



You can't change what you don't see; the role of the curriculum in addressing the Critical Concern of racism on Mercy campuses.



Dr. Jennie S. Schmidt

Associate Professor of Education Mount Mercy University

The murder of George Floyd in May 2020 renewed attention to the pervasive racism and white privilege that dominate all aspects of society, including institutions of higher education. In the fall of 2020 students, faculty and administrations returned to campus with a renewed dedication to revisiting and refocusing plans for progress towards dismantling racism and the racist beliefs on campus. Institutions of higher education have a long history of engaging in making such progress, at least on the surface.¹ Despite this long history there is still great change that needs to be made: policies and practices continue to limit access for BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) students entering universities and campus climate concerns persist.²

As institutions of higher education proceed with a renewed focus on their role in bringing about racial equity and justice there is no guarantee of their success. In fact, many predict or foresee their failure.³ Critical Race Theory offers an insightful lens through which to analyze past failures. Critical Race Theory posits that the social construction of race and institutionalized racism perpetuate a racial caste system that advantages white people and disadvantages people of color. Delgado writes “the critical race theory movement is a collection of activists and scholars interested in studying and transforming the relationship among race, racism, and power”.⁴

According to Critical Race Theory, current anti-racism efforts on campuses are likely to fail because they fail to keep the true nature of the problem at the center of the work: The United States was “founded on racist principles that have permeated the systems upon which this country functions; education is no exception.”⁵ Seen through this lens, any attempt to eradicate racism in educational settings needs to dismantle the systems and narratives that help racism persist. It is not uncommon for this work to be done under the guise of “diversity initiatives” that focus on compositional diversity, providing supports for BIPOC students and tolerance training for the community at large.⁶ All three of these areas are undeniably important: if more traditionally marginalized students are to move to the center of power, more need to be let through university gates, supported once they arrive and be able to live in a climate free from outward signs of intolerance and aggression. However, programs that focus on these features alone do nothing to address the ways in which social constructions of race and institutionalized racism perpetuate a racial caste system that advantages white people and disadvantages people of color. What is needed to address racism on campus and to prepare students with the tools to identify and dismantle racist policies and practices in their future lives are initiatives that get to the heart of the matter: whiteness as an oppressive system and systemic issues that result in racism.⁷

It is no longer acceptable to focus on compositional diversity alone. Institutions of higher education must expand approaches to dismantling racism to include actions that directly require members of the dominant white population to interrogate whiteness and the power it brings. Recent research notes that while white students are less overrepresented at more selective public universities they continue to be overrepresented at more selected private colleges.⁸ This data should take no-one by surprise. Colleges and universities are logical and sensible places for this work to be done as they are not immune to the pervasive racism that has been present since early colonial times. The first institutions of higher education were rooted in anti-black ideology and designed to benefit (white) wealthy Christian males.⁹ Institutions of higher education have not severed these roots and to this day remain important guardians and gatekeepers of access to power and privilege in the United States.¹⁰

To make true and lasting progress toward the goal of transforming into more equitable and welcoming settings for all students, institutions of higher education must interrogate all aspects of university life from policies and practices to the curriculum. It is a *particular* job for Mercy institutions to do this work. Working at a Mercy institution, therefore, necessitates that faculty design and implement courses that facilitate students’ exploration and understanding of issues of power, privilege and social justice. The curriculum is a key area in which student consciousness raising can take place. Students’ coursework is fertile ground in which to grow their ability to see and investigate the way in which dominant narratives support systems of power that perpetuate an unequal caste system based on race in the United States. In this paper, I describe the work I do within a sophomore level course for pre-service teachers at a Mercy institution to raise my students’ consciousness of the critical concern of racism and the subtle, almost invisible, ways it plays out in educational settings.

I work in the education department at Mount Mercy University in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. My department works with students seeking to gain licensure to teach in either elementary or secondary schools. As schools, (public and private) are crucial locations where society organizes the endemic, institutional and systemic racism that pervades society, education departments carry a huge responsibility to prepare future teachers who not only know, understand and can recognize this history but are prepared to work to dismantle it. A number of scholars use Critical Race Theory to outline the role that education systems play in upholding whiteness and perpetuating the hegemonic systems that benefit them. In line with this analysis is a call for teacher education programs to explicitly prepare future educators to work on the transformation of schools as sites of this perpetuation and reproduction.

Sleeter stresses the importance of taking on teacher education in the work being done to transform schools as sites of reproduction into sites of transformation.¹¹ Milner stresses the crucial need for teacher education programs to ensure that future teachers are equipped with the tools they will need to successfully navigate the many challenges facing P-12 classrooms including “the many dynamics inherent in the teaching and learning exchange is how race and culture manifest in the classroom to erect roadblocks to students’ academic, social, personal, and collective success.”¹²

Sleeter, Milner and others have put out the charge. My job is to answer it. I work to take Sleeter and Milner’s charge in all the work I do, but one course I teach, “Foundations of Education” is particularly suited for this effort. This course is a basic historical, philosophical, and sociological orientation to the field of American education. This course is designed around 3 key goals: Make sense of classroom situations and the social, political, economic and philosophical forces that influence them; think critically about the multiple purposes and values that schools and teachers serve in society; critically examine schools and schooling practices using an interpretive, normative and critical lens. I have worked to make this course an example of the way in which faculty can use the curriculum to raise my students’ awareness of the way in which networks of power operate to uphold white privilege and maintain current systems of oppression and inequality. The students I teach will be the educators of tomorrow and I aspire to foster in them the skills and tools needed to recognize and dismantle these systems.

Students come into this course, a 100-level sophomore requirement, both well-versed and unconscious of the way schools work. On the one hand they know so much about pk-12 classrooms, have successfully navigated them and, as pre-service teachers, enjoyed them enough to want to spend a significant portion of their futures there. The majority of the students who come through our department identify as white and have attended predominantly if not totally white schools. My experience with these students over the past 10 years of teaching this course is that they are incognizant of the power and race dynamics at play in these institutions. If this operational blindness is not interrupted most of these students will proceed into the teaching profession as if it requires merely skill and care for their students. Giroux points out that interrupting this operational blindness, however, can allow my students the agency to realize they need to “adopt the more critical role of challenging the social order so as to develop and advance its democratic imperatives.”¹³ An inherent challenge in this work is the invisible nature of the way in which power is working through schools to create and sustain white hegemony and white supremacy. My students cannot interrogate that which they cannot see.

I launch this class with a lesson on the language we use to talk about schools. I ask students to define the difference between education and schooling and then give them the definition we will use in the course. Education is the act of teaching and learning and can happen anywhere anytime. Schooling, however, is “the learning that takes place in formal institutions whose specific function is the socialization of specific groups within society.... the informal learning that groups of people, usually children, acquire about behavior in these schools.”¹⁴ Schooling is what happens to you in school and schools are locations where power is negotiated. Schooling encompasses the ways in which we are socialized through the curriculum we are or are not exposed to, the cultural norms that dictate the rules and standard operating procedures of classrooms and buildings and

where our social status and economic earning power are determined. Schooling is both visible and invisible. Schooling is how power is negotiated, enacted and managed by those in power in ways to maintain those relationships of power.

To help students explore these definitions, we look at various images of school settings. One, for example, is a picture of young students in line by gender. Another picture is of students with their hands over their hearts reciting the pledge, yet another shows a classroom poster stating the rules: be quiet, listen, stay in your seat. Students have seen these types of things all their lives but start to see them differently when asked to consider a set of questions they will become familiar with: “why is this?” “who decided this?” “how else could it be?” “who benefits?” “what does this serve?”

The next exercise asks students to interrogate their own memories of pk-12 school experiences. These memories often bring up the subjects of tracking, segregation, and the hierarchical nature of schools themselves. I ask students to make a habit of asking “why is this?” “who decided this?” “how else could it be?” “who benefits?” These initial exercises introduce one of the key ideas we will explore in the course: school arrangements are neither “good” nor “bad” but they are not *neutral*. By articulating ways in which these situations are describing the way in which power operates in schools. The next step in the course is to help students see that these arrangements are not neutral by design and serve to perpetuate the social order in a way that undermines democracy and upholds white supremacy.¹⁵

To take this next step, we move on to study the history of public schools in the United States. Students first compare and contrast educational arrangements in the three Colonial regions. I assign each student a persona to pay particular attention to as they read, i.e., you are a white, wealthy male from the north. In class, I then ask students to line up in the order that answers the question “who has the most access to education?” Students note that white, wealthy Christian males are at the front of the line. The next question I ask is: re-configure to show who has that access today. There is not much movement in the line at all. White females move up in access but neither surpass their male counterparts nor do their BIPOC counterparts move with them. Then, once again, we reflect: “why is this?” “who decided this?” “how else could it be?” “who benefits?” “what does this serve?”

These initial experiences prime the pump for students to begin to grapple with the ways in which schools have been constructed as places where power/status is reproduced or reconstructed. From here we continue to study the history of schools in the United States so that students can both know what came before them and, more crucially, understand the role that education systems play in upholding whiteness and perpetuating white hegemony.

- We look at Horace Mann’s conception of the Common School as the Great Equalizer and ask “common to whom” as we examine the treatment of Catholics in schools which conflated “Protestant” with “Good” and “Normal” and Catholic with all things bad.
- We look at the arc of development of schooling for African-Americans starting with laws which forbade the teaching of reading to the enslaved. We look at tables of data showing that right after the Civil War African-American students enrolled in schools surpassed white students and then look at the way that relationship changed with the rise of Jim Crow laws.
- We look at the incredible growth of schools systems from one room schoolhouses for some to large, comprehensive universal school districts and expansion to graded k-8 and then k-12 systems. Again, students look at data and see that though the race and ethnicity of students with access to these systems grew substantially, the access was not equal: for BIPOC, Irish and other immigrant groups, access to high school education was predominantly relegated to “Industrial Education” track.
- We look at the Native American boarding school movement as a tactic in the movement to eliminate native peoples and cultures.

- We look at how segregated schools were used to segregate by language in addition to race, the long road to Brown and where we are today (still separate, still unequal).
- We end by looking at testing, demographics and school arrangements in Cedar Rapids as a means of unveiling past uses of redlining and other restrictive covenants that played a role in their current understanding of what and where the “good” schools and neighborhoods are today.

Over the years of teaching this course, I note that by the end of the course the former invisible relationships of power have been made visible and students are independently beginning to question relationships of power, privilege and the dynamics of dominance. Is this “enough”? No. But it is a necessary first step for the learning these students need to continue to do.

It is necessary for institutions of higher education to create spaces in which white students can interrogate their whiteness and the role that power and privilege have played in shaping their life experiences and outcomes. The logic and suitability of colleges and universities as poignant locations for working on racism is particularly at play at institutions under the care of the Sisters of Mercy. Students pursue higher education for many reasons but at the end of the day they come to campus for the purpose of being educated. Students choosing to enroll in Mercy institutions of higher education are actively agreeing to/looking to be educated at an institution dedicated to “the preservation and development of the core Catholic identity and mission of Mercy higher education in accord with the spirit, mission, and heritage of the Sisters of Mercy.”¹⁶ Students enroll in Mercy institutions knowing that they’ve signed up to be active participants in discussions that explore the Sisters of Mercy Critical Concerns and are built upon a foundation of Catholic social teaching. As a faculty member at a Mercy institution I am thankful for this foundation as it both gives me permission and a mandate to engage in issues related to the critical concerns. I do this through many facets of my work, but none are quite as potent as the work I do in the classroom.

In his Letter from the Birmingham Jail, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. writes:

*I suppose I should have realized that few members of the oppressor class can understand the deep groans and passionate yearnings of the oppressed race, and still fewer have the vision to see that injustice must be rooted out by strong, persistent and determined action.*¹⁷

As a faculty member at a Mercy institution, I feel both obligated and honored to be charged with the task of supporting my students’ ability to understand these groans and yearnings and, perhaps, planting seeds that might keep them rooted in strong, persistent and determined action throughout their lives.

¹¹ Alvarez McHatton, Patricia, Harold Keller, Barbara Shircliffe, and Carlos Zalaquett. "Examining efforts to infuse diversity within one college of education." *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education* 2, no. 3 (2009): 127; Dodge, Georgina, and Lindsay Jarratt. "Building and Sustaining a Campus-Wide Multicultural Initiative." *New Directions for Student Services* 144 (2013): 27-35; Harper, Shaun R., Lori D. Patton, and Ontario S. Wooden. "Access and equity for African American students in higher education: A critical race historical analysis of policy efforts." *The Journal of Higher Education* 80, no. 4 (2009): 389-414.

² Anderson, James D. "Race in American higher education." *The racial crisis in American higher education: Continuing challenges for the twenty-first century* (2002): 4.

³ Harper, Patton & Wooden, “Access and equity”)

⁴ Delgado, Richard, and Jean Stefancic. *Critical race theory: The cutting edge*. Temple University Press, 2013, p. 3.

⁵ Harper, Patton & Wooden, “Access and equity”, 403

⁶ Ash, Allison N., Redgina Hill, Stephen Risdon, and Alexander Jun. "Anti-racism in higher education: A model for change." *Race and Pedagogy Journal: Teaching and Learning for Justice* 4, no. 3 (2020): 2. 3

⁷ Ash, Hill Risdon and Jun “Anti-Racism” p. 4

⁸ The Urban Institute. <https://www.urban.org/research/publication/racial-and-ethnic-representation-postsecondary-education>

⁹ Wilder, Craig Steven. *Ebony and ivy: Race, slavery, and the troubled history of America's universities*. Bloomsbury Publishing USA, 2014.

¹⁰ Harper, Patton and Woodson “Access and equity,” 405

¹¹ Sleeter, Christine. "Wrestling with problematics of whiteness in teacher education." *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 29, no. 8 (2016): 1065-1068.

¹² Milner IV, H. Richard. "What does teacher education have to do with teaching? Implications for diversity studies." *Journal of Teacher Education* 61, no. 1-2 (2010): 120.

¹³ Giroux, H., & McLaren, P. (1986). Teacher education and the politics of engagement: The case for democratic schooling. *Harvard educational review*, 56(3); 214.

¹⁴ Bennett, Kathleen P., and Margaret D. LeCompte. *How Schools Work: Sociological Analysis of Education*. Longman Publishing Group, 95 Church Street, White Plains, NY 10601, 1990.

¹⁵ Giroux & McLaren

¹⁶ Conference for Mercy Higher Education <https://mercyhighered.org/>

¹⁷ King Jr, Martin Luther. "Letter from Birmingham jail." *Liberating faith: Religious voices for justice, peace, & ecological wisdom* (1964).

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