Race Talk in Teacher Preparation: Understanding the Discourse through Teaching and Learning

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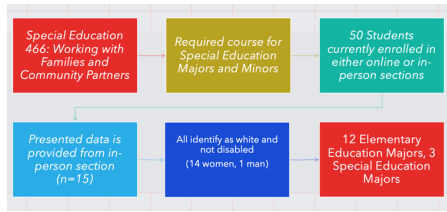
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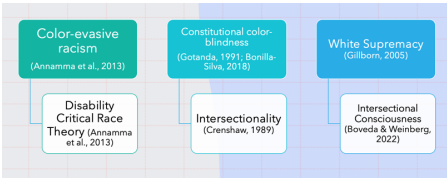## What is the purpose of this study?

The purpose of this paper is to illuminate the color-evasive discourse employed by pre-service (special) educators in their educational and university exchanges and the learning opportunities to address those patterns within teacher preparation.

In Wisconsin, over 94% of teachers are white, while 70% of students are white. Children of Color are almost twice as likely to receive a behavioral disability label than white children, yet white children are more likely to be labeled with "high-status" disabilities, such as ADHD. Many spatial and social factors are implicated in these statistics. This work focuses on teacher preparation for addressing racial disparities in schools and special education systems.

Study Context

- Special Education 466: Working with Families and Community Partners
- Required course for Special Education Majors and Minors
- 50 Students currently enrolled in either online or in-person sections
- Presented data is provided from in-person section (n=15)
- All identify as white and not disabled (14 women, 1 man)
- 12 Elementary Education Majors, 3 Special Education Majors

Theoretical Foundations

- Color-evasive racism (Annamma et al., 2013)
  - Disability Critical Race Theory (Annamma et al., 2013)
- Constitutional color-blindness (Gotanda, 1991; Bonilla-Silva, 2018)
  - Intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989)
- White Supremacy (Gillborn, 2005)
  - Intersectional Consciousness (Boveda & Weinberg, 2022)

Method

- A critical discourse analysis (CDA; Van Dijk, 1993) of student written and spoken communication (e.g., journal entries, discussions).

- Student discourse emerging from course activities functions as the site of analysis (Staudinger, 2017).

- Additionally, curricular decisions and instructional activities are evaluated for impact on student learning (Berk, 2018).

Instructional Snapshots

Snapshot 1: Third week of classes

Students engaged components of the *Intersectional Consciousness Protocol* (Boveda & Weinberg, 2022).

Students reflected on their own identity markers according to dominance or "difference"/diversity.

15% of students selected race as one of their identities to write about

Snapshot 2: Ninth week of classes

Students read and presented on selected chapters from *Affirming Disability: Strength-Based Portraits of Culturally Diverse Families* (Sauer & Rossetti, 2019)

Students reflected on prior knowledge of various countries of origin (Vietnam, Somalia, El Salvador, China, India, Mexico)

Findings: Deductive Patterns

Discursive Frame	Discursive Tools	Example
Claiming white racial innocence	Maintaining the innocence of white educators	*The teachers are missing lots of important cultural information that would help them understand the students so much more.* (snapshot 2; in response to readings from *Affirming Disability*)
Employing progressive notions	Drawing on illusions of the past (diversity is new)	*When we think of a community or society, we think of them as speaking English, being at least middle class, a US citizen, Christian, a man, healthy, having a post-secondary education etc. I do not think this is reality anymore. Not everybody you talk about or have an encounter with is going to fall under all these categories.* (snapshot 1)

Discursive Pattern	Definition	Example
Employing neoliberal notions of resist perceived threat to self-worth	When students defend their sense of self using neoliberal messages about hard work and productivity as value-laden	*As a white woman, I often hear others saying how white women are so privileged. When in reality, I feel as though much of what I have, I have worked for.* (snapshot 1)
Unraveling of experiences with stigma or shame	When students identify a new lens for re-situating the onus of difficult experiences in their own lives	*Many times in school I was excluded from events outside of school because of money wise. Many people believed my mother was lazy and didn't want to work or didn't want to take care of her children. It may seem like little things but thinking now about it, I shouldn't have been treated like that just because my family wasn't well off.* (snapshot 1)
Elicitation of Divine Luck, feeling/being "Blessed"	When students used religious or spiritual connotations to position themselves as fortunate and others as less fortunate	*I am blessed with having a lot of normative markers that have made my life a little bit easier than other people in the world.* (snapshot 1)
Persisting reluctance to use racial terms /**centering self**	When students find other means to denote race in a particular context	*While I may have one view of how to support families **like we read about**, other educators may have a different view, so it may be hard as one person to fight for a family if everyone else on the team doesn't agree. That doesn't mean I won't be working to change that stigma.* (snapshot 2)

Participants consistently positioned white school professionals (e.g., teachers, speech and language pathologists) as innocent given examples of discrimination toward families of color and non-compliance to the legal mandates of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004).

Participants engaged in patterns of centering self that served to foreground their lived experiences, emotions, and sense of identity when discussing their orientations to power structures in society.

Deductive Coding Schema (Wilt, et al., 2022)

Discursive frames of color-evasive racism.

Discursive Frame	Definition	Discursive Tools
Centering self	When white educators positioned themselves as foundational to racial equity, while they simultaneously prioritized their own emotions and professional identities over Girls of Color.	Creating hypothetical or manufactured scenarios; Claiming helplessness to make change; Shifting to non-racial topics of professional expertise, and Foregrounding lived experiences.
Claiming white racial innocence	When white educators discursively remove white people [and whiteness] from the context of racism.	Maintaining the innocence of the white educator; Asserting the innocence of white students.
Employing progressive notions	When white educators portray the ways the town, school, and themselves have moved past racism	Acknowledging white privilege; Describing a progressive environment; Relying on outside sources; Equating small actions with systemic change
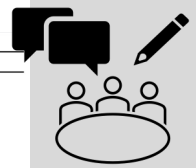
Implications

- Interpretations of student discourse may be useful to illuminating **the nuance of discursive decision-making, especially for the purpose of racial equity in schools**
- Special educators **need skills and frameworks to make meaning of and discuss racism in relation to intersecting injustices in schools**.
- **Expand undergraduate education student opportunities** to engage with practical applications of theoretical tools (e.g., Disability Critical Race Theory; Annamma et al., 2013) and **understand tendencies to center themselves in challenging discourse on race**
- Model and practice being exacting in our words and descriptions of students, families, communities, and their experiences with discrimination and systemic oppressions.
- **White instructor reflexivity and vulnerability, including salient orientations to systems of power and oppression (Boveda & Annamma,** 2024; e.g., What about me is reinforcing color-evasive racism?)