

HOW GENDER AND RACIAL IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT INFORMS WHITE WOMEN TEACHERS

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Abstract

Many United States educators today are white women, and the students they teach are becoming more culturally diverse each year. In order to meet the needs of culturally diverse students, white women educators must understand their own gender and racial identities. Identity development will empower teachers to make informed leadership decisions about the culturally responsive teaching of their diverse students and the creation of school communities that promote excellence.

Introduction

In 1819, Emma Hart Willard decried the lack of quality education for women of her time. At the beginning of the United States, white men and women were not considered equals in intellectual abilities. The fight for equality, the gradual changes in our educational system and the lingering biases are all present in America's educational system today. Because there are currently many white women United States educators, examination of the past as well as development of gender and racial identity is needed for teachers to best serve the students of today. Initiatives like *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) are marginalizing poor, minority, and learning disabled groups (Darling-Hammond, 2004). White women teachers must analyze if prescriptive policies meet the needs of their diverse students. Additionally, they must consider their own roles in creating culturally competent learning environments.

Through examination of historical experiences that led women to the education profession and understanding what it means to be white and female, women can change educational practices to be inclusive and for the good of all children. Individual potentials are corrupted by our exclusive system, and futures are negatively affected. Our present system oppresses many, and our country will suffer as a result of the inadequacy of our schools. White women teachers can be instrumental in creating culturally competent schools, but they must begin by developing self-awareness.

History

In 1750, only 40% of the white female population in the United States was literate as opposed to 90% of the white males (Zinn, 2003). The role of white women in professions evolved slowly because white men had power in early American society. Early feminist writers urged women to not accept a secondary role in society. In 1792, Wollstonecraft (1985) first published *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, declaring that women were being objectified by men and their minds enfeebled from lack of proper education. She urged women to seek opportunities to strengthen mind and body, understanding the need for strength in both for healthy development. Her writings were followed in the 1820s by several books, manuals, and essays on women's roles (Zinn, 2003), a societal response to Wollstonecraft's push to increase opportunities for women. In these reactionary works, domesticity was

glorified in an attempt to appease women with work that was equal to men's but separate (Zinn, 2003). Women were left without choice about whom to marry, and they were not able to vote, own property, or enter male professions or colleges (Zinn, 2003).

Women speaking out were not always well received by other women. Feminists of the mid-1800s like Martineau, Willard, and Fuller did not think of Wollstonecraft as a good example for women's rights (Rossi, 1973). Women not banding together made the road to equality a long, arduous one. Although they could not attend male universities, middle class white women began entering the field of education as primary school teachers (Zinn, 2003). It was not until early in the twentieth century, when professional teaching opportunities began to expand for women (Goldin, 2006).

At an 1853 convention of schoolteachers, Susan B. Anthony challenged men about the underlying feelings about women in the teaching profession (Rossi, 1973). Even though women were not seen as competent to be lawyers or doctors, Anthony pointed out that women were the teachers of men who eventually populated those higher-paying professions (Rossi, 1973).

Freud questioned the intelligence of women and viewed women as lesser beings than men (Freud, 1989). These early perceptions and lack of respect for the potential of women have affected the teaching profession. Even as the amount of women going into the teaching profession increased steadily, Freudian psychology offered the public an excuse for the oppressive treatment of women (Friedan, 1983). Despite the preparation that goes into teaching and the continuing education that good teachers pursue throughout a career, teacher professionalism is questioned by the public, teachers are not rewarded monetarily, and the federal government is enacting policies that minimize the power of teachers to make sound educational decisions for their students.

Understanding the evolution of gender roles in the United States can inform white women teachers. Women of the past fought for respect for education professionals, and white women teachers today must cultivate their professionalism by developing their racial and gender identities. White women have benefited from white privilege, but they have suffered oppression due to gender. This puts that group in a unique position of being both privileged and oppressed. Deep understanding of both racial and gender identity can provide white women teachers with the skills to become the culturally competent leaders needed so desperately in the field of education today. Culturally competent leaders will see the shortcomings of national policies and band together to create new school cultures that value and enrich students.

The Beginning of Educational Change

The unique position of being both privileged and oppressed gives white women educators a responsibility to understand both identities if they hope to positively affect the lives of those they educate. Self-awareness is crucial, and Brookfield (1995) recommends that teachers live and teach consciously through use of critical reflection. He uses the term "teaching innocently" (p. 1) to caution teachers about thinking they know the effect their actions have on students (Brookfield, 1995). If white women teachers continue to focus on content instead of context and do not take a critical look at their own racial and gender identities, then connecting with culturally diverse students in our schools will be a difficult task, and children can leave school disenfranchised by the very system meant to progress their development.

Gender and Racial Identity

Gender

Past oppression caused negative feelings as women fought to be educated and to enter professions. The fight to overcome oppression and prove their equality with men led to educational and professional progress for women, but it also perpetuated comparisons between the sexes, taking away from women's focus on their own gender identity development. Women want the opportunity to develop their own identities without societal encumbrances. Helms offers the womanist model as a way for women to find value in any role they choose for themselves (Ossana, Helms, & Leonard, 1992). Research suggests that women who have developed their gender identity have higher self-esteem (Boisnier, 2003). This quality is essential in positively affecting the development of students.

Helms's womanist identity development is characterized by four levels: pre-encounter, encounter, immersion-emersion, and internalization (Ossana et al., 1992). Women working through these levels can create a healthy gender identity that enables them to empathize with the cultures of others. Studying the history of women in the United States is essential when women consider gender identity. There are underlying attitudes from earlier times of oppression against women that still exist today, and those attitudes undercut the potential of women in their chosen professions. Women choosing to be educators are further affected by the fact that education was one of the earliest professions to admit women, and the structure of some educational institutions today reveals a lack of trust in the professionalism of teachers. Women need to acknowledge this structure and question the logic behind it. Failures to do so will result in continued acceptance of educational policies that are not culturally responsive and do not adequately address the educational needs of all students.

The pre-encounter level includes acceptance of traditional sex roles without acknowledging societal bias (Parks, Carter, & Gushue, 1996). This first level of identity development is shortsighted. A modern white woman can reason that she has a professional career as a teacher, and she was not prevented from that career by any oppression. What she fails to see is the struggle that came before her that affects the standing of her profession in our society. As women were admitted to professions, they were also expected to maintain home and family. Juggling multiple demands has become a way of life for women, so being required to do the same in education careers is nothing new to white women teachers. They have tried to juggle the requirements imposed by NCLB while, at the same time, trying to teach children in ways that promote individual development. Although the task is too large, teachers keep trying because they are accustomed to working against great odds. Teachers continue to work under the standards of prescriptive policies even though their professionalism is not respected, and they are labeled failures if children do not meet standards (Gay, 2007). Moving beyond the pre-encounter level will enable women to not only realize the unrealistic demands of national standards that do not benefit all children, but to change the system into one that is concerned with the healthy development of all children.

Movement into the encounter level will allow women to question gender stereotypes (Ossana et al., 1992). Without this questioning, women educators will continue to accept a flawed system that does not allow for their professionalism to be respected. Active rejection of male supremacy begins the third level, immersion-emersion (Ossana et al., 1992). When women educators get to this level, they can evaluate their profession from the very beginning and question its standing in today's society. Leaving the present structure of this system and resulting public attitudes about the teaching profession unchallenged keeps teachers from leading system reforms that will improve education and inform

societal perceptions. Blaming as described by Moorman (2001) serves the public well. Teachers are blamed for educational deficiencies, so the general public does not have to take a hard look at the true causes of educational inequity in our system. Professional teachers who have been shown disrespect through inadequate salaries and questioning of practices are further maligned by our public as federal policy causes greater disparities in our system. Questioning the evolution of this system and the shortsighted policies meant to improve it will empower teachers to enact the change so desperately needed.

Internalization, level four of the womanist identity, allows women to internally define their identity without concern about others' perceptions or expectations (Parks et al, 1996). Attention to gender identity enhances women's development. Internalization leads to positive views of womanhood (Boisnier, 2003), which empower women in their chosen roles. Women educators who reach the internalization level will no longer be concerned with juggling bad policy and good education. Their main concern will be with the students within our schools, creating a culture of excellence as described by Berger (2003) instead of knowing what will benefit children, but having to follow ill-informed policy. White women educators who understand their gender identity are less concerned with conforming to the perceptions of others and more concerned with drawing from their knowledge about how children learn to inform their educational practices.

Gender identity development is a liberating experience for women who have worked to build careers in a system that was created by men and still suffers some ill-effects from early oppression. Honest examination of the system and the professionalism of teachers within it can lead to changes that positively affect the educational experiences of children. Women educators have a unique opportunity to connect with students of other cultures because of the experience of being affected by past oppression. Once they develop an awareness of how past oppression affected their current profession, they can better empathize with the challenges faced by the culturally diverse population in America's schools.

Race

White women may have oppression in their past due to gender, but they are also the beneficiaries of white privilege, which can cause alienation of students if not examined. Race is an important part of a person's identity (Helms, 2008). Race cannot be changed, so understanding racial identity is essential in the quest for cultural competence. White women may be able to connect to culturally diverse students as victims of past oppression, but they are also saddled with negative feelings that their race may inspire in people who do not have white privilege. Racial identity development causes white women to look at the unearned privileges they have and reflect upon their responsibility for maintaining roles that have caused oppression to others (Ponterotto, Utsey, & Pederson, 2006). Currently, there are white teachers in the role of educating diverse students, but not all of those teachers have learned to be multicultural people (Howard, 1999). Only upon examination of racial identities can white women develop as culturally competent educators of diverse populations.

Bhopal (2002) explains that white woman educators have to be aware of how students perceive them. Being white affects the views and experiences of white women educators (Bhopal, 2002). Non-white students who have white teachers can be resentful of the teachers because of race, so teachers need to be aware of their white privilege and work to advance their racial identity. Helms (2008) refers to white privilege as the "foundation of racism" (p. 19); teachers who have not examined their racial identity may misunderstand reactions from students and create barriers to learning. Negative behaviors can be displayed without a person acknowledging the significance of those behaviors. Critical reflection

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of both thoughts and behaviors will reveal to white women whether or not they harbor any conscious or unconscious racist feelings. Nieto (1999) stresses the importance of white teachers defining their own histories and identities, because without going through this process, the tendency is to see white as normal and other cultures as something other than normal. White women educators who take the time to develop their own racial identities inform their leadership practice with a knowledgeable perspective about how racial identity affects learning.

Both Hardiman (1982) and Helms (2008) provide models of white identity development to aid white women in acknowledging white privilege and moving to a non-racist identity. Hardiman's model includes five stages: lack of social consciousness, acceptance, resistance, redefinition, and internalization. The first stage involves concern only for self and personal needs, and Hardiman attributes this stage to the first five years of life. The acceptance stage is where socialization takes place, and ideas about behaviors and beliefs conform to the social codes (Ponterotto et al., 2006). This can be seen in the act of selection (Sonnenschein, 1999) when people make choices consciously or unconsciously about what they see. There is no need to address oppression if there is no acknowledgement it is happening. It is crucial for teachers to work beyond this stage because they need to understand experiences and histories of students in their classroom in order to best address learning needs. Cognitive research supports the connection of new information with existing knowledge or experiences (Darling-Hammond, 1997). White women educators must have cultural knowledge about the experiences, values, and traditions of students in the classroom if they hope to facilitate student learning and development.

Once people's racial beliefs are challenged, they enter the emotional stage of resistance (Ponterotto et al., 2006). Liggett (2008) found that many white teachers do not address the issue of race in class discussions or respond to the issue when a student addresses it. Teachers who do not welcome these discussions are not allowing themselves or students to confront or reflect upon racial beliefs; consequently, there will be no progress in identity development. White educators should welcome racial discussions that will stimulate critical thinking. Redefinition, the fourth stage, follows where whites must work on creating a new identity as they rethink existing values and form new ones that lead to elimination of racism (Ponterotto et al., 2006). The final stage of internalization is where people have created a healthy racial identity and can now teach other whites about racism. Working against all forms of oppression is part of this evolved stage (Ponterotto et al., 2006). Getting to this stage frees teachers to advocate for the needs of all children. It gives them the knowledge and courage to fight against policies that may limit the educational opportunities of certain groups.

Helms's (2008) model includes six stages. The first three stages--Contact, Disintegration, and Reintegration--are considered internalization of racism. In the Contact stage, colorblindness may occur (Helms, 2008). Although people feel they are not racist due to not noticing skin color, this stage can be dangerous because colorblindness prevents people from realizing white privilege. Consequently, oppression that has happened as a result of white privilege can continue, and the color blind person becomes part of the oppression. White teachers in this stage may think they are addressing students as valued individuals, but miscommunication can happen because of what teachers do not know. Teachers who are colorblind may not be aware of institutionalized racism, so they will fail to address it (Banks et al., 2005). Disintegration happens when whites acknowledge benefits received because of race, but they do not necessarily want to give up those benefits (Helms, 2008). Reintegration confronts people with the social problem of oppression, but people can avoid changing by blaming the victims (Helms, 2008). Existing in either of these stages prevents teachers from understanding what students may be carrying

with them, and students can be mistakenly labeled by teachers, thus marginalizing students instead of aiding their development.

The second three stages of the white identity development model are transformative. In the Pseudo-Independence stage, people redefine whiteness as not superior to other races, but they are not yet ready to take responsibility for their part in the maintenance of racism (Helms, 2008). Although people in this stage may support programs that will increase equality, supporting actions without taking responsibility will not end racism. When people are ready to learn about what actually happened to other races at the hands of white people, they enter the Immersion-Emersion stage (Helms, 2008). It is during this stage that people accept responsibility for past racist acts and undergo the feelings of being a party to oppression. Once these feelings are confronted, people can enter the Autonomy stage where they consciously work to educate others about racist ideas and act to end oppression (Helms, 2008). White teachers cannot be effective to all students if they do not understand their needs. Racial identity development offers educators the opportunity to critically look at themselves and how their race affects what happens in the classroom. Armed with this insight, they can address diversity issues (Howard, 1999).

Working through white identity development is a difficult, emotional task, but it is essential for white women who hope to be effective educators. Leaders in education must go through this process, or efforts to connect with students of all cultures can be circumvented by unacknowledged feelings that hinder learning. Identity development alone by white women educators will not transform education. They must determine their role in “understanding, decoding, and dismantling the dynamics of White dominance” (Howard, 1999, p. 5). After looking inward, white women educators can confidently and courageously act as change agents in our flawed educational system.

Culturally Responsive Teaching

For white women, racial identity is equated with social power, but gender identity comes from a subordinate position (Parks et al., 1996). The contradictory states of white women’s identities can give them a unique understanding of what it means to be oppressed and privileged. Teachers can build upon this unusual perspective to create pluralistic environments in their classrooms. Subjective identities affect teaching and learning (Bhopal, 2002), and women who have developed their identities will be aware of how their gender and race can influence student-teacher interactions. The development of gender and racial identity informs the leadership practice of white women educators.

“Culturally responsive pedagogy validates, facilitates, liberates, and empowers ethnically diverse students by simultaneously cultivating their cultural integrity, individual abilities, and academic success” (Gay, 2000, p. 44). Teachers cannot create culturally responsive classrooms without truly understanding their own identities and what they are bringing to the classroom. They also need to promote understanding of identities amongst their students. Corkery (2009) describes the problems that arise when white students do not understand their racial identities. Students can feel slighted by initiatives like affirmative action and not be able to objectively think through the reasons for such programs (Corkery, 2009; Taylor, 2008). Development of racial identity can give people the insight to think about issues fairly and critically instead of just reacting to them. Corkery used awareness of racial identity development coupled with the English curriculum, so students could search for meaning in identity without feeling stigmatized. This type of instruction allowed students to work with curriculum while trying to reconcile power relations with others (Corkery, 2009). The most important part is that students of different cultures worked together to discover how race has affected the development of the

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United States. An effective teacher gives students the forum to discuss sensitive issues (Bhopal, 2002). Culturally responsive lessons like this empower students to have conversations about issues that previously may not have been discussed. An open environment leads to a pluralistic environment.

Relationships with teachers are important to student learning (Darling-Hammond, 1997). An environment of trust needs to be built so that students feel comfortable sharing. Once Bhopal (2002) gave her students a forum to discuss race and gender issues, they were relieved to have the opportunity to work through ideas that challenged them. White women educators have a responsibility to create these environments for their increasingly diverse students.

When white students are confronted with past oppression by their race, they often react with shame and do not want to be defined as part of that group (Denevi & Pastan, 2006). The oppression that continues in our country persists because of failure to confront it. Identifying with white groups can support those who feel shame and give strength to a systemic change in practices that oppress (Denevi & Pastan, 2006). White women educators who have developed their own gender and racial identities can work together to bring about changes in the educational system that currently marginalizes certain groups. Working together to create school cultures that embrace diversity will be empowering to teachers who often feel isolated and overwhelmed. Women of the past did not always join together to fight oppression, but white women educators with an awareness of the history of education and development of their own identities, have the knowledge, confidence, and wisdom to work together to create culturally responsive education.

Gay (2000) contends that our educational system needs educators with knowledge about culture and values of diverse students, awareness of problems that currently exist in our educational system, and skills to confront those problems. Educators must create inclusive environments where students and their learning are valued (Gay, 2000). White women educators who have taken the time to understand and develop their identities realize the impact of cultures on the educational process and will use their awareness, knowledge, and skills to inform their leadership practice. Policies that marginalize or fail children will no longer be acceptable to professional educators once they stand together in the best interests of their students. Personal identity development creates teachers who are prepared to confront the challenges facing our educational system today.

After considering past oppression and privilege, white women who choose to be educational leaders must assess the current system and change what is not working. Their focus must be on creating an educational system that values our culturally diverse students. Once teachers work based on their professional knowledge about how students learn and make changes from within, all of our students will have opportunity to progress. Public perceptions of educators will evolve as students from all groups achieve educational success. White women educators must be leaders in positive educational change for the students of the United States.

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