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Popular White Teachers of Latina/o Kids

The Strengths of Personal Experiences and the Limitations of Whiteness

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This article presents a year-long qualitative study conducted in an "urban" high school, where 77% of the students were Latina/o and 100% of the teachers were White. A teacher in the school, the author studied four popular teachers for the (a) ways they could relate to students, (b) ways they could not relate, and (c) influences of teachers' Whiteness on relating. Findings show that teachers could relate to students through personal experiences but not through race or culture. Most teachers held exceedingly deficit views about the students' home lives, cultures, and families. Implications for the education of Latina/o schoolchildren are discussed.

Keywords: *White teachers; Latino students; diversity; racism*

Introduction

In the United States, today, K-12 students are more racially and ethnically diverse than ever before.[1] According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES),

> In 2004, 43 percent of public school students were considered to be part of a racial or ethnic minority group, up from 22 percent in 1972. In comparison, the percentage of public school students who were White decreased from 78 to 57 percent. The minority increase was largely because of the growth in

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> the proportion of students who were Hispanic, from 6 percent in 1972 to 19 percent in 2004. The proportion of students who were Black or members of other minority groups increased less over this period than the proportion who were Hispanic, and Hispanic enrollment surpassed that of Blacks for the first time in 2002. In the West, beginning in 2003, minority public school enrollment exceeded White enrollment. (2006, p. 5)

The numbers of students of color, including Latina/o students, increase each year, as government-sponsored studies and data collection efforts, such as the Census tell us. (NCES, 2005, 2006; U.S. Census, 2003). Indeed, these numbers change so frequently that those of us researching this phenomenon must update the numbers constantly. By the time this article is published, they certainly will have grown. Another quickly growing segment of the student body, estimated to be about 17% in 1999, speaks a native language other than English (NCES, 2003a). During the same year, about 8% of children were estimated to receive English language services in school (NCES, 2003b). These numbers are also certainly higher by now.

In contrast to students, about 90% of teachers in the United States are White (National Education Association [NEA], 2003) and about 97% are estimated to be monolingual in English (Darling-Hammond & Sclan, 1996). Throw into this mix the fact that 79% of teachers are female (NEA, 2003), and one can easily see the homogeneity of much of the teacher workforce. The predilection of American schools to be segregated by race and economic class creates the additional tendency for a growing number of schools to be characterized by White adults working almost exclusively with children of color (Donato, Menchaca, & Valencia, 1991; NCES, 2004, 2005; NEA, 2003; Tatum, 1999; Trueba, 1998). Indeed, in 2005, the Pew Hispanic Center reported that “Hispanic teens are more likely than Blacks and Whites to attend public high schools that have the most students, the highest concentrations of poor students and highest student–teacher ratios” (p. 1). It is possible for Latina/o and African American students in the United States to spend their entire school careers without meeting a single teacher of color.

Examination of the Literature

This condition of education where White teachers work with children who are different from themselves racially, culturally, linguistically, and, often, economically, has been examined through several different perspectives, most of which are addressed in the field of multicultural education. These include exploring cultural mismatch between teachers and students (Heath, 1983; Michaels, 1980; Philips, 1983), teaching in ways that are culturally relevant for students (Diller & Moule, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 1994), and examining the beliefs of teachers and preservice teachers regarding students who are different from themselves in these ways (Cohn & Kottkamp, 1993; Delpit, 1995; Fuller, 1994; Haberman & Post, 1992; Marx, 2000; Valli, 1995). The attitudes and practices of successful teachers who work with students who are different from themselves racially, culturally, economically, and linguistically have also been examined to some degree by Ladson-Billings (1994), Haberman (1995), and González, Moll, and Amanti (2005), though this is still a small body of literature.

In examining the differences between teachers and students, a growing number of educators, including some of those named above, have been centering race in their analyses. This body of work adopts the critical race theory (CRT) perspective that racism is "a system of advantage based on race" that advantages, or privileges, Whites at the same time that it disadvantages people of color (Tatum, 1999, p. 11; Wellman, 1977). CRT also considers racism to be pervasive and structurally endemic in the U.S. society (Delgado, 1995a; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Through this perspective, all people are seen as racialized; that is, all people are understood to be influenced by their race and the privileges or lack thereof that characterize their race. Those who adopt CRT argue that this system is always in place, whether or not we admit to it or agree to it (Scheurich, 1993). Some even argue that the racism that characterizes the United States is a "permanent" condition (Bell, 1992). Schools, which mirror the diversity, the strengths, and the weaknesses of our society, are likewise affected by racial inequality (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Thus, researchers and educators who have adopted CRT tenets explicitly examine racism in discussions of education inequality and some suggest practices that might mitigate its effects (e.g., González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 1999; Marx, 2006; Solórzano, 1997, 2001, 2002; Tatum, 1994, 1999).

Related to this body of work, and often making reference to CRT, is the education literature that focuses specifically on Whiteness and its link to racism. This literature centers on the ways that Whiteness inevitably influences a White educator's ability to construct beliefs about and work with children of color (e.g., Bell, 2002; Berlak & Moyenda, 2001; Brandon, 2003; Chubbuck, 2004; Kendall, 2006; Lawrence, 2005; Marx, 2003, 2004a,b, 2006; Marx & Pennington, 2003; McIntyre, 1997, 2003; Obidah & Teel, 2001; Sleeter, 1992a,b 1993, 1994). This perspective necessitates understanding Whiteness as a socially constructed, privileged racial identity that, most often in the case of White people, is unmarked and, therefore, invisible to those living in White skin (Frankenberg, 1993). Though often unspoken, the privileges of Whiteness are, perhaps, its most salient characteristic and what enables Whiteness commonly to be described by what it is not: of color and without racial privilege (Chubbuck, 2004; Fanon, 1967; Roediger, 1991). It is in this way that Whiteness is inexorably linked to racism. Some who philosophize on the subject ask if Whiteness would even exist without racism; the two are so inseparably entwined (Ignatiev, 1997; Ignatiev & Garvey, 1996; Roediger, 1991, 1999).

Study Purpose

In many of the studies on the topic of White teachers and students of color, the inability of teachers to relate to students is mentioned as a side note. There is some evidence that strong interpersonal relationships between teachers and students correlate with increased motivation, happiness, and success in school (Cohn & Kottkamp, 1993; Doddington, Flutter, & Rudduck, 1999; Noddings, 1992). Valenzuela (1999) explains that "relationships with teachers exert a tremendous impact on the kinds of schooling orientations that develop in school. . . . Productive relations with teachers and among students make schooling worthwhile and manageable" (p. 30). Recognizing the value of positive teacher–student relationships, many education scholars have included the importance of these relationships, although usually as a side note, in their analyses of and recommendations for successful teaching and schooling (e.g., Brown, 1994; Haberman, 1995; Haberman & Post, 1998; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Noddings, 1992; Obidah & Teel, 2001; Scheurich, 1998).

To my knowledge, the ability of White teachers to relate to or not relate to their students of color has not been explicitly examined in the education research beyond a small 1971 study that compared Black and White student reactions to videotapes of White teachers teaching short lessons on Black Power (Heath, 1971). This study concluded that "the ability of teachers to relate to students is likely to vary substantially as a function of the ethnic background of the student group" (p. 9). The study presented in this article seeks to examine this issue in greater depth in the context of contemporary schooling. In this study, four veteran White teachers who were popular among their predominantly Latina/o students were studied for the (a) ways they could relate to their students, (b) ways they could not relate to their students, and (c) effects their Whiteness had on their ability to relate according to their own assessments and the interpretive lenses of CRT and critical studies in Whiteness as applied by the researcher.

Study Genesis

The year this study took place, I worked as a reading teacher at Nevada Rosena High School (NRHS).[2] NRHS was a small public high school located in the town of Nevada Hills, which itself was located a few miles outside a major metropolitan area in California. NRHS was a "continuation" high school, which can be described in the following manner:

> The California Department of Education's Continuation Education program has been an option for students since 1919 for those in need of more flexible school schedules with an emphasis on vocational or career goals. This program is designed to meet the needs of students aged 16 through 18 who have not graduated from high school, are not exempt from compulsory school attendance, and are deemed at risk of not completing their schooling. More than 68,000 California high school students attended 522 continuation high schools in 2002–03. (California Department of Education, 2004, p. 1)

Continuation high schools typically serve kids who are far behind in their schooling credits because of underachievement and absences. At NRHS, most kids had had severe problems with absenteeism in the past because of pregnancy, being young parents, time spent incarcerated, high family mobility, and in the case of one young man, the death of a parent. It is beyond the scope of this article to offer extensive criticism of the continuation program, though it certainly merits critique. At our small school, enrollment went up substantially at the beginning of the spring testing season when the traditional schools in the district became concerned about meeting measurable student achievement scores. The number of continuation schools within high "minority," low income districts, such as Nevada Hills, is cause for concern as well. California's continuation schools, at least at the time of this study, were prescribed different, much lower standards and used as a means to siphon low performers out of mainstream schooling.

That being said, NRHS was situated in a dusty, high traffic, low income area and consisted of a collection of portable buildings on a concrete and grass lot on the edge of the town of Nevada Hills. This location had been considered temporary for more than a decade preceding this study. Because of this status, little money was put into the actual structure, so buildings leaked, floors creaked, and the "Nevada Rosena High School" sign was so faded that those driving by often missed the school altogether. However, beautification efforts were evident in the student artwork on building walls, the nicely trimmed grassy areas, and the overall tidiness of the campus. The

California sun and the outdoor nature of the school gave the campus the feeling of a tidy, if somewhat aged, municipal park.

Nevada Hills is a town of 200,000 inhabitants. It is known, like many places in the Western United States these days, for its methamphetamine production. Crime is common. Watching TV one day, I caught an episode of "Cops" that had been filmed in the area. Numerous gangs were represented on campus, but dedicated administrators and, perhaps, small school and class sizes kept gang demonstrations subdued. If the assistant principal had not pointed out symbols of gang affiliation to me, I would not have noticed them. Despite these characteristics of NRHS and Nevada Hills, many of the students' families had moved to the area to shelter children from the dangers of city life. Several of the houses bordering NRHS had chicken coops, and crowing roosters could be heard from the classrooms. Friendly dogs wandered the campus and stray cats lived in decorative flower planters. In these ways, the NRHS campus had a distinctively rural feeling. Reflecting the demographics of the district, Latina/os accounted for about 77% of the student body, African Americans made up 9%, and White students comprised 14%. About half of all students had been in English language development classes at some point in their school career. In contrast, all teachers and administrators, except for one African American assistant principal who worked at NRHS for just the year of this study, were White and none spoke more than a few words of Spanish. The only two school employees who spoke Spanish were the part-time bilingual resource aide and the custodian. Both were native speakers.

Although many urban, low income schools with student bodies largely of color have low faculty morale, dismal, prison-like atmospheres, and high percentages of novice teachers and teachers with emergency credentials (e.g., Anyon, 2001; Haberman, 1995; Kozol, 1991), NRHS was decidedly different. At the time of this study, there were no novice teachers at NRHS. Rather, the teachers averaged about 20 years of experience. All were certified in their subject areas, and most had master's degrees; some had two master's degrees, and many had attended advanced training sessions in their various subject areas. Several had been specifically recruited by the NRHS principal from other schools in the district because of their excellent reputations. As a teacher in the school myself, I found the school climate to be very friendly, cheerful, collegial, and professional. The warmth of the faculty and staff added to the warm, park-like feeling that characterized the school.

My own teaching position was divided into two components: teaching reading to students and conducting teacher development training in reading instruction. As part of my responsibilities, I spent many hours observing my colleagues and getting to know them. During the observations, I was frequently struck by the kindness of teachers and the care they showed their students. Moreover, as a teacher myself, I heard frequent comments from students that revealed their fondness for some teachers in particular. It seemed to me that many students were truly connecting with some of the teachers and that it did improve their educational experience, particularly in regards to their motivation to come to class. Based on this background, I thought the ability of some of NRHS teachers to relate to their students, despite their differences in race, ethnicity, and, often, language skill would be an interesting, potentially instructive, phenomenon to study.

Study Methodology

The first aspect of data collection entailed sending out a short survey to all students asking them to name a teacher they felt they could relate to and to explain why. Next, I asked the principal and a popular secretary who worked directly with the students every day which teachers they thought could relate well to students. The names of three teachers, Nikki Starr, Mickey Currey, and Jane Alexander, were given by the students, the principal, and the secretary. Based on my own knowledge of these teachers, I was not surprised to hear their names. A fourth teacher, Rose Green, received the most mention by students, more than double the “votes” given to any other teacher. Based on this information, I chose to study the four teachers named above.

After telling teachers the purpose of the study, I interviewed them individually twice over a several month period. As I did this, I asked them just three broad questions: (a) How they felt they could relate to students, however they wanted to define this quality; (b) How they felt they could not relate to students; and (c) Whether or not they were cognizant of their own Whiteness, and how it influenced their ability to relate to students considering that, oftentimes, they were the only White person in the classroom. Interviews were loosely structured, and all questions were open-ended, as is typical in qualitative research (Glesne, 2006; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Interviews were tape recorded and then transcribed. Each teacher was given a draft of her own short life history to member check for accuracy (Glesne, 2006; Lather, 1991; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Each offered small corrections or elaborations. I also took field notes as I formally observed all teachers, except for Jane Alexander, teaching one class period (Glesne, 2006; Wolcott, 1994, 1995). Jane and I could not match our schedules to arrange for a formal visit. However, as part of my teaching position, I had observed Jane and the other three teachers several times previously.

Despite all the data gathered, it was the stories gained from interviews that were most informative; thus, they are the central focus of this study. These stories, contextualized within the personal and professional lives of the four teachers, were fascinating and revealing. As mini life history narratives, they enabled me to better understand where the teachers were coming from and how their personal, cultural, and racial backgrounds helped shape their thoughts about their students. By sharing aspects of their lives, these teachers shared themselves as individuals affected by time, place, and social forces. Ball and Goodson (1985) recommend life history as a form of narrative inquiry for understanding a teacher's career "in the context of the whole life" (p. 24). Teachers not only teach lessons but they also teach young people. As a result, their work is value-laden, and they are often considered by their students as well as society to be role models in myriad ways (Marx, 2006). Life history narratives enable researchers and readers to get a sense of the many facets of themselves teachers bring with them into the classroom.

As I represented the stories of these teachers in this article, I sought to share "the juice of the lived experience" (Scheurich, 1997, p. 63) by using many long quotes from teachers and by retelling their stories in narrative form. I do this not only to entertain the reader but to demonstrate an important component of CRT methodology: presenting the stories of others in narrative that is accessible to readers from a wide variety of backgrounds (Delgado, 1995a). This approach enables stories to make impressions on those outside narrow academic fields, where they may have more of a catalytic effect (Delgado, 1995a; Lather, 1986). Although CRT narratives may be best known for telling the stories of the racially and ethnically marginalized, stories that are typically unknown to the dominant culture, in this article, narratives are used to highlight the White teachers in this study as racialized actors in the field of education. As Solórzano (1997) suggests, "The racial/ethnic experiences of Whites and other non-minorities can be an important part of the discussion and analysis of the advantages and privileges of being White in the U.S." (p. 10). Indeed, the stories shared by the teachers in this study are very revealing concerning the interplay of race and racism in the ways they thought about their students of color.

This accessible, engaging narrative style is also advocated by critical qualitative researchers such as Foley (1998, 2002) and Tierney (2002) who emphasize the value of writing by engaging research that is of interest to those participating in, as well as those conducting, academic research. These and many other qualitative researchers also advocate reflectiveness in writing, so that the researcher is incorporated into the text, rather than purposely (and artificially) written as absent. This technique adds to the trustworthiness of qualitative research, highlighting its interpretive nature and illuminating the postmodern perspective that the researcher is not all-knowing, but limited in her perspective (e.g., Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Glesne, 2006). In this article, I purposely use a nonacademic, self-reflective voice with all these purposes in mind. Also, because I was a colleague of the teachers I present in this article, I felt it was important to weave in some of my own impressions of NRHS to offer some context for the comments teachers made. I also do this purposely to mitigate the inevitable ways these women are objectified and somewhat essentialized simply by being represented in this article as participants in a study (Abu-Lughold, 1991; Scheurich, 1997). They are complex individuals and I hope that comes through in this article.

In organizing the narrative of this study, I begin with personal description and life history information of each woman, including comments the students made about them, and then follow with their own stories that illuminate (a) how they could relate to Latina/o students, (b) how they could not relate, and (c) how they felt that their Whiteness influenced their ability do so. I then follow this with an analysis section where I interpret the ways (a) teachers could relate to students based on their own personal experiences and then (b) examine the ways they could not, using CRT and critical studies in Whiteness as a theoretical framework. Although I offer these analyses after the stories, readers are invited to make their own interpretations and generalizations based on their own life experiences and their abilities to “relate to” the stories shared.

Rose Green

Rose Green was a 52-year-old native New Yorker who had taught for 21 years, 14 of which had been at NRHS. She had short, windswept black hair and, behind glasses, intense brown eyes. She was tanned by much time spent outdoors and favored casual clothes like jeans and T-shirts. She was the only teacher in this study who actually lived in Nevada Hills, in a “master planned extravaganza” that bordered the next town. She was the only Jewish faculty member. Her areas of expertise were history and writing, and at NRHS, she taught English. She had a master’s degree in rhetoric. Students described Ms. Green as someone who “looks at things differently than most adults,” is “easy-going, calm, well respected,” and “very understanding.” Several students described her as being able to “understand teenagers” and “put herself in my shoes.” Other words used to describe her were, “caring,” “nice,” “cool,” “friendly,” “a good listener,” and “trustworthy.” One student wrote, “She doesn’t see it only from her point of view. She keeps it real.” Another student explained on the front and back of her survey that

> Ms. Green is a very understanding teacher and you can talk to her and she will understand and help you out with your problems. She is very down-to-earth, and I think if there is a teacher of the year award at NRHS, I think Ms. Green should get it.

Ms. Green had such a warm relationship with students that I occasionally observed kids who had been suspended from school hanging out in the back of her classroom, passively taking in the lesson and chatting with her in between classes. The administration knew about this situation, and they and Ms. Green quietly condoned this practice as they felt it kept the kids out of trouble. She chatted, joked, and admonished students throughout the classes I observed.

Relating

When asked to describe what enabled her to relate to students, Ms. Green emphasized two things: (a) her experience feeling like an outsider and (b) her experience as a former drug addict. “Oh God,” she said, “I was always one of those people—I was never comfortable in my body. I never felt like I fit in. I always felt different.” She explained that “a lot of my adolescence was really painful.” Growing up in Queens, she was making plans to go away to college when her father “dropped dead” of a heart attack. Revisiting difficult memories, she shared that

> I never felt like my parents loved me the same way they loved my brother. I didn’t even think my mother liked me. When my father died, I overhead my mother telling one of my aunts that I really wasn’t important to my father. You know, the boy. . . Jewish family. There is that dynamic in our family, that boys have more worth.

After this event, her brother went into the Peace Corps, and because “somebody needed to stay home with my mother,” Ms. Green stayed in Queens, went to a local college, and got married at the end of her junior year when she was just 20 years old. She quipped that, in the late 1960s, “nice Jewish girls did that to get out of the house.” Not originally planning to become a teacher, she worked in publishing after graduation.

Ms. Green divorced after just 3 years of marriage. On a trip to Tucson, Arizona, she met a drug dealer named Don and, she said, “The rest is history.

I went back to New York, quit my job, gave up my apartment and left for Tucson," all within 3 weeks. At this time in her life, she explained that "I didn't just use drugs. I lived them. It was my entire existence." Ms. Green married Don, and they had three children in 4 years. Despite her growing family, "Drugs were the most important thing in my life. . . . My kids were not as important as, you know, as my habit." Regretfully, she added, "I look back and some of the things I did were just so horrible." At the time of this study, Ms. Green had been clean for 18 years and was proud of her recovery. In reflecting on the reasons for her addiction, she said, "I just never felt like I belonged. . . . When I was using I felt normal because I didn't have to feel anything." She added, "I never felt like I fit in. I never felt like I belonged. . . I think these kids, they are the same way. They don't feel like they belong." This statement brought her back to the original interview question. "And you ask why I am able to get along with the kids and that is part of the reason. Because I know. I have been there. I know."

Not Relating

When I asked how she could not relate to the students, Ms. Green, like other teachers in this study, stated that she could not relate to the violence so many of the students talked about. Usually, the violence was gang-related. As she said,

> They all have lost people. I mean they are 16 years old, 17 years old. I can't tell you how many essays I have gotten over the years, maybe 10, where they are talking about somebody—their best friend—dying in their arms; their cousin being killed; their brother being dead. I can't. . . I find it hard to relate to.

Though I had not heard stories about murder, I knew that several of my own students had been in juvenile hall for criminal endeavors such as vandalizing, tagging, fighting, and stealing cars. One student of mine returned to class after being absent for an entire month. I was happy to see him and asked where he had been. With a shy smile on his face, he sheepishly confessed to being "locked up 30 days" for "GTA." This caused an agreeable ruckus among students, as seven out of eight of the boys in the class then shared that they, too, had been arrested for the same thing. GTA, they informed me, was grand theft auto. The eighth boy had been in jail for a different offense. The students spent much of that class period telling war stories, and I spent all of it being amazed. Every boy in my second-period class had spent time in jail. Like Ms. Green, I found it very difficult to relate to these types of experiences.

Although Ms. Green did not bring up race or ethnicity when discussing how she could relate to students, color was a clear topic when discussing what she could *not* relate to. “Black kids,” she said, “I think they have this attitude like, ‘You’re picking on me because I am Black.’ They bring that with them.” And later, although she said color “has never really been an issue,” in tacitly referring to Latina/o students, she admitted that

> I don’t understand the parents who move in May and don’t enroll their kids in school or move in May so the kid loses an entire semester of school. I don’t understand that. “Yeah we are going down into Mexico in February for a month.” Just taking a kid out of school. I don’t get that.

Regarding Latina/os, she also admitted that

> I can’t relate to some of the Mexican heritage stuff, like the attitude of “Well, you are a girl so you don’t need to go to school.” You know, that kind of thing. The double standard. Or the fact that these moms just idolize these boys who are just raging jerks.

Given that Ms. Green had talked at length about how her own family did not value girls as much as boys, I was surprised that she could not relate to this perception she held about students with Mexican heritage. Thinking more about issues of gender, she added, “I don’t understand the acceptance of these girls having babies, and you know, the moms just taking over as parents. . . . I don’t get the sleeping around.” Thinking about the ways she could not relate to Latina/o students prompted Ms. Green to shake her head and say, “There is a lot that I don’t understand.”

Something else she could not relate to was the inability of many NRHS kids to move beyond their troubles. She said that “I was a cocaine fiend, but I still was teaching and, you know, dealing with my life. . . . I was still functioning. I never really stopped.” Analyzing this situation, she pondered,

> I kind of have that fortitude or tenacity or whatever you want to call it. So I have not really given up. And I think a lot of the kids, what I don’t relate to is the fact that they have given up. . . . There is something missing and I guess what I am saying is that I always. . . I didn’t have it missing, whatever it is. . . . But these kids, they are missing something. You know, there is something wrong.

Although she could relate to struggles in life and the unfairness of life, she could not relate to being overwhelmed by life. As she said, “I beat my addiction. I have raised 3 kids, I have a job. I kept my sanity, I haven't killed myself. I am a role model in a lot of ways." Thinking of herself compared to her students, she paused and said, "So I probably *don't* relate to them more than I *do* relate to them. But, I still like them and I am still interested in what they do." She also mentioned many times in our interviews that she valued the kids "as people."

Whiteness

Even though Ms. Green was Jewish, she said that she did, indeed, consider herself to be White, as is the case for most American Jews (see Brodkin, 2000). Like the other teachers in this study and like most White Americans, however, she was not used to talking about her race (Frankenberg, 1993; Marx, 2006; Omi & Winant, 1994). I asked her if working in a school like NRHS had revealed her Whiteness to her. After describing this question as "a toughie," Ms. Green talked about some of the stories her students had shared with her.

> I think a lot of time when they tell me stories about living in their cars or one girl told me this story about her father being shot at and he got shot through the hand and they were holding hands when she was little, you know, those kind of stories. Or their parents are major gang-bangers. I mean, that is when you know you are White middle class.

Thinking more about her Whiteness, she offered, "I am a 52-year-old, White, middle class, Jewish woman and I shouldn't—by all the things that are right in the world—I really shouldn't be able to relate to these kids, but I do."

Nikki Starr

Nikki Starr was 40 years old. She was finishing up her second year at NRHS and her 12th year teaching high school English. She had a master's degree in English. The principal of NRHS had recruited Ms. Starr from another high school in the district. The year of this study, she shared the NRHS Teacher of the Year award with Ms. Alexander. She had fair skin, green eyes, and curly blond hair. She favored Western wear, such as long prairie skirts and cowboy boots. Although she grew up in Nevada Hills and attended local schools, she now lived about 45 minutes away on a small ranch. She left Nevada Hills in the late 1980s, when "We just got this influx of gang stuff from the city. . . . We had high crime going on all of a sudden.

We had graffiti every place you looked. I just couldn't deal with that." Ms. Starr explained that she liked living away from Nevada Hills because "I like not being a teacher for 24 hours a day. I like being out of town." On the student surveys, she was described as someone who "knows when I'm having a good or bad day" and as someone who "teaches good and strong even on bad days." Several students described her as "nice" and as having "a good sense of humor." Two students emphasized that she "is very nice to all her students" and that she is "understanding" and helpful. Observing her in the classroom, she chatted and joked with students, carefully winding her way between the desks to ensure close contact with everyone. She even led teacher development workshops on this practice.

Relating

When asked to describe how she could relate to her students, Ms. Starr laughed and said, "I was them. I was these kids to some degree. A lot of them. I was the kid who ditched class or partied too much and lost his credits." She explained that "My mom and dad divorced when I was 6. My father was an alcoholic, unfortunately. He was an administrator in the district and just had a problem he couldn't get a hold of. He died when I was 16." At that point, she had a cantankerous relationship with her mother. Describing herself as a teenager, she said that, "[My mother] wanted me to graduate and go to a four-year university and live in a dorm and be a virgin when I got married. . . . So, of course, I made sure to do everything just the opposite." Ms. Starr took the high school equivalency exam during her junior year. When she passed it, she quit school and enrolled in beauty school. Later, she realized that "doing hair" wouldn't satisfy her intellectual needs, so she enrolled in junior college. She eventually transferred to a four-year teacher education program, taught for "three or four" years, and then earned a master's degree.

Ms. Starr vividly remembered her own adolescent years. "I remember feeling at 16 very ready for some new stage of life," she explained. "And so, I can understand the kids who don't want to be here and feel like, 'I would rather just be working.' Or 'I would rather just be doing something else.'" She also felt strongly that once students were 18, "If they're gainfully employed, we should cut them loose." Remembering back to her own experiences growing up, hanging out with the "wild" crowd, "partying" instead of studying, being "a truant," but, nevertheless, still being "a good kid at heart," Ms. Starr stated, "I guess I can't help it but kind of bond with these kids. . . . I relate to them as human beings." Thinking about the topic some more, she added, “There’s just something about them. You know that they are together and probably just made a mistake or two. But, they will get it together and go on.”

Not Relating

When I asked her what she could not relate to regarding her students, Ms. Starr told several stories of “tough cookies” with whom she was eventually able to “break through” and “bond.” She also talked about the low skill level of most NRHS students and how hard that was for her to relate to. Although she had been “wild” and a “truant,” she had always had strong academic skills. Most saliently, however, Ms. Starr talked about race and culture. She emphasized that “My Black students. . . I know they have different backgrounds [than mine] sometimes, but I am not sure it is as different [as the Latina/o students].” Although she said that “It has always been easy for me to relate to most of my Black kids,” she revealed many ways that she could not relate to Latina/os. Growing up in Nevada Hills, she had witnessed the demographic changes that occurred when urban and farm working Latina/os moved into the town, and Whites moved out. It was clear she resented these changes and the displacement that came with them.

Talking about what had prompted her to move 45 miles away, she said that although being a “minority” “never bothered me in the classroom, it bothered me in the community.” She then described things that “bothered me tremendously in the community,” namely her view that

> The Hispanic population doesn’t have—in what I have seen—they don’t have the boundaries that we have. If they want to go in your yard, they will go in your yard. Their kids might be playing in our yard, or if they want to listen to their music full blast, well should it matter to you that it is 11:00 at night and I have to work at 5:00? You know. That bothered me a lot.

This topic reminded her of her “beefs” with the welfare program. She said that 10 years ago most newly arrived Latina/o families survived on welfare, and she talked at length about her qualms with this system, highlighting its unfairness. As she said,

> I don’t want to go to work everyday so that somebody else can sit home and watch soap operas. That pisses me off. You know a lot of my friends who would have liked to have had more children couldn’t afford to have more children, so stopped at two. While somebody at home over here is having six and eight. And that is bullshit.

She also talked about her troubles with Latina/o parenting. She mentioned that some Latina mothers were “happy” when their “16-year-old girl gets pregnant,” stressing, “I can’t even fathom that.”

Summing up her thoughts about Latina/os, Ms. Starr said,

> There seems to be two different kinds of Hispanic people. . . You have your gang-banger, city type that I never like. And, frankly, I don’t think we have too many of those here—or at least I think they have toned down. And the other part of them are just really hard-working people that don’t earn high wages. But they work very hard. And a lot of our boys do work with their dads and I do like that about them.

Ms. Starr went on to say that “I had a lot of resentments. And I found that, in moving out of town, it helped actually.” As she talked about these feelings, she emphasized, “But it is not personal against my kids [students].” When I asked if these thoughts ever carried over into her classroom, she answered, “It never does. Thank God. And, if it did, I would leave the profession because that would be grossly unfair to my kids and to me.” Explaining further, she added,

> The things that annoyed me in the community were not things that I had to deal with in my classroom. . . . In the classroom, it is just about skill level and what can you do to try and help this kid and what can you do to try to help that one, and yeah, language is an issue, but it is just another skill level to try to help them with. And so, that was never bothersome to me.

Whiteness

Ms. Starr was very comfortable talking about race and had talked about “Black” and “Hispanic” students explicitly during our conversations. Thus, when I asked her “how being here has revealed your Whiteness,” I wasn’t surprised when she answered, “That is easy.” She said that her students named Whiteness all the time. “They forget that I am White,” she said, which allowed her to hear them talk about “White people.” She found it funny to a degree, but she could not understand why her students of color found it necessary to point out Whiteness. As she said,

> They identify people as “the White boy.” “This White boy came up to me and said this or that.” And I am thinking, it is a bigger deal to you than it would be to us . . . We wouldn’t say, “This Mexican kid walked up to me.”

When I pointed out that this may not really be true, that White teachers often do talk about their Black or Mexican students, Ms. Starr agreed, but then added,

> I guess I am so used to these Mexican kids, that is all that we have here. Maybe, if we were in a school of all White people and a Mexican kid came up, we would say, "Yeah, it was this Mexican kid." So, I think it is possibly because we are the minority in this town, by far, by far.

She added that "the kids have actually joked with me before, 'Hey Mrs. Starr, you are the only White person in here.' [I responded:] 'Yeah, I am a minority. You better treat me right.' And they laugh. You know, it is just interesting." Throughout our conversations, Ms. Starr easily acknowledged and discussed race. However, she reminded me that she frequently "forgot" about race as well. As she said, "It is a very strange thing. People will ask me about that. 'Isn't it mostly Hispanic over there?' 'Well, yeah, I guess it is.' " She added later that "I feel like I am almost color-blind in my classroom. Because when we are in my classroom, they are just kids and it doesn't really matter, you know what I mean?"

Jane Alexander

Jane Alexander was 36 years old and had been teaching for 13 years. This was the end of her fourth year at NRHS. She had an undergraduate degree in secondary education and a master's degree in curriculum and instruction with emphasis in leadership. A native of Tucson, Arizona, she had grown up in an all-White area, which she described as "upper middle class." She was typically well dressed in a smart, casual professional manner. She had shoulder length dark hair and blue eyes. She also had something of a sarcastic demeanor and could strike fear in the hearts of students and faculty alike when she was angry. However, she had a very strong reputation on campus, and many students described her as a "good teacher" who was easy to relate to. One student commented that "Mrs. Alexander relates to me because it doesn't seem to matter what I ask her or tell her, she understands where I'm coming from. She is an excellent teacher." Another student wrote, "This teacher relates to me because she shows me that I can trust her. She's a great teacher and I appreciate her a lot. Mrs. Alexander is a great person with a huge heart." Other students mentioned how fun she was as a teacher and how, "out of all my teachers, Mrs. Alexander is the one that I feel I can talk to when I need someone's point of view." Although she typically taught from a podium, Ms. Alexander regularly cracked jokes with students, maintained tight discipline, and was especially engaged in their personal essays. Writing, she had found, was a way to get students to open up to her as a teacher.

Although she was a popular teacher, Ms. Alexander had not originally planned to teach. Rather she had aspired to be a writer and had taken the job in Nevada Hills to be in California and close to the beach. She earned a teaching degree only as a "back up" and had planned to teach for 5 years until her writing career took off. Laughing as she said this, she remarked, "It is eight years late. It is past my deadline." As she laughed, Ms. Alexander looked a little uncomfortable and then admitted that "I am not really fond of little kids. Like, I will never have children of my own." Teenagers, however, were a different matter. Working with NRHS students was a pleasant surprise for Ms. Alexander. From the first day, she discovered that "I just like these kids. In fact, I like the NRHS kids better than I have ever liked any group of students I have ever taught. They make me laugh every single day." These were sentiments shared by many other teachers in the school, including myself.

Relating

When I asked Ms. Alexander how she could relate to her students, she took a deep breath and then talked about the many ways she felt that she could *not* relate to them. Finally, she suggested that

> The only thing that I can figure is that I was very shy when I was in high school. I never wanted to be called on in class because I didn't want to be the kid that didn't have the right answer or tried to give the answer and then be totally embarrassed. . . . I didn't want to draw any attention to myself. So it probably comes from some of that.

Professionally, it was very important to her that "I want them to always know that 'I know who you are,' from the most severely shy to the most outgoing. I don't want them to feel that [I don't know them]."

Having each of her students feel known by her as a teacher was so important to Ms. Alexander that she had analyzed her teaching, even videotaping herself, to make sure she was giving attention to all her students. As she did this, she asked herself,

> Are there certain kids that I purposely avoid or I make very little contact with and then, what would be the reason for that? Why would I avoid certain kids?

> So I found that I did, that kids who came in and seemed very initially unapproachable, not unapproachable. . . confrontational. You know, like came in with the attitude. And so then I thought, "Well, you know what? I am going to be the teacher that gets [to know you] and gets you to talk to me."

She then shared stories of students who were very difficult for her, for example, Latino gang members who initially tried to intimidate her. She made it one of her teaching missions to purposely get to know these kids. "And now," in the case of one formerly difficult student, "He and I joke around and I give him a hard time and I am like, 'Yeah, you are so tough.'" "So," she finished, "it probably comes from that, from me not getting a lot of attention in that respect. Not wanting a lot of attention when I was in school."

Not Relating

Not relating to her students was a much easier topic for Ms. Alexander to discuss. When I asked her how similar or different her own background was to her students she answered, "Oh dramatically different. Completely different." She said that when she met the NRHS students, she realized "how dramatically different I was and how naïve I was about the lives these kids had." In describing these contrasts, she said that "my parents are still married; it will be 40 years in June. My mother did not work. So there was always somebody home when we came home." She described her home as "very stable, very loving," and could remember "maybe twice in my life, actually [seeing] my parents have a fight, an argument. Just, you know, a very good, very good home life."

She also remembered that education was strongly emphasized in her home and that "it was always just assumed that you were going to go on to college." Remembering her upbringing, she gushed,

> I have wonderful parents and I had an incredible childhood that I would love anybody to experience. And so, what I see in my students is how many broken homes there are and the lack of support and importance that is placed on education for these kids.

With what seemed to be a mixed sense of frustration and respect, she added that "I think the kids find [education] more important and realize how much more important it is than their parents do." She then emphasized that this was something she could not relate to. "Not at all. I mean. . . I think I have tried to adjust and tried to understand, but it is not something that I have personally ever experienced."

To illustrate cultural differences, Ms. Alexander described her early, difficult relationships with some Latino students. These were male students who would not ask her for help, no matter how much they needed it. She talked to a Latina teacher about the situation and received the advice that "it is because you're a White female in a role of leadership and you're not supposed to [have] a role of authority. . . . They do not want to admit their weakness to you by coming up and asking for help." This information, coupled with her experiences of Latina/o students planning to work rather than continue their education, led Ms. Alexander to believe that Latina/os did not value education. In light of her own upbringing, she considered this a cultural difference to which she could not relate.

Later, we talked about the large proportion of English language learners (ELLs) in our school. Speaking candidly, she admitted that

> They [ELLs] are probably the ones I relate to the least because I feel a deficiency in not being able to speak Spanish. And not understanding, again, not being able to relate to what that would be like, to be here and trying to go through school and not having a clear understanding of the language. It would be. . . I can't even imagine. It is very, very hard. So that is probably where my biggest weakness is as far as—I wouldn't say relating to them on a personal level—but being able to really help them as much as I should, on the classroom level.

Although all new teachers in California were required to earn either a cross-cultural language academic development (CLAD) or bilingual cross-cultural language academic development (BCLAD) credential to teach in California schools, at the time of this study teachers with more than 9 years of public school experience did not need to pursue this credential. Thus, no teacher in this study, nor any teacher at NRHS, had received any formal multicultural or language development training. Though Ms. Alexander expressed interest in learning more about multicultural issues, many NRHS teachers were strongly against taking more classes in that area, pointing to their many years of experience working with students of color and their various advanced degrees in other areas.

Whiteness

When I asked Ms. Alexander specifically how, as a White person, she was able to relate to students who were mostly of an ethnicity or race different than her own, she answered "Wow," reminding me of the politically and emotionally charged nature of talking about race. I understood

Ms. Alexander's trepidation, but encouraged her to think about race explicitly. To talk about Whiteness, she talked about differences. "I'm sure that there are cultural differences that I can't relate to at all. . . I will admit it." She said, "I was a White naïve girl from Tucson, Arizona and we didn't have a large ethnic population. . . . So, I can't relate really, probably at all." Thinking about her success as a teacher, she offered the following analysis:

> I think what I have been able to accomplish has just been through my experience and kind of, just, you know, hit and miss here and there. But, as far as being able to relate to them and, you know, things that I initially couldn't, I don't know that I can now. I mean, there are cultural differences that I don't understand.

She did emphasize, however, that presently in her career she did not deal with much cultural or racial clash in the classroom. I asked her if she felt that she had a "color-blind classroom." She answered, "I think so." But, wondered, "Is that a good thing?" I later asked her if Whiteness had affected her in any other way; she answered,

> Just my inability to relate culturally—not that I think it is necessary—I don't think it has a huge effect as far as my ability to teach, because I really think that—I don't look at them as their race culture. I look at them as a teenage culture and I think that is truly their own culture. So. . . that is what I try to relate to, them as young people. Not so much as them as an African American young person, or a Hispanic.

Mickey Currey

The year this study took place, Mickey Currey was 55 years old and had been teaching for 32 years, the last four of which had been at NRHS. As a teacher of business education, she found it important to dress professionally. Most days, she wore suits and heels. Careful makeup accentuated her large blue eyes, and her brunette hair was typically swept back in an elegant arrangement. Her teaching degree was in consumer science, and she had a master's degree in curriculum and instruction. Her experience ranged from teaching consumer economics to English to world history, but business was, by far, her favorite subject.

Ms. Currey had won at least seven Teacher of the Year awards at school, district, and county levels during her career. She had also been a runner up at the state level. For the county award, she had competed with 25,000 other teachers. Her teaching reputation in the local and wider communities was exceptionally strong, and she was greatly admired by her colleagues. She was also adored by many of her students. Several of my own students had talked with admiration and affection about Ms. Currey. When I centered a business task in my lesson plan one day, a Latino student admonished me, saying, “Why do you even bring this up? Ms. Currey does it so much better than you.” I suspect he was right based on my knowledge of Ms. Currey. Observing her in the classroom would convince anyone of her sincerity as she made sure to touch every student in her room, to bend down to meet them at eye-level during class time, and to frequently offer warm hugs and praise. She passionately and frequently stated how much she loved her students. She also told them frequently that she would teach for free if she had to because she loved her job and her students so much.

During our conversations, Ms. Currey pulled out letter after letter from her former students, one of which stated,

> You are the best teacher I have ever had. You are loving, respectful and grateful. And I thank you so much for helping me with everything. Every day I walk in your class I have a smile on my face because being around you makes me happy.

These sentiments were reflected in the surveys where many students had written about how much Ms. Currey cared, offering comments such as, “She loves all of her students. She cares about them and their future;” “I like the way she seems to care about all her students. She’s willing to do anything for her students;” and “She’s the best teacher that I or anyone else in the school has ever had or will ever have.”

Ms. Currey grew up as an “army brat” and moved around California countless times as a child. She went to six different first grade classrooms. Her parents put her in public schools, private schools, and then back in public schools many times. Their marriage was unstable, and they divorced and then remarried during her elementary school years, moving yet again during the processes. Although she emphasized, “Even though they didn’t get along, they were really pretty darn good parents,” the instability of her early years took a toll. She struggled in the first years of elementary school and doubted her academic skills through much of high school. She said that “when I got to high school, I had some teachers make comments that I was really sharp and. . . it was like, ‘Are you taking to me?’ I could hardly believe it.”

Although she gained confidence in her academic skills during high school, her parents “were fighting all the time and there was just a tremendous amount of upheaval. It was just so rocky. . . I was just beside myself.”

In an effort to change her life, she got married right after high school. She explained,

> I was 18. And I have no clue why I got married, other than I thought it would be nice for me to start my own home and what have you. And it was a mess. It was just absolutely a mess. I was in way over my head and, you know, in an abusive situation, really, to be honest. And so, I went from a situation that I thought I was going to have this wonderful life on my own, and then of course it was worse.

It took Ms. Currey several years to leave her abusive husband. A few years after her divorce, she married her present husband, and they created a household with his three teenage children.

In contrast to these experiences, Ms. Currey felt very confident and in control as a teacher. She said, “I felt teaching was really a good career choice for my personality style.” She also said several times that she was “fed” by her work. Ms. Currey had spent her entire career in the Nevada Hills School District. The small classes and the chance to teach business all day convinced her to move to NRHS when she was called by the principal and offered the position. Excitedly clasping her hands as she remembered this opportunity, she shared, “I thought, ‘Oh this is perfect. These are the kids who need me the most.’”

Relating

Ms. Currey said, “Yes, I really do,” when I asked her if she could relate to her students. Knowing that many of our students moved frequently, that many did not live with both or either of their parents, that many had tumultuous home lives, and that many were making poor choices in their efforts to create stability in their lives through immature, sometimes abusive relationships, I recognized through hearing Ms. Currey’s stories that she might be able to identify with her students in numerous ways. She explained that

> I think that I came from a pretty dysfunctional family to say the least, but I think that I came from a dysfunctional family in a different sense than their families. I see my family differently than I see theirs, but I still understand transition and dealing with the unexpected. Because I hear these kids say, “Oh my mother and father had this huge fight and my father left last night.” It is like, “Okay, I remember.”

In assessing the relationship between her own difficulties and successes, Ms. Currey said, “I think [my experiences] really did leave an impact on me, but not necessarily a bad impact. You know, for every bad thing you experience you learn something from it." Relating this to her students, she said, "I just want them to know that they can make it. They can make it."

As we continued talking, Ms. Currey emphasized the importance of genuinely caring about the students. As she did this, she became uncharacteristically quiet, and her eyes welled with tears. Explaining her thoughts, she said,

> I remember not feeling good about school. I don't want them to hate school. I want them to enjoy it and I want them to know that they are somebody. I think back and I am almost glad that my mom and dad had the situation that they had, because it makes you stronger in the long run.

Comparing herself to her students, she added, "All of these kids who have learned things the hard way, I hope that they will take that lesson and use it in a positive way later on." She dabbed her eyes and said through her tears, "I enjoy working with these kids. I really, really care about these kids. I love them. I really think that it is rewarding. It's not just a paycheck."

Not Relating

When I asked her if there were some ways that she could not relate to her students, Ms. Currey answered, "I do not understand physical violence" and explained that she had "lost over 20 students who were murdered or maimed" during her career. However, she stressed that "I don't think that there are many kids that I can't reach, because I think I really try to reach them. And if I can't reach them, I try to find somebody else that can." She then shared the story of a young African American man who seemed sad, stoical, and tired. After talking with him, she found out that gang members had killed his dog and then the puppy meant to replace it, all to intimidate his brother. As a result, "He was afraid to go outside" and he did not get much sleep. "He didn't really relate that well to me," she said, "because he was just into his own world." So, she got in touch with an air force recruiter who was a "very polished," "really wonderful Black man and I told him about Armand." She told the recruiter, "In all likelihood, he is not going to go into the Air Force, but it would just mean a lot to me if you could kind of keep in touch," which he did. She said that the attention seemed to make a difference, "and the kid came along. . . I guess he improved."

Another student she mentioned was an African American named Cole. "He was like a Black Panther," she said.

> He was furious. And he hated almost all White people, except for me. He was on fire. He would come in and he would rant and rave, and rant and rave about all this political injustice and what have you. He was like a young Jesse Jackson. I thought to myself, "My goodness, here is a man that has some great qualities, but he has such hatred in his soul." And so I hooked him up with a newspaper reporter who was also a really polished Black man.

Thinking about why she had done this, Ms. Currey said, "It was like I couldn't understand the rage that he had because, you know, to him, I had never experienced anything like that. And that is exactly right." On the rare occasions when she could not relate to a particular student, efforts such as these were the best she felt she could do.

Whiteness

Ms. Currey brought up the topic of Whiteness herself. After telling the story related above, she shared that while she was in college in Idaho, she worked on an Indian reservation where her Whiteness was illuminated to her for the first time. As she said,

> Of course, being really, really White, I would go onto the Indian reservation and I would be trying to offer them this wonderful White opportunity and they would look at me like, "You are coming in here to take our sons and daughters away," which was true because I was recruiting for the Upward Bound, Job Corps. I can remember this one little grandma; she chased me off with a stick, screaming, "White! White! Get out of here!"

Building on this story, I asked Ms. Currey if she felt cultural or racial differences with her students. "Yes," she answered. "Absolutely." She then shared several stories of attending graduation parties, birthday parties, weddings, funerals, baptisms, and other "things like that," where she was the only White person. She learned the hard way about cultural differences when she arrived at a baptism party for the child of a Latina student at 2 o'clock, the time written on the invitation. She discovered that the party did not "get going" until 5:30. Learning from that experience, she showed up several hours late for the next party and, as she said, "It was perfect, right in the middle." She used this information in class to press her students to arrive on time for interviews in the dominant White culture. As she said, "When we're talking about the interview, if it says 10 o'clock, it means 9:45. You have to be there 15 minutes early and we are not kidding."

Ms. Currey also talked about the explicit ways her students described Whiteness. For example, she said that one of her students referred to Ms. Starr as “the White teacher.” She responded by saying, “You know honey, I am White too.” Ms. Currey laughed at this, saying, “I don’t know if it is because she has blond hair, but it is like she could be talking about any of us ladies on campus because there are no Black teachers here.” I pressed her on the issue of race and asked her specifically if she could relate well to kids of color despite her own Whiteness. Passionately, she answered,

> It doesn’t make a difference to me. Absolutely not. . . I don’t necessarily think that it makes for a block. I think that they see the difference maybe even more than I see the difference. But I think that if you are really sincere with them, and they think that you are trying to help them, that they relate pretty well.

Analysis

Relating Through Instability and Personal Challenges

Through their stories, it is clear that the unique personal experiences and challenges of these four teachers facilitated their abilities to relate to many students. Likely because of these experiences, each teacher strongly emphasized her ability to relate to students as “human beings” and gave kids the benefit of the doubt in trying situations. All teachers but Ms. Alexander could relate to familial instability. Ms. Green was empathetic yet stern when she heard kids talking about drugs. Ms. Starr was very patient with absenteeism and particularly sympathetic to responsibilities outside of school, such as parenthood and work. She also encouraged some students to take the high school equivalency exam to exit school early, as she had done. It seemed that Ms. Currey saw her own early low skill level and sense of insecurity reflected in nearly all of her students. Though her own life experiences were quite different from her NRHS students, Ms. Alexander nevertheless recognized her own shyness in even the toughest gang members and sought to reach out to them in the ways she wished she had been reached out to as a student.

As a former NRHS teacher myself, I can confirm that these personal connections made strong impressions on many of the kids. Many students, including many Latina/o and African American students, felt respected by, cared for, and understood by these teachers, and many students readily described the four women discussed here as “good teachers.” Some students plainly adored these teachers, particularly Ms. Currey. In these ways, it was clear that the personal life experiences of these teachers and their abilities to use these experiences as ways to connect to the students were tremendously valuable. As the literature suggests, this ability to relate seemed to contribute to students' motivation to come to school as well as their enjoyment of school (Cohn & Kottkamp, 1993; Doddington et al., 1999; Noddings, 1992; Valenzuela, 1999). These were positive qualities many students told me they had not experienced before meeting these teachers. In these ways, all four teachers made very strong, positive impacts on many of their students.

Not Relating

At the same time, as all teachers admitted, there were many ways in which they could not relate to their students. All of these were connected obviously or subtly to race. Indeed, as the stories above illustrate, aspects of the teachers' own White identities were revealed as they talked about the ways they could not relate to students. At the same time, when they articulated their thoughts about Whiteness, the differences they perceived between themselves and their students were illuminated. A theoretical framework of CRT and critical studies of Whiteness requires that racism and Whiteness be examined holistically rather than incrementally, as well as in an integrated way. As a result, in this section of the analysis, I will present ways teachers could not relate to the students interpreted through a perspective that forefronts race and racism. Although there are many components of CRT that can be used to analyze racial inequity in schooling (see DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Delgado, 1995a; Ladson-Billing & Tate, 1995), in this analysis I focus on the pervasiveness of institutionalized racism and its embedded, normal nature. Theories of Whiteness, in concert, help to explain how teachers viewed themselves compared to how they viewed their students.

Violence, Gang Activities, and Racial Segregation

All teachers mentioned violence and negative gang behaviors as activities to which they could not relate. Although the gang influence in the school was subdued, it was prevalent and appeared in the symbols some kids doodled on their notebooks, the many graphic stories they told, and the earnest questions they often asked us teachers about what actually constituted a crime and how forensic evidence was gathered. Gangs were overrepresented in NRHS because of its continuation nature: Many gang members were purposely removed from the traditional schools in the district and sent to NRHS because of their negative behaviors, absenteeism, lack of school credits, and poor standardized test scores. Gang involvement is typically connected to poverty in racially marginalized urban areas, a characteristic that readily describes Nevada Hills, and often brings with it many negative life experiences, such as getting shot or being incarcerated, experiences that, unfortunately, characterized the lives of many NRHS students.

In contrast, none of the teachers had personal experiences being involved in gangs or growing up racially marginalized. Their inability to relate to these experiences reveal the overlapping racial, economic, and geographic distance between teachers and students that is the norm in the United States today. For example, most U.S. teachers come from suburban or rural areas and most grow up in the middle class (Haberman & Post, 1992; Leming, 1991). Although just 1% of White students attend high poverty schools, this is the case for 25% of Latina/os (Pew Hispanic Center, 2005). At the same time, 56% of Latina/os attend the nation's largest schools, compared to 26% of Whites (Pew Hispanic Center, 2005). In addition, just 53% of American teachers actually live in the school districts where they teach, and only 32% live "within the attendance areas of [their] school buildings" (NEA, 2003, p. 97). Critical race theorists point to historic and contemporary racial segregation, and its accompanying inequality, as evidence of the pervasiveness of racial inequality as a structural feature of society and schools (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

Deficit Thoughts About People of Color

In addition to violence and gang activities, Ms. Green, Ms. Starr, and Ms. Alexander held strong deficit views about their students of color; that is, they thought of these students as lacking qualities fundamental to educational success (Valencia, 1997). As is clear in the stories shared above, most of their perceptions of Latina/o culture(s), families, and people(s) were misassessments based on stereotypes and lack of knowledge.

Lack of Regard for Education. For example, Ms. Green and Ms. Alexander believed that Latina/os did not value education. This is a common, disturbing stereotype of Latina/os that seems to have no basis in reality. In fact, much evidence exists for the commitment Latina/os have for education (e.g., Valencia & Black, 2002; San Miguel & Valencia, 1998) and for the support Latina/o families give to the educational pursuits of their children (e.g., Romo & Falbo 1996; Valencia & Black, 2002). Although it is the case that many Latina/o immigrants to the United States have limited educational backgrounds, there is no evidence to support the belief that Latina/os do not value education. Valencia and Black (2002) argue that this stereotype is based on deficit thinking rather than empirical evidence.

Lack of Respect for Women and Girls. Many teachers at NRHS, including Ms. Green and Ms. Alexander, believed that Latinos did not respect women and so would neither listen to nor respect their female teachers. They said this *despite* the many stories they shared that illustrated the respect Latino students showed them. Many teachers at NRHS lamented the *machismo* of Mexican culture and its detrimental effect on girls and women. Although their concern for girls is admirable, their assessment of Mexican culture is, in fact, a misassessment, again based on stereotypes and deficit thinking. In fact, much research has debunked the construction of the subordinated Mexican female who lives at the mercy of the Mexican male as myth (e.g., Cromwell & Ruiz, 1979; Oropesa, 1997; Staples & Mirandé, 1980; Stern, 1995; Valencia & Black, 2002). In her examination of the development of marital power among women in Mexico, for example, Oropesa (1997) found that the reality of women's experiences with power "challenge stereotypical descriptions of the position of wives in Mexican families as necessarily subordinate to husbands. Husband dominance is neither universal nor insurmountable" (p. 1310). Writing nearly two decades earlier, Staples and Mirandé (1980) similarly felt the need to address the stereotype of the passive female and dominant male in the Chicano household. They conclude that "this empirically unsupported model of Chicano family life, until recently, has been the most prevalent in the social sciences" (p. 893). The stories of NRHS teachers show the resilience of this stereotype.

Simplified Understanding of Students and People of Color. The stories Ms. Green, Ms. Alexander, and Ms. Starr shared about their students of color also revealed their beliefs that these students led less complex lives than their own. Although their own stories were complicated and revealed many obstacles they had overcome, the stories they shared about students were simplistic. Beliefs that Latina/os did not value education nor respect women are examples of this, as is Ms. Starr's characterization of Latina/os as "two different types:" "your gang-banger or city type that I never like. . . and the other part of them are just really hard-working people that don't earn high wages." With this kind of mindset, Ms. Starr could not account for the achievements of the many successful Latina/os in the United States, such as the scholars cited in this article. Research on Whiteness has shown that Whites often consider White cultural attributes too complex to essentialize or even characterize (Marx, 2006; Nakayama & Krizek, 1999; Tatum, 1999).

In contrast, they often define cultures of color through stereotypes that are overly simplified (Feagin & Vera, 1995; Frankenberg, 1993). This uncritical embrace of racist, simplified stereotypes is more evidence of the racism embedded in Whiteness and experienced by Latina/os in society and in schooling.

Color Blindness

Though the teachers at NRHS spent their professional lives working with mostly Latina/o students and often found themselves to be the only White person in their classrooms, they were typically uncomfortable talking about race. At this time in the United States, we live in an era of "color-blind" thinking and "color evasive" language that deeply discourages us from talking about race, even though race continues to influence all Americans (Frankenberg, 1993; Howard & Denning del Rosario, 2000; Marx, 2006; Omi & Winant, 1994; Takaki, 1990). NRHS teachers were not immune to this influence. As a result, although all four teachers admitted to some racial or cultural barriers between themselves and their students, every one of them emphasized that race really made no difference in their ability to work with Latina/o students or other students of color. Ms. Alexander, for example, shared several misassessments of Latina/o culture(s), and noted "my inability to relate [to Latina/os] culturally;" but, immediately followed this statement by emphasizing that race was not as important as the "teenage culture" of the students to which she could relate. Ms. Starr shared several negative perceptions about Latina/os that stemmed from her experience becoming a racial/cultural "minority" in Nevada Hills. Her resentment toward Latina/os as a cultural group was palpable. However, she emphasized that her negative feelings had no connection to the individual Latina/os in her classroom. As she said, "If it did, I would leave the profession because that would be grossly unfair to my kids and me."

Ms. Currey was influenced by color blindness in ways that were similar to and different from her colleagues. The stories she shared about not being able to relate to students clearly centered on racial and cultural differences. Both of the students she discussed were African American males. Although she highlighted the violence one student was experiencing, she did not state that violence was the reason she could not relate to him. Instead, with both students, she implied that race created a gap she could not bridge herself. Rather then being daunted by this difference, ignoring it, or resenting it, Ms. Currey diligently looked for someone else who could bridge this gap for her and give the boys the extra personal attention she felt they needed. Both times, she turned to African American men. Although she frequently commented that race “doesn’t make a difference to me,” her actions show that it did. It is likely that color blindness prevented her from being able to articulate this.

CRT and Whiteness theories examine color blindness as a limitation in progress toward racial equality (e.g., Delgado, 1995b). Rather than enable race to be discussed as an obstacle to teacher–student relationships, color blindness insures that the topic is not addressed as even a possibility. As a result, segregated, “minority–majority,” low income school districts like Nevada Hills are not problematized by society. Nor are schools like NRHS where all the teachers are White, the majority of students are Latina/o, and not a single teacher in the school speaks the native language of most students. Suggestions that there might be issues of racial inequity inherent in these very structures often provoke great upset and resistance among White parents, teachers, administrators, and community members. Such suggestions are often criticized as “racist” themselves for simply naming race as a possible contributor to inequity and marking the usually unmarked characteristic of Whiteness as racialized. Color blindness insures that critical discussions of structural racism do not take place and, as a result, helps maintain structural racial inequality.

Conclusion

Through the stories shared above, it is clear that personal experiences with struggles and, in particular, instability helped the four NRHS teachers in this study successfully relate to their students in some valuable ways. However, it is also clear that Whiteness was a limiting characteristic for all teachers. Ms. Currey was the only teacher who recognized this limitation and took actions to overcome it. She was an exceptional teacher, as her many awards attest. The other teachers in this study and many of my colleagues at NRHS held very negative views about Latina/o culture(s) and families that were constructed by ignorance and distance and then fed by stereotypes and mythology, all symptoms of pervasive societal racism, as well as the privileges of their own Whiteness. This was the case even though they worked predominantly with students of color, most of them being Latina/o; created warm, caring classroom environments for their students; and talked at length about how much they liked the kids and how much fun they were to teach. A colleague to them all, I can attest to their sincerity. However, even as they contributed to this warm environment where NRHS students felt cared for, they continued to hold very negative images of the students’ homes and cultures that were rooted in racism.

As they held onto these negative beliefs, they seemed to consciously separate individual Latina/o students from Latina/o culture(s). When the students regularly flouted stereotypes teachers believed in by valuing education, by being respectful of female teachers, by being confident females themselves, and by being something other than a "gang-banger" or a hard worker who didn't "earn high wages," these teachers embraced them as exceptions to the rule rather than products of a culture different than the one they imagined. As they embraced their students, these teachers often deepened their resentment for the students' home culture(s) and families that, they felt, were holding students back in their educational success. Of course, their assessment of their students' home culture(s) and families were really misassessments. Although they were able to lovingly and successfully teach their students, relating to them through personal experiences, they were not able to relate to students' experiences as racial and cultural beings, and they greatly misunderstood their students because of this. Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) might explain this inconsistency as "a logical and predictable result of a racialized society in which discussions of race and racism continue to be muted and marginalized" (p. 47). Derrick Bell (1992) might point to this as another example of "the permanence of racism".

These findings are compelling for the wide racial chasm they illuminate. Ms. Currey took continual and deliberate steps to bridge that chasm with her students of color. For the other teachers, the chasm seemed to grow wider as time went by. What I do not want to do in this analysis is now venerate Ms. Currey and demonize Ms. Green, Ms. Starr, and Ms. Alexander by constructing nonracist–racist or good–bad binaries. Reality is much more complex than such simplified constructions. If we adopt the CRT perspective that racism is an institutionalized system of advantage that privileges Whites as it disadvantages people of color and the CRT and critical studies in Whiteness tenet that all Whites are advantaged by Whiteness and racism, no matter their intentions (e.g., Delgado, 1995a; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Marx, 2006; McIntosh, 1988/1997; Scheurich, 1993; Tatum, 1999), then we have to expect that all White people, including White teachers such as those presented here, are influenced by racism. Some are better able to work against these influences than others.

Rather than simply condemn the teachers for their limitations, I would like to problematize their racial and cultural misunderstandings of their students and situate them within the educational system of which they are a part. I suggest that racial inequity is necessarily inherent in an education system where 90% of teachers are White (NEA, 2003), less than 3% of teachers speak Spanish (Darling-Hammond and Sclan, 1996), 43% of students are of color (NCES, 2006), and less than half the teachers live in the district where they teach and where their students live (NEA, 2003). The differences between the majority of teachers and a great many of their students should be problematized as a possible obstacle to successful education. Of course, this critique must also include the prevalence of White administrators, school board members, and teacher educators. Just as race matters in our society, it matters in our schooling.

Although just four teachers were studied in this exploration, the insights into inequity they offer are considerable. In contrast to new, inexperienced teachers or teacher education students who are often studied when they are working with children of color for the first time (e.g., Case & Hemmings, 2005; Fuller, 1994; Marx, 2000, 2003, 2004a,b, 2006; Marx & Pennington, 2003; Valli, 1995), the teachers studied here were veterans who professed to love working with their students of color. Their many years of experience exempted them from required further education in multicultural and English as a second language education. They were considered popular by the students and successful by their colleagues. Many were recruited by the principal of NRHS specifically because of their proven ability to work well with Latina/o students from low income backgrounds who had struggled in schooling. Their inability to relate to the cultures and home lives of their students surprised me, as did their emphasis that race and culture did not matter. My experience working with these teachers and observing how much they cared about their students led me to expect very different results.

Of course, Ms. Currey offers as exception to this situation as she regularly went out of her way to get to know her students and to look beyond stereotypes. She was able to construct multifaceted, complex images of her students' realities and to gather the help of others to help her cross racial barriers in relating to her students. Ms. Currey told me many times that she was primarily a teacher and then a private person. Her students came first. Few teachers can boast that kind of perfect teaching personality. Molding a personality like Ms. Currey's is likely beyond the ability of the best teacher education program. Principals looking to hire only that type of teacher would fill few openings indeed. Ms. Currey's example is salient, however, as it illustrates that the gap between White teachers and students of color is not insurmountable. For most teachers, though, this gap is a canyon rather than a crack.

As I reflect on these findings, I find a conundrum. The teachers represented in this article were exemplary in many ways. Their students admired them greatly. However, just a few pointed questions revealed the many ways they were unable to relate to their students of color and the many ways that racism influenced their misperceptions of these students. Although they emphasized that the racial and cultural differences between themselves and their students did not matter, in the end, one has to wonder if that really can be true. What would the parents of NRHS students think about the stories shared in this article? Would they reassess any thoughts they might have about these teachers being able to work with their children? Would they still feel that their children are being cared about in school? What would NRHS students say if they read these findings? Would they still feel their teachers could relate to them? Would they wonder if having no teachers of color in their school might be having an impact on them? One can only speculate and call for further research that would delve into questions such as these. In the meantime, the seriousness of the predominance of Whites in the profession of education and its necessary limitations must give us all food for thought. What would we say if these were our own children we were talking about here?

Notes

1. Throughout this article, I use race and ethnicity interchangeably. As I do this, I highlight the socially constructed, overlapping nature of both these entities. The 2000 U.S. Census designates White and African American as a “races” but “Hispanic” as an “ethnic group.” By conflating the two terms, I mean to highlight the arbitrariness of this distinction (see also Marx, 2006). In addition, although race is the focus of this article, I use the term “culture” frequently, especially when discussing teachers’ thoughts about Latina/o students. Many teachers preferred to use the term culture instead of race in our discussions. In my research, I have found that the word “race” is most often used when describing African Americans. I purposely incorporate the concept of culture into my analysis of race because they are also socially constructed, overlapping entities.

2. All names of schools, districts, towns, and people are pseudonyms.

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