

White intellectual alibies in use: A critical analysis of preservice teachers' rhetoric

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The demographic disconnect in the U.S. between the majority white, female teacher workforce and the diverse students they serve perpetuates white supremacy in various ways. These relationships can be especially problematic in mathematics settings, where race issues are often disguised behind discourses of neutrality, intelligence, and meritocracy. To further understand how white supremacy is enacted in educational spaces, we applied Leonardo's theory of "white intellectual alibis" to critically analyze interview data involving a pair of white-identifying preservice teachers engaging with novel hypothetical scenarios. Findings show that participants utilized various alibis that reinforced racist narratives and silenced possible antiracist conversations. Implications for teacher education are discussed.

Introduction

One way that white supremacy is perpetuated in U.S. classrooms is through disproportions between white teachers (79%) and students of color (50%) (Taie & Goldring, 2020; Yoon, 2012). Often, white teachers fall back on "hidden expressions of disgust for the Other" (Matias & Zembylas, 2014) and rely on the privilege of whiteness afforded them in existing systems. Within schools, mathematics spaces can be especially problematic as white privilege is further exacerbated by narratives of meritocracy, knowledge neutrality, normative intelligence discourses about who is capable and who is not, and white masculinity (Bullock, 2017; Martin, 2009; Warburton, 2015).

For the white teachers who wish to take part in mending this broken system, and would like to understand their role in perpetuating its preservation, the view from their classrooms can seem daunting. Perhaps white teachers are aware of centuries of inequality in the U.S. (Kendi, 2016; Ewing, 2018), which result in disparate, racialized, educational outcomes that significantly disadvantage students of color (e.g., academic outcomes, graduation rates, and college admissions). They might wonder if their daily interactions with students will have any impact on students' lives inside and outside of the classroom, or affect lasting change in helping reform inherently racist systems.

Although it is tempting to argue that white teachers are not the *problem*, but rather the *symptom* of these racist structures, we choose to focus on them because we contend that the

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actions of individuals can either rescript existing narratives or challenge them (Perry, 2011). Teachers who enter their professions with antiracist identities and the skills necessary to enact antiracist education are better equipped to be part of positive systemic change (e.g., Lewis, 2018; Tilson, Sandretto & Pratt, 2017). Thus, we seek to address the practices of white teachers as leverage points for potential change.

Teacher education programs are potential sites to address these issues. However, it has been argued that teacher education has itself been a site of whiteness's remaking (Daniels & Varghese, 2020, p. 57; Jupp, Leckie, Cabrera & Utt, 2019). Even within teacher education programs that are dedicated to social-justice issues, there continues to be disconnects between antiracist education and teacher practices (e.g., Agarwal, et al., 2010; White, Crespo, & Civil, 2016). This is often due to how white preservice teachers (PSTs) work to avoid and deflect interrogations into their own positionalities, consequences of whiteness, and how racism and white privilege are enacted (e.g., Buchanan, 2016; Lewis, 2018; Matias & Zembylas, 2014). A recent review of 39 peer-reviewed journal articles (all focused on the intersection of preservice teacher education and race) found that "teacher educators continue to face the problems of race talk evasion, colorblind racism, and even retaliation" that were evident in early white teacher identity studies (Hambacher & Ginn, 2020, p. 339).

Examining how PSTs affective responses and white subjectivities are enacted during "uncomfortable conversations devoted to naming the consequences of racism" has potential to illuminate various leverage-points and potential pitfalls for teachers and teacher educators to design and implement antiracist education (Buchanan, 2016; Lewis, 2018; Matias & Zembylas, 2014; Sharma & Lazar, 2014). In this study, we look carefully at the discourse of two preservice elementary teachers, Abby and Sarah, as a window into practices that evade race and racism. Data come from a pair interview; during which, the pair were given several scenarios and were asked to imagine that they were teachers in a fictitious classroom and would need to provide next pedagogical steps that would support students pertaining to content or issues of equity within a mathematics or science setting.

This paper focuses on one of these discussions in which participants were faced with hypothetical scenarios where a student shared a concern regarding how they perceived that "white kids" were being unfairly called on more during math class. Their discussion offers clues into ways which white teachers might unknowingly perpetuate racist status quos, and how they can often see defensive and race-evasive behaviors in another teacher's reactions (e.g., denial, avoidance, unfair blaming), though not in their own, similar, reactions.

Theoretical framework: White intellectual alibis

In this paper, we focus on how the participants used *white intellectual alibis* (Leonardo & Zembylas, 2013) to "prove" their innocence when faced with the possibility of their own racism. The alibi is a spatial metaphor: "The criminal is ruled out as a suspect once he furnishes a fail-proof accounting for his whereabouts [...] he cannot be in two places at once" (p. 152). White intellectual alibis create a racist binary; whites positioning themselves as good nonracists, and "other" whites (or their former selves) as bad racists.

White intellectual alibis leave no room for the possibility that one could espouse antiracism yet maintain discriminatory practices (Leonardo & Zembylas, 2013; Perry, 2011). This suggests an extant nonracist, rather than keeping focus on possible antiracist narratives. Through avoidance and silences, racism proceeds unchecked and internalized messages about white superiority are perpetuated, rather than investigated and challenged (Souto-Manning, 2013). In this way, *acting* antiracist takes precedence over *advocating* for antiracism projects.

There are many possible alibis, such as: “my best friend is black”; “the n-word is just a word”; or claiming “I don’t see race” (Nishi, Matias, and Montoya, 2015, p. 462). The findings presented here show how participants Abby and Sarah created white intellectual alibis for themselves through various discursive strategies. Here we pay special attention to three of these alibis—*I’m not like bad racist “others”*; *I’m a strategic problem-solving teacher*; and *Well, life isn’t fair*. Through the lens of white intellectual alibis, we analyze how discourse can work to “prove racist innocence” and avoid “difficult” conversations; we suggest the growing list of white intellectual alibis in teacher education might be expanded to include our findings.

This framework, as well as the white intellectual alibies described in this paper, are informed by a rich tradition of CRT and whiteness theory. For example, Bonilla-Silva (2018) provides a useful guide to recognize rhetorical moves that signify “color blind racism”: In this data corpus we see how, as Bonilla-Silva outlines, meritocratic-thinking functions as race evasion (seen in *the strategic problem-solving teacher* alibi). Additionally, in avoiding race talk by discussing the how life may not be fair, or focusing on the behaviour of others, participants were discussing “anything but race” in order to “dismiss the fact that race affects an aspect of [their] life” (Bonilla-Silva, 2018, p. 86). In focusing this analysis on white intellectual alibies, we do not intend to overstate the power of this theoretical lens. We use it to show one of the ways whiteness functions in action – as “evidence” for white innocence.

Participants and methodology

The qualitative data for this study come from a pair interview with two preservice elementary teachers (Abby and Sarah) enrolled in a university teacher training program. Both participants and the interviewer (Author 1) identified as white women. The interviewer approached the participants (and approaches this work) in a spirit of complicity—understanding that her work as a white teacher has been problematic at times, and she must confront and challenge her own white intellectual alibis.

The interview protocol was created as part of a larger project focused on improving math and science content and methods courses in a university teaching licensure program. As part of this project, a team of researchers gathered qualitative audio data of PSTs discussing various classroom case-study scenarios, which we call *hypothetical teaching scenarios* (HTSs). Using hypothetical scenarios in teacher education settings to approximate real classroom interactions is common practice (Shaughness & Boerst, 2018). However, what is less common is gathering and analyzing qualitative data of teachers *collaboratively* engaging with HTSs, in small groups or dyadic interviews, for example. The HTSs in this project were designed

to elicit rich discussion about issues that might arise in a mathematics or science classroom and covered a wide range of content and pedagogy (e.g., using representations in mathematics; evaluating arguments in science; addressing sexism, racism, or intelligence discourses in STEM settings; see Gutiérrez et al., 2019).

This paper focuses on two HTSs (Figures 1 & 2). Next, we describe our protocols.

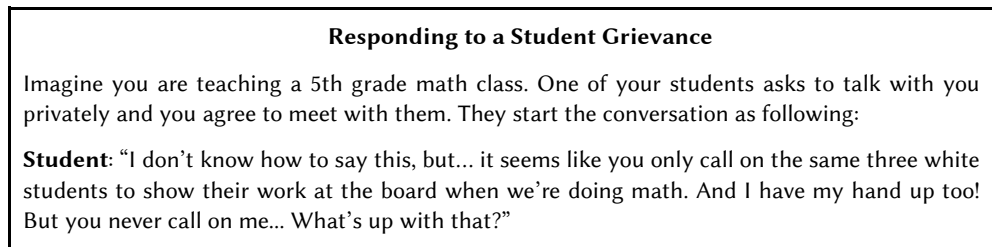


Figure 1: “Responding to a Student Grievance,” a hypothetical teaching task.

After reading this scenario, small groups of PSTs were prompted to imagine how they might respond to the student, then write and discuss their responses. From analyzing these responses, the research team created a coding scheme that highlighted common ways PSTs used language to respond (e.g., apologies, explanations, or “solutions”; Gutiérrez et al., 2020). The research team proposed taking this HTS into an interview setting where the interviewer would ask follow-up questions and provide individualized prompts. We chose to utilize a pair interview format, where participants could interact back-and forth with a friend as well as the interviewer. We hypothesized this format would create an environment for participants to discuss difficult or uncomfortable topics, such as race, in ways that they might not otherwise. In this setting, at times, the interviewer prompted participants to discuss responses with one another and took an active observer role (Morgan, Ataie, Carder, & Hoffman, 2013). At other times, the interviewer jumped into the conversation, sharing relevant experiences and prior racial assumptions or beliefs.

For this pair interview study, we also sought to understand how PSTs viewed another teacher’s response; to see if they might notice whiteness discourse outside of themselves. Thus, we added an HTS, *Student Grievance Conversation* (Figure 2), that included an imaginary conversation between the hypothetical teacher and student. The hypothetical teacher’s responses in this HTS were crafted to closely follow common themes from the small-group discussion analysis (Gutiérrez et al., 2020). During the interview, Abby and Sarah were presented with paper versions of these scenarios, one at a time. For *Responding to a Student Grievance* they were asked to write how they would respond to the student, then share their responses with one another and discuss. They were also asked follow-up questions and prompted several times throughout. Next they were asked to read the *Student Grievance Conversation* and were given similar protocol prompts. However, in this case they were asked to discuss their thoughts about the teacher’s response, rather than their own responses.

Student Grievance Conversation

Imagine the same student and a teacher (other than yourself) had the following conversation after the student shares the same concern:

Student: "I don't know how to say this, but... it seems like you only call on the same three white students to show their work at the board when we're doing math. And I have my hand up too! But you never call on me... What's up with that?"

Teacher: "I'm so sorry you feel this way. I never meant for this to happen. I will try and call on students more fairly in the future."

Student: "Thanks. That's cool. I don't think it's just that I feel this way, though. I notice the same thing happening with my friends or at the store. I just feel invisible sometimes. I just want white people to admit that they treat me this way."

Teacher: "Well, again, I'm sorry you feel this way. Not every white person treats you this way. I care for all my students. I can't control your friends or people at the store. But I can control what I do in my classroom."

Student: "OK. Thanks." [walks out of the room, but seems disappointed and has head down.]

Figure 2: "Student Grievance Conversation," a follow-up HTS.

The interview was video and audio recorded, and transcribed. We applied Critical Discourse Analysis methods to analyze, understand, and explain the data in order to "speak to and, perhaps, intervene in institutional, social, or political issues, problems, and controversies in the world" (Gee & Handford, 2013, p. 9).

Findings

Here, we highlight three of the white intellectual alibis consistently employed by Abby and Sarah. Much of the discourse seen here is discussed in whiteness literature to explain, for example, ways in which avoidance, deflection, image management, or cultures of caring work to shift conversations away from antiracist ones (e.g., Lewis, 2018; Orozco, 2019). We present these data under the lens of white intellectual alibis in order to further highlight ways that rhetorical moves are used as spatial dividers between "innocent" nonracists and "guilty" racists.

The strategic, problem-solving teacher alibi

Both Abby and Sarah wanted to "solve the problem" as evidenced in Abby's statement, "I would feel horrible if a kid felt that way, and I would want to fix it." Solving problems and fixing things is generally considered an important part of a teacher's job; however, using pedagogies and classroom practices as comprehensive solutions to racialized situations is, we submit, a type of white intellectual alibi: *I'm a strategic, problem-solving teacher*. The use of this alibi both exonerates white teachers from being racist, and from participating in further discussions of race. Notice how this alibi functions by considering Sarah's initial response to the first scenario:

I would never call on the same three white kids [...] I wouldn't teach like that [...] [I would] pull sticks [...] making sure every child can answer the question.

Although Sarah used the term "white" (a rare occurrence in the data corpus), there was no prior or further discussion about race or racism. She proceeded as though she had solved the problem by pulling sticks in order to randomize student participation (her solution for equity.) This illustrates how an alibi works to "solve the problem," and shut down possible conversations about race. Sarah could not be in two places at once: with strong pedagogies and classroom management skills, she precluded herself from committing a racist crime and interrogating potential racism or biases.

This alibi also worked to pacify the student and "prove to him that they were not doing it on purpose" (Sarah). Instead of engaging in critical self-reflection, Abby and Sarah addressed the student in order to "fix the problem," proposing several solutions. For example, at one point Sarah offered the following solution: "I will make sure to wait a little bit longer for people to put their hands up as well." And another time, Abby sought to involve the student in the solution: "Like, do you have a solution [...] so how can I fix this for you? What I'm doing might not be working for you. What do you have in mind?" In focusing on pragmatic solutions for the issue at hand, and in working to "fix" things by getting the student's input, Abby distanced herself from the guilty racist charge. There was no further discussion about racism afterward; these conversations about classroom pedagogies were used to absolve Abby and Sarah and convince themselves (and others) that there was no possibility that a racist crime had been committed.

Well, life isn't fair alibi

Another alibi can be seen in the following excerpt that occurred after Abby scanned the second HTS and audibly sighed:

I can see [...] it talks about the white people, and stuff, and the sad thing is, you can't control every aspect of their lives [...] I can only do so much [...] Like, I can't go everywhere and make sure everybody treats them fairly.

This statement seemed to put-an-end-to, or take place of, possible discussions of racism. As with other alibis, on its face, this is a true statement: Abby cannot "control every aspect" of a student's life. However, the work is not done through the statement alone, but through the insinuation that this fact is not compatible with problematizing racist selves and practices.

We call this alibi *Well, life isn't fair*. One of the most notable incidents of this alibi was near the end of the interview when Sarah explicitly addressed the possibility of her own racism by saying:

I feel like I'm coming off racist [...] I'm not [...] Like it's always a battle [...] but you're not going to win every battle [...] like there are going to be really hard things to deal with in life [...] and there's some really crappy people in the world, but we need to, like, be above those people.

Sarah's contention that she was "not" racist was followed immediately with the *Well, life isn't fair* alibi (e.g., "Like it's always a battle [...] but you're not going to win every battle"). The way that the nonracist comment was paired so closely with this alibi is evidence that Sarah saw the two as mutually exclusive. Her racism couldn't coexist with the fact that life was, in general, unjust and "hard." For Sarah, the two ideas could not occupy the same space at the same time.

I'm not like bad racist "others" alibi

The last part of the excerpt above, "there's some really crappy people in the world, but we need to, like, be above those people," is an example of a common theme in Abby and Sarah's speech: racism does exist, but only in others ("crappy people".) This alibi, *I'm not like bad racist "others,"* was especially apparent when Abby and Sarah, positioned as observers of another teacher, responded to the second HTS. They spoke as though the teacher's response was racially motivated, whereas, they projected their own motivations as unintentional—creating a nonracist alibi while distancing themselves from the racist "other" white in the scenario (Leonardo & Zembylas, 2013).

Especially revealing of this was when Sarah critiqued the teacher's apology:

The *but* takes away the sincerity of it. It's like, 'blah, blah, blah, this, this, and this. *But* I can't really help you.' I hate the comment, 'I'm sorry you feel this way.' To me, that's like, it's almost like, 'Oh, yeah. I'm sorry you feel this way!' [sarcastic tone] That's not validating their feelings at all [...] it's shutting it down and trying to make it a smaller problem.

Here, Abby's critique of the teacher's apology ("I'm so sorry you feel this way") was very similar to Abby's apology from the first scenario ("I'm so sorry if, like, that made you feel [...] I'm so sorry if that made you think that I never call on you."). Despite the obvious similarities in the apologies, Sarah never mentioned this irony. In fact, she "hates" the teacher's apology. Looking at this phenomenon through a white intellectual alibi lens, we can see that it functions similar to a legal battle where the defendant's character is either defamed or commended. Again, we see how the spatial binary works: a defendant either has "good" behavior and, thus, is not capable of committing the crime of racism, or has "bad" behavior, and thus, is likely to be racist. Further, in pointing-out the bad behavior of others, the defendant separates themselves even more from the scene of the crime.

Discussion and future research

White intellectual alibis

This analysis shows how, as Abby and Sarah navigated a racialized discussion, they spent a significant amount of time creating white intellectual alibis that carefully managed their images as nonracist. Although both teachers seemed genuinely interested in addressing and rectifying the problem broached by the hypothetical student, they were rarely direct in addressing racism as a possibility. Abby and Sarah seemed, primarily, concerned with proving their innocence to themselves and the hypothetical student through the use of alibis

These findings validate the claim that “turning to whiteness in education means that the subjects who are least individually prepared and collectively underdeveloped for race dialogue occupy a central place at the table” (Leonardo & Zembylas, 2013, p. 155). This is a call to white educators like me (Author 1) to interrogate the alibis we use that allow us to excuse ourselves from racist practices. So doing, I hope to model for PSTs a process of critical self-reflection, attempting to expose *my* white intellectual alibis and engage in race-visible pedagogy (Jupp et al., 2019).

Hypothetical teaching scenarios

The novel use of HTSs in a pair interview has several implications for teacher education and critical education research. Our findings reveal that, although the participants were engaged in discourse, they carefully avoided discussing racism and possible antiracist pedagogy. This implies that teacher educators who wish to use HTSs as antiracist pedagogies will have to carefully consider design that nudges participants to explore issues of racism more directly. Otherwise, group discussions might be spaces where whiteness continues to have a primary role, instead of discussions where whiteness is questioned and PSTs are able to see their roles in problematic racist practices. In the case of Sarah and Abby, one possible tactic might be to circle back to their response to the first scenario and highlight the similarities in apologies. This might create a generative tension that can carry them through a crucial dialogue and confronting their potential racial biases.

Limitations and extensions

This HTS was couched in a mathematics-centric protocol; however, narratives about race in mathematics settings were backgrounded in this particular scenario. We were curious to see if participants would be primed (by the previous HTSs) or notice that the student referred to math in his complaint; however, none of the participants focused on this point. In future studies, we hope to find a way to include race issues while simultaneously highlighting the mathematics setting, in order to see how PSTs discuss these issues in tandem.

Through much feedback and discussion, we imagine there are many variations of this HTS that might extend our understanding of how whiteness functions in teacher education settings. For example, as suggested by an MES reviewer, the HTS might be structured to “reveal the kind of anti-racist response” that we might encourage in PST learners. As per his suggestion, perhaps the teacher would be directed to “ignore the dominating white male students in order to allow other voices to emerge.” In this setting we could investigate how PSTs respond to the idea of “using discrimination to overcome discrimination?”

Finally, this work might be extended to other settings where whiteness is at work. It seems natural, for example, to use HTSs in professional trainings for university faculty and staff in STEM degree settings where, typically, student diversity is low, unexamined biases are high, and individual faculty members are engaged in practices that can either reinscribe or challenge this status quo (Killpack & Melón, 2016).

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