

Disrupting Education with Testimonios: Subverting White Supremacy in New Mexico

Zachary Ramsey

University of New Mexico

Introduction

Education is often thought of as the great equalizer. Schools are supposed to provide each individual with the means in which to improve their lives. However, in America there rages a debate about equity, education, and how we are teaching our diverse students (Cochran-Smith et al., 2016; Darling-Hammond, 2007; Riley & Coleman, 2012).

In the United States, teaching is a profession dominated by White¹ people. As a result, school systems and curriculum have become perpetrators of White supremacy (Mazzei, 1997; Huber, 2009). Cruz (2012) warns, “Curriculum, how we shape it, whose communities are represented, and how histories are depicted is power” (p. 464). In order to invest all students with power, teachers must become culturally-responsive. For White teachers, this means examining the legacy of White hegemony and their role as potential, accidental evangelists of White supremacy.

Whiteness, Hegemony, & Education

In America we are steeped in White culture. This can make it difficult for White people to divest themselves from the dominant culture in order to objectively view how People of Color interact within and are impacted by the dominant culture (Earick, 2018; European-American Collaborative Challenging Whiteness, 2002; Mazzei, 1997). For all teachers, this means that we should question traditional pedagogical practices that are rooted in the 20th century and in practices designed to condition and subjugate People of Color.

American teachers, who were raised in America, have been living in the fog of White, Euro-centric hegemony for their entire lives. Most of us don't even realize there's a fog at all. If it has always been there, it is normal. If it is normal, it is invisible and does not garner attention.

If it does not garner attention, it will not be scrutinized through a critical lens. However, when one begins to see through the veneer of “normalcy,” they may be surprised by the disquieting inequity present in our culture and in our educational systems.

The invisibility of White supremacy, especially in the eyes of White people, makes the work of creating educational equity especially hard. Mary E. Earick’s (2018) research is illuminating when it comes to the various difficulties White people have when talking about the legacy of White hegemony and the impacts of colonization that still benefit White people at the expense of all other races. Earick articulates several archetypes she uncovered through her research, but at the crux of the issue is the individualistic nature of White culture. The hegemony of White supremacy in American society fosters individualism as opposed to collectivism, which is highly valued in other cultures (Earick, 2018). This individualism means that when discussing the racism of the education system, White people have a tendency to make it about themselves. This is evidenced when White people think they need to “save” or “help” non-white people. This almost certainly stems from the difference in perceived power created by the dominant White culture in our society. White people, with their focus on the individual, have placed themselves at the top of a social pyramid in America, and are reluctant to share the space with others.

One significant observation made by Lisa A. Mazzei (1997) is that when White people are having a discourse about Whiteness, what is *not* said is as important as what *is* said. There exist worlds of implication in what is absent from the conversations White people have about their own race. Specifically, Mazzei noticed that when the White people in her study described themselves, none of them used race as a label. When Mazzei inquired about how White people

saw themselves as raced, they had difficulty giving a direct answer and defaulted to comparing themselves with an *other*.

The difficulty White people have with regard to identifying their own Whiteness extends to the ways their values are based on and perpetuate White culture. That there are White-specific values may even come as a surprise to some White people. Mazzie (1997) points out, “...as teachers of all ethnic and racial backgrounds, we impose a value system on our students, some elements of which we recognize and voice, some elements of which we are unaware” (p. 11).

It is the value systems we promote as White teachers that can become problematic. If our values, based on the dominant White culture, do not match the values of our students and their families, we run the risk of marginalizing our students. When we prioritize White values and culture we are inadvertently dismissing the worth of other cultures — of our students’ cultures. To teach successfully in the 21st century, and especially in New Mexico, teachers of all races must recognize and honor *other ways of knowing*. The days of everyone needing to master multiple-choice style standardized tests are over. Our new, technologically advanced society is quickly making standardized testing obsolete. With the world changing at the speed of innovation, we can no longer rest on the laurels of the past with regard to teaching and assessing our students’ skills, competencies, and knowledge.

Subverting White Supremacy

At the University of New Mexico, Dr. Mia Sosa-Provencio is trying something different. She is using *Testimonio* as the basis of an innovative and emerging new pedagogical practice. As part of a preparation course for pre-service teachers, Dr. Sosa-Provencio created a site-based “curriculum lab, which utilized class time as workshop space within which pre-service teachers

are guided in designing, teaching, and reflecting upon student-centered, inquiry-based, multimodal curriculum” alongside high school students (Sosa-Provencio, Sheahan, Fuentes, Muñiz, & Prada Vivas, 2019, p. 212). The *Testimonios*, narratives of struggle told by oppressed individuals, provide a central focus for the learning and a lens through which to think about education and curriculum.

In her own words, Dr. Sosa-Provencio explains the impetus for the curriculum lab: “...we engaged in our curriculum lab to wrap flesh around previously imagined and theorized alternatives to the hollow scriptedness of neoliberal standardization and the silencing of mainstream schooling” (Sosa-Provencio, Sheahan, Fuentes, Muñiz, & Prada Vivas, 2019, p. 215). The lab is an effort to authentically value *other ways of knowing* and subvert the traditional, hegemonic, White pedagogical practices that dominate classrooms in America, despite the growing number of Students of Color in classrooms all across the country.

The curriculum lab offers the participants, made up of university and high school students of various backgrounds along with Dr. Sosa-Provencio, a new and novel approach to education and learning. The authentic setting of the curriculum lab (held at a local public high school) provides pre-service teachers a tangible means to interact with and learn about an alternative pedagogy in the most immersive way possible. It allows pre-service teachers to explore an alternative model of practice that they can replicate and build on when they have their own classrooms. In addition to learning about pedagogy, the lab gives White students and educators an opportunity to examine their Whiteness and how they can begin to share their seat on the social pyramid.

The curriculum lab stands as a significant example of alternative pedagogy. It provides educators with a necessary model, for without models people will frequently revert to what is known and familiar. This is why we still have so many classrooms that look exactly like they did 100 years ago: desks in rows, children raising their hands to speak, individuals working in isolation, teachers standing in the front of the room while students sit passively, etc. The pedagogy of the past will not adequately or equitably prepare our students for the future.

Borrowing from the concepts of *mestizaje* and *creolization*, which relate to the combining of multiple cultures resulting in a new unique culture, Dr. Sosa-Provencio has forged a new learning environment to foster innovative practices and test emerging theories (Gordon, 2014; Sosa-Provencio, 2018). As she eloquently explains:

In melding vastly diverse students, texts, ideas, and pedagogical approaches across two teacher education courses, my students and I, exploring *mestizaje* in the crossroads, galvanized *creolization*'s power of confluence and fluidity set in the crossroads of race/ethnicity, class, language, geography, age, and residency status. (Sosa-Provencio, 2018, p. 18)

The lab is a deliberate attempt to subvert the hegemonic culture of White supremacy and racism present in the education system.

It should be pointed out that racism manifests as more than person-to-person discrimination or oppression. According to the European-American Collaborative Challenging Whiteness, "...many in our society fail to understand that racism is the institutionalization of privilege, not simply a manifestation of prejudiced attitudes by individuals" (p. 74). Teachers,

administrators, and entire school systems wittingly and unwittingly participate in institutional racism in a variety of ways, including choice of content, curriculum, and assessments.

A Different Lens

In an effort to deliberately peer through the fog of hegemony teachers can employ Critical Race Theory (CRT) as a way to think about their practice. According to Huber (2009), “CRT functions to recognize the significance of experiential knowledge in the research process and utilize interdisciplinary perspectives to identify and challenge all forms of subordination, working toward racial and social justice for Communities of Color” (p. 643). White teachers may benefit from a branch of CRT called Critical Whiteness Scholarship (CWS). Critical Whiteness Scholars filter their analysis through critical race theory “to expose and decenter Whiteness as the normative discourse through the use of counter narrative storytelling and revisionist historiography to address racism and White Supremacy” (Earick, 2018, p. 803).

The counter narratives used by Dr. Sosa-Provencio and the participants of her curriculum lab are Latin-x *Testimonios*. These stories of struggle provide the basis for curriculum design. The curriculum lab is intentionally decentralizing White culture from the educational setting. It is a marriage of theory and practice, catalyzed by the desire to overcome oppression.

Part of the influence of White hegemony can be overcome with a shift in thinking. For White teachers, it might be helpful for us to think about our behaviors as members of the dominant culture and how students from different cultures and/or backgrounds might interpret or perceive those behaviors. For example, White people have a tendency to turn statements into questions, like when a student is out of their seat to sharpen a pencil at an inappropriate time. A teacher behaving in accordance with the dominant culture might ask, “Would you like to have a

seat?” However, they are actually telling the student to “sit down,” they just don’t use that language because of the culture. Students who have not spent their entire lives in this society might be confused by that type of communication practice. White teachers might also consider their dispositions regarding students of different races and cultures and how those dispositions have been informed by the dominant culture. For example, thinking that certain students can’t learn at the same level as White students, or that certain groups of students are lazier than others.

One easy first-step for White teachers when planning culturally-responsive curriculum is to incorporate “material created by and for [P]eoples of Color disrupting historical and current official knowledge” (Earick, 2018, p. 817). Using *Testimonios* provides one way to disrupt the dominant culture and the “current official knowledge” being taught in American classrooms.

Brayboy and Castagno (2008) make the point that we don’t have to adopt an either/or approach when it comes to what we teach and who we serve in education. Teachers can employ differentiation to provide an equitable education to all students regardless of their race or background. As long as we are responsive to the different races, cultures, and backgrounds of our students and incorporate appropriate ways for all of our different students to grow, we can better ensure we are providing an appropriate education for every student in our schools.

Looking Ahead

By building on the foundation created by the curriculum lab, new pedagogies can be tested and explored. *Testimonios* provide an example of how teachers can incorporate *other ways of knowing* as the focus of their pedagogy. In the future, expanding beyond the Latin-x *Testimonios* to incorporate stories of struggle from a variety of oppressed peoples and incorporating *indigenous ways of knowing* could allow for even greater differentiation. Another

method for casting a wider net of equitable learning opportunities could be to create labs for other groups of students. For example, a curriculum lab that focuses on creating equitable curriculum for Native Americans or for African refugees or for LGBTQ+ students might be established.

Spaces like Dr. Sosa-Provencio's curriculum lab are necessary for immersing pre-service teachers in a culturally-responsive environment where they can openly examine the ways in which they operate within, perpetuate, and/or oppose White supremacy. For White students, it is a safe place to examine their Whiteness and how they have been influenced by White hegemony. Earick's (1997) powerful words serve to clarify the choices White teachers have once they learn to see through the miasma of White supremacy: "Our choice as White scholars is clear, partner in liberation of all peoples from White supremacy or continue to colonize the social justice movement" (p. 803).

As a culture we don't lose anything by incorporating and honoring *other ways of knowing*. We only gain a broader understanding of the diverse world in which we live.

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Footnote

1. I have deliberately capitalized the words *White* and *People of Color/Students of Color* because they are social constructs created to describe specific races or groups of people and should therefore be considered proper nouns.