

Anti-racist
racist English
education

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class to ask and attempt to answer questions such as: Who gets to be the subject of their own experience in classroom spaces? How is that communicated in classroom practice and enactment? How might a new performance of teaching disrupt inequity in classroom spaces? With our positionalities in mind, we sat down together and designed the course.

In thinking about how dominance constrains much of our current educational landscape, we chose to center course materials that challenged traditional curricular choices, questioned literary whiteness and promoted resources for finding books for young people with diverse authors and characters across racial, gendered, sexual, linguistic, ethnic and abled identities. We created a book club assignment that included texts like:

- Other people's children: cultural conflict in the classroom;
- Acting out! combatting homophobia through teacher activism;
- Finding joy in teaching students of diverse backgrounds: culturally responsive and socially just practices in our classrooms; and
- Teachers as Allies: transformative practices for teaching DREAMers and undocumented students.

We asked students to read formative articles on culturally sustaining ([Paris and Alim, 2014](#)), culturally relevant ([Ladson-Billings, 1995](#)) and culturally responsive ([Gay, 2002](#)) pedagogies. We asked them to investigate the differences between diversity, equity and inclusion and critically examine ways to resist narrowed, deficit ideas about students, communities and texts. Each week, we required our students to write a reflection that connected the course readings to their own identities and students' teaching experiences in hopes that they would consider how their past and present identities might impact their pedagogical practice. Ultimately, in content and design, our goal was to invite preservice teachers (PSTs) to consider how they might resist harmful dominant educational practices to advocate for *all* students, no matter their future teaching contexts.

Although we each taught a separate class, designing the course together and meeting each week after we taught our classes ensured that our ideas and goals were consistently aligned. Still, we believed that even within our space of alignment, it was possible that students received the information differently, as our instructor identities and theoretical influences could have some bearing on the way students responded to us as instructors. Thus, after the course concluded, we decided to study student work from the course – their weekly reflections and major projects – because we were interested in thinking about how our racial identities as instructors might have influenced their responses to course content. What we found in our analysis of these responses surprised us, especially, as we worked so hard to foreground readings, assignments and discussions that centered racial equity as integral to education. Specifically, we noticed that our PSTs continuously affirmed the importance of the course content but quickly pivoted to finding and sharing all the reasons why an anti-racist English education was, in fact, impossible now and in the future. They could not imagine that equitable classrooms that honor the humanity and needs of Black and Brown students could exist. Because of this, we had to ask ourselves: What rhetorical moves do white PSTs make to defer responsibility for anti-racist pedagogy? How might teacher educators respond to these moves to activate PSTs' imagination of Black and Brown life?

The ubiquity of whiteness in teacher education

Like all racial conceptions, whiteness is “a social reality that structures societies and how we experience the world” ([Fuentes, et al., 2019](#), p. 400). Even though race does not accurately

represent biological variation in the past or present, it is worth noting that because of the social reality of racial constructions that support policies of discrimination, “race is real, as is racism and both have real biological consequences” (Fuentes, *et al.*, 2019, p. 400). Whiteness, then, refers to the social reality of racial constructions that position whiteness as the norm and non-whiteness as the other. Teacher education programs have long been spaces of whiteness, even while often espousing values of multiculturalism and diversity. The statistics for newly certified teachers, the teacher workforce as a whole and teacher educators all indicate that approximately 80% of educators across these categories are white (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). Given these statistics, we are not the first, nor will we be the last to ask how we might account for the ubiquity of whiteness in teacher education programs to better prepare teachers committed to anti-racist pedagogy.

Although early studies of whiteness in teacher education often focused on how “little cross-cultural background, knowledge and experience” (Sleeter, 2001, p. 95) white PSTs brought to their teacher training (Barry and Lechner, 1995; Schultz *et al.*, 1996; Su, 1996; Valli, 1995), more recent studies have turned to how white PSTs either embrace or resist the aims of anti-racist pedagogy. For example, Aronson, Meyers and Winn (2020) found that white PSTs often blamed their own miseducation or other authority figures for misleading them about the role of race in education and in society. Of particular import to the current study was the researchers finding that PSTs often used *niceness* or emotional language (for example, being *amazed* or *shocked* by racism) to respond to racial critiques or counterstories that engaged race. This *niceness* was coded by the researchers as an underlying instance of resistance that indicated a failure on the part of white PSTs to engage fully with the reality of race and racism in educational spaces.

Recent studies, too, have noted how whiteness in teacher education is often sustained by emotional responses such as guilt, fear and shame by white PSTs (Matias, 2016; Matias *et al.*, 2016; Sleeter, 2016) and by white teacher educators (Harris *et al.*, 2019) in conversations around their whiteness and their white privilege. Matias (2016) points out that the visible and visceral reactions of white PSTs mean that teacher educators focus more on the emotional needs of White students rather than those of students of color, who are often socially penalized for showing emotion by being labeled “too angry” or “too sensitive.” Quite frankly, studies show a whole panoply of reasons white PSTs give for not engaging with substantive discussions of their own responsibility within their racialized identities. They positioned themselves as personally experiencing similar minoritization, whether they talked about their religious identity or class status, related anecdotal stories of reverse racism to show that they were the real victims of racism or equated having “nannies of color” with an “open-mindedness about other races and ethnicities” (Picower, 2009, p. 202). What previous studies make most clear is that whiteness in teacher education is ubiquitous, creatively self-sustaining and difficult to unseat. “Whiteness is so prevalent that white people can appear ‘reasonable’ and even ‘moral’ while opposing almost all practical approaches to deal with *de facto* racial inequality” (Bonilla-Silva, 2013, p. 28).

The ubiquity of whiteness in teacher education must be acknowledged in conversations about antiblackness because scholars cannot divorce whiteness from the history of white supremacy and racial dominance (Dumas and Ross, 2016). Said another way, we cannot dismantle antiblackness in English education if we refuse to call out the ways in which the ubiquity of whiteness within our education system makes space for antiblackness to thrive. Overwhelming niceness, statements of reverse racism, attempts to redirect blame and consistent emotional displays all act as weapons to protect the onto-epistemological weeds of whiteness. As Okun (2010) argued, white supremacy culture runs rampant in our society, but because it is considered normal, it hides in the behaviors and attitudes of all people.

It hides behind a fear of open conflict (niceness), a need to defend rather than examine (statements of reverse racism/attempts to redirect blame), a belief that white emotional and psychological comfort must be centered (consistent emotional displays). Thus, to ensure that anti-racist pedagogy has space to grow, we must grasp at the roots of white supremacy culture and pull them out of the educational soil.

Abolitionist teaching and imagination

Although not traditionally considered a theoretical framework, we situate this study within Bettina Love's (2019) concept of abolitionist teaching because it asks researchers to consider how all educational stakeholders can work to dismantle antiblackness and white supremacy. We also situate this study within abolitionist teaching because our individual theoretical frameworks ask us to contend with issues of power and dominance within schools and society.

Love (2019) defines abolitionist teaching as follows:

The practice of working in solidarity with communities of color while drawing on the imagination, creativity, refusal, (re)membering, visionary thinking, healing, rebellious spirit, boldness, determination and subversiveness of abolitionists to eradicate injustice in and outside of schools (p. 2).

That is, to engage in this pedagogical pursuit, a teacher must not only be able to work with and for the communities they serve but they must also understand a community's historic legacy, intricate present and unbounded future. It places a responsibility on educators to rally against white supremacy and cultivate a classroom environment in which all students can thrive. Of course, this can be a daunting task, as the US system of education is intricately intertwined with whiteness and white supremacy and only acknowledges the genius of Black and Brown youth as an exception to the rule of racial inferiority (Tosolt, 2020). Due to the racist foundations of education, abolitionist teaching also requires imagination: the imagination to form new ideas, use theories of social justice to create a new curriculum and abolish the systems that continuously push Black and Brown students to the margins of the classroom.

In fact, abolitionist teaching begins in the imagination, for radical educational change does not simply reside in the current moment; instead, radical movements take us to new worlds and futures, enabling us to envision what educational freedom could look like. As Kelley (2002) argued, "the conditions and the very existence of social movements enable participants to imagine something different, to realize that things need not always be this way" (p. 9). Additionally, Love (2019) contended that educators must have a commitment to the imaginary, as it is our greatest weapon in the fight against injustice. The imagination can help us to eradicate feelings of apathy and despair over the current moment and think about possibilities for the future. It can aid us in creating just worlds that uplift and support people's full humanity, center students who are consistently forced to the margins and thrive in solidarity with folx who are already doing the work. Ultimately, it is within this imaginary space that educators can collectively dream of ways to move us beyond the current system of education and create humanizing and affirming spaces for Black and Brown children.

Of course, dreaming without action will not create educational change. Many teacher education programs tout a dream of systemic educational reform, but white perspectives dominate curricular choices thereby "buttress[ing] the practice and belief that adding one or two readings or activities that address 'diversity' will satisfy the complex needs of Black teacher education students" (Faison and McArthur, 2020, p. 7). Many teachers dream of

Black lives mattering, but racist notions imbued within the educational system perpetuate “marginal mattering” where Black and Brown’s students are propelled into school and/or social failure or “partial mattering” where Black and Brown’s youth are only praised for skills and abilities that do not challenge the normalcy of whiteness (Carey, 2020). Additionally, many educators dream of creating a humanizing classroom for all students, but the institution of education continues to ask Black and Brown students to “suffer in a place that is structured on dehumanizing them” (Stovall, 2020, p. 5). Ultimately, anti-darkness is the foundation upon which education was birthed, so it will take a combination of dreaming and action to begin and sustain educational change. Because of this, abolitionist teaching both centers the collective dreams of those engaged in social justice reform and moves beyond those dreams to engage in concrete action. Without dreams, we fail to create new paths for education, but once those paths are imagined, it takes action to ensure that the conduits to our invented futures are fortified.

Method

Participants

During the time of this study, we were graduate students located within a public R1 institution in the southeast USA. Our classroom demographics mirrored that of the university as a whole, as the majority of our students were middle and upper-class white women who came to the university from within the state. Across both courses, 34 students were enrolled, with 29 identifying as women and 5 identifying as men. Of the students, 31 identified as white, 2 identified as Black and 1 identified as Latinx. For this paper, we exclude data gathered from the Black and Latinx students in the course because, after we began analyzing the data, we noticed that their weekly responses were steeped in the cultural knowledge of their communities, situating their writing as outliers in comparison to the words of their white peers. Within their responses, they gave examples of their own experiences of racism in education and they consistently discussed how those experiences influenced their beliefs about teaching and their roles as future teachers. We did not see the same pedagogical discussions in our white PSTs responses.

Of course, we did not remove their work lightly, as Black and Brown’s educators are essential to abolitionist teaching. In fact, removing their data from this particular study created tension for us. We had to ask ourselves if we were participating in the same oppressionist methods of erasure that we hoped to counter in our course and in this article. We had to consider if centering whiteness might be contributing to the antiblackness we sought to disrupt. However, after some discussion, we noted that the difference between our PSTs’ responses and our goals for this article is that we are attempting to explicate the inner workings of whiteness in teacher education. We are trying to better understand how our white PSTs continued to resist anti-racist teachings within our classrooms even as their professors and peers pushed them to dream otherwise. It is not that we are failing to look beyond whiteness; instead, we are choosing to scrutinize whiteness to ensure that it cannot disappear itself from conversations about antiblackness. We interrogate whiteness to hold it accountable to the Black and Brown students white supremacy has and will leave in its wake.

Data collection and analysis

Including all course data is beyond the scope of this paper, so we center our analysis on the following: the weekly responses that were specifically tied to anti-racist pedagogy, the English education autobiography reimagining assignment and the diversity statement assignment. As we mentioned above, students were responsible for writing reflective

responses that connected the course readings to their personal histories, their current classroom placements and their dreams of future classrooms. Although each week was guided by an essential question (e.g. How do we resist narrowed ideas about which texts we can/cannot use in classrooms? How do we ensure an engaging classroom for all learners?), we did not provide the students with prompts or guiding reflective questions. We wanted them to think about their own connections, questions and insights. The autobiography reimagining was the second component to a larger assignment. At the beginning of the semester, we asked students to write an ELA autobiography describing their experiences as students in language arts classrooms. Toward the end of the semester, we asked the students to review their original work alongside their weekly responses to imagine what their future classrooms could like. The diversity statement assignment was composed at the end of the semester and we asked students to write a statement that outlines their commitments to building equitable classroom spaces in which all students can thrive. We chose to focus on these tasks as they most explicitly connected to conversations about race, equity and imagination in the classroom.

We analyzed the data using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2019). This method requires researchers to “be fully cognisant of the philosophical sensibility and theoretical assumptions” (p. 594). Thus, we understood that themes would come from our creative labor instead of emerging from the data. We understood that we would be required to continuously, consistently and clearly question the assumptions we made as we analyzed the data. We understood that working together to analyze the data and construct themes meant that our “coding approach [would have to be] collaborative and reflexive, designed to develop a richer more nuanced reading of the data, rather than seeking a consensus on meaning” (p. 594). Further, we took into account that we collected this data before COVID-19 devastated the world, before the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor and Tony McDade and before the 2020 protests for Black Lives swept through the world. Being reflexive meant we had to acknowledge how the current state of police violence, governmental surveillance and psychological and spiritual murder (Johnson and Bryan, 2016; Love, 2019) would impact our analysis.

To begin, we familiarized ourselves with the data, reading and rereading the student responses from our individual classes (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Our theoretical alignments impacted our thinking processes. Heidi, who most often works with poststructural concepts of discourse, made meaning out of the data by considering how discursive and seemingly “commonsensical” assumptions (Bové, 1990) about whiteness and Black youth were presented in PSTs reflections. As a scholar influenced by womanism, Black feminism and Afrofuturism, Stephanie’s meaning-making centered on how the PSTs positioned themselves in relation to Black and Brown children and if they aligned themselves with anti-oppressionist pedagogical stances. Throughout this process, we conversed about our initial ideas, questioned each other and noted responses that were replicated between our courses and across assignments. In these conversations, we talked about how the PSTs used superlatives, like “I appreciate the sentiment at the heart of the argument” or “I am passionate about representation” in response to articles centering on racial equity. We also discussed how the PSTs centered whiteness in varied ways and/or attempted to defer the responsibility for racial justice to tests, administration, parents or students. Finally, we conversed about how our students often made excuses as to why they could not engage in anti-racist education now and possibly in the future.

Our conversations influenced our initial codes: superlatives, centering whiteness, deferring responsibility, forward-thinking and barriers (Table 1). After the initial coding and discussion process, we looked for patterns of shared meaning, stories about particular

Data extract	In response to	Coded for:
"The transcription of a conversation with a minority boy included at the beginning of the article resonated with me" "To be honest, I feel this was a little over my head . . . In the beginning, the author used the phrase, "I offer a new term." I wish they would stop coming up with new terms and just tell me how to do it!! "There is definitely an issue of non-diverse texts in our English classrooms, but I think the first article may take the argument to the extreme. Saying that 'AP Literature may have even closer links to a white supremacist viewpoint than other subject areas is a pretty harsh statement, even though I think the author brings up some valid points" In my classroom, I will strive to provide students with the opportunity to make text-to-life connections, to build a community with the learners around them and to make them feel in control of their education and empowerment from their gaining of knowledge. I know that inviting my students' cultures and backgrounds into the classroom will make the class content more relevant for them and hopefully motivate them to put their full effort into it because it really matters to them	The apartheid of children's literature by Christopher Myers (Week 8) Culturally sustaining pedagogy by D. Paris (Week 9) AP English literature and the pedagogy of whiteness by A. Chiaravalli (Week 8) Excerpt from autobiography reimagining	- Barrier (unable to use Black in response) - Barrier (article should tell me how - Want solutions that do not require a reframing of perspective/language) - Centering whiteness (comments against whiteness too harsh) - Barrier (acknowledges the issue, but does not like wording) Superlatives – "I know" "I will strive" Future language but lack of specifics – I'm seeing this – "I will" "I can" "I know" – mostly followed by non-specific or general ideas. It is the specifics where the doubt starts creeping in (inability to imagine in real terms)

Table 1.
Coding examples

patterns across our data set (Braun and Clarke, 2019), rather than relying on domain summaries or "summaries of the range of meaning in the data related to a particular topic or 'domain' of discussion" (p. 592). To do this, we examined the coded data for links that could help us not only explain the rhetorical strategies the PSTs used but also to explain the story behind those rhetorical moves. This was essential to our analytic process because finding all the data related to a topic was not our end goal; instead, our goal was to connect these findings under a central organizing concept.

Findings

In this section, we discuss the PST's rhetorical moves across three themes: failure to imagine Black and Brown humanity, failure to imagine a connection between theory and practice and failure to imagine curriculum and schooling beyond whiteness. We use the phrase "failure to imagine" deliberately as a reminder that abolitionist teaching begins in the imagination. Using this phrase as a part of our organizing concept was essential to

showcase how the PST's rhetorical moves highlight a lack of imagination, thus constricting their pursuit of becoming anti-racist, abolitionist teachers.

Failure to imagine black and brown humanity

To imagine Black and Brown students' humanity is to engage in a practice of mattering. According to [Elliot et al. \(2014\)](#), mattering is connected to awareness, importance and reliance. With awareness, teachers notice, recognize and focus attention on their students. Importance requires teachers to invest in students, be attentive to their needs and take pride in their abilities. Reliance demands teachers value students' contributions and look to them for resources. Thus, for Black and Brown students, "mattering can be analyzed by considering the likelihood that institutions and others (mis)recognize them, (dis)prove their (in)significance and (de)value them for facets of what they embody" ([Carey, 2020](#), p. 4).

As we examined the data, we noticed that many PSTs could not imagine the mattering of Black and Brown students. For example, in a weekly response that mirrored the responses of other PSTs in the class, one student wrote:

Most of my students are white and I encouraged them to read *Long Way Down* by Jason Reynolds [...] I knew many of them didn't have similar experiences as the main character who is an African American male whose brother and father were shot from the gang and gun violence. I challenged them to think about the ways in which their lives differ from his and why they differ. I believe it was important for them to recognize why their lives are different from this character's [life] to think about the way that our society is currently benefiting.

Several rhetorical moves are used to situate Black students as others. Specifically, the PST noted that most of her students were white, not all. Black and Brown's students are present in the classroom and yet, they do not exist in her reflection or in her pedagogical planning. Additionally, by saying "our society is currently benefiting," she removes Black and Brown students from the classroom society which she creates, suggesting that they do not exist as part of the community, for they are not the ones benefiting in this society. Further, she fails to acknowledge the complexity of Black life, as she challenges her white students to compare their lives to a monolithic description and stereotype of Black existence. She equates Black identity to violence and subsequently asks her imagined all-white classroom to do the same.

The denial of humanity is also present in how some PSTs could not imagine Black and Brown students in their future classrooms. For example, one PST chose to write a letter to her students for the diversity statement assignment as a way of confirming her commitment to equity in the classroom. Although her letter, like most of the PSTs diversity statements, discussed her dedication to anti-racism, the rhetorical strategies portrayed in the writing suggest that she could not imagine that Black and Brown children could be members of her future classroom community:

I want to make this space welcoming for all of you while also encouraging empathy for other perspectives that may not be present in our dynamic... it is one of my goals to provide diverse voices in conjunction with what we are expected to learn and I will be a part of that process, with your voice and by providing insight into other voices we may not organically come across. We are building this classroom and our expectations together, so your voices are needed and encouraged to develop our learning and understanding, not only of diverse voices but of ourselves.

Although the PST says she wants to build a classroom that encourages inclusion and empathy, she notes that "other perspectives" may not be present in their classroom and she describes the unnatural nature of encountering "other voices" in their day-to-day lives. Further, her use of "not only diverse voices but ourselves," assumes that the students in her

classroom will not be diverse. These comments highlight her focus on white students, as there is no reason why Black and Brown students would not organically come across Black and Brown voices. Moreover, words such as “other” and “diverse” are often used as educational dog whistles or coded words used to represent Black and Brown students without explicitly acknowledging them. Essentially, her word choice suggests the imagined absence of Black and Brown students from her future classroom “dynamic.”

Love (2019) argued that “anti darkness is the social disregard for dark bodies and the denial of dark people’s existence and humanity” (p. 14) and these statements suggest a failure to imagine Black and Brown humanity in their current and/or future classrooms. The representative examples we present in this section showcase how our PSTs could not imagine the existence of Black and Brown students even when those students were a part of their classroom communities, so they created visions of a predominately white classroom that minimally include “other voices.” The examples also show how Black lives could not matter in their classrooms because they fail to acknowledge them, invest in them and value them as contributing members of the class community. Mattering helps teachers to not only see their students as existing but to view each student as a vital part of the classroom community; however, mattering cannot happen if white teachers fail to imagine the existence of Black and Brown life now or in the imagined future.

Failure to imagine connections between theory and practice

Another disconnect the PSTs in our study experienced was a view of theory and practice as separate rather than intertwined concepts. Like many PSTs, our students showed a strong preference for practical approaches and resisted articles or discussions they viewed as too theoretical. What we noticed, however, is that the articles they considered too theoretical were those that asked them to create or imagine a curriculum for Black and Brown children inside their future classrooms. Theories of empathy and care were welcomed, while theories of racial equity were shunned. The eschewing of theory is a major factor in PSTs’ willingness and ability to see themselves as enacting anti-racist pedagogical approaches. As Ladson-Billings (1995) pointed out in her study of effective teachers of Black children, the pedagogical practices of highly effective teachers had little in common; instead, it was:

The philosophical and ideological underpinnings of their practice, i.e. how they thought about themselves as teachers and how they thought about others (their students, the students’ parents and other community members) that was the common thread between these teachers. That is, theoretical understandings of educational practice and purpose are central to a teacher’s enactment of anti-racist and abolitionist pedagogy (p. 162).

This disconnect was evident in the way PSTs positioned anti-racist pedagogy as something that could be checked off of a lesson plan or included in one unit instead of as embedded within their everyday practice. One PST noted that he thought the unit he and his mentor teacher were building together did reflect a culturally relevant approach to teaching:

Content integration: check. Knowledge construction, prejudice reduction, equity pedagogy and empowering school culture: check(ish). I think our classroom does well to foster all thoughts, beliefs and cultures equally.

Here, the PST uses a literal checklist to mark his efficiency at being culturally relevant, reflecting how PSTs viewed anti-racist pedagogy as one element of the unit and lesson design instead of as a central purpose of that design. Another PST noted that her literature choices for an upcoming unit “covered white and African American people” and another talked about “sprinkling diverse texts” throughout her unit.

In a similar vein, several PSTs pointed to the lack of practical guidance and/or pre-packaged resources that were available as a reason why they would be unable to enact anti-racist pedagogy in their own classrooms. For example, one PST wrote as a response to class readings that advocated for the inclusion of more diverse narratives in classrooms:

Something that I feel would really help me would be examples of worksheets and activities that fill the same spaces where we teach non-culturally diverse literature [...] because right now I feel kind of like I'm floundering and I don't want to be. Instead, I want to be part of the movement.

This desire for prepackaged worksheets that would teach culturally diverse literature to students with minimal effort on the teachers part indicates the PSTs lack of imagination to envision a curriculum that is deeply connected to the community, place, culture and lives of Black and Brown students in her classroom—a curriculum that is inherently not standardizable or captured by worksheets. The theoretical articles that encouraged them to examine their beliefs about themselves and their students were at odds with their desire for a checklist of anti-racist pedagogical practices. One PST, in their response to [Ladson-Billings' \(1995\)](#) article on culturally relevant pedagogy, stated most explicitly, "I'm so tired of big idea articles that don't give you a plan or a place to start."

The disdain for certain theories connects to a characteristic of white supremacy culture ([Okun, 2010](#)) in that they valued quantity over quality – the PSTs wanted antiracist practices they could measure, but the theoretical pedagogical framings we offered were immeasurable. The PST's responses also suggest the hidden nature of whiteness in that they did not fully understand the ways in which they were already operating from theoretical understandings of classrooms, teachers and students—theoretical understandings that, in most cases, did not account for the experiences of Black and Brown children in classrooms. They could not imagine that the theoretical articles they were reading as a part of the course were meant to invite them to reimagine classrooms in ways that worked against theories of whiteness. Most importantly, the PST's desire for checklists, worksheets and less theoretical approaches were deployed as a form of resistance to centering anti-racist pedagogy and abolitionist teaching as more than a "sprinkle" in curriculum planning. As [Love \(2019\)](#) pointed out, "Abolitionist teaching is not a teaching approach: It is a way of life, a way of seeing the world and a way of taking action against injustice." (p. 89) In short, abolitionist and anti-racist pedagogy is always underpinned by theoretical understandings of the humanity of Black and Brown students.

Failure to imagine curriculum and schooling beyond the whiteness

To imagine a school system that centers Black and Brown students, white teachers must relinquish the power of whiteness. However, whiteness is valuable, so much so that it is bound to a system of financial, physical and psychological investments and consistently uses creative means to challenge and reassert dominance ([Bebout, 2014](#); [Delgado and Stefancic, 2012](#); [Tosolt, 2020](#)). The socially constructed worth of whiteness makes it a tangible thing, a piece of property owned by the identity carrier and like property, whiteness must be protected. [Matias \(2016\)](#) described four ways white people confronted with race conversations protect hegemonic whiteness: feeling guilty and reaffirming themselves; feeling helpless and performing racial ignorance; feeling self-victimization and shifting focus to themselves and feeling angry and resorting to disrespect. In our analysis, we noticed these protective mechanisms in action.

One PST wrote, "I believe that teaching can be a way to give back to the community. I believe that teaching is a way of serving students' needs and being a light for them in ways that they may not know elsewhere." The statement was made after reading articles

on culturally relevant pedagogy, culturally responsive pedagogy and culturally sustaining pedagogy and it showcases how she redirected the conversation to herself even when there was a purposeful curricular opportunity to decenter whiteness and reimagine teaching. Even after reading about how exemplary teachers of Black youth valued, engaged and sustained Black culture (Ladson-Billings, 1995), this PST continued to position herself as someone who could be “a light” in students’ lives while positioning Black students as needing that light because they “may not know [the light] elsewhere.” Aligning with Matias’ (2016) argument, the PST eased her guilt by reaffirming her position as a good person.

The deficit understandings of Black and Brown youth, families and communities and the high valuation of Whiteness were not unique to one PST. Another PST said, “I will use my own unique perspective and culture not to set a standard for my students to follow, but as a tool toward enlightening my students on the extensive amount of ways in which we can use our perspectives as assets in the classroom.” A different PST wrote, “even though this has shifted recently, in the past, classrooms have been predominantly white and I still think that it’s important for those white students to read books other than those which show them their potential futures.” In both responses, our students shifted the conversation to whiteness rather than dealing with the feelings associated with discussing racism. The former student-centered herself as a tool to lead students toward “enlightenment,” highlighting her viewpoint as an example of a classroom asset rather than relying on the asset-based knowledge of her students. The latter moved away from conversations about the need for stories written about Black and Brown youth to re-center white children and their needs. In both examples, the PSTs shifted the focus “from how hegemonic whiteness impact[s] people of Color and humanity” (Matias, 2016, p. 70) to how it affects white people.

Rather than refocus the conversation, other PSTs chose to perform racial ignorance. One PST wrote:

Personally, I like the idea of using students’ own diversity to help enrich the class, instead of trying to do that on my own as the teacher. I think that this gives students a voice and opportunities to share real lived experiences, not forced representation for the sake of multiculturalism in the classroom.

In this response, the teacher suspends culpability for racial equity and places the undue burden of dismantling the racist institution of education on students. This weight will disproportionately fall on Black and Brown students who would need to share their life experiences to ensure the teacher does not have to engage in “forced multiculturalism.” If there are no students of color, the teacher will have a pass from creating an equitable classroom and avoid being forced to include adequate representation of minoritized students.

Harris (1993) argued that “whiteness is simultaneously an aspect of identity and a property interest, it is something that can both be experienced and deployed as a resource” (p. 1734). With our PSTs, we see whiteness being used as a form of property that must be protected in the classroom and curriculum. To protect the asset, the PSTs reaffirm themselves as “lights” in the classroom; center their experiences and the experiences of white children over those of Black and Brown youth and surrender culpability for an equitable classroom to the students. Their rhetorical moves protecting whiteness exist alongside commentary on the need for racial equity in their current and future classrooms and the duality of both suggests that our PSTs could not imagine a classroom where whiteness was not at the center. Whiteness strangled their imaginations.

Seeing our failures; activating our imaginations

Our findings suggest that even though the PSTs were exhilarated by the idea of anti-racist teaching, their exuberance dissipated when those ideas required them to embody a pedagogical stance that centered on Black and Brown students. They outwardly showed their morality and niceness, but rhetorically opposed all practical applications to dismantle white supremacy in their current and future classrooms. We cannot just blame the students, though. When an entire field remains as ubiquitously white and steeped in white supremacy culture as English education has—both demographically and culturally—an assessment of the structure of the field is in order. As we encourage our students to view themselves as abolitionist teachers who regularly put themselves on the line to center the humanity of Black and Brown students, we must ask ourselves: what do we put on the line? Where do our imaginations fail?

As we reviewed our feedback to student responses (including the data shared above), we noticed that we praised even the smallest moves on the part of the PSTs and often overlooked the less overt examples of white supremacy at work. While we pushed our PSTs to reconsider the word choice of “sprinkling diverse texts,” we simultaneously commended them for acknowledging their own white privilege, as though recognizing whiteness was equal to imagining anti-racist classrooms that honor the humanity of Black and Brown youth. In this way, we also centered the comfort and emotion of whiteness over anti-racist teaching. We failed to imagine an English education that moves beyond whiteness because we failed to push our white PSTs to do better, to engage in a collective freedom dream for the future of Black and Brown humanity. As teacher educators who center on anti-racist, abolitionist pedagogies, we were repulsed by our failures, but we also know that the “filtering of socially-just pedagogies and curricula through the ocular of whiteness” (Matias, 2016, p. 92) is not new. Numerous scholars have discussed how Whiteness dominates all facets of education, from classroom assignments to assessments (Borsheim-Black and Sarigianides, 2019; Kirkland, 2013; Picower, 2009). Both of us were steeped in the prevailing context of whiteness, and thus, it infiltrated our imaginations despite the consistent self-work with which we have engaged.

Now, however, we are more cognizant of the way whiteness influences our imaginations. We acknowledge when our students recognize their whiteness, but we also give more pointed feedback about how whiteness is embedded within their responses. We are more aware of the limitations of self-work, how our individual work must also extend to the larger structures that surround the entirety of English education. We now recognize that the ubiquity of whiteness not only surrounds PSTs but it also surrounds us all, even those of us who center critical theories, who engage in anti-racist practices, who want to imagine anti-oppressive futures for Black and Brown children. Understanding our own failures is essential for examining how we can respond to white PSTs’ rhetorical resistance and activate their imaginations in our future classrooms.

Through our analysis, we see the importance of communicating the specific race-based pedagogical and theoretical objectives (Borsheim-Black and Sarigianides, 2019) framing the course and using that framing to tailor our feedback and evaluation. This might mean we would place less emphasis on PSTs’ personal reading reflections and more emphasis on action-based research and enactments. It might also mean that we make space for students to find and critique their own failures of imagination, helping them to “[familiarize] themselves with White supremacy culture, [point] it out within themselves and [make] a commitment to point it out to others whenever it occurs” (Faison and McArthur, 2020, p. 8). In this way, we would provide a more overt framework for anti-racist pedagogy and help shift our students’ pedagogical stances from one that asks “How can I divest myself of

White privilege in my own life?’ to the quite different question, ‘What can I do to make my society more racially just?’” (Blum, 2008, p. 318). This shift can help white PSTs to decenter themselves – to decenter whiteness and white supremacy culture – and imagine antiracist projects that center Black and Brown humanity.

Further, Kendi (2016) posits that changing and erasing racist beliefs and attitudes requires a focus on the policies, practices and structures that hold white supremacy in place. So, making rhetorical moves, individual racist ideologies or personal racist acts the nucleus of anti-racist work will not effectively quell the hold of white supremacy culture. In fact, Kendi (2016) argues that addressing the problem in this way is historically backward because racist rhetoric sprung up to defend racist policies, practices and structures. Dismantling the structures that hold white supremacy in place also dismantles the very need for racist rhetoric and beliefs. Thus, it is also essential that we engage our colleagues in a *program* redesign instead of just a *course* redesign. The amount of personal reflection, community work and imagination needed to combat antiblackness in English education is immense, so standalone social justice courses will not work (Tosolt, 2020). As Ladson-Billings’ (1999) argued, teacher preparation programs will have greater success in preparing anti-racist teachers when they focus on “changing the philosophy and structure of teacher education programs” (p. 221). That is, English education needs a paradigm shift, for imagining an ELA experience that celebrates the lives of Black and Brown youth requires a collective commitment to abolitionist teaching. White supremacy culture is ubiquitous and it has seeped into every facet of English education. It has had years to feed and thrive within our educational institutions. For these reasons, one course is not enough. Disentangling whiteness from the necks of PSTs requires an overhaul of the field, a collective freedom dream in which we all imagine English education as a space for Black and Brown mattering.

Finally, we acknowledge that we all are socialized into a racist, anti-black society, so it is vital for us to activate our imaginations. Our current educational system fails to imagine the existence of Black and Brown humanity, the need for equitable pedagogical practices that center Black and Brown joy and the demand to dismantle white supremacy’s hold on schooling and curriculum. PSTs, teacher educators and teacher education programs are products of this larger system. Thus, we must collectively imagine something different. By activating our imaginations to fight against white supremacy, we can form new ideas, create a new curriculum and abolish the systems that continuously push Black and Brown students to the margins of the classroom. Specifically, activating our imaginations means we must center Black and Brown students in our classroom by honoring their histories, uplifting their futures and making space for the full range of their emotional existences. It also means that all educational stakeholders must be brave enough to abolish the current reality of educational structures and actively engage in the creation of an anti-oppressionist education system that has yet to exist. We have to look beyond what is and imagine what can be, but we cannot be the dream keepers or the dream makers if our imaginations continue to malfunction.

Conclusion

There will always be resistance to anti-racist efforts because whiteness will always fight back. As Okun (2010) reminds us, white supremacy culture expends a lot of energy to protect its power and delineate between the powerful and the powerless. For example, although she was later reinstated, a Texas teacher was put on leave after she refused to remove Black Lives Matter and LGBTQ-affirming posters in her virtual classroom (Fernandez, 2020). Several education faculty have been placed on professor watchlists for speaking out in support of anti-racism in higher education (Kamenetz, 2018). Further, on

September 4, 2020, the former president ordered that employee training at federal agencies centering the racist history of the USA and discussing white privilege must desist (Lalljee, 2020) and legislators in various states – including Idaho, Iowa, Louisiana, New Hampshire, Missouri, Oklahoma, RI and West Virginia – are proposing bills to ban conversations centering race and gender (Schwartz, 2021). Love (2019) contended, however, that “activism, no matter how big or how small, grounded in the teachings and dreams of abolitionist and participatory democracy, will win” (p. 115). Imagination allows us to dream of the unfathomable, to fight against the abominable and to create the unknowable, but whiteness is creative, pervasive and self-sustaining. Only equally creative and imaginative educational and pedagogical moves toward equity will make space for Black and Brown life in our classrooms. We cannot afford to let our imaginations continue to fail.

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About the authors

S.R. Toliver is an Assistant Professor of Literacy and Secondary Humanities at the University of Colorado, Boulder. Her scholarship centers on the freedom dream of Black youth and honors the historical legacy that Black imaginations have had and will have on activism and social change. S.R. Toliver is the corresponding author and can be contacted at: Stephanie.Toliver@colorado.edu

Heidi Hadley is an Assistant Professor and the Director of English Education in the English department at Missouri State University. Her research interests include teacher education and identity, the intersection of religious identity and pedagogical practice and community-engaged literacy practices.