During a recent quarter, Caitlin, a White graduate student, had the opportunity to co-teach a course, Applied Linguistics for Educators, with a professor at our university. There were approximately 30 students enrolled in the course, all of whom were either former, current, or future classroom teachers. All but four of the students were female and all but four of the students were White. With a background in linguistics and a passion for helping students recognize the vital connection between language and culture, Caitlin had envisioned this course to be a source of positive change for both the students enrolled and for the students they teach in their classrooms. During the same quarter in which Caitlin taught, she was enrolled in a doctoral seminar on theories of race and education that focused on the tenets and writings of Critical Race Theory (CRT). Adrienne, an African American professor, designed and taught the course. Caitlin’s participation in the course led her to rethink her pedagogy and certain assumptions upon which it was built. We offer these reflections on the course Caitlin taught not as a critique of the course per se, but rather as an acknowledgement of her role in perpetuating particular pedagogical assumptions that opened up some possibilities while simultaneously shutting down others. We use CRT as a lens to illustrate how new understandings about teaching and learning are made possible when new research models and paradigms are brought to bear on our work as teachers and teacher educators.

**Critical Race Theory and Education**

Critical race theory (CRT) has its roots in the legal field and is a response to the limitations of the law to address and redress racial inequity (Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas, 1996). Scholars of color in the field argue that in many ways, U.S. jurisprudence has helped to create and legitimate race and racism. Moreover, many legal scholars of color argue that, disproportionately, so-called race-neutral laws adversely affect people of color. The primary aim of CRT scholarship is to make structures of racial privilege visible. Legal scholar Mari Matsuda (1993) outlines six unifying themes within CRT:

1. Critical race theory recognizes that racism is endemic to American life.
2. Critical race theory expresses skepticism toward dominant legal claims of neutrality, objectivity, colorblindness, and meritocracy.
3. Critical race theory challenges ahistoricism and insists on a contextual/historical analysis of the law. . . . Critical race theorists . . . adopt a stance that assumes that racism has contributed to all contemporary manifestations of group advantage and disadvantage.
4. Critical race theory insists on recognition of the experiential knowledge of people of color and our communities of origin in analyzing law and society.
5. Critical race theory is interdisciplinary.
6. Critical race theory works toward the end of eliminating racial oppression as part of the broader goal of ending all forms of oppression. (p. 6)

Many CRT scholars examine the role and impact of language and discursive practices in justifying White racial privilege and the marginality of people of color. Building from CRT’s legal roots, CRT scholars in education examine the ways in which educational disparities specifically, such as disproportionate tracking of students or unequal public school funding systems, are a result of racialized structural inequities maintained through discursive practices (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Dixson & Rousseau, 2005; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

A common approach in multicultural teacher education is to “expose” preservice teachers to perspectives different from their own. The hope is that by reading literature by and/or about “other” groups, listening to speakers who are “other,” visiting “other” neighborhoods and communities, or playing simulation games that help preservice teachers feel
what it’s like to be “other,” they will finish their teacher education programs more informed and willing to embrace difference (Montecinos, 2004). While these approaches in and of themselves may be helpful and serve as a sort of “inquiry into difference,” they fail to address or interrupt the dysconscious racism many White preservice teachers hold about racialized groups (King, 1991). King, building on the ideas of Wellman (1977), defines dysconscious racism as:

...a form of racism that tacitly accepts dominant White norms and privileges. It is not the absence of consciousness (that is, unconsciousness), but an impaired consciousness or a distorted way of thinking about race as compared to critical consciousness. Uncritical ways of thinking about social inequity accept certain culturally sanctioned assumptions, myths, and beliefs that justify the social and economic advantages White people have as a result of subordinating others. (p.135)

Thus, while being exposed to “other” perspectives should be the goal of education, simply exposing students to difference does not encourage the criticality that King encourages, particularly as it pertains to race. CRT scholars in education, specifically those who work with preservice teachers, suggest that preservice teacher education must provide teacher candidates with opportunities for critical reflection on their racialized beliefs and experiences (Ladson-Billings, 1999; Rousseau & Tate, 2003). It is important to note that this notion of critical reflection goes beyond “reflection journals,” wherein students write down what they think and feel about a topic or an issue. Milner (2003) suggests that rather than make students of color and their communities problems upon which preservice teachers reflect, teacher educators should use critical reflection to help teachers think about how “they come to terms with some of their own issues around race” (p. 4).

In terms of language, critical theorists (e.g., Freire, 1970) and postmodern scholars (e.g., Foucault, 1972) alike have theorized the power of language in general, while both White linguists (e.g., Labov, 1972) and linguists of color (Baugh, 2000; Rickford, 1999; Smitherman, 2000) have highlighted linguistic patterns of language use by racialized groups. In fact, the centrality of language and, in turn, language variation in processes of teaching and learning has been explored by a number of educational researchers over several decades (cf., Bernstein, 1975; Cazden, 1988; Delpit, 1995; Valenzuela, 1999; Whiteman, 1980).

The particular lens of CRT, however, makes the systemic cultural and racial patterns that operate in schools more visible. Therefore, when looking at language study in teacher education, CRT helps us move from describing differences in language use to examining the implications of those differences as a product of our racialized society. While those presently involved in dialect study may recognize that not all language variations are equal in power and status (cf., Delpit, 1995; Wolfram, Adger, & Christian, 1999), these patterns of differential prominence are the very patterns that CRT helps us interrogate and understand more deeply. We will illustrate this point in this article by employing the CRT constructs of Whiteness as property and the persistence of a colorblind ideology. We begin with a brief outline of these two concepts before describing this graduate-level education course on language study and then performing a CRT analysis of its pedagogical practices and assumptions in order to illustrate how even when striving to use a progressive pedagogy, the realities of race are frequently subtracted from language study.

Whiteness as property is an idea that has been developed by CRT scholar Cheryl I. Harris (1995). Harris argues that due to the history of race and racism in the United States and the role that U.S. jurisprudence has played in reifying conceptions of race, the notion of Whiteness can be considered a property interest (p. 280). Harris posits that property functions on three levels: the right of possession, the right to use, and the right to disposition. The rights to transfer, use and enjoy, and exclude are also essential attributes associated with property rights. Harris suggests that these functions and attributes of property historically have served to establish Whiteness as a form of property. Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) also suggest that the use of a CRT perspective to analyze educational inequity, the curriculum, and, specifically, access to a high-quality, rigorous curriculum, has been almost exclusively enjoyed by White students. DeCuir and Dixson (2004) suggest that tracking—the practice of assigning students to classes that reflect levels of difficulty, such as regular, honors, gifted, and advanced placement courses—is just one way that schools have essentially been re-segregated, reflect-
ing policies and practices that make schooling serve the property interest of Whites.

In terms of a colorblind ideology, Crenshaw, Gotanda, and others (Crenshaw et al., 1996) point out that integration, assimilation, and colorblindness have become the official norms of racial enlightenment. Dominant discourse in both legal scholarship and educational institutions frequently seek colorblindness as an ideal. CRT points out that an appeal to a colorblind perspective is a particular political choice that ignores historical and social contexts where race has and continues to matter. In this appeal to ignore race and depend instead on meritocracy, these establishments obscure their own participation in maintaining racial inequalities.

As Hyttten and Warren (2003) have illustrated, White people’s discussions about race often walk a “fine line between productivity and resistance” or avoidance (p. 69). In undertaking this analysis, Caitlin examines that challenge in her own thoughts about her teaching through the lens of CRT in order to illuminate places her comfort with having racial privilege counteracts her good intentions. It is important, however, for both of us to recognize there is a risk of recentering Whiteness when examining our pedagogies. Although Lee (2006) reminded us recently that we are all entangled in Whiteness and White supremacy, to recenter Whiteness is to keep those who already enjoy racial privilege as the subject of investigation while allowing people of color to be further marginalized. The goal here is not to perform a self-conscious confessional or redemption narrative (McCarthy, 2003). Rather, Caitlin is working to directly examine how she failed to center the realities of race and its concomitant power inequalities (Tate, 2003), and instead allowed, and even encouraged, the students in her course to be content with a relativistic, colorblind view of the material that may do little to challenge existing racism in their classrooms and schools. We see this reflection as one step in a larger process, a part of the overall commitment to both theory and action that CRT demands (Crenshaw et al., 1996).

PEDAGOGIES FOR RE-THINKING: CAITLIN’S TEACHING

I (Caitlin) had hoped that my students in this Applied Linguistics course would first come to understand the types of patterns inherent in all linguistic systems, and then to understand what they were asking from their students if or when they asked them to change their language. Although the importance of language and identity was central to these goals, I didn’t make explicit the racialized patterns of our judgments about language usage. At this point, I am not yet able to clearly articulate the reason I did not make these patterns explicit. I do know that I considered this course an introduction to the field of linguistics and linguistic inquiry, and thus my focus was on the “basics” of what I believed constituted the field. While the discipline of linguistics often studies topics where race is central (cf., Labov’s seminal study of Black English), historically it has only infrequently taken up systems of racial oppression in a central and theoretical way (i.e., Baugh, 2000). In addition, I was concerned with meeting the students’ expectations, and I didn’t want them to feel overwhelmed by what I considered “larger issues” or cause them to be resistant to our future discussions. I could imagine not just implicit, but blatant critiques such as, “I thought this was a course on language, not race!"

The pedagogy for the course was carefully constructed to speak directly to the needs of educators (cf., Justice, 2004) while building on linguistic work in dialect studies and the experiences of other teacher educators (see Goodman, this issue). The first class session was designed to reveal the students’ own histories with language and to introduce them to linguistic theories of language variation (see Figure 1). In my past work with preservice teachers, some students argued with the idea that non-dominant, stigmatized language forms such as African American Vernacular English, Chicano English and Puerto Rican English (sometimes called Spanglish), and Appalachian English are linguistically as complex and valid as the standard forms they work so hard to teach in their classrooms. My goal, then, was to neutralize students’ assumptions about language standardization by asking them to draw on their own experiences of language variation and to use these experiences as evidence that language use has many forms and facets, depending on the participants’ purposes and their situation. Specifically, I wanted the students to think about whether they had ever been told they “talked funny” when entering school or visiting another part of the country. Did a grandparent or someone older ever comment on their own teenage vocabulary
Language Stories

Your Own Language Story

1. What language(s)/dialect(s) do you speak?
2. What were you told about your language/way of speaking at home?
3. What were you told about your language/way of speaking at school?
4. What do you think about your own language?
5. Have you ever traveled to a place (English-speaking or otherwise) where it was difficult to understand the local speakers? What did you do?

A Classmate’s Language Story.

Name: __________________ teaches _________ grade in ________________ district.

1. What language(s)/dialect(s) do you speak?
2. What were you told about your language/way of speaking at home?
3. What were you told about your language/way of speaking at school?
4. Have you ever traveled to a place (English-speaking or otherwise) where it was difficult to understand the local speakers? What did you do?

Figure 1. Language stories worksheet

RE-CENTERING RACE

CRT encourages “identifying the operation of racial power within discursive traditions widely accepted as neutral and apolitical” (Crenshaw et al., 1996, p. xxv). Although I had originally conceived of the class sessions on dialect and the use of one of our class texts, McWhorter’s Spreading the Word (2000), as tools for working toward such unveiling of the seemingly neutral standards of language usage, the plan had several shortcomings. First, since I maintained my role as a mediator of the content, I excluded the more direct experiences of people of color that could have been realized either through additional texts or through expanding class participation and leadership. In addition, although McWhorter is an African American scholar who writes in an informal tone, his political perspective is quite conservative and his approach still derives from a formal linguistics background. Therefore, the course failed to challenge the conventional academic tradition of what counts as knowledge.

From a CRT perspective, this failure is problematic because such knowledge sources and traditions have consistently privileged Whiteness. In fact, as Harris (1995) has pointed out, White-controlled institutions, including universities, imbue Whiteness with a property interest by consistently rewarding those who learn and use conventional perspectives and ways of categorizing knowledge. By not troubling what counts as valid knowledge but merely assisting the students in learning the vocabulary and concepts of the discipline of linguistics, the course increased the students’ Whiteness property values. In
other words, the curriculum functioned as a type of property (Dixson, 2003) and the course gave students further access to the knowledge and structures that have been and continue to be valorized and controlled by White people. I had adopted the practice Gordon (1995) warns of: adding knowledge without reconstituting the conceptual system. Though I had disrupted the students’ previously assumed linguistic privilege, I failed to “remove the protection of the existing hierarchy” (Harris, 1995, p. 288) that maintains racial advantage. Even if the information and experiences from the course did make some individuals less likely to engage in acts of racism (to the extent that we linked questions of language and race), it still failed to interrogate the larger systems that implicate those individuals and myself (Crenshaw et al., 1996).

Now, the students could feel affirmed in any racist and deficit beliefs they may continue to hold because such practices had “survived” and been validated by a (supposedly neutral) institution of higher learning.

Yet, in this arrangement, I felt successful as an educator who addresses issues of race because I could look to students’ individual changes as progress and learning. I saw students using terms correctly, transcribing speech in phonetic symbols, and noticing patterns of variation in data sets. They described awareness about language variation that they hadn’t demonstrated in our earlier sessions. I assumed the course was going well because they were learning the material that the course proposed to teach them: a foundation in linguistic terms and an introduction to dialect study. Isn’t this what we’re taught as teacher educators to look for when evaluating the effectiveness of our teaching? However, once Whiteness as property is seen as an ideological construct that sustains inequities, it allows for examinations of race that go beyond skin color to provide an analysis of how “ways of being, knowledge construction, power, and opportunity are constructed along and conflated with ‘race’” (Dixson, 2004, p. 1003).

The mostly White students were seeing themselves as more and more educated and liberal while the language features of their students of color were being positioned as different or exotic, but still able to be known by the White teachers.

Through using this CRT construct of Whiteness as property, it is possible to understand much of the questioning and subtle arguing Adrienne and I have both experienced in working with pre-and inservice teachers. As a direct result of property interest through the conflation of race and power, many White students object to being told they speak a dialect of English because this tarnishes their expectation that “Standard English” is the purview of White people. They lose their expected distance from black people and other racialized groups who “really” speak differently, and so their Whiteness is diminished by eroding their sense of entitlement to a position of superiority. In this way, explaining to a White person that she speaks in a dialect could be seen as an analogous offense to the historical crime of defaming a White person by calling her black (Harris, 1995).

Critical race theory also reveals that in my role in designing a course meant to disrupt current practices and create change, I established an environment that accepted and even encouraged the perpetuation of a colorblind ideology. My failure to more explicitly include the role of racism in the stigmatizing of dialects silenced those very connections. In other words, Crenshaw’s (2002) argument that we must look at legal rules in terms of their function in a racial world holds true for linguistic rules as well. By not thinking about how the information I presented to the students would manifest in a racial world, I ignored historical context and longstanding relations of power and fell into the discipline’s practice of setting apart racial issues from the “real” scholarship in linguistics.

This silencing is also likely to have been the result of my own discomfort with White privilege. In addition, I wanted to remain a supportive ally to the (White) students as they explored these issues. My alliance with the White students in the class definitely pushed our/my acknowledgement of race to the margins. Furthermore, I conceptualized my students’ lack of knowledge and erroneous beliefs about language variation as individual views without exploring the institutional and structural dimensions of their viewpoints completely enough (Gotanda, 1995). Through my emphasis on the idea that understanding language variety is crucial to educational equity, I created the perception that when teachers’ individual prejudices about language were improved or eliminated, it was as if all barriers to inequity in student learning would disappear. Upon reflection, it is easy to see how this individual narrative (Marable, 2002) then became the basis for my students to adopt the “neoconservative
claim that present inequities cannot be the result of discriminatory practices because this society [i.e., myself and all the White people in my class] no longer discriminates against blacks” (Crenshaw, 1995, p. 107). Moreover, encouraging my students to think of all language as “a variation of a language just like my own” colonizes, or objectifies, other language practices by applying White, Standard English frames to judgments about whose language counts. Finally, by learning to value other languages as merely a variation of one’s own, it is possible to ignore what Gotanda (1995) calls “culture-race,” the positive and unique aspects of African American language and culture.

Although I did attempt to challenge my students’ commonly held notion that the current arrangement of educational practices are both inevitable and fair by leading the class in critiques of current curriculum materials that help to reproduce inequity through linguistic biases, I was still operating under a restrictive versus an expansive view of equality. This distinction comes from Crenshaw (1988), who suggests that within antidiscrimination law, two visions of equality exist—the restrictive and the expansive. She explains that:

The expansive view stresses equality as a result, and looks to real consequences for African Americans. It interprets the objective of antidiscrimination law as the eradication of the substantive conditions of Black subordination and attempts to enlist the institutional power of the courts to further the national goal of eradicating the effects of racial oppression. The restrictive view, which exists side by side with this expansive view, treats equality as a process, downplaying the significance of actual outcomes. The primary objective of antidiscrimination law, according to this vision, is to prevent future wrongdoing rather than to redress present manifestations of past injustice. “Wrongdoing,” moreover, is seen primarily as isolated actions against individuals rather than as societal policy against an entire group. (p. 1341–1342)

Critical race theory scholars in education have used the restrictive vs. expansive constructs of equality as a framework to examine the nature of educational inequity (cf., Dixson & Rousseau, 2005). According to Rousseau and Tate (2003), for example, the high school mathematics teachers with whom they worked assumed that if they treated students equally within their classrooms, then the outcomes of student achievement would be equal. This colorblind perspective failed to account for the reality of race-based inequities in the teachers’ practices and their students’ lives. Rousseau and Tate suggest this restrictive view of equality served as a barrier to teachers’ understanding of the nature of educational inequity (cf., Dixson & Rousseau, 2005) and other populations who are raced linguistically. This practice kept my knowledge central to students’ learning, both re-centering Whiteness and reaffirming my position as an antiracist authority. Kiang (2004) considers the classroom and the curriculum as “places to be claimed and transformed” (p. 211), yet, as Thompson (2003) writes, for White teachers attempting to take on those transformations, “Our tendency to think that we know antiracism when we see it suggests that we too have definite ideas about desirable outcomes” (p. 20). In other words, even if I were supportive of my students’ growth and even if I led them to tools and knowledge that assist their work in making their classrooms more equitable, I need to
reflect on why I feel comfortable having the answers in the first place. “When we start congratulating ourselves on how far along we are, it is easy to stop thinking of ourselves as on a journey and start thinking of ourselves as having arrived” (Thompson, 2003, p. 20). I’ve realized that my pedagogy to this point has been built on the idea that I already knew information that my students didn’t, so I could act blamelessly. I was separated from them because they were on the journey and I already “got it.” I may have said I was implicated in systems of privilege, but I acted as if I were exempt. Thus, it is important for all teacher educators and others who work with pre-/inservice teachers, especially those of us who take on issues of race and racism as part of our pedagogical project, to consider the ways in which we participate in and promote, albeit tacitly, White privilege.

IMPLICATIONS

With its explicit focus on race and racism, especially at systemic rather than personal levels, critical race theory makes it difficult, if not impossible, to avoid the realities of race. This theoretical framework can be a gift to educational researchers working for social justice by illuminating racism’s role in structures previously assumed to be fair or colorblind. Just as CRT legal scholars have investigated the laws and the courts of this country, educational researchers could employ CRT in understanding the racialized nature of standardized testing, teacher hiring and retention practices, public school funding structures, and even particular instructional methods. Such studies will not be without consequence. Since Whiteness has long enjoyed privilege in this society, work using CRT will likely bring new critiques on procedures that have heretofore been considered necessary or even best practice. Yet the benefits of such work would bring us closer to a just society. What types of inequalities would we see and what new possibilities for change might become visible when these issues are viewed through a lens that centers race?

It is not just research in PreK–12 institutions that can benefit from this framework. Teacher educators, too, need to be open to a similar type of critical reflection on our own practices. White teacher-educators encouraging multicultural education especially need to consider our stance towards our own expertise as we present it in the classroom, and how our race affects that message. We need to be committed to a constant process of inquiry into views and theoretical frames that may make inequalities and inequities visible in new ways. We need to then use those approaches in our teaching and our research to help make the realities of race apparent to our students and our readers so they can better arrive at their own solutions for ameliorating our society’s current injustices. Perhaps above all, we must remember that our teaching and our students’ teaching take place in a race-based society. That reality cannot be overlooked if we want to change education from further benefiting the already privileged. We must teach and we must encourage our students to teach about language, but always in the context of those preexisting power relations.

For scholars of color who work with pre-/inservice teachers, the process of self-conscious reflection on our teaching has a slightly different focus. In light of what we have written in this article, scholars of color must also attend to issues of race and racism; however, as Adrienne points out, how we position both ourselves and the content (race/racism) requires us to think carefully about how the message gets conflated with the messenger. That is, we need to also consider that while teachers of color may have lived experiences of being marginalized by race, many of our students do not. As a result, we have to scaffold them through multiple layers of knowing, unknowing, and “not knowing” while still working to keep race central to our teaching. Lee’s point regarding the ways in which all of us participate in White supremacy is particularly important for scholars of color to consider as we think carefully about our pedagogy. None of us is exempt and all of us have to do our part to address it. Yet, how we address White privilege, how invested we are in maintaining it, and what we are willing to give up to dismantle it are the important questions we have to answer.

CONCLUSION: THOUGHTS FOR FUTURE PEDAGOGY

Although I (Caitlin) undertook this CRT analysis of my pedagogy in order to shape my future actions, I also want to challenge myself to resist the idea that I’ve now created a list of things to “fix” for next year. For all of us working with pre-/inservice teachers, the preceding can serve as a cautionary tale, if you will, of how to keep from evading race in
our classes. We should be mindful of the following list of the tenets from critical race theory as we continue the work of dismantling White privilege and making race more visible:

1. Become more comfortable with the continual process of not knowing.
2. Continue to problematize our thinking in those times when we think we know what students need to do, think, feel, or believe to be more equitable teachers.
3. Position ourselves as co-learners rather than as experts.
4. Search for more ways to invite traditionally silenced voices and ways of knowing into the classroom.
5. Be more explicit in our teaching about how all knowledge is partial and how all practices are bound up in systems that, in this country, are often structurally inequitable.

Our preference, as difficult as it is to enact, would be to engage with students in inquiry about privilege and our unwitting but persistent acts of exemption from knowing. Critical race theory helps us see that as teachers and teacher educators, no matter what our discipline or grade level, our teaching is never just about good intentions and working hard, but is also about frameworks of power and privilege that require concrete change.

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References


meanings, and methods in teaching. 

African American Read-In Scheduled for February, Black History Month

On Sunday and Monday, February 4 and 5, 2007, NCTE will join the NCTE Black Caucus in sponsoring the eighteenth national African American Read-In Chain. This year’s goal is to have at least one million Americans across the nation reading works by African American writers on Sunday, February 4. Monday, February 5, is the date designated for read-ins in schools. The event is an opportunity for schools, libraries, community organizations, businesses, and interested citizens to make literacy a significant part of Black History Month by hosting and coordinating read-ins. These activities may range from bringing together family and friends to share a book to staging public readings and media presentations featuring African American writers.
For further information, go to the NCTE website at http://www.ncte.org/prog/readin/107901.htm. Contacts: Dr. Sandra E. Gibbs, NCTE Coordinator, Senior Program Officer, 1111 W. Kenyon Road, Urbana, IL 61801-1096; or Dr. Jerrie C. Scott, National Coordinator, African American Read-In, College of Education, ICL-320-C Ball Hall, University of Memphis, Memphis, TN 38152.

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