

“I Don’t Want to Hear That!”: Legitimizing Whiteness through Silence in Schools

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In this article, I examine the ways in which silences around race contribute to the maintenance and legitimation of Whiteness. Drawing on ethnographic data from two demographically different schools, I highlight patterns of racially coded language, teacher silence, silencing students’ race talk, and the conflating of culture with race, equality with equity, and difference with deficit. These silences and acts of silencing create and perpetuate an educational culture in which inequities are ignored, the status quo is maintained, and Whiteness is both protected and entrenched. [silence, Whiteness, race]

Silence is golden.

—Anonymous

If you don’t have anything nice to say, don’t say anything at all.

—Anonymous

Silence is indifference.

—Elie Wiesel

He who passively accepts evil is as much involved in it as he who helps to perpetuate it.

—Martin Luther King Jr.

I begin this article with these four somewhat disparate quotations about silence to call attention to some common messages Americans hear about silence. The first two statements are probably the most familiar, but I’ve juxtaposed them with the last two to highlight the political and decidedly un-neutral messages in seemingly innocuous calls to “bite our tongues.” Within schools, silence is the norm around a number of topics, and in this article, I examine teachers’ silences around and the silencing of race. Even though issues of race are always present and are often at the surface of school-related discourse, practice, and policies, educators are consistently silent and socializing students to be silent about them.

My focus on race is important for a number of reasons.¹ As much research has shown, race is clearly related to patterned and persistent achievement gaps among students. Race is also an important area of inquiry for school-age youth, particularly in middle school, where identities are being formed and contested. Furthermore, race is central to discussions of normativity, access, and power. In other words, although race is present, it is too often silenced, muted, and ignored within schools (Boler 2004; Pollock 2004; Schultz 2003; Thompson 2005). Although many educators insist on ignoring race, they are engulfed in a system in which race structures both how schooling operates and the subsequent outcomes of schooling (Ladson-Billings 2005). By analyzing the silencing of race in one urban school district, I am able to highlight both how race is understood and positioned by teachers and how teachers’ responses to topics of diversity and power are shaped by an overwhelming culture of Whiteness

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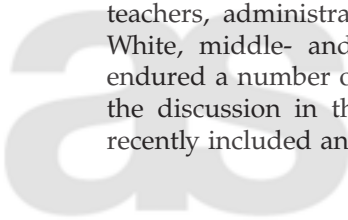
and an awareness of how their own interests as predominately middle class and White may be threatened by adopting a more activist, social-justice-oriented approach to issues of race.²

In this article, I address two primary questions: (1) How and why are issues of race silenced in schools and (2) How and in what ways do these silences surrounding race legitimate Whiteness? My data illustrate how issues of race are silenced through coded language among educators, through teacher silence, through the silencing of students' inquiries about race, and through the conflating of culture and race, equality and equity, and difference and deficit. An examination of my data illuminates that most White educators are reluctant to name things that are perceived as uncomfortable or threatening to the established social order. In other words, they possess a strong desire for comfort and ideological safety within their classrooms and the school walls. White educators also tend to hold a shared allegiance to the status quo, presumably because it generally works for us. The sum total of these patterns is that race is not part of the accepted or expected discourse within schools. The discourse that is prevalent in schools is instead one of culture, equality, and difference—constructs that are part of the contemporary culture of Whiteness and that merely serve to obscure race, racism, and inequities based on race. The silences around race entrench and rationalize Whiteness because they allow most White educators to maintain the illusion that race either doesn't matter or doesn't really exist and to continue schooling in a business as usual fashion.

Research Methods and Context

This article is based on data I collected in 2004 and 2005 in an urban school district in Utah. I draw specifically on a subset of the findings from a yearlong ethnographic study that examined teachers' understandings and practices of multicultural education in one middle school serving primarily low-income students of color and another middle school serving primarily White middle- and upper-class students. I was in the two schools on a full-time basis for one academic year; during that time I observed 12 teachers in each of the two schools, conducted both formal and informal interviews with all 24 teachers and the administrators at each school, and attended faculty meetings and other schoolwide events. I also interviewed 11 district-level administrators, attended district-level professional developments and board meetings, and reviewed pertinent policies, reports, and district publications. This article draws primarily on my classroom observations within the schools to highlight the ways in which "normal" classroom occurrences contribute to and sustain Whiteness.

During the fall of 2004, the Zion School District served approximately 24,000 students³—39 percent of whom were designated as limited-English proficient, 51 percent of whom were students of color, and 60 percent of whom qualified for free or reduced-price lunch. This diversity is a fairly recent phenomenon that has occurred over the past three decades. As in most diverse school districts, however, teachers, administrators, and those with decision-making power are still largely White, middle- and upper-class, and native English speakers. The district has endured a number of incidents in the past 10–15 years that bear direct relevance to the discussion in this article. The racial and ethnic diversity in the district has recently included an influx of refugee students from Sudan and Somalia, which has



presented a number of challenges to educators and has resulted in many well-funded initiatives in the district. The Zion School District has also been under review with the Office of Civil Rights because of allegations of discrimination in the services provided to nonnative English-speaking students.⁴ This, too, has resulted in countless resources allocated to certifying teachers in English as a Second Language (ESL) and other services for nonnative English-speaking families in the district. Thus, the district had been engaged in race-related issues for some time prior to my entering as a researcher in 2004. This context led me to believe that the Zion School District would be a particularly interesting place in which to study multicultural education. Furthermore, the fact that the district had an explicit policy on multicultural education seemed to indicate that this educational philosophy and approach would be well integrated throughout the district. Given these multiple factors, it is telling that my data revealed such pervasive silences around issues of race and patterns that resulted in the legitimization—rather than the dismantling—of Whiteness.

I designed the study specifically to examine two different schools because of the pervasive assumptions about the dichotomies between the “eastside” and “westside” of the community. Located on opposite “sides” of the district, Birch Middle School served almost all poor students of color, whereas Spruce Middle School served a predominantly White middle- and upper-class student population. Spruce Middle School is located on the far eastside of the city in a neighborhood of single-family bungalow homes. Although the homes are relatively small and higher priced than those near Birch, they are some of the most sought-after homes in the city. Spruce has long been considered a “good” school within the Zion School District, and their annual performance on the Criterion Reference Tests is consistently high.⁵ Students scoring in either the sufficient or substantial categories are considered proficient for the purposes of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and adequate yearly progress (AYP) measures; only around 20 percent of Spruce’s students do not meet this criteria.

Birch, however, has long been considered one of the “worst” schools within the district, but the principal and faculty have worked hard in recent years to change this image. As you walk through Birch’s parking lot and into the front doors of the school, a large sign at eye level reads “Welcome to [Birch] Middle School—where failure is not an option, and success is the only option. Together We Can.” This theme of “together we can” is also displayed in other parts of the school, including on flags in the auditorium and on banners over some of the stairwells. Immediately next to this large colorful sign are smaller wooden signs announcing Birch’s “countdown to excellence.” In the middle there is a mirror at eye level with the statement “I can do it!” and on either side there is a sign for language arts and math with the number of days until students take the district’s standardized tests in these subjects. Students are reminded of the “countdown to excellence” almost daily during the morning announcements as well. Standardized test scores at Birch have been consistently rising over the past couple of years, but they still only post 50 percent of students scoring proficient in language arts whereas 75 percent score proficient in mathematics. Despite very different student demographics at Birch and Spruce, the patterns of silence among the teachers at both schools were the same—a pattern that is indicative, perhaps, of the problems inherent in a predominantly White teacher workforce.

Researcher Positionality and Ethnographic Tensions

As in all studies, my positionality and identities certainly played a role in how I was perceived, how people interacted with me, what they said to me, and what they did not say or do (Emerson et al. 1995; Weis and Fine 2000). As a White person conducting research with predominantly White teachers, however, my racial identity was often taken for granted and not questioned. In this sense, my Whiteness was an asset because White teachers and administrators seemed to assume a sort of compatibility with me and assumed that I would have similar beliefs about race as them. I am sure that a number of teachers felt comfortable saying certain things to me because of our shared White identity. Acutely aware of how I was likely being perceived by most of the White teachers with whom I worked caused me some discomfort, however. I often wondered if I was being dishonest or unethical by not making my beliefs about race and racism explicit to them. Doing this would have likely caused tension in a number of the relationships I formed with teachers and, in the end, I opted to not offer my perspectives about race but also to be honest if I was asked. Perhaps unsurprisingly, I was rarely asked about my thoughts on issues of race and racism. A district administrator of color told me early in the study that I would need to learn how to “maneuver the system and stay under the radar” because she believed that many people in the district were staunchly resistant to talking about “diversity” and hearing that they might be part of the problem. This advice shaped my approach to the entire study.

The biggest struggle for me in this project has been finding the right voice with which to talk about what I observed in the Zion School District. There are many things about which to be critical, but having formed relationships with the participants and generally believing that they are “nice people” makes being critical somewhat more difficult. I worry that my analysis here will be read as saying they are “bad people.” This is not my intention and, in fact, most of the educators in this study were caring and wanted all of their students to learn and be successful. Much of what I observed, however, reflects the larger society in which we live and in most instances, my critiques should be read as being critical of that system and those structures, rather than of the individual teachers. In other words, my goal is to illustrate how systems of power and structures of privilege and oppression are played out at the local level. However, there is certainly some measure of critique of individual teachers because we all need to recognize the role we play in creating and sustaining oppressive systems. Unfortunately, the line between these two places is quite thin, and I have struggled to both locate that line and keep my analysis within reach of it.

Some Theoretical Constructs from Which to Draw: Silence, Colormuteness, and Whiteness

In analyzing the data I collected in the Zion School District, three theoretical constructs have been particularly helpful. I draw on literatures about silence, colormuteness, and Whiteness because they help make sense of the empirical patterns I observed and because they complement one another theoretically. In what follows, I give a brief overview of each of these three concepts. After this theoretical discussion, I share data that highlight how patterns of silence and colormuteness are present in the Zion School District, and I illuminate how it is that those patterns result in the legitimation of Whiteness. I conclude by describing some counterexamples to the

patterns I observed as well as discussing the implications of this work for our understandings of silence, race, and Whiteness in schools.

Silence and Silencing

My data illustrate patterns of both silence and silencing on the part of educators. The difference lies in the fact that whereas silence is an absence, silencing is an act done to someone else (in this case, students). There exists a fair amount of scholarship on the notion of "silencing" in schools. As Fine notes, silencing refers to

the formal and informal ways schools control who can speak, what can and cannot be spoken, and whose discourse must be controlled (Cummins 1986). Inside public schools, particularly low-income public schools, there persists a systematic commitment to not name those aspects of social life or of schooling that activate social anxieties (Brodkey 1987). With important exceptions, school-based silencing precludes official conversation about controversy, inequity, and critique (Fine 1987). [Fine 1991:33]

In her study of students who had both dropped out and been pushed out of school, Fine found that the silencing of these students was not simply erratic but a patterned response in schools.

What became apparent was a structural fear of naming. Naming involves those practices that facilitate critical conversation about social and economic arrangements, particularly about inequitable distributions of power and resources by which these students and their kin suffer disproportionately. The practices of administration, the relationships between school and community, and the forms of pedagogy and curriculum applied were all scarred by the fear of naming, provoking the move to silence. (Fine 1991:34)

It becomes clear, then, that although I distinguish between silence and silencing, they are intimately related. Often, silence on the part of teachers leads to the silencing of students and the formation of a norm of silence around certain topics. Additionally, however, students can also be silenced through teachers' talk. Both of these possibilities are highlighted in this article. In opposition to the notion of being silenced is the notion of "voice." Numerous scholars have written about voice and, in general, it refers to having the power to name the world around you and "the ability to construct, articulate, and therefore shape one's experience as it is presented to others" (Quiroz 2001:328). Importantly, however, for voice to be powerful, it must be heard and not simply spoken (Ruiz 1997). It is apparent throughout this article that even when students attempt to voice ideas about race, they are either not heard or reprimanded to silence.

Colormuteness

Another way to think about these silences and silencing acts is through the notion of being "colormute." Pollock (2004) writes about educators being "actively colormute" through the "purposeful silencing of race words." By examining race talk in one public school in California, Pollock argues that educators ascribe to an ideology of colormuteness in public settings, but that they are more than willing to name and talk about race in private settings and when it is possible to displace blame away from themselves and toward other individuals or groups. She notes:

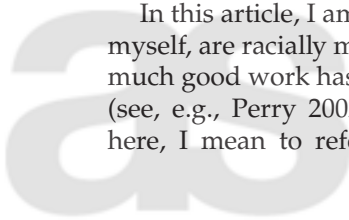
Race talk matters. All Americans, every day, *are* reinforcing racial distinctions and racialized thinking by using race labels; but we are also reinforcing racial inequality by refusing to use them. By using race words carelessly and particularly by *deleting* race words, I am convinced, both policymakers and laypeople in America help reproduce the very racial inequalities that plague us. It is thus crucial that we learn to navigate together the American dilemmas of race talk and colormuteness rather than be at their mercy. [Pollock 2004:4, emphasis in original]

Johnson (2001) agrees and notes that most (White) people are “put off” by words such as *race*, *racism*, and even *White*, because they assume that the words are imbued with personal and individual blame and guilt. Rather than attaching meaning about structures and systems of oppression to such words, many educators attach individual action and feelings. As a result, the words become taboo. However, as Johnson argues, by dispensing of such important words, we are merely making it “impossible to talk about what’s really going on and what it has to do with us” (Johnson 2001:2). He continues by writing, “When you name something, the word draws your attention to it, which makes you more likely to notice it as something significant. That’s why most people have an immediate negative reaction to words like ‘racism,’ ‘sexism,’ or ‘privilege’ ” (Johnson 2001:11). In their efforts to erase race, educators necessarily imply that race does, in fact, matter because acknowledging it is something to be avoided (Crenshaw 1995; Lewis 2003). A similar argument can be made of colormuteness—that is, by deleting race words, we actually make them matter more (Pollock 2004). As I illustrate below, I witnessed similar patterns as Pollock has around educators’ colormuteness.

Whiteness

Where my discussion extends the literature is by highlighting how educators’ silences around race result in the legitimation of Whiteness. Explanations and definitions of Whiteness abound among scholars. “Even though no one at this point really knows exactly what whiteness is, most observers agree that it is intimately involved with issues of power and power differences between white and nonwhite people” (Kincheloe and Steinberg 1998:4). Although there is some agreement among scholars as to how Whiteness is performed and how it affects the material realities of daily life, there are differential emphases placed on whether Whiteness is an identity, a performance, a set of beliefs, a structure, or nothing at all. I draw on a number of scholars to make sense of Whiteness, but I center Dyson’s explanation of Whiteness as an identity, an ideology, and an institution (Chennault 1998; Dyson 1996). As an identity, Whiteness refers to the “self-understanding, social practices, and group beliefs that articulate Whiteness in relationship to American race”; as an ideology, Whiteness references the “systematic reproduction of conceptions of whiteness as domination”; and as an institution, Dyson explains that “from the home to the school, from the government to the church—[various institutions] compose the intellectual and ideological tablet upon which have been inscribed the meanings of American destiny” (Chennault 1998:300–302).

In this article, I am not concerned with Whiteness as an identity. People, including myself, are racially marked (and in some contexts unmarked) as White, and although much good work has been done to uncover the meanings of Whiteness as an identity (see, e.g., Perry 2002), that has not been my project. When I speak of Whiteness here, I mean to reference the ideological and institutional aspects of Whiteness.

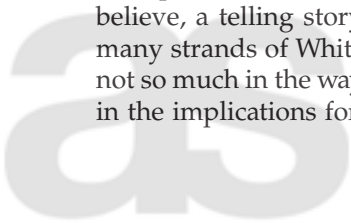


Importantly, Whiteness serves as a “pervasive ideology justifying dominance of one group over others” (Maher and Tetreault 1998:139). The ideology of Whiteness also serves as “a form of social amnesia” that allows White people to forget or ignore how we are implicated in the maintenance of systems of privilege and oppression (McLaren 1998). This function of Whiteness as ideology is illustrated throughout this article. As a system of ideologies and material effects (privilege and oppression), Whiteness is also a well-entrenched structure that is manifested in and gives shape to institutions. It has thus become a norm against which others are judged but also a powerful, if sometimes unconscious, justification for the status quo. As a location of structural advantage, Whiteness serves as “a discursive regime that enables real effects to take place” (McLaren 1998:67). Fine highlights an important aspect of Whiteness as an institution; she notes, “whiteness was produced through the exclusion and denial of opportunity to people of color. . . . Institutional leadership and seemingly race-neutral policies/practices work to insure white privilege” (Fine 1997:60). Thus, in examining and illustrating the structural and systemic nature of Whiteness, it is important to highlight the exclusion and oppression it produces, reproduces, and maintains for racialized people. Some of the characteristics of Whiteness that I illustrate in this article include the ignoring of race and racism, the embracing and rationalizing of meritocracy, the denying of institutional oppression, and the protecting of and investing in privilege.

Colormute: Silences around Race

In what follows, I examine how colormuteness operated in the Zion School District in four distinct ways: first, through the use of language that is coded for racial meaning; second, through the explicit ignoring of students’ race talk; third, through the active silencing of students around issues of race; and fourth, through discursive patterns that conflate culture with race, equality with equity, and difference with deficit. Importantly, the silence around race is part of teacher practice, but it is not a silence among most students. Because many students are keenly aware of race and racism, when teachers are silent on the topic, they end up silencing students as well.

Some may read what follows as a monolithic representation of teachers that is too tidy to be a realistic portrayal. As ethnographers, we are trained to look for contradictions, anomalies, and counterexamples to the patterns we observe, and we believe that a failure to provide such data is likely indicative of a weak ethnography because humans and social life are nothing if not complex. I, too, ascribe to this position in general, and although my larger ethnography (Castagno 2006) includes a number of contradicting examples around some of the coded themes, this was not the case with the pattern of colormuteness in my data. In fact, I had over 35 distinct examples of teachers’ silence or silencing of race within their classrooms and fewer than five examples to the contrary. What may be read as a flat representation is actually, I believe, a telling story about how beautifully (if we want to call it that) woven the many strands of Whiteness are. It is, unfortunately, quite simple. The complexity lies not so much in the ways White teachers silence race to legitimate Whiteness but rather in the implications for both students and society as a whole.



Racially Coded Language

It is significant that very few of the educators in this study explicitly referred to race in their discussions and descriptions of students. Although both schools served a racially diverse student body and displayed racialized patterns in tracking and achievement levels, teachers very rarely named these facts. At Spruce, language and ESL were particularly effective code words for race because almost all students of color at this school were classified as English-language learners (ELL) and enrolled in ESL courses. Thus, by talking about “language minority” students, Spruce educators could talk about and around race in ways that were perceived to be safer and less threatening. Like language, refugee status also served as a less dangerous way for educators to talk about race. At Birch, refugee status was intimately tied to race in complicated ways. Although students of color made up the overwhelming majority of students at Birch, they were primarily Latino and Pacific Islander.⁶ Very few Black students attended Birch, and those who did were almost all Somali Bantu refugees. There were a smaller number of refugee students from other African countries, but I knew of only two Black students at Birch who were not refugees. Refugee status at Birch, then, was not only associated with race in general but more specifically with being Black.

At the central office level within the district, language, poverty, and refugee status all served as signifiers of race, and all of these constructs were implicated in discourse around “eastside” and “westside” schools and students. Importantly, these “eastside” and “westside” constructs “serve as shorthand for race- and class-based distinctions. They index an understood knowledge base of spatial, historical, and ontological properties that are partly produced within . . . schools. As a result, they obscure the basis of their definition, allowing those who invoke them to denote meanings about race and class without explicitly naming them” (Buendia et al. 2004:835). In other words, although eastside and westside constructs are defined in relation to race and social class, the usefulness of the labels lies in our ability to implicitly reference race and social class without ever explicitly naming them. These code words are equally as pervasive in the local media and popular discourse as they are among educators in this study. It is important to remember, then, that in their use of racially coded language, educators are acting in ways consistent with the patterns present outside of schools. Equally important is the way in which district-level policies contribute to the tendency to avoid race-based language. The Zion School District allocates significant financial and human resources to “alternative language services” and “refugee services,” thus contributing to the dominant discourse in which these are the acceptable and commonly understood categories about which to describe students. Again, although issues related to language and refugee status are certainly important, my point here is that race is also important in the ways it shapes students’ schooling experiences. Despite its importance, race is consistently obscured through racially coded language.

Some readers may question whether these labels (i.e., regarding language, poverty, and refugee status) actually signify race. Although I did not explicitly ask participants in this study if their use of this language was tied to racialized understandings of their students, we cannot ignore the fact that all of these categories of identity are identifying students who are also students of color. Almost exclusively, in fact, students who come from low-income homes, live on the westside, speak a language other than

English, and are recently arrived refugees in this community are racialized students. It is striking that educators (and, indeed, the larger public) are more likely to identify students by these other signifiers than by their racial signifiers. Thus, although race always matters and racism is pervasive, we have operationalized a number of "code words" that enable us to talk about race while never actually naming race (Delgado and Stefancic 2001; Ladson-Billings and Tate 1995; Solórzano and Villalpando 1998; Tate 1997; Villenas and Deyhle 1999). Use of such racially coded language is problematic for at least two reasons: first, it hides the reproductive practices in which schools engage related to race and inequity; and second, it allows educators to believe that they are not differentiating education based on deficit models of students' racial identity but rather delivering an education that is appropriate to what "eastside" and "westside" students need (Buendia et al. 2004). It is clear, however, that although race was never named, educators' understandings of their students were still very much tied to ideas about race.

The tension, then, becomes how to view students as diverse individuals while at the same time protecting oneself from being perceived as racist, discriminatory, or unprofessional. Within schools, this tension is further shaped by things like policies, professional developments, and the language that surrounds us. Teachers' racially coded language is a strategy for navigating this tension in a way that seems to be win-win. But racially coded language allows racist views to be expressed without seeming to be racist (Bush 2004). This is important because one of the ways Whiteness operates is by concealing the power, privilege, and oppression that it perpetuates. Thus, by perpetuating racist beliefs through seemingly nonracist, neutral, and "common sense" language, Whiteness is engaged and reproduced. Through the ignoring of race and power within schools, educators contribute to the hegemony of deficit thinking and meritocracy. These two ideologies are necessary for the rationalization of the status quo and business-as-usual schooling practices. Racially coded language is, therefore, one important way in which Whiteness is both operationalized and legitimated within the Zion School District.

Teacher Silence

Much like educators' talk about their students was often coded for racial meaning and thus reflected a desire for safety and comfort, their responses to race talk among students also reflected a similar desire to maintain the legitimacy of the status quo. As the following examples illustrate, teacher silence in the face of student race talk served to support and possibly perpetuate racist beliefs and actions.

At Spruce, the predominantly White, middle- and upper-class school, most race talk and racist behavior from students went without response from teachers. One instance occurred while a small group of students were reenacting scenes from WWII in front of their social studies class; first they battled against Germans and repeatedly yelled, "Die, you Krauts!" and later they were Japanese military personnel and proceeded to have a "conversation" using very high-pitched noises that mimicked a stereotypical sounding Asian language while using their fingers to pull the skin around their eyes out and downward slanting. The students in the audience found this all very funny, and the teacher also laughed a bit and described the skit as "good" and "entertaining." By laughing and calling such a clear exhibit of racism "entertaining," the teacher reinforced the idea that these types of displays are acceptable and

that some (White) people's entertainment can come at the expense of others' identities. Rather than learn accurate and important history about the internment of Japanese Americans in their own backyards, these students instead left that particular class with the same stereotypical and racist assumptions about Japanese involvement in WWII as when they entered.

A similar example occurred when a teacher was doing a lesson on some of the American Indian tribes in Utah. The teacher talked about various "artifacts" that have been found around the state that archeologists and historians have used to piece together stories about both "prehistoric" and "historic" tribal groups. One student asked jokingly if they have "found a lot of Utah Ute flags" (the local university's mascot is the Ute) and then a group of White boys started pretending to be "prehistoric basketball players" by making cavemanlike grunting noises and moving their bodies in awkwardly violent ways. Later in the lesson when the teacher explained that the Utes were a "powerful" group and asked what "advantages" they may have had over other groups, one of these same boys answered "the first rounded rock" and motioned like he was throwing something with both hands from above his head while making a high-pitched shrieking noise. I interpreted these student behaviors as imitating and thus reinscribing the traditional savage and uncivilized images of Indigenous peoples, so it is striking that the teacher failed to intervene, question the assumptions that were being made, or provide more accurate information. The teacher's silence in this instance served not only to condone the behavior but also to miseducate students about Indigenous histories and peoples. When teachers do not interrupt students' racist behavior, they let an important opportunity pass and contribute to the perpetuation of racism. Rather than taken up as vehicles through which to disrupt the status quo, these instances were left as moments of entertainment for the class. The parallels with the racism involved in using ethnic groups as school mascots, as in the Ute mascot of the state's flagship university fewer than five miles down the road, cannot be overlooked. In both this classroom occurrence and the case of such mascots, the connections between individual's everyday practices and larger structural issues are clear: White privilege and dominance are left intact when these narratives of Indigenous peoples and tribal communities are passed on.

Another opportunity was passed in a language arts class. One morning after an announcement about a MESA field trip to a local amusement park,⁷ a White boy from a very affluent family complained, "you know what bugs me about that—you have to be of ethnicity [*sic*] to go to that," and he explained that when he asked the MESA teacher if he could be in the group, "he told me no, flat out." The teacher (and indeed the entire class) looked at the student as he said this but nothing was said in response—in this case, a student presented an opportunity to discuss issues of equity and why a program might exist that targets students of color but again, the teacher's silence instead seemed to imply agreement with the assumptions the student made. As a result, this class of predominantly White students was taught that minoritized groups receive privileges and special programs that are "unfairly" kept from White students. Again, Whiteness is operationalized through the messages that are sent about what is fair, equal, and equitable.

An extremely common phrase I heard among the male ELL students at Spruce was "just because I'm Brown" and less often "just because I'm Black." This was generally used as a response to these students' disciplining by their ESL teachers. One day after a boy was told, "Pull your pants up, and your belt shouldn't be hanging down," he

made the requested arrangements to his clothes while saying under his breath, "Just because I'm Black, man." In another instance, after a teacher started writing up a disciplinary referral for what she felt was excessive talking and failure to follow directions, another boy said, "Man, just 'cause I'm Brown." These Latino boys often equated their racialized identities with negative treatment by teachers such that if they had been White, they might not have been disciplined in the same manner or as frequently. I heard at least one of these "just because I'm Brown" comments from this particular group of boys every day that I was at Spruce and most of the time, the teachers never responded.

Teacher silence in response to students' race talk is another important mechanism for legitimating Whiteness in schools. Much like the effect of racially coded language, teacher silence around issues of race sends the message that race and racism are either nonexistent—figments, perhaps, of students' imaginations—or unnecessary topics of thought and conversation—something students use to try to divert attention or stir up controversy. Both of these possibilities are likely informing teachers' silence. Allegiance to colorblindness, equality, and meritocracy means that race can't possibly matter—if race and racism existed and held some significance in students' lives, then either our schools are not really colorblind, equal, and meritocratic, or teachers aren't. Further, the very topics of race and racism have historically been at the center of arguments, violence, and protest—all of which most teachers believe have no place in the classroom. Educators have very few models of how such conversations might look different, so why would we expect anything different from teachers who are already working hard to ensure that their students learn, behave appropriately, and pass standardized exams? But through this consistent denial of the systemic inequities, privileges, and oppressions associated with race, Whiteness is maintained. Students are being schooled in both the ideological and institutional aspects of Whiteness even when teachers don't say a word.

Silencing Students

When race talk wasn't met with silence on the part of teachers, it was usually met with a very shallow response from teachers requesting student silence. When the Spruce teachers did respond to the previously mentioned "just because I'm Brown" comments, it was with statements such as, "What'd I say about that comment," "I don't want to hear it again," "Don't say that," and "That'll get you in [detention]." I never once observed an honest conversation between the students and teachers about what motivated the race talk, what it meant, or why the teachers thought it was problematic. Teachers were clearly bothered by these comments and were uncomfortable with the implication that they were racist, but rather than address these concerns and the concerns of the students in a forthright way, they simply exerted their teacher authority and White privilege by silencing the comments and pretending that they had no meaning.

Another example involved mainstream, regular track students and illustrates clearly how students are interested in and constructing ideas about race and how uncomfortable teachers are with race talk in their classrooms. This incident occurred in a world languages class when a student's mother, who was White, came to speak with the class in the language they were learning. After she introduced herself in the language, the students were instructed to ask her questions in the language. One boy

asked what translated into “What is your color?” and the woman answered “Black” because she assumed he actually meant “What is your favorite color?” The student was not satisfied with this answer so he asked the same question again and when the woman gave the same answer, he said in English, “You’re Black?” The mother then said in English, “Oh, you’re asking me my nationality? . . . You don’t ask that . . . It is not appropriate.” The student asked why it was not appropriate and the mother gave a nervous giggle, looked at the teacher, and simply said again that it wasn’t appropriate. She left shortly after this conversation, and the teacher was clearly upset with what had transpired. She reminded the students that they had “been in school for 165 days” and that they had “learned at least 100 questions.” She explained that “one of the most cruel things you can do in [this particular European country] . . . is ask anyone what their race or ethnicity is”; she then asked, “Is it polite here?” A number of students answered yes, to which the teacher retorted, “No, it’s not!” The boy who originally asked the question noted that “they do it on the CRT test,”⁸ and a number of other students asked the teacher why she didn’t think it was okay to ask. The teacher simply said that it wasn’t appropriate “in public” and “in front of everyone.” She also said that the mother “was being kind” in her answer and that “in America it’s not polite and in [this European country] it’s worse.” She added, “If someone came up to you and asked you about religion or ethnicity or race, it’s just not polite.”

As in the previous examples, here the teacher was actively telling students to be colormute and to avoid such conversations. The assumptions being made are that talking about race makes one racist and that not talking about race makes it go away. As Pollock (2004) argues, however, not talking about race can make race matter even more and can be just as racist as talking about it—sometimes it can be even more damaging. The original student finally seemed to buy in to the teacher’s position and said, “Oh, I get it, because you might get made fun of?” The teacher said yes and seemed relieved to end the conversation with the last words: “It really doesn’t matter because we’re all humans.” As the students were leaving the room, the teacher looked at me with wide eyes and put her hands to her cheeks in disbelief or possibly embarrassment. This veteran teacher was clearly flustered in the face of students’ race talk, and her belief that such talk is “impolite” highlights what may be a critical motivating factor behind many teachers’ silence and silencing of race. Educators are expected to school children in the social etiquette of the dominant culture, which includes knowing what and when to raise particular issues. Once again, students were taught that silence is the expectation around issues of race, and that one is “impolite” and “not nice” if they speak what is considered the unspeakable.

Similar examples of teachers demanding student silence on issues of race occurred at Birch. But here, where students of color were the significant majority in the school, students’ race talk was generally far more productive and less often racist than at Spruce. For example, on most of the days I observed an art class at Birch, the students talked among themselves while they worked on their projects. On one particular day the conversation topic was race and racial labels. A Pacific Islander boy asked about the word “Spicket” and a Latino boy replied, “It’s about your race.” Another Latino boy related it to the word “Tonganos,” and the Pacific Islander boy said to the Latino boys, “Your people say it in negative ways like ‘stupid Tonganos.’” One of the Latino boys said that that wasn’t true and another countered that “some do.” At this point, the teacher interrupted the conversation and said, “Stop talking about race and ethnicity because it’s making you upset” and “I want this to be a nice environment

where everyone feels welcomed." From my vantage point, I did not sense that the students were getting upset; it seemed to me like they were having a productive conversation about race and language. The students continued the conversation a bit more quietly, and the teacher again interrupted by exclaiming, "Stop!" The boys explained, "We're just talking and playing around," and the teacher responded, "but other people can hear it and may get offended." The students switched to other conversations, and the teacher continued to walk around the room checking on the students' work. Unfortunately, as Tatum notes, "Children who have been silenced often enough learn not to talk about race publicly. Their questions don't go away, they just go unasked" (1997:36). Thus, by silencing students' potentially productive race talk, teachers not only fail to answer student inquiries but also contribute to the likelihood that students will not voice such inquiries in the future.

This, then, is another important way in which Whiteness is legitimated in schools. When teachers silence students' race talk and students learn to avoid such talk in the future, the likelihood of systemic change is greatly reduced. Without systemic change, achievement gaps persist, educational inequities continue, and patterned privilege and oppression has the same material effects as has been true for decades. In other words, Whiteness is reproduced and through its reproduction becomes more normal, accepted, expected, and rationalized. Although students' race talk could create opportunities for critiquing Whiteness, when it is silenced by teachers, it instead becomes another place for the legitimation of Whiteness.

Conflating Concepts in the Interest of Whiteness

Alongside teachers' silences and silencing of race were discursive practices that further obscured the role of race and racism and, therefore, legitimated Whiteness. The teachers in my study regularly conflated culture with race (Akom 2006; Pierre 2004), equality with equity (Brayboy et al. 2007), and difference with deficit in their discussions of students, teaching, and education.⁹ The conflation of these concepts further highlights how Whiteness works through nice people, including teachers who believe they are acting in the best interests of their students. Importantly, however, what is believed to be in students' best interests is too often in the interests of Whiteness.

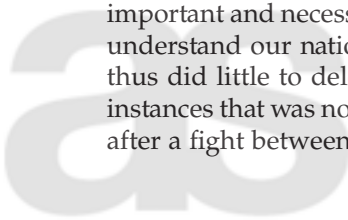
Teachers obscured race, equity, and deficit beliefs by talking about students' "culture" and by describing "good teaching" as that which "appeals to different learning styles" and "incorporates different teaching styles." As one Birch teacher explained, "You make an effort to include all cultures." Teachers also talked about "equality" and described good teaching as offering the same thing to all students—as highlighted by a Spruce teacher who told me, "I just teach kids; I don't do anything differently based on the kids' cultures." Ms. Wendall, from Birch, provides a representative example: "I think that regardless of what culture or socioeconomic status or ethnicity they are, a teacher is always going to have to find ways to reach students that learn differently than others. I think regardless that is your goal, is to find what works for certain students." These very common appeals to culture and equality are yet another way Whiteness gets legitimated in schools by teachers who believe they are doing "what's best for the kids." Teachers' belief in the importance of "culture" often implied deficit thinking and an assumed superiority in their own "culture." This was particularly evident in the popularity of Ruby Payne's work and the extent to which

teachers at both Birch and Spruce relied on Payne's model and described their own work as needing to "build the cognitive capacities" of children from low-income backgrounds. Mr. Mecha, for example, explained that he had recently "read and learned much more about how living in poverty affects students"; he noted that this information has "helped" him to let "things the students say go in one ear and out the other because they can say those things at home and that's related to their low-income backgrounds." In a similar conversation, another teacher commented that "there's the culture of poverty and that's a lot of what's going on here at [Birch]." Teachers' discourse centered around the "differences" between various groups of students (such as those from low-income families), but in describing such "differences," deficits were clearly implied. Although such discriminatory beliefs were never explicitly linked to race, they have racialized meanings. Because race is never explicitly engaged, these discursive practices represent another form of silence around race, thus perpetuating the system in which silence is the norm and Whiteness is held intact.

The conflating of these concepts represents acceptable and, in fact, encouraged ways for "good" teachers to engage race. Discursive appeals to culture, equality, and difference represent "a respectable cultural theory" (Foley 2008) for teachers to make sense of the achievement gaps they hear so much about and observe every day in their classrooms. As long as these are the ways educators think about students, identity, power, and inequity, Whiteness will continue to be engaged and, therefore, perpetuated and legitimated. Furthermore, it is precisely in the space of slippage between culture and race, equality and equity, and difference and deficit that Whiteness is reified. The slippage that occurs when we conflate these concepts is in many ways caused by liberal ideologies such as meritocracy, colorblindness, and multicultural education. Does this mean that liberal White teachers who have embraced such discourses and ideologies are truly unaware of the ways in which we perpetuate Whiteness, like the teachers in Marx's (2006) study? Does this mean that all we need to do is make teachers aware of their avoidance of race and they will see the subtle ways that they privilege Whiteness? Marx believes so, but I am less sure. Certainly we must try to transform the attitudes of White teachers, but we must also recognize how deeply engrained colormute attitudes and practices are. The ambivalence that results from the conflating of concepts is, in fact, part of the way Whiteness works and part of what makes it so difficult to undo.

Counterexamples and the (De)Legitimation of Whiteness

I mentioned earlier that I experienced very few examples that did not fit within the colormute patterns I have described here. All of the counterexamples occurred in social studies classes at Birch Middle School, and almost all occurred in the context of history lessons. Mr. James, for example, brought up racial and religious differences when discussing the development of the 13 colonies, and Ms. Manning discussed racism within the context of the U.S. Civil War. These sorts of examples are clearly important and necessary aspects of U.S. history. Although they helped students better understand our nation's history, they were not connected to present-day issues and thus did little to delegitimize Whiteness within the current context. One of the few instances that was not framed within a history lesson occurred in Ms. Manning's class after a fight between different groups of Latina students resulted in a number of her



students being suspended from school. She facilitated a conversation with her students that began with, "Why don't you guys like each other?" and ended with, "You have to learn to get along." This was a heated conversation in which students were engaged and the teacher did not silence what was already a contentious issue, but it is striking that the conversation was solely about racial tension between students of color. Although this is certainly an important concern, it leaves out an historically grounded structural analysis of racism and thus reinscribes Whiteness.

When I asked Mr. James and Ms. Manning about their willingness to broach topics of race within their classrooms, they both discussed versions of three themes: that "history cannot be understood without talking about it," that they "can do more of that because we don't have those tests to worry about," and that "our students deal with this stuff every day." Thus, they clearly saw their discipline as well as the racialized identities of their students as opening up space for particular conversations about race. These represent important "cracks in the wall of whiteness" (Bush 2004). Although these openings did not result in race talk that delegitimated Whiteness, they certainly might with further probing. Equally significant, and also mentioned by both Mr. James and Ms. Manning, is that neither of these two teachers were members of the dominant religious culture within Utah and have, as a result, experienced some degree of "not-belonging" within their own communities. Being positioned outside what is a significant cultural majority, but in solidarity with other "dissenters," led to a sense of empowerment and willingness to "push the envelope" in some cases. This is, again, a place in which we might pursue strategies for dismantling rather than legitimating Whiteness.

Thinking through Influence, Intentionality, and Implications

Spruce and Birch students, like students around the country, possess a number of ideas about race and racism. Through teacher silence and acts of silencing, students are learning rules about what can be acknowledged, publicly recognized, and discussed (Polite and Saenger 2003). But if schools hope to practice culturally relevant schooling, advance equity, and dismantle Whiteness, they must take on the difficult task of talking to students about issues like race and racism. When we fail to explicate the ways in which racism is operating within our schools, educational inequity is left to be understood as resulting from individual deficit (Gillborn 2005). Thus, meritocracy and Whiteness are mutually reinforcing of one another. When meritocracy is assumed, our focus is directed away from systemic inequities and toward individual success and failure. Thus, meritocracy allows us to see ourselves as "innocent bystanders rather than participants in a system that creates, maintains, and reproduces social injustice" (Applebaum 2005:286). Teachers' participation in this system clearly carries a significant influence over our nation's youth.

And what about the influence researchers might have on their research participants? In my own case, failing to initiate the very conversations with teachers that I believe teachers failed to initiate with students might mean that I too participated in the legitimization of Whiteness. My discomfort about this likely possibility was only partially alleviated when I spent two days sharing my findings with school and district leaders six months after the completion of the study. Although I was discouraged from sharing my findings directly with teachers, the principals and administrators with whom I worked agreed, for the most part, that colormuteness was pervasive

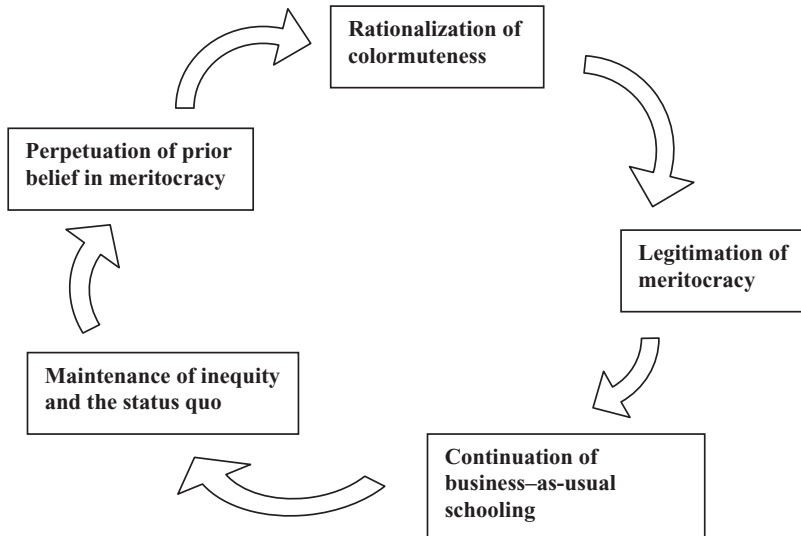
within the district. Their admission of these silences was combined with either apologetic disappointment—like Birch’s principal who said, “You’re absolutely right, and it isn’t what’s best for our kids”—or rationalizations for the behavior—as when Spruce’s principal defended the silence as “best practice” because of potential parent discontent and other teaching pressures that did not provide time or energy for such dialogue. However, a high-level district administrator later told me that my work sparked the district to engage in sustained dialogues about these issues and that they were beginning this process by reading and discussing Singleton and Linton’s (2005) *Courageous Conversations about Race: A Field Guide for Achieving Equity in Schools*.¹⁰ A sustained commitment along these lines may begin to disrupt the legitimization of Whiteness achieved through teachers’—and my own—silence and silencing of race.

My hope now is that I have effectively illustrated how silences around issues of race are not only pervasive at both Spruce and Birch but also create and perpetuate an educational culture in which the status quo is maintained. Through both teacher silence and demands for student silence around issues of race and racism, teachers exhibit an overwhelming aversion to acknowledgments that race exists or matters. And through their discursive appeals to culture, equality, and meritocracy, teachers further erase race and engage Whiteness. This is significant because I posit that in their prescriptions for colormuteness, educators are able to maintain the legitimacy of meritocracy, which serves to protect the status quo and the interests of White people and communities. In other words, by denying race, educators are able to also deny the ways in which we participate in the legitimization of Whiteness.

The educators in this study are, for the most part, well-intentioned individuals who want their students to succeed and who want to provide a welcoming and fair educational climate within their classrooms. Indeed, most of the silences and silencing I observed were motivated by teachers’ desires to “keep everyone happy,” “not offend anyone,” and protect students from “getting upset.” The general belief is that talking about race is simply too conflict laden, tense, and hurtful and, perhaps more importantly, implies that one is racist. In other words, if you talk about race, you must see race, and if you see race, you must be racist (Bush 2004; Solomon et al. 2005). I don’t mean to imply here that educators engage in colormuteness because they are intentionally legitimating Whiteness. Instead, most of the teachers in this study were either genuinely afraid of explicitly naming and talking about race or did not know how to do so—or both. What I hope has become apparent, however, is that even when it is with good intentions that we silence or avoid responding to students’ race talk, we are engaging in practices that perpetuate Whiteness within our schools. This is, in fact, the brilliance of the way Whiteness operates—just like any other hegemonic ideology and institution, it is most successful when the majority of its adherents are least aware of it and its power.

The colormute practices in the Zion School District thus serve an important purpose: namely, they feed the cycle in which meritocracy is justified, business as usual schooling is rationalized, and inequities are sustained. The cumulative impact of this cycle is the legitimization of Whiteness (see Figure 1). The cycle helps illustrate why it is so easy to continue—it is not a very big step from one point to the other, but the cumulative effect is quite troubling. We must begin to strategize ways to chip away at each piece of the cycle to imagine schools in which Whiteness does not prevail.

Figure 1.
One process through which Whiteness is entrenched in schools.

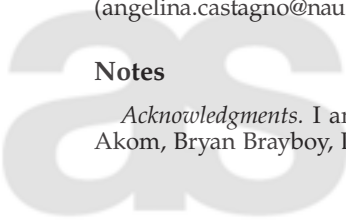


The silencing of race and the subsequent legitimation of Whiteness have multiple and varied implications for students in both racially diverse and predominantly White school contexts. The politeness associated with colormuteness in predominantly White schools works for and to the advantage of students at schools like Spruce. Engulfed in a system meant to benefit us, White people may have much to lose by explicitly addressing race and racism. In schools serving primarily students of color, however, race talk would likely resonate with the everyday experiences of students, which could in turn lead to improved academic achievement through the development of critical thinking about real-world issues. And in all school settings, such discussions are important for working toward structural and ideological social change—a move that contradicts the entrenched nature of Whiteness, but that is necessary if we hope to bring about greater equity in schools and the larger society. Indeed, when educators fail to address race, they fail to address students' needs (Pollock 2004; Thompson 2005). Within a framework of Whiteness in which the status quo is desirable and beneficial, silence truly is golden. But within a framework of equity in which social justice and fairness are sought, silence is both indifference and highly problematic.

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Notes

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1. I understand “race” to be a social construction that has significant material effects for people. Although I recognize the variability in the ways race interacts with other identities and the ways people are racialized, experience racism, and identify racially, such a discussion is beyond the scope of this article.

2. Although it is AAA style to lowercase the terms *black* and *white*, I have elected to capitalize them as proper nouns.

3. All proper names of the schools, district, and educators have been changed to protect the anonymity of the participants.

4. The Office of Civil Rights allegations also related to special education services, but this has less relevance to my discussion of race in this article.

5. These are the standardized tests the district uses to comply with NCLB regulations.

6. In the Salt Lake area, “Pacific Islander” and “Polynesian” are used interchangeably to denote the significant number of people in this community from Samoa and Tonga. Among the teachers in this study, the diversity within these labels was rarely noted.

7. MESA stands for “Mathematics, engineering, and science achievement” and is a program within the district that aims to involve students of color and low-income students in these fields in which they are traditionally underrepresented.

8. This is the Criterion Referenced Test the district uses to comply with NCLB regulations.

9. Although a complete articulation of this theme is not possible here, I develop these ideas further in another work currently under review and in a forthcoming book.

10. It is important to note that a handful of administrators of color and White allies have been making similar points within the district for years. I believe, however, that my outsider and researcher status, as well as my White identity, may have contributed to my message being heard in ways that were not previously possible. This was, however, also only possible because of the collective work by many leaders within the district.

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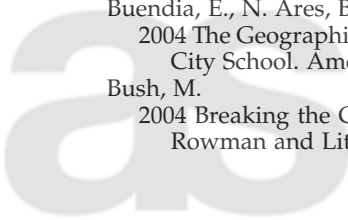
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