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Disrupting the World as We Know It: Addressing Racism in ELA Teacher Education

By Melanie Shoffner, James Madison University

I'll be honest: I have struggled to write this essay. What more can I add to the conversation about racial issues today? Even as an English teacher educator, what more can I say about racism in education? Educators far wiser than I have considered connections and pondered problems with issues of race, advocacy and pedagogy as long as I've been alive—well before and, likely, well after, too (e.g., Anderson, 1988; Banks, 1996; Delpit, 1995; Fecho, 2004; Freire, 1989; Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Sleeter, 2005; Tatum, 1997). As yet another white, mid-40s, from working-class-to-middle-class, former-teacher-now-professor female, I am reluctant to add yet another whitesplaining voice to our discussions on race. What can I offer that hasn't been said before by people far more equipped to say it?

That's not the point, though, is it? We struggle with things that are difficult, and talking about racism is difficult. It doesn't help that we don't do a very good job of talking about it in this country. We yell about it; we pontificate on it; we dismiss it; we avoid it. Rarely do we sit down and have a meaningful conversation in order to know better and do better. Racism is not an intellectual exercise or a theoretical construct: It is a lived experience. We may suffer from it or benefit from it but we are all affected by it, and that means we must address it openly and honestly with our preservice teachers.

So, we try. We lecture on its systemic causes and assign readings about its effects. We explain culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2000) and define the school-to-prison pipeline (Winn & Behizadeh, 2011). We require field placements with diverse students (Boyd et al., 2006) and develop teaching opportunities in international classrooms (Cushner, 2009). We orient our teaching toward equity (Morrell, 2015) and ground our actions in

social justice (Souto-Manning & Smagorinsky, 2010). We do many things as teacher educators yet worry that none of them are sufficient.

I use readings in my methods courses that connect race to student learning and classroom instruction and educational purpose (e.g., Christensen, 2011; Grater & Johnson, 2013; Lehman, 2016; Michie, 2012b; Shoffner & Brown, 2010; Weinstein, Curran & Tomlinson-Clarke, 2003). I choose literature for class assignments that addresses issues of race and power and justice, such as Octavia Butler's *Kindred*, Gilbert King's *Devil in the Grove: Thurgood Marshall, the Groveland Boys, and the Dawn of a New America*, Meg Medina's *Yaqui Delgado Wants to Kick Your Ass* and Angie Thomas' *The Hate U Give*. I have preservice teachers write mini-ethnographies of diverse students in their field placement classrooms, develop lesson plans that integrate instructional supports for English language learners, discuss institutional racism as it manifests in secondary schools, reflect on their own understandings of privilege and identity. My preservice teachers can understand the concept of racism, certainly, as well as its effects on the classroom and society at large, but, still, I wonder when they leave me if they will meaningfully engage inequality and structural discrimination when they encounter it in their own personal and professional lives. Will they actually orient themselves toward a life that embodies social justice?

For the record, I don't really like the term *social justice*. Words carry connotations, as I remind my students; they carry meanings we don't intend, provoke responses we don't expect. The fluidity of language means words evolve and shift and transfer. What captures the idea precisely for one person can cause meaning to escape for another. In my ear, *social justice* echoes with a faint ring of collective righteousness and communal crusade.

The concepts embodied by the term, the teaching grounded by the term, the purposes advocated by the term: yes, I like those, I support those and I do my best to enact those. The words themselves, however, do not adequately represent what I want my students to recognize, act upon and live in the world around them, which may explain why educators struggle to provide a definitive definition. As the CEE Commission on Social Justice

(2009) found when attempting to do so, “social justice is definitionally complex; it ignites controversy, is not neutral, and varies by person, culture, social class, gender, context, space and time...a consensus definition of social justice is not likely to satisfy the most open-minded of thinkers” (p. 2).

Variably conceived though it may be, the concepts of social justice permeate my life as a teacher educator. I interact with colleagues daily who engage with issues of race, equity and diversity in their “policy, theory, research, curriculum design, and implementation” work (Burns & Miller, 2017, p. 2-3); our conversations as we pause in the hallway or debate during meetings or sit with a pint raise new questions and spark new ideas. I encourage a “critical perspective on social inequity” (Souto-Manning & Smagorinsky, 2010, p. 49) in my classroom, requiring preservice teachers to tackle topics like discrimination, gender roles, censorship and immigration during class discussions, while writing reflections, as they develop unit plans, when they choose instructional strategies. My teachers-to-be learn to expect my response of “it depends” when they ask for a definitive answer to a problematic question: how to respond to students using racial slurs when they pass their Latina classmates in the hallway; what to do if parents object to a young adult novel depicting a White police officer shooting an African American boy; whether to incorporate issues of race and power into a unit plan as first-year teachers. Rather than blindly accepting the educational status quo, my preservice teachers must learn to ask questions and find answers that cause them to rethink their teaching and their students’ learning; they need to consider how they can purposefully create and support an open, equitable and democratic community for the students in their classroom (Michie, 2012).

In my mind and in my classroom, social justice is a distillation of human rights, an enactment of civil rights. As humans, we must affirm and respond to the world’s diversity in ways that support and promote empathy, acceptance and understanding. As educators, we develop those abilities in humans by examining contexts, questioning assumptions, engaging critical thinking, affirming difference. As teacher educators, we prepare humans to develop those abilities in others as they hone those same abilities in themselves. None of this is easy but all of this is necessary because empathy, acceptance and understanding are human endeavors that foreground the rights and responsibilities of every person on this planet.

If only we lived in a perfect world.

We don't.

We live in a world navigating overt racism, unabashed hate speech and open white supremacy—a world that invents different explanations for country-specific immigration bans, voter disenfranchisement, demarcated borders, memorials to civil unrest, delayed disaster relief, the killing of unarmed black men—a world of Tamir Rices and Philando Castiles and Charllestons and Charlottesvillees and Puerto Ricos. We live in a world that needs much more empathy, acceptance and understanding from everyone in it.

So, we attempt to foster that through our classes, with our preservice teachers, in our communities. We turn to websites with classroom resources addressing racism (such as [Literacy & NCTE](#), [justice.education](#), [Teaching for Change](#) and [Teaching for Tolerance](#)) that offer specific lesson plans for use with adolescents and suggest books, essays and articles to foster discussions on issues of privilege, diversity and race. We speak openly and frankly with our preservice teachers, bringing current events and complex issues into the classroom. We use reflective assignments to help them consider their understandings of the world and how these beliefs will influence their actions as teachers (Coombs & Ostensen, 2014; Garmon, 2005; Howard, 2010; Shoffner, 2009, 2008).

Still, I struggle with how to engage my preservice teachers—mostly middle class white women—with issues of racism in authentic ways—as a mostly middle class white woman. Speakers can provide some understanding of the lived experience of racism. Literature study can support the development of empathy for diverse others (Alsup, 2015; Louie, 2005). Field placements can develop personal connections with and disrupt assumptions about those diverse others (Goldstein & Lake, 2003; Graham, Vinz, Bush, Christenbury, Cummings, Dickson & Taylor, 2005; McDonald, Bowman & Brayko, 2013). These experiences have the potential to engage and strengthen many social justice-oriented dispositions: open-mindedness, ethical thinking, commitment to student learning, communicative effectiveness, respect for others.

Like social justice, though, dispositions are difficult to define, affected by context, dependent on the interpreter—and considered “requisite for effective teachers” (Schussler, Stooksberry, & Bercaw, 2010, p. 351). Whatever the definitional disagreement, the need for preservice teachers to develop and possess certain dispositions is grounded in the understanding that certain skills, behaviors and beliefs are necessary to support meaningful teaching and learning (Shoffner, Sedberry, Alsup & Johnson, 2014). Understanding what that means and what that looks like in one’s development means understanding both dispositions and social justice not as theoretical concepts discussed in methods classes but as ways of engaging with and living in the world. And that means our preservice teachers need to travel.

Abroad. Away. Elsewhere. Preservice teachers need to experience more than their slice of the world before entering a whole new world of diverse learners. They need to leave the comfort of familiarity and meet new people, try new things, explore new places. Engaging with difference, in whatever form we find it, has a way of shifting perspectives, developing thinking and changing beliefs; that can happen when students are taken out of their lived experiences to live entirely new ones elsewhere in the world (Cushner, 2009; Dolby, 2004; Hadis, 2005; Kitsantas, 2004; McKeown, 2009; Shoffner, forthcoming).

I realize this is an easy pronouncement to make and a difficult thing to do. Study abroad requires money, planning, support and interest, necessities that may be in short supply for preservice teachers for any number of reasons. International study is a possibility on every college campus, however, and it needs to become a standard feature of every preservice teacher’s education (and, yes, I realize that not all teachers are products of university teacher education programs but that’s a conversation for another day). That means rethinking teacher education to prioritize study abroad experiences for preservice teachers.

Where should they go? I don’t care. Paris is lovely in the springtime, it’s true, but Seoul is fascinating year-round. Perhaps Arusha, maybe Zagreb, possibly Quito: anywhere and everywhere offers the opportunity for study. What should they study? I don’t care about that, either. Art history in

Italy, economic policy in Japan, agricultural management in Guatemala, indigenous culture in Australia, theatre performance in Romania: If something is interesting, then it's something worth studying.

The significance of international study for preservice teachers isn't that they learn a certain subject or have a specific experience; they don't need to focus on their content area or work with students in classrooms to justify study abroad as worthwhile learning. They need to have a meaningful academic experience, certainly, but the familiarity of coursework should serve as the foundation for their experiences with the unfamiliar. Preservice teachers need to be strangers in a strange land. They need to be different. They need to be uncomfortable—because, as one of my preservice teachers said, when you travel, you're uncomfortable and that's when “you learn a lot about yourself, and that's when you learn most about other people, too.”

International study and travel do not automatically confer positive growth and deepened understanding, of course, any more than required field experiences and methods courses do. Students can cling to the familiar and the known, leaving their personal practical knowledge (Handal & Lauvas, 1987) untouched, even when faced with new information and clear contradictions. While abroad, students need support to make sense of cultural contexts, engage with cultural concepts and reflect on intercultural understandings if they are to make sense of their experiences (Paige & Vande Berg, 2012). McKeown's (2009) assessment of study abroad experiences holds true for any educational endeavor, however: “Without an experienced faculty member or director to guide their learning...students [are] influenced by the general social context in which they [find] themselves...[showing] that program quality and structure are important ingredients in...program effectiveness” (p. 41). The personal and professional dispositions we expect and cultivate in our preservice teachers play a role, as well.

Engaging with the world outside the cultural, political, social and racial confines of the United States requires preservice teachers to consider taken-for-granted understandings, abilities and beliefs in completely new contexts. They don't understand directions on the subway or customary procedures at restaurants. They get on the wrong bus, give the wrong change, use the wrong words. They stand out with their college T-shirts and

ubiquitous tennis shoes and too-loud laughter. As they navigate all the customary adjustments, however, they also interact with people with different viewpoints and live in places with different priorities.

For the first time, perhaps, preservice teachers are asked why the US cannot overcome its racial divisiveness. They have to explain the lack of universal healthcare and the excess of guns. They field questions about American immigration, American stereotypes, American nationalism. Suddenly, they are on the outside, looking in, attempting to make sense of the familiar from a different perspective. The benefit of all this, as Nelsen (2015) points out, is that “when we are faced with novel situations and problems that our prior ways of engaging cannot resolve, we develop new resources, new habits, and ultimately new dispositions in our aims to resolve the problems or tasks” (p. 95).

I am under no illusions that preservice teachers will experience a lightning-quick conversion while studying abroad and return home with paradigm-shifting understandings of racial issues. Obviously, it’s not that simple or we wouldn’t need to reframe civil wars and rehabilitate Nazis in the 21st century. Disrupting racism is never simple or easy or comfortable, as teacher educators know and preservice teachers learn, but neither is study abroad because both require the interrogation of the individual. The disruption of difference is inherent to international study, just as it is essential to combatting racism, and that disruption is necessary for those who wish to teach.

Preservice teachers need to develop as people if they are to develop as socially just educators. International study, done well, requires preservice teachers to engage with complexity, question what they know, test what they believe and act upon what they learn, just as teacher education, done well, requires preservice teachers to recognize, understand and embody social justice and civil rights and human rights as fundamental to teaching, learning and living in a better world. Our preservice teachers and their future students need us to do well. I choose to believe we can, struggle though we may, because the world as we know it needs disrupting. And English teachers are really good at disrupting things.

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