McIntosh as Synecdoche: How Teacher Education’s Focus on White Privilege Undermines Anti-racism

The Midwest Critical Whiteness Collective

Ubiquity of McIntosh’s Knapsack

In our work for this paper, we did close readings of McIntosh’s text and searched for accounts of uses of her work in teacher education and professional development programs, and for critiques of her work on white privilege.

What we found was that McIntosh’s work is:

• Used almost everywhere in teacher education programs,

• Cited almost everywhere in research on multicultural teacher education and the racial identities of white future teachers,

• Taken up, critically, almost nowhere.

Collective Autoethnography

We call our method collective autoethnography, in which we theorize stories and use writing as a method. In such work, stories are considered both personal—woven out of our own bodies and minds—and made out of materials and practices not originating from us.

In our paper, we focused on two personal narratives to explore some of the ways that white privilege pedagogy limits and even undermines our anti-racist aspirations and educational projects.

In the first narrative, Jessie draws on her personal experiences in the National SEED (Seeking Educational Equity and Diversity) Project on Inclusive Curriculum, which was founded by McIntosh. Jessie describes an important and pervasive SEED ritual, called “Serial Testimonies.”

In this ritual, participants take turns sharing personal experiences or responses to prompts, but there are strict rules against commenting on or asking questions about what anyone says.

Jessie’s narrative includes what happened when she shared a complex and racially/emotionally-charged story within this ritual—a story about her morning commute to work that morning, which involved being approached by an African-American man and his pregnant wife, who asked Jessie for money because their car had broken down.

...When my turn came, I shared the story about the man and his wife, and again, I cried. Heather thanked me for sharing my story and moved to the next person in the circle. I remember the eyes of my colleagues on me, and while I wanted to feel their support and understanding for the power of this incident in my life, I recall wishing that I hadn’t shared the story.

I can only guess why the incident and its retelling made me cry. I believe I was frightened by the Black man walking up to my window in the darkness of morning. And I believe I was frightened even more by my racially motivated fear. Rolling down my window was an act of defiance against that fear. But as I wrapped up my story and Heather moved on to the next person in the circle, I never felt that my words were fully understood.

In the second narrative, Mary tells about her work as a teacher educator in a course on multiculturalism. Mary works at a small state university that serves a number of rural poor and working-class white students.

She focuses on how John, one of her white students, questioned and resisted McIntosh’s ideas about white privilege, often drawing on his own experiences growing up in rural poverty. In his response to reading McIntosh’s piece, he rejected her ideas and called the article “asinine.”

Mary was tempted to interpret and label this resistance as she had seen countless research articles interpret and label it— as a sure, straightforward sign of John’s racism. However, John was, within this same course, moved deeply by accounts of the historical and ongoing oppression of black and Native peoples in his region, and was eager to work with Mary on what this new knowledge meant for his teaching.

...John was stunned by historical readings on the removal and genocide of Native populations, including in our region, and changed his “get over it” stance on the use of Native-American mascots in schools. In a group project, John assumed the position of advocate for recent refugee students.

John’s journal reflected a changing attitude in many areas, but especially significant was how he started challenging mainstream/conservative myths surrounding immigration.

John’s responses to McIntosh’s text, and then his work throughout the course, made me ask: If students don’t see what McIntosh sees, does that make them racist? If they are white and poor and struggling, and if they have difficulty seeing advantages of being white, does that make them racist? Really? ...

One important thing that Mary’s story helps us understand is that McIntosh’s conception of white privilege often takes on the role of being a “Racism Detection Device” (RDD)—it acts as a test or screen to identify those who will not confess their privilege and who are therefore racist. Those who resist might be asked again, be given another chance to confess, but if they continue their resistance they have shown their true selves.

John could not read himself into McIntosh’s depiction of a white person with privileges. However, through additional course material and a sense of connection to local history and place, his own complexity and intersectionality was provoked. And he was moved.

Racism Detection Device

Our work suggests two primary implications.

First, our paper dramatizes the need to displace white privilege from the center of anti-racist work in teacher education, and to focus instead on dismantling white supremacy.

Second, our work points to how McIntosh’s characterization of white privilege tends to simplify and flatten out how we think of and imagine the white racial identities of our students and ourselves. We need to re-conceptualize white racial identity in ways that are generative for anti-racial teaching.

Much work remains to be done.