

Anything But Race: Race-Evasion and Color-Blindness in Preservice Teachers' Responses to a Hypothetical Scenario

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Abstract: This paper contributes to the literature challenging color-blind racism in teacher education by presenting findings from a study involving elementary preservice teachers responding to a hypothetical teaching scenario about race. Framed by theoretical perspectives on race-evasive teacher identity studies and color-blind racism, our findings reveal four typical response components—*apologize*, *explain*, *solve*, and *appreciate*. We describe each component and explain how all four can serve to evade race and hide/reproduce color-blind racism.

Background and research purposes

What do elementary preservice teachers (PSTs) know about race and how it influences classroom teaching and learning? What assumptions or previous understandings do PSTs bring to bear to make sense of and address racial situations they might encounter in future teaching? How do we build on—and possibly confront—their prior knowledge? These are the thematic questions that guide our work as teacher educators and researchers as we consider our responsibilities in preparing teachers for diverse classrooms.

The work reported here is part of a larger project improving our home institution's elementary teacher licensure program. One of the broader aims is to incorporate social justice content and learning activities PSTs can engage across their program coursework. To pursue this aim, our signature methodology involves designing and empirically evaluating the use of *hypothetical teaching scenarios* to support teachers learning about diversity, inclusion, and justice in elementary education. This study analyzes a subset of data involving PSTs discussing a scenario in which a 5th-grade student reports a racial grievance (Figure 1). In small groups, the PSTs discussed how they would respond to the grievance and confront their potential racism and biases.

Responding to Student Grievance	
Imagine you are teaching a 5 th grade class. A student asks to talk with you privately and you agree to meet with them. They start the conversation as following:	
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. And I have my hand up too! But you never call on me... What's up with that?"
How would you respond? Please write the next one or two lines of dialogue for what you might say or do.	

Figure 1. "Responding to Student Grievance."

Critical Whiteness Studies, Color-Blindness, and Race Evasion in Teacher Ed.

Critical Whiteness Studies in education is the broader paradigm in which this study is situated, wherein the theoretical and analytic foci are shifted away from the experiences and achievements of students of color to *Whiteness*. Whiteness is comprised of ideological as well as material forms of racial privilege and advantages for the dominant racial group (Gillborn, 2005; Leonardo, 2013), that is, for people who are born white. Additionally, scholars argue that Whiteness goes "undetected and proceeds as part of normalcy and racial common sense" (Leonardo, 2013, p. 93) in large part through the racial ideology of *color-blindness*.

How can teachers' perceptions be considered racist if there is no direct discourse about race? For this paper, we focus on one of Bonilla-Silva's conceptual tools for analyzing *color-blindness* and how it becomes re/produced in interaction. *Anything But Race* (ABR) is a rhetorical strategy that "allows whites to explain away racial fractures in their color-blind story" (Bonilla-Silva, 2018, p. 86). The overwhelming majority of participants in our study dismissed race as a relevant aspect of the scenario. "[W]hites explain the product of racialized life (segregated neighborhoods, schools, and friendship networks) as nonracial outcomes and rely on the available stylistic elements of color blindness to produce such accounts" (Bonilla-Silva, 2018, pg. 87). This study demonstrates how our PST participants, as a group, employed ABR as a means of making sense of the scenario.

The university and licensure program where we teach and do research is a predominately White-serving institution. There is incontrovertible evidence that, absent any racial awareness or a capacity to engage in race dialogue, White preservice and in-service teachers tend to evade, deny, or minimize the salience of race in classroom teaching and learning (Jupp et al., 2019). Previous research also highlights the challenges teacher educators face as they attempt to inform White teachers' racial understandings and promote race-visible teaching (Hambacher & Ginn, 2020). This study contributes to ongoing efforts in social justice-oriented teacher education and builds on previous research by providing clear and detailed descriptions of preservice teachers' racial sense-making during collaborative engagement with a hypothetical teaching scenario.

Summary of data, findings, and discussion

We analyzed PSTs' written responses and rhetorical moves during small group dialogue. Our main findings reveal a pattern of interpretation across all groups (14 groups; N=46) that reproduces color-blind racism. Furthermore, we have discerned four typical response components from our data—*apologize*, *explain*, *solve*, and *appreciate* (Gutiérrez et al., 2020). Here we argue that the different components serve the same functions, to evade race and reproduce color-blind racism; this paper discusses how each component does so in its own way and how the four combine and work together to explain the racial grievance as “anything but race” (Bonilla-Silva, 2018).

While typical explanations (e.g., “it was an accident”; “I try to choose a variety of students and he might be seeing it wrong”; or “I call on students who raise their hand first”) expressly evade race, indirect apologies (e.g., “I’m sorry you feel that way”) provide auxiliary support to the race-evasions and carry out the emotive work of color-blindness. Often, apologies came first, before an explanation. We speculate that apologies do the initial work of distancing PSTs from the scenario and begin to undermine the student’s claim that a racial disparity has occurred. Some of the groups stated that teachers have to address the situation and (pseudo) apologize to control the situation and move past it. All 14 group conversations reflect an interaction in which PSTs pushed for a color-blind interpretation of the scenarios. Some groups did this implicitly by NOT mentioning race, smoothly and quickly shifting the conversation away from race, and proposing a typical four-component response. Here is a representative example: “This is hard for me to answer, because I know as a pre-service student NOT to only chose the same students to answer {*explain*}. In this situation, I would apologize to the student {*apologize*} and let them know that I appreciate their responses/help {*appreciate*} and promise to call on him more {*solve*}.”

In summary, the evasions we observe in our data are performed as an attempt to absolve and excuse PSTs from doing the work of race (Rosenberg, 2004). These evasions also allow PSTs to furnish responses to the student’s grievance—i.e., to “*solve* the complaint”—in ways that they perceive are good teaching practices, such as using a random generator to call names, eliciting input from the child, and so forth. However, we maintain that these race-evasive moves, reflected in all the groups, do not challenge racial discrimination or bias and therefore perpetuate it in the everyday practices of classroom teaching and learning. To remove race from the scenario, a PST needs to believe that racial bias is impossible, the teacher plays zero role in discrimination, and, as a consequence, the classroom opportunities they will provide in future teaching will be the same for “all students” so long as they “just do popsicle sticks” and “make sure everyone’s participating.” All this reinforces racial inequality in education.

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