

Title: Unspoken Realities: White, Female Teachers Discuss Race, Students, and Achievement in the Context of Teaching in a Majority Black Elementary School. Joy K. Williams (2008)

Abstract:

The purpose of this ethnographic study was to explore White, female teachers' attitudes and perspectives towards their African American students, the Black/White Achievement Gap, and their teaching practice in regards to their students' achievement, through the use of focus group discussions. The target group for this study was White, female teachers with three or more years teaching experience in the selected school. The northwest, urban school chosen for this study is 100% Title I with a minority student population of 91.7%. African American students make up 67.8% of the students while 26 white females represent 72% of the teaching staff.

Findings suggest that the eight teachers in this study have built a bond of solidarity around their Whiteness and their positions as White teachers in a predominantly Black school. Their likenesses, shared experiences, stories, students, and the school have become the glue that binds them together and is what allows them to reinforce and support each other on a daily basis. As participants shared their stories, perspectives, and feelings, manifestations of their individual and collective racial identity status emerged. Teachers liberally used disclaimers, avoidance techniques, colorblindness, and stereotypes, and spontaneously shared their *outsider* feelings, as outcomes of their thinking around race throughout the focus group discussions. Findings revealed teachers' attitudes towards students included both caring and deficit thinking. Deficit thinking was found to influence their view of the Black/White achievement gap and the roots of its cause, as well as their classroom management, instruction, and interactions with parents.

A critical race theory perspective was incorporated to create an understanding of participants as a collective entity made up of individuals who are a product of American society and the educational system. I focused on mitigating factors that serve to reinforce teachers' participation in racist discourses. Culturally responsive teaching theory was used to examine, not only how participants view their students and teaching as individuals, but also to consider how the pedagogic theory could supply a framework for further development of teachers' cultural understanding and practice.

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<p>Teacher Solidarity</p> <p>Teachers supportive of each other in discussion and opinions through silence and/or agreement</p> <p>Teachers support & enjoy their teaching teams</p> <p>Teachers lean on one another rather than seek administrative assistance</p>			
<p>Teachers' Response towards Race</p>			
← Awareness →	← Denial →	← Confusion →	← Avoidance →
Caring	Deficit Thinking		
Students School Parents Each other	Towards students Towards parents Towards community Towards Administration		
← Continued Teacher Efforts →	← Avoidance of Teacher Responsibility →		
Racial sensitivity Conventional classroom management and instruction	Race, racial & cultural issues Black/White Achievement Gap Shared Leadership Culturally Responsive Instructional methods Culturally Responsive Behavior Management		
<p>Teachers' Feelings</p>			
← Satisfied →	← Struggling →	← Very Frustrated →	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enjoy their colleagues • Like their students • Want to make a difference • Want to be at Carver • Love their job • Like their assignment • Like their room • Feel relatively safe 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students • Parents • Community • Effectiveness • Teaching • Safety • Lack of resources • Time • No aides • Lack of volunteers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • With students & parents • With administration • Dislike their assignment • Difficult schedule • Too many students • “always some new hoop” • Too many demands • Giving up – “tired of it all” • Wanting to leave • May take early retirement 	

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Table 4.5: *Summary of Findings*

Research Question 1: How do White, female teachers see their African American students, parents, and community?

Research Question 2: How do White, female teachers view the Black/White Achievement Gap and their teaching in regard to their students' achievement?

Some Excerpts from Participant Dialogue:

Typical disclaimer: "Well, when I started at Carver, well, I want to back up a little bit by saying I grew up in a very diverse neighborhood..."

Colorblindness: "I don't see color" "I'm an equal opportunity discipliner; I don't look at their color" "I didn't really notice that all the kids were Black..."

Outsider feelings: "I didn't realize how, how much of an outsider I felt like within the community..."

Family & peer reactions to workplace: "I remember people saying, you're wasting your education, why would you want to work up there?..." "I've had a few people say, do you wear a flak jacket...?"

Caring: "I think that's the way we are; we love these kids..." "I want to build them up..."

Savior attitude: "I want to stop feeling like I have to save them from their own families and their futures, which you can see going down the drain unless something drastically changes."

Deficit thinking: "I have the students...they don't care. They're unbelievably unmotivated and there's not a punishment or reward or consequence that you can give them." "There's no intrinsic motivation or want to please." "They need those rewards all the time..." "There's no respect...they act as though I'm not even there!" "...these kids think that things are owed to them..." "I feel like a ton of our parents don't understand the correlation between what they do and how it affects their children..." "but when you see parents who don't even appear to want to try. It's really hard to respect them at all as human beings..." "Half of them dropped out of school, they had trouble, they struggled...and they gave up."

Achievement Gap: "You can see which families really value education and which ones don't. ...so they make excuses and education isn't that big of a deal since they don't put value in it." "I don't think the achievement gap is Black or White, I think it is class..." "Being drug affected, generational poverty, more likely to use drugs, having babies, you're way, way, behind the curve..." "...do you ever find yourself kind of resenting some of their families thinking if you helped at home, this much!" "Money, technology, parent volunteers, role models, behavior, lack of parent involvement..."

Classroom Management: "You're very strict, just as I am very, extremely strict." "I do try to keep a pretty short leash on the kids." "I...didn't let the kids walk all over me..."

Instruction: "...one of my biggest challenges is building background knowledge...lack of resources and outside world knowledge." "I teach how I teach. I don't know if it would be different somewhere else." "...probably a lot more explicit instruction..."

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Unspoken Realities:

- Carver is a majority Black school with experienced long-term White, female teachers who exhibit racist thinking, discourse, and practices.
- Teachers participate in unintended racism; in fact most are unaware that they do.
- Teachers work in a Black school but don't recognize institutionalized racist behavior or practice.
- Teachers, in their solidarity, protect each other even when they recognize a racist attitude.
- Teachers are marginalized, yet perpetuate the marginalization of their students as opposed to empowering them.

Real Situations – Real Possibilities

Teacher Solidarity: a foundation for individual & collective change

If teachers stopped blaming and trying to “fix” the students, validated the worth of the students’ cultural heritages, accepted the inevitability of cultural influences on their own beliefs and behaviors, disavowed the sanctity of educational conventions, and placed the burden of change upon themselves ... (change can occur). (Geneva Gay, *Culturally Responsive Teaching*, 2000; p. 211)

Findings from this and like studies suggest that a change in policy is needed in the areas of schools, curriculum, teacher training / professional development, student referral/placement systems, administrative decision making, and accountability systems:

1. Schools – Bring all schools up to standard with like resources, funding, and support systems. Work to create equitable opportunities for all students.
2. Curriculum – Ensure that all curriculums reflect the needs, culture, and contributions of all peoples.
3. Teacher training/professional development:
 - Make multiculturalism, cultural identity development, and culturally responsive pedagogy the norm in teacher training and a requirement for employment.
 - Provide mentors and ongoing professional development that works from teachers’ strengths to support development of cultural competency and culturally responsive pedagogy, realizing that teachers’ education is a continuous process.
4. Student referral systems/student placement – Create equitable systems that work in the best interests of children. Overhaul systems that track students according to race and other delimiters, reducing the disproportionality of referrals for students of color.
5. District administrative decisions – Schools must be staffed with personnel that are up to the task of supporting needed change.
6. Accountability systems – A system must be put in place that ensures adherence to specified goals and timelines.

Which issues are addressed, how they are addressed, who gets to participate in the discussion, and what solutions are considered viable are all influenced by racism. As informed and active citizens, we can influence the nature of public policy discussion and decisions. (Paul Kivel, *Uprooting Racism* 2002; p. 174)