect for how we living ... we are you doing in here that makes a God-damn difference in my life?

As Ms. Gruwell attempts to respond to Eva, she states, "You don't feel respected? Is that what you're saying Eva? Well maybe you're not, but to get respect you have to give it." Her naïve attempts to place her own value-system upon Eva is immediately refuted by Marcus who tells her,

That's bullshit. Why should I give my respect to you? Cause you're a teacher? I don't know you. How do I know you're not a liar standing up there? How do I know you're not a bad person standing up there? I'm not just gonna give me your respect because you're called a teacher.

In the scene, we saw Ms. Gruwell struggle to take in this information that undoubtedly was all new to her based on her facial expressions. Eva continued to *school* her teacher stating, *white people always wanting their respect like they deserve it for free*. Ms. Gruwell, attempted to take a colorblind approach responding that the Color of her skin shouldn't matter. Hence the problem.

Continuing our discussion, I asked the students to watch the movie scene and to think about the following questions:

1. What pre-existing paradigms might Ms. Gruwell have had that she has to change now?
2. What do you think about the typical roles/responsibilities teachers face?
3. Does this change your characteristics of what it means to be a teacher?
4. In what ways does Ms. Gruwell portray a WSIC/white saviorism?

Not only was this our first class which students do not know me or each other, this is the first time many of these students have been introduced to concepts of white privilege and saviorism. I concluded this first class with students filling out a reflection asking if our conversation today has influenced their prior beliefs in any way.

Through the rest of the short summer semester we rapidly moved through topics regarding motivation, creating productive learning environments, and different approaches to learning. Within each topic, I used case studies and presented alternative research to keep my focus on white privilege and saviorism throughout the course. For example, when teaching about intelligence, we watched the documentary *Secrets of the SAT*, which dispels the myth that the SAT is a neutral test and instead highlights how access sets up inequitable advantages for students of Color and those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (Soares, 2007). Also, when teaching about “classroom management,” we discussed the discipline gap⁴ and learning about restorative justice as an alternative approach to maintaining positive learning communities (Wallace, Goodkind, Wallace & Bachman, 2008). In the following section, I share findings comparing the first day of class to the last day.

Findings

The First Day

There were two main themes that arose when students were asked what pre-existing paradigms might Ms. Gruwell have to change: assumptions and deficits.

Assumptions. The majority of the students agreed that Ms. Gruwell came into the classroom with far too many assumptions regarding students’ home lives and their academic abilities. Respect was mentioned as something Ms. Gruwell assumed was natural part of teaching and one she should be rewarded for. One student was more specific in his answer stating Ms. Gruwell needed to, “erase stereotypes based on race, white supremacy, etc. All the students acted like they couldn’t go anywhere in life- believe in them, inspire them.” Another student stated that Ms. Gruwell “assumed her value system was also theirs.” These statements suggested these pre-service teachers were beginning to acknowledge the dangerous assumptions teachers sometimes make that could harm students rather than help them.

Deficits. Despite having discussed what saviorism was, many of the pre-service teachers continued to state deficit-oriented responses in their reflections. It may be the case that the pre-service teachers needed time to reflect about what these ideas meant and be given more opportunities to discuss research related to white teachers and saviorism. One student stated that Ms. Gruwell assumed, “students want to and were open to learning.” Another student stated that Ms. Gruwell assumed, “she could rely on a normal teaching

⁴ The Children’s Defense Fund report that although Black children comprise 17% of the public school population, they represent roughly 37% of children who were suspended and 38% of all students expelled (Children’s Defense Fund, 2011).

style.” Another student said that she, “assumed they were motivated to learn.” None of the students took into account that the students’ public education system had failed them (as Cole describes, “the brutal policies” the white savior supports) and their placement in a remedial English class with outdated, unrelated texts might have been more of a reason for them not to “want to learn” rather than them simply not caring about knowledge. Additionally, they held on to ideas such as “normal” teaching styles, not recognizing that most schools are designed to support white middle-class values and attitudes at the expense of other cultural groups (O’Grady & Chappell, 2000).

During this first class, I knew there was work to do here. Looking at where the students were at this point was able to inform where I went next in terms of how I guided their reading and prepared myself for how I facilitated the last assignment which was a mere six weeks later, given the short length of time for this summer course.

The Last Day

As mentioned above, the first part of the final assignment asked students to choose a “diversity” topic to study in depth in small groups with the end goal of leading a seminar discussion on the last day of class. The second part required students to write an individual reflection to turn in at the end of the semester. As a teacher educator continually working on improving her practice, my goal was to examine how implementing a focus on white privilege and saviorism intersected with other forms of difference influenced students’ understandings.

Reflections on Race and Poverty. In this particular class, I sought to be explicit about what the WSIC was and see if my own positioning would have any impact on students related to their understandings of how we discussed “difference.” I will use the example of how poverty and race were intersected in our conversations of difference.

Despite the explicit conversations regarding white saviorism, using popular culture, and media to highlight white savior examples, and revealing my own positionality with students, they did not escape aspects of saviorism within their discourse. For example, one white female teacher who had just finished her first-year teaching in a rural (and linguistically diverse migrant community) setting shared,

About fifty percent of the kids I serve are below the poverty line and have various struggles to contend with well beyond what is expected of them in the classroom setting. Some of those students have no one to come home to or are not sure about who will be there that evening. The kids also have jobs that compete with their time. The teachers at my school know that not only do we have to teach these kids, but we have to be a stable and positive influence in their lives. We know our jobs go beyond academics and more revolve around taking care of the kids emotionally and sometimes even assisting them with home stability.

Upon first examination of this teacher’s statement, one might overlook the problematic positioning of herself here. I do not suggest her intentions are not from a position of care, however as we know, good intentions are not enough (Milner & Laughter, 2015) and hence the problem with the WSIC that renders the teacher as the big-hearted intervener who will

“be a stable and positive influence” for students. This statement alludes to an underlying assumption that, the teachers, herself included, are the stable influences in their students’ lives and that she is the only one who can take on the caregiver role. Of course, teachers are caregivers, and should provide love and care for their students, however, the way in which this white female teacher positions herself is as if she is the only one that provides care for her students, and she can be congratulated for taking on this *burden*. But this begs the question, how does she know this? Based on my own understandings of how whiteness operates, I presume she draws this conclusion from her own white privileged background and fails to acknowledge her own role in reproducing whiteness by suggesting her students conform to her same Eurocentric, middle class standards, much in the same way Ms. Gruwell did. This is further reinforced when she shares,

I really loved the idea of giving the students a plant or something that they are solely responsible for in order to teach them responsibility and provide a connection to the class. I think this would really be beneficial for students, especially those who feel as if they are not properly cared for, to learn how to respond to needs of something else and see the outcomes of their care.

Again, this teacher reinforces her own values of “responsibility” when she suggests student’s growing a plant as means for them to understand responsibility, as well as gives her the “emotional satisfaction” to know she is intervening when students’ “uncaring, and thus problematic families cannot. As Matias (2016b) explains, “these White teacher candidates profess love, care, and hope for humanity, their students, their teaching, they nevertheless continue to make prejudicial assumptions” (p. 30). In this case, this white female teacher seemingly assumes that her students are not cared for because the ways in which her values explicate care and responsibility do not align with her students and therefore she must intervene, which in turn allows for her to reap the emotional benefits and feel-good effects of white saviorism.

This imposing of white middle-class values was a theme that stemmed throughout our conversations on race and poverty. One white male student said,

I don’t want to stereotype here, but the way I see it, a lot of this stems from home. When there are financial issues you see more violence or you could be seeing illegal substances.

In this example, the problems in communities of Color are often pitted on those who live there rather than acknowledging larger systems of historical inequity that has contributed to the continued disparities that exist today -- again as Cole explains, “the brutal policies” that keep systemic inequality in place, which the “savior” is not complicating. This further reinforces notions of meritocracy that is often breaded through media and popular culture. Despite my attempts to counteract these false narratives using excerpts from Jean Anyon’s text *radical possibilities*, one white male responded in a predictable way to this reading:

I do agree with Anyon that schools seem to be controlled politically, but this does not mean that politics is keeping people from advancing themselves in the world. There

have been plenty of students that have advanced regardless of their schooling situation, and I have many friends at South University that have overcome being a minority in a public school, become the first college graduate of their families, and even to break the cycle of poverty within their families by completing their education.

This statement begs the question, can a person of Color actually, “overcome being a minority?” No. Unfortunately, by using examples of his friends who have “overcome” their race and achieved in similar capacities to himself, this student erases the notion that issues of racism or classism exist because of his own experience which has cancelled out the broader experiences people of Color living in poverty; and he can feel good about being able to help his friends (and future students) to “overcome.” With saviors such as this student declaring Truths, Cole (2012) explains that, “Marginalized voices in America have fewer and fewer avenues to speak plainly about what they suffer; the effect of this enforced civility is that those voices are falsified or blocked entirely from the discourse.”

This example regarding the pre-services teachers’ reactions to conversations of race and poverty highlight the continued work that needs to be done in the teacher education classroom, and served as an impetus for where I pushed myself in my work. It is important to share the lessons learnt as social justice educators- which includes sharing both our successes and failures along the way. One might consider the students’ inability to critically reflect upon race and poverty as *their failure*, which some of it is, but I also I consider it mine. However, with this “fail” I continued to build upon my work in dismantling the hegemonic project of whiteness. In the next section I will discuss the evolution of my own teaching learned from this experience.

Discussion

Within this cultural studies project, the results were seemingly negative in nature, or at least that is now I felt when I read through my students’ reflections after only six short weeks together. However, I wish to share this research to highlight that where I am today in my teaching (four years later) stemmed from this initial project where I actively named who I was in my own teaching and the informed opinions that I hold. Additionally, the self-discovery of my own racialized whiteness has since led me to understand the importance of all students’ needing to go through an archeological dig of who they are in relation to broader society.

Thinking back to my original intentions, the WSIC as it translates into white teacher saviorism is a complex phenomenon that has taken many of these teacher candidates twenty plus years to learn, internalize, and become a part of their everyday “normal.” So expecting students to have extreme paradigm shifts in only six weeks, may have been overzealous on my part; after all, I have spent eight years now in my current position unlearning, and continuing to unlearn, all that I *knew*.

We must acknowledge that these tropes of saviorism are “reproduced in teachers’ minds, not only through mass media, but also in teacher training and professional development programs, as well as through national policy debates in education” (Brown, 2013, p. 129). There have been a plethora of scholars who have evaluated the impacts of popular culture’s image of teachers dating back to the 1930s (Edelmen, 1983) to more contemporary analyses today (Hughey, 2014; Shoffner, 2016; Vera & Gordan, 2003). In

unpacking some of these ideas further, we might understand how in teacher education we might more strategically dismantle the WSIC many of our pre-service teachers arrive with.

Using Media as a Tool to *Dismantle* White Supremacy

Within cultural studies, it is important to include pop culture as a part of any analysis. We know that the media can reinforce stereotypes, but can it be used as a tool to dismantle them? As argued above, savior movies often reinforce the notion of the WSIC for many pre-service teachers because they portray teachers who work hard to be the “great hope” for underprivileged students, but also ultimately can benefit from how rewarding the job of teaching can be without ever having to complicate their role. However, bell hooks (1996) has discussed the power of movies as a tool for learning:

Whether we like it or not, cinema assumes a pedagogical role in the lives of many people. It may not be the intent of the filmmaker to teach audiences anything, but that does not mean that lessons are not learned ... Movies not only provide a narrative for specific discourses of race, sex, and class, they provide a shared experience, a common starting point from which diverse audiences can dialogue about these charged issues. (p. 3)

So for hooks, and I would agree, depending on how we situate our critiques of movies can have an impact on how we either reinforce or disrupt discourses. Many studies have highlighted the use of media in teacher education classrooms as potential spaces for critique. Pimentel (2010) conducted a study in her graduate class entitled, “Multicultural Teaching and Learning” at a large Southwestern University. In her class, students were given an assignment to identify racist discourses in Hollywood media (including *Freedom Writers*) searching for hegemonic or dominant discourses that may not always be as apparent. After several class readings regarding issues of race, ethnicity, language and power, students were able to engage in critical discussions on race and discovered some of the ways discursive racism is reproduced in film.

However, not all implementations of using popular culture in teacher education spaces have been used to disrupt the discourse of the WSIC. For example, Tanase (2013) sought to increase pre-service teachers’ basic understandings of meeting students’ needs. Cited as another “inspirational education movie,” Tanase used *Freedom Writers* to demonstrate to students, “when teachers care about their students, they create a climate of trust, respect, and optimism, influencing their students’ attitudes about school and their academic performance (Purkey & Novak, 2001)” (p. 4). Never complicating any notions of race, racism, or white privilege in the film; rather, Tanase concluded, “*Freedom Writers* is a prime example of real-life application of the Circle of Courage [a Native American philosophy she borrows] as the teacher is constantly meeting her students’ needs” (p. 6, text inserted). Within this article, she briefly references Pimental’s (2010) study as a space to identify racial discourse, but then quickly glosses over the main thesis of what Pimental was alluding to by citing another study that romanticized *Freedom Writers* (Choi, 2009). Through a similarly lens, Choi (2009) also focuses on Erin Gruwell’s character as successful teacher in an urban school,

Although urban problems largely stem from sociopolitical power relations rather than individuals, classroom teachers must shoulder the responsibility for making education empowering for urban youth. *Freedom Writers* ... addresses the complex challenges that inner-city teachers face by portraying the extraordinary pedagogy of one teacher, Erin Gruwell ... The movie opens with the struggles Gruwell faces on her first day of teaching, when she is immediately confronted by uncooperative, rebellious students who overtly challenge her authority. (p. 244)

The way in which this research immediately paints a picture of the “struggles” the teacher faces over the systemic issues she alludes to in the beginning of her statement only further reinforces how a WSIC can be achieved with the four themes from the film she identifies that makes Gruwell successful: rewriting curriculum, treating students as creators of knowledge, creating classroom community, and teaching as self-realization. It is not to suggest that any of these concepts are *bad* or not worthy of promoting in the teacher education classroom, or that these teacher educators are not advocates of social justice; however, without critical analysis of the WSIC alongside this media analysis, we risk perpetuating the idea that students of Color are in need of saving, white teachers are the ones to do it, and with these four strategies, white teachers can and will be as successful as Erin Gruwell.

These studies are all helpful in understanding the strengths and weakness of my own cultural studies project. While I was explicit and upfront with my aims and purposes of showing *Freedom Writers*, and exposing my own deficit-oriented journal to students; something was still missing that did not allow for students to truly identify and disrupt their own evolving WSIC. Looking back now, I believe the major disconnect made in my own teaching was a focus on white privilege without an understanding of white supremacy from the beginning. I conclude this article with the main lesson learned and recommendations for where to move forward in teacher education.

Lessons Learned: We Need More Than “White Privilege”

Matias (2016b) warned us how white teacher educators often co-opt language that give an appearance of socially justice work, but in reality is continuing to perpetuate inequality by using vague terms. By not being explicit about the needs to discuss race, racism, and white supremacy, and instead using terms such as privilege and diversity alone, we are just covering the surface and/or talking around issues. I argue we are in a time now where discussing white privilege is not enough in understanding the real impacts of racism. We live in a time where false notions of post-racial society have led to groups of white people to believe *they* are oppressed, and that conversations of white privilege are actually forms of “hate speech.”⁵

In the larger system of white supremacy, *we are falsely taught being white is better so it makes sense why we would instill our white values upon students of Color. We falsely believe ourselves to be the “chosen ones” who can save these children through our hard*

⁵ Arizona House Bill 2120 introduced by Republican Bob Thrope wants to protect students from being suggested to courses using terms such as “white privilege” that advances agendas toward any one group of people. See <http://www.dailydot.com/irl/arizona-white-privilege-ban/>

work ethic, our creative teaching methods, and our enthusiasm and dedication. These are the messages that movies such as *Freedom Writers* teach us. But the question then becomes, how do we get our pre-service teachers to see this? How do we get them to see that saviorism is racist in and of itself? I argue that identifying white privilege alone cannot explain the existence of a WSIC embodied by so many teachers. We must reach further than simply discussing the hegemonic project of whiteness that allows for white privilege to exist to an understanding of a project of white supremacy.

Now I know that white supremacy is a scary word to many. I remember a time when I was afraid to use this word in my own classroom. However, as I have heard white privilege used more and more, on TV, in songs, and other media platforms, I realize that along with its normalized usage comes a desensitizing of the term, and thus the meaning. Perhaps this might happen to white supremacy eventually, but we are not there yet. If students do accept that they receive privilege associated with their own whiteness, what does this mean for them as teachers in Black and Brown communities? Once they accept their own privilege (if they do) then what other responsibility do they have to disrupt it? White teachers cannot disrupt their own participation of in the WSIC without a broader understanding of white supremacy and its role in institutions such as schools (Vaught & Castagno, 2008).

With these understandings, I have reshaped my approaches to teaching and learning about race, racism, and whiteness. I have acknowledged that because Critical Race Theory (CRT) has informed the work that I do, as a teacher educator, this is my theoretical lens.⁶ Thus, I share this with students and explain what CRT is and how this has guided the pedagogical decisions I make within the course. My courses now are centered around understanding the tenets of CRT⁷ and how students can analyze all the topics we discuss including race, ethnicity, class, gender, orientation, and religion. Each of these topics are studied in intersectional ways in which we always problematize whiteness. When introducing the tenets of CRT, I spend time with helping students to understand what white supremacy is and how this creates a system they are a part of whether they acknowledge it or not. This is a part of my current research agenda and research I will continue to work on in the near future.

Conclusion

I use myself as the primary source of data in coming to this conclusion. I was first introduced to the concept of white privilege my freshman year of college in 2003. While I acknowledged its existence and realized I probably did benefit from being a *nice white lady*, I still held onto to the WSIC while teaching. What led me to ever even think about complicating this notion was not until years later in studying Critical Race Theory (CRT). CRT gave me a theoretical lens to understand the permanence of racism, issues of intersectionality, whiteness as property, interest convergence, and to have a critique of

⁶ As a white scholar I acknowledge that CRT was created by People of Color (POC) for POC and that by using CRT I risk scholarly misappropriation (Bergerson, 2003) or the "co-opting" of language and ideas (Matias, 2016b). I cannot avoid these critiques, nor should I. It is my intention to use CRT as a means to disrupt white ideologies. Given its profound impact on my own learning, I aim to work through these tensions with my white students as well.

⁷ Read *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction* for more detail about the tenets of CRT.

liberalism (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Within this understanding, I have begun to rework my approach to teaching about race and racism with predominantly-white pre-service teachers. The work of Cheryl Matias, Zeus Leonardo, and Rickey Lee Allen have helped to push my teaching into include explicit conversations of white supremacy using CRT and Critical Whiteness Studies (CWS) as pedagogical tools. I plan to continue in my future research agenda sharing more about these new approaches to teacher education in response to calls to join in the fight for humanity (Nishi, Matias, Montoya, Sarcedo, 2016).

Author Notes

Brittany Aronson earned her doctorate in 2014 in Learning Environments and Educational Studies. She is currently working as an Assistant Professor of Educational Leadership at Miami University and teaching classes in sociocultural foundations and multicultural education. Her research interests include critical teacher preparation, social justice education, critical race theory, critical whiteness studies, and educational policy.

References

- Allen, R. L. (2001). The globalization of white supremacy: Toward a critical discourse on the racialization of the world. *Educational Theory*, 51(4), 467-485.
- Anderson, A. (2013). Teacher for America and the dangers of deficit thinking. *Critical Education*, 4(11), 28-47.
- Barker, C. (2008). *Cultural studies: Theory and practice* (3rd ed.). London: Sage Publications Ltd.
- Bergerson, A. A. (2003). Critical race theory and white racism: Is there room for white scholars in fighting racism in education?. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 16(1), 51-63.
- Boser, U. (2014). Teacher Diversity Revisited: A New State-by-State Analysis. Center for American Progress.
- Choi, J. (2009). Reading educational philosophies in Freedom Writers. *Clearing House*, 82(5), 244-248.
- Cammarota, J. (2011). Blindsided by the avatar: White saviors and allies out of Hollywood and in education. *Review of Education, Pedagogy, Cultural Studies*, 33(3), 242-259.
- Children's Defense Fund. (2011). *Portrait of inequality 2011: Black children in America*. Cambridge, MA: Washington Research Project.
- Cole, T. (2012, March 21). The white savior industrial complex. *The Atlantic*. Retrieved from <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/03/the-white-savior-industrialcomplex/254843/2/>
- Delgado, R., & Stefancic, J. (2001). *Critical race theory: An introduction*. NY: New York University Press.
- Edelman, R. (1983). Teachers in the movies. *American Educator: The Professional Journal of the American Federation of Teachers*, 7(3), 26-31.
- Irvine, J. J. (1990). *Black students and school failure*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.
- hooks, b. (1996). *Reel to real: Race, sex and class at the movies*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Hughey, M. W. (2014). *The white savior film: Content, Critics, and Consumption*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.
- Hyttén, K. (1997). Cultural studies of education: Mapping the terrain. *Educational Foundations*, 11(4), 39-60.
- Hyttén, K. (2006). Education for social justice: provocations and challenges. *Educational Theory*, 56(2), 221-236.
- King, J. E. (1991). *Dysconscious racism: Ideology, identity, and the miseducation of teachers*. In L. Stone (Ed.), *The education feminist reader* (pp.336-348). New York, NY: Routledge.
- McIntosh, P. (1990). White privilege: unpacking the invisible knapsack. *Independent School*, 49, 31.

- Matias, C. E. (2016a). “Why do you make me hate myself?”: Re-teaching Whiteness, abuse, and love in urban teacher education. *Teaching Education*, 27(2), 194-211.
- Matias, C. E. (2016b). *Feeling white: Whiteness, emotionality, and education*. Rotterdam, The Netherlands: Sense Publishers.
- Milner, H. R., & Laughter, J. C. (2015). But good intentions are not enough: Preparing teachers to center race and poverty. *The Urban Review*, 47(2), 341-363.
- Merriam, S. (1998). *Qualitative research and case study applications in education*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Nishi, N. W., Matias, C. E., Montoya, R., & Sarcedo, G. L. (2016) Whiteness FAQ: Responses and tools for confronting college classroom questions. *Journal of Critical Thought and Praxis*, 5(1).
- O’Grady, C., & Chappell, B. (2000). With, not for: The politics of service learning in multicultural communities. In P. McLaren & C. Ovando (Eds.), *The politics of multiculturalism and bilingual education* (pp. 209-224). Boston, MA: McGraw Hill.
- Ormrod, J. E. (2011). *Educational psychology: developing learners* (7th ed.). Boston, MA: Pearson Education, Inc.
- Pimentel, C. (2010). Critical race talk in teacher education through movie analysis: from stand and deliver to freedom writers. *Multicultural Education*, 17(3), 51.
- Saldaña, J. (2016). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers* (3rd ed). Los Angeles, CA. Sage Publications.
- Shoffner, M. (Ed.). (2016). *Exploring teachers in fiction and film: Saviors, scapegoats and schoolmarms*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Smith, A. (2012). Indigeneity, Settler Colonialism, and White Supremacy. In D.M. HoSang, LaBennett, O., & Pulido, L. (Eds.). (2012). *Racial formation in the twenty-first century*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Sleeter, C. E. (2001). Preparing teachers for culturally diverse schools: Research and the overwhelming presence of Whiteness. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 52, 94-106.
- Valenza, R. R. (1997). *The evolution of deficit thinking: Educational thought and practice*. Washington D.C.: Falmer Press.
- Tanase, M. (2013). Meeting student needs in the freedom writers movie: An activity in a classroom management course. *Journal of Invitational Theory and Practice*, 19, 4-14.
- Vaught, S. E., & Castagno, A. E. (2008). “I don’t think I’m a racist”: Critical Race Theory, teacher attitudes, and structural racism. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 11(2), 95-113.
- Vera, H., & Gordon, A. M. (2003). *Screen saviors: Hollywood fictions of whiteness*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
- Wallace, C. M., & Bachman, J. G. (2008). Racial, ethnic, and gender differences in school discipline among U.S. high school students: 1991–2005. *Negro Educational Review*, 59, 47–62.
- Wright, H. K. (1995). Unpublished notes. Received at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, TN.
- Wright, H. K. (1996). How (not) to define cultural studies in five minutes, under pressure. *UTK College of Education Summer Newsletter*, 12-14.
- Wright, H. K. (2003). Cultural studies as praxis: (making) an autobiographical case. *Cultural Studies*, 17(6), 805-822.