Exposing Color Blindness/Grounding Color Consciousness: Challenges for Teacher Education

Kerri Ullucci¹ and Dan Battey²

Abstract
As teacher educators we have been struck by the consistency, urgency, and frequency in which students employ color-blind perspectives. This orientation has negative consequences in K-12 settings. In this manuscript, we lay out the multiple meanings of color blindness, drawing from legal, educational, and social science traditions, and offer arguments for color consciousness in education. In addition, we use this theoretical perspective to investigate interventions for countering color blindness in teacher education. Using a framework steeped in the tenets of color consciousness, we draw from scholars as well as our own work to provide interventions designed to challenge color-blind orientations in teachers.

Keywords
racism, urban, preservice teachers, teacher education, White students

Introduction
“I don’t care if they are brown, white or green! I treat all kids the same,” explains Joseph, a student in a master’s course. “I don’t pay attention to their

¹Roger Williams University, Bristol, RI, USA
²Rutgers The State University of New Jersey, New Brunswick, NJ, USA

Corresponding Author:
Dan Battey, Assistant Professor, Department of Learning and Teaching, Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, 10 Seminary Place, New Brunswick, NJ 08901, USA
Email: dan.battey@gse.rutgers.edu
backgrounds,” echoes Patricia, “It’s not necessary. Why make things complicated? I just try to be color-blind.” Our preservice and in-service teachers are emphatic. They argue feverishly that culture plays no role in their classrooms, that they are impervious to difference. Undergraduates or graduates, practicing teachers or not, individual refrains remain of “I am color-blind” blend into a troubling chorus of “we don’t see race.” As teacher educators, who teach in very different contexts, we have been struck by the consistency, urgency, and frequency in which pleas of color blindness emerge. We imagine our experiences are not unique.

As educators in the field of urban schooling, we both teach courses that address the intersections of race, class, and ethnicity in schools. Teaching such courses is often a challenge, as they ask students to engage in discussions of privilege, power, racism, and oppression. Students frequently resist these lines of conversation, creating intellectual roadblocks that in a domino-like way stymie further talk about culturally relevant teaching, critical pedagogy, and equitable schooling in general. When students enact a color-blind perspective, it automatically challenges the legitimacy of our work. Why do students need a course on race and education if they have decided race plays no role in education?

As we attempt to prepare teachers to work with children from diverse backgrounds, a critical first step is a willingness to see how discrimination functions in society. Teachers cannot see racial inequities if they position race as insignificant in schooling and see racism as a historical artifact. Rather, teachers need to be open to the fact that racism still operates in structural and interpersonal ways. Change hinges on our ability to confront potentially negative and/or outdated normative beliefs that determine who is worthy of an education, which students are deemed able, and who is pushed and who is left behind.

While color blindness is generally sold as a positive—that in ignoring color, racism is minimized—we will argue that instead color blindness contributes to a collective ignorance and relieves individuals from fighting against the impact of racism. Color blindness, according to Rosenberg (2004, p. 257), allows people to deny that “race, especially skin color has consequences for a person’s status and well-being. That blindness to skin color and race remains a “privilege” available exclusively to White people.” It is the refusal to acknowledge the costs and benefits associated with one’s racial and cultural identity. It provides cover for many Whites, who by claiming color blindness are able to dismiss their complicity in racial hierarchies. Flagg (1993) eloquently asserts that we determine “our position on the continuum of racism by the degree of our commitment to color blindness; the more
certain we are that race is never relevant to any assessment of an individual’s abilities or achievements, the more certain we are that we have overcome racism as we conceive of it” (p. 953). Color blindness provides the ultimate protection. By claiming to treat everyone the same, those who aver color blindness shut down any need to discuss inequality.

Despite its shortcomings, many teachers seem to aspire to color blindness. The focus of this article will be exploring this phenomenon. What is the role of color blindness and how does it function in society? Why does color blindness matter in school? Considering our backgrounds, we are also concerned with how teacher educators can specifically address the role of color blindness in their courses. How can teacher educators help prepare race-conscious teachers who understand how race/racism play out in schools? Thus our goals are quite ambitious. First, we lay out the multiple meanings of color blindness, drawing from legal, educational, and social science traditions. We outline the role of color blindness as a “new racism” (Bonilla-Silva, 2003) and the necessity of race consciousness. In addition, we investigate options for countering color blindness in teacher education. Using a framework steeped in the tenets of color consciousness, we draw from scholars in the field as well as our own work to provide an overview of interventions designed to challenge specific color-blind orientations in teachers.

I Want to Be Color-Blind, Right? Unveiling the Power of Neutrality

In order to get beyond racism, we must first take account of race. There is no other way.¹

Justice Harry Blackmun, 1978

I (first author) recently read a picture book to my young son written by Christine Farris King (2003), the older sister of Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. While reading the section that included King’s “I have a dream” speech, I found myself thinking of this article. “I have a dream” is steeped in seemingly color-blind language, including the well-known phrase “I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character” (King, 1963). To us, this speech helps crystallize why color blindness is often perceived positively: a historic Black leader is eschewing judgment by the most superficial of means. In our reading, however, King is not suggesting
that race be ignored. The phrase “not be judged by the color of their skin” is not a plea to submerge any notice of difference. Nowhere in the speech does the reader find references to assimilating or in any other way minimizing one’s racial identity. Instead, King specifically names people by their racial and cultural groups (Blacks, Whites, Jews, Gentiles). His words caution against judging people based solely on their skin color, not acknowledging skin color. However, the phrase “not be judged by the color of their skin” has been co-opted over time to suggest society simply stop seeing race and only judge people for their personal characteristics. Yes, a necessary national goal is to treat individuals as individuals and not as racial categories. But this cannot be done simply through pretending race neither exists nor matters. Thus, to move toward King’s vision of a just society, the first step must be to do the difficult work of untangling how race and racism function now, in reality. A simple whitewashing of the material and psychological ramifications of racism merely maintains the status quo.

The lesson that we glean from “I have a dream” is not that color is to be erased, marginalized, or ignored. The ultimate goal in a just society is not to treat people as if they are White, or as if their race and culture are inconsequential. Thus student refrains of “Doesn’t Martin Luther King talk about getting beyond people’s race? Aren’t we supposed to be over this?” must be challenged. Our goal should not be to “get over” race by employing fantasies of color blindness. Indeed, by discrediting race as a category, efforts to counter racism are diminished. Our objective is to eradicate racism, not eliminate race.

Providing the Foundation:
Why Color Consciousness Matters

Recent senate deliberations highlight how color blindness and color consciousness function in society. The Sotomayor judicial nomination hearings took place during the writing of this article. While watching the first day’s testimony, it was quite clear the degree to which Whiteness operates in American society. In his opening remarks, Senator Jeff Sessions (R-Alabama) continuously questioned Sotomayor’s impartiality, implying that he did not believe her cultural heritage could be separated from her rulings. He specifically questioned whether her experiences as a leader for the Puerto Rican Legal Defense and Education Fund provided clues to how she judges (and will judge). To Senator Sessions, it seemed that a female of Puerto Rican descent was automatically more of a biased actor simply because of her race and gender. Do we ask White, male candidates for the Supreme Court similar
questions? Do we ask them how their Whiteness will play out on the bench? How their gender will affect their impartiality? Can we imagine a question in which a potential judge was asked, “I see you were on the board of directors for JP Morgan Chase. Can you tell me how being a wealthy male who works for a historically White corporation impacts your understandings of the law?”

Because Whiteness is deeply interconnected with color blindness it is critical to clarify our understanding of these terms. Whiteness is a racial discourse, a social concept that confers benefits and privileges to Whites (Leonardo, 2002). Whiteness, according to Leonardo, is a “racial perspective or world view . . . supported by material practices and institutions” (p. 31). Gillborn (2009, p. 54), synthesizing works by Leonardo (2002), Frankenberg (1993), and Roediger (1992) explains key components of Whiteness as

- “an unwillingness to name the contours of racism” (with a particular downplaying of White privilege);
- avoidance of identifying with a racial experience or group” (making Whiteness “normal” and ethically identified peoples “other”);
- a “minimalization of racist legacy” (seeking to place racism in a historical, rather than contemporary, context).

Part of the perniciousness of Whiteness is its seeming invisibility and all encompassing nature. Allen (2004) argues, “‘White,’ ‘normal,’ and ‘human,’ converge into a disturbingly synonymous relationship which serves to mystify the actual particularities of white existence” (p. 126). Senator Session’s very questions to Judge Sotomayor reveal his embodiment of Whiteness. His questions reflect his particular lens, not some all encompassing, universal worldview. Despite hinting at her racial bias, he was unable to locate his at all.

Of particular concern to our work is how Whiteness functions in schools and with teachers. Many White teachers enter the field with little awareness of racism and a dysconscious understanding of their own Whiteness (Swartz, 2003). Chubbock (2004) suggests that the lower academic success among children of color may be attributable to “White teachers’ dispositions towards race [which] may create internal obstacles to the implementation of both effective pedagogy and curriculum and a transformative response to inequitable policies” (p. 302). How teachers think about their students’ abilities and potential is critical (Milner, 2006). Steeped in deficit theories, Milner cautions that teachers often see their student of color as liabilities. Through this deficit lens, he warns that “counterproductive thoughts contaminate the teaching and learning in the classroom” (p. 82).
Thus, instead of aspiring to color blindness, we argue that color consciousness should be our collective goal. A necessary step in recognizing others’ worldviews and experiences as valid requires acknowledging that such paradigms are racially informed and not monolithic. White teachers need to understand themselves as racial beings (Bell, 2002) whose behaviors, beliefs, customs, and ways of getting things done are culturally and racially specific. Thus, when their Latino or Cambodian or Haitian students express values that veer from a “White” baseline, teachers can attribute the difference to a plurality of worldviews, rather than to a broken/wrong/abnormal worldview. Instead of burying race as a factor in the schooling process, we agree with Teel and Obidah (2008) that competent teachers possess an “awareness of race, of the possibility of their own racism and the racism of others, and the significance of these perceptions in the teaching and learning process” (p. 4). Thus, teachers’ awareness of race and the role that it plays in students’ lives is a critical piece in addressing the conundrum of urban school achievement. Color blindness, on the other hand, dangerously alters teachers’ understandings of their students, rendering those teachers color-mute (see Pollack, 2005).

The Building Blocks of Color Blindness

Color blindness takes on many forms and purposes, depending on the circumstances and goals of the actor. Most simplistically, the color-blind perspective is a “point of view which sees racial and ethnic group membership as irrelevant to the ways individuals are treated” (Rist, 1974, in Schofield, 1997, p. 252). Color blindness is particularly powerful because it capitalizes on two historically American concepts: merit and individualism. We conceive of merit and individualism as forming the scaffolding (along with Whiteness) on which color blindness lies (see Figure 1).
Merit forms one “leg” of our scaffold. Myths about American meritocracy whitewash how group membership often overshadows individual effort. Tate (1999) sounded a call for more in-depth investigations of the roles of merit and individualism as they pertain to race and education, as merit cannot be simply understood as “a matter of individual traits or products” (p. 258). Merit is often seen as a purely personal capacity. One has merit due to the work they put in, effort they make, and hurdles they clear. In this vein, rewards should go to those who have demonstrated merit in some way. What this equation leaves out is that determining merit is subjective and historically constructed. Crosby and Blake-Beard (2004) caution that merit is based on two assumptions: (a) that merit can be accurately measured and (b) that measuring is conducted “in a clean environment, free of toxins or pollutants” (p. 152). Taking a school-based example, we can see how the merit argument stands on brittle legs. An African American student transfers to a school where a gifted and talented program exists. Her parents want her to test into the program. If she does not pass the test, and therefore does not “merit” getting into the program, is it due to her intelligence? Or is it due to a test that is based on antiquated notions of intelligence or biased test items? If the child only had access to materials published 20 years ago and studied under teachers who were not credentialed in their fields, that “toxic environment” begins to have repercussions. The student may be judged meritless (a) based on her not being properly prepared through no fault of her own, and/or (b) because the test is designed to reflect White norms and standards of intelligence. Merit is not simply a tally of one’s hard work and gumption. Merit is shadowed by place, time, and who does the measuring.

The notion of individualism further bolsters color-blind mentalities. Scheurich (1993) defines individualism as the “idea that each person is largely the source or origin of him or herself” and that this orientation is a “naturally occurring, transhistorical, transcultural condition to which all humans aspire” (p. 6). Bonilla-Silva (2003) and Moore (2008) discuss this same idea as abstract individualism, referencing its use as a rhetorical strategy to reject group-based racial inequity. Individualism supports the notion that personal characteristics are the sole determinant in one’s success or struggle. Thus, if you are hard working, diligent, and savvy, good outcomes will result. Lazy, unmotivated, and uninspired people create their own demise. Through the lens of individualism, factors outside one’s personal characteristics do not affect one’s chances of getting ahead. Race, gender, sexual orientation, class, and religion fail to operate on this expansive, “level” playing field. However, individualism fails to take into account a long history of mobility in the
United States being tied to social class and ethnicity (Banks, 1997). While the anyone-can-pull-themselves-up-by-their-bootstraps narrative may be favored, in reality the United States has a long and stable history of oppression playing out. Rosenberg (2004) cautions, “the ideology of equal opportunity and access obscures the actual unequal distribution of resources and outcomes for a variety of individuals based on social categories” (p. 259).

Individualism and merit then work without considering context, rejecting the place of history in endowing certain individuals with more resources and attributing merit to particular groups of people. At the same time, color blindness relegates racism to a historical artifact, refusing to recognize how it operates today. This mistakenly places individuals as existing outside the influence of privilege, oppression, and power. Together, these ideologies relegate contemporary racism to individual acts of intentionally racist actors within neutral systems of power that do not advantage anyone. Working together, meritocracy, individualism, and Whiteness allow color blindness to render racism as a thing of the past in a postracial society.

Our model of color blindness is built on these misreadings of social realities. Take the following scenario: an upper-middle-class White male is accepted into a prestigious college where few students of color attend. We can imagine a thought process in which he rationalizes his acceptance in the following way:

All that I have earned has been through my hard work (merit). It is my own personal characteristics that have led me to my success (individualism). I live in a society in which my being White is inconsequential; I do not receive material benefits because of my skin color (Whiteness). The lack of students of color is just happenstance (color blindness). Because my race doesn’t impact my life, race doesn’t impact others either (color blindness). My getting into this college is a product of my own efforts and intelligence, period (individualism).

This scenario could be applied in many contexts to explain away countless benefits and privileges bestowed on Whites. Functioning together, the components of merit, individualism, and color blindness create durable stories that dissuade people that color consciousness matters. Are we arguing that merit is never relevant or that having positive personal characteristics are meaningless? No. Rather, we want to highlight that for every situation where the meritorious receive their just rewards, equally deserving people (of color, English language learners, those in poverty, immigrants, women, those with disabilities, etc.) are overlooked. These myths have tangible consequences.
Iterations of Color Blindness

Color blindness manifests in different forms. We first argue that most basically, color blindness is a form of storytelling. Our understanding of story is quite simple: a narrative which is shared between people, occasionally filled with half-truths and embellishments, often to illuminate a point or explain a conundrum. The conundrum in our scenario is plain: in seeing race, we worry we are racist (Howard, 2006). Thus to shift blame, “telling stories” of color blindness evaporates the phenomenon of racism. No race equals no racism. Color blindness undergirds a story Whites can tell themselves to “prove” the fundamentally fair nature of life in the United States. In using the narrative of color blindness, Whites can render race a nonfactor, thereby convincing themselves that “nothing more stands in the way of equality of opportunity” (Carlson, 2004, p. 304). These narratives allow Whites to normalize systemic racism by reasoning that the disparities that exist cannot be due to institutional racism since individuals within the system do not see race (Moore, 2008). This in turn minimizes racism and releases individuals from responsibility for racism and racial disparities. By maintaining fidelity to a color-blind approach, racism is a moot point and those who do not get ahead do so because of their own faults and shortcomings, denigrating the cultures of communities of color (Moore, 2008).

But this story is clearly a fantasy. Taylor (1999) argues, “by insisting on a rhetoric that disallows reference to race, blacks can no longer name their reality or point out racism” (p. 184). In this way, color-blind positions invalidate the life experiences of people of color (Derman-Sparks & Ramsey, 2006) and the narratives they tell about their own lives. In fact, telling color-blind stories only exacerbates race-based inequalities. In arguing against color blindness, Haney López (1996) warns that “to banish race-words redoubles the hegemony of race by targeting efforts to combat racism while leaving race and its effects unchallenged and embedded in society, seemingly natural rather than the product of social choices” (p. 177).

The notion of color blindness also comes from a long legal tradition. Aleinikoff (1991) traces color blindness back to Justice Harlan’s ruling in Plessy v. Ferguson (1896), in which Harlan argues that the Constitution does not support race-dependent decisions. The only judge to dissent, Harlan argued that

There is in this country no superior, dominant, ruling class of citizens. There is no caste here. Our Constitution is color-blind and neither knows nor tolerates classes among citizens. In respect of civil rights, all citizens are equal before the law.
However, history challenges this notion of a caste-free society. In Moore’s (2008) analysis of color blindness in law, she notes the pervasive use of group-based reasoning in legal precedent, including (a) legally defining Blacks as property in the Constitution, (b) the Supreme Court’s support of legal segregation, and (c) the denial of equal access and outcomes for people of color in housing and schooling. In addition, she shows how individualism and individual rights are supported for Whites alone as a way to preserve their social and economic standing. The legal tradition’s claims to individualism and race neutrality are actually rooted in the production and reproduction of racism. Racism continues to be a “serious social disease” that has serious legal repercussions, be they witnessed in housing discrimination, job discrimination, hate crimes and hate speech, and in higher education and politics (Aleinikoff, 1992, p. 33).

Adding further complexity, Gotanda (1995) argues that this color-blind vision has entirely egregious ends. Particularly troubling to Gotanda is that color blindness seems to hold as its goal a “racially assimilated society in which race is irrelevant” (p. 268). While a “raceless” society may be sold as utopian, such a society requires the obliteration of cultural differences. The end product would surely not be a society based on African American or Latino cultural norms. Thus, for people of color, color blindness requires a form of cultural genocide (Gotanda, 1995). Instead of taking a color-blind stance, Gotanda argues that the Courts must understand the complexity of race, the role of White racial privilege, and history of racial subordination to work toward equality in the United States.

We base our final iteration of color blindness on Bonilla-Silva’s work (2003) that looks at color blindness as a “new racism.” Not just a story nor a legal construct, Bonilla-Silva instead argues that color blindness is a form of racism. In his book Racism Without Racists, Bonilla-Silva eloquently explains how color-blind racism functions. This is a “kinder, gentler” form of racism that does not rely on overt manifestations of racism (read, cross burnings) but rather methods that are “subtle, institutional and apparently nonracial” (p. 3). Throughout his book, Bonilla-Silva illuminates the many iterations of color-blind racism: a parent expresses “concern” about their daughter dating an African American man, employers post job ads in predominantly White areas only, Latinos are funneled into certain communities when looking for housing. So while not loud, angry, violent demonstrations of discrimination, the outcomes remain the same. A White-topped racial hierarchy remains intact.

Color-blind racism operates similarly to passive racism and unconscious racism. Passive racism will sound familiar to many. It is “seen in the collusion of laughing at racist jokes, of letting exclusionary hiring practices go
unchallenged, of accepting as appropriate the omissions of people of color from the curriculum and of avoiding typical race-related issues” (Tatum, 1999, in Marx, 2006, p. 10). It is manifested in the way Whites justify basic, everyday decisions that seem to be not particularly race-specific:

- I send my kids to an all White school as it is in my neighborhood.
- I want to rent in a neighborhood that is like where I grew up.
- I want to hire the most “well-spoken” employee.
- I want the day care to be staffed with people who understand our values.
- I want my doctor/lawyer/accountant/broker to understand where I am coming from.

It is the “normalcy” or “naturalness” of these decisions that belies their true roots. Lawrence (1995) stresses that the process that leads to unconscious racism stems from the acquisition of tacitly learned stereotypes. These are “learned, internalized, and used without an awareness of its source[s]” (p. 241). Examples that operationalize this paradigm abound. We have been in classes in which students explained that despite living in all-White neighborhoods, this was simply coincidental. Another student shared that her school wanted to outlaw students speaking Spanish in class, as it was a safety issue. They could be discussing drug deals. No racial or cultural overtones were implied. In a job interview, in which the first author explained her support of culturally relevant pedagogies in bettering the outcomes in urban schools, she was met with an incredulous “Really? You really think those things matter in those schools?”

Is it too strong to call these examples racist? In the popular imagination, a racist burns crosses, dons a white robe, or hurls racial epithets at Civil Rights workers. They are the “bad apples” who do not look or act like mainstream Americans. Racists belong to the Klan.

Our understanding of racism stems from work by Solórzano and Yosso (2009), which defines racism as having three components: (a) one group deems itself superior to all others, (b) the group has power in which to act out their superiority, (c) enacting racism benefits the group in power while negatively affecting others. So when an African American family works with a real estate agent who only shows them houses in low-income areas, this is racism. Why? The White agent has determined that certain people live in certain places (and conversely, that certain people don’t want Others in their community). She is able to act out her dominant position by showing the family houses in the “correct” location. This negatively affects the family by
limiting their options, potentially affecting them financially, educationally, and socially. Quiet, subtle, seemingly “natural”—but racism.

Developing Color Consciousness With Preservice Teachers

As we have spent the first portion of this article tracking how color blindness functions, we turn our attention to applications appropriate for teacher education. We seek to provide interventions that help students stretch toward color consciousness. By this, we mean to provide books, videos, articles, assignments, and activities that challenge color-blind perspectives. We are not unique in the desire to provide such interventions to our students. Many other researchers in the field have written widely about interventions they use to challenge color blindness (see Banks, 2001; Cochran-Smith, 1995; Nieto, 1992; Sleeter, 2001). These methods include storytelling through biography and autobiography, interviews, defining race and culture, use of videos, reading and book groups, and field work in communities of color (among other approaches). During the preparation for our courses, we have immersed ourselves in their suggestions to find concrete ways in which teacher educators can explore issues of race and difference. In the following section we detail a number of these practices drawing both from the field overall and from own work. For each subsection, we provide a variety of approaches teacher educators can utilize to reach particular color-conscious goals. We incorporate work from scholars in teacher education, Whiteness studies, culturally relevant pedagogy, and multicultural education.

Our strategy in laying out this section is unusual. Rather than structure the article based on interventions and how to incorporate them, we have chosen to organize our findings around outcomes—what we hope our students will ultimately gain from these interventions. To us, it was critical to theoretically ground these outcomes. We did not want to include “cool” or “intriguing” suggestions simply to include them. We wanted a more rigorous approach. The outcomes instead are guided by our definitions of color consciousness and color blindness. Again, Teel and Obidah (2008) explain that color-conscious teachers understand that race matters, racism exists, and issues around race and racism affect schooling. We define color blindness as a story, an attitude, and a new form of racism, which at its heart contends that racial and ethnic identity are irrelevant. Our primary aim is to develop teachers who are either moving toward color consciousness or dismantling color blindness in some way. Thus, these orientations—rather than the activities themselves—serve as anchors. We think this approach is stronger theoretically than
providing a laundry list of potential interventions. By leading with where we hope to end, we believe we put the intention before the activity, and potentially stave off intellectually light-weight time fillers.

Our efforts clearly do not embody an exhaustive list. There are certainly other approaches to countering color blindness. However, drawing from our theoretical base we have focused on the following outcomes:

1. Challenging neutrality on the part of White teachers by racializing Whiteness;
2. Validating the experiences and perspectives of people of color;
3. Naming racist educational practices and developing a race-conscious repertoire;

The first understanding names White privilege and racism by racializing Whiteness rather than maintaining neutrality (based on Gilborn, 2009; Leonardo, 2002). It arises from the iteration of color blindness as a narrative that maintains nonracial stories, which minimize racism (Carlson, 2004), and also from our concern that Whites understand that their racial positionality matters (Bell, 2002). The second understanding directly addresses the ways in which color-blind narratives invalidate, negate, and disallow the perspectives and experiences of people of color (as in Derman-Sparks & Ramsey, 2006; Taylor, 1999). This also allows us to show students how race/racism plays out in the lives of people of color. Third, we address racist practices in education by looking at color-blind versus color-conscious pedagogies to highlight how noticing race can help teachers (see Delpit, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1994, 1995). Last, we draw on work from Bonilla-Silva (2003) and Solórzano and Yosso (2009) to highlight practices that illustrate the inner-workings of institutional racism and color-blind policies. We want students to acknowledge the “structural obstacles to mobility” that continue to exist (Leonardo, 2007, p. 266). This allows students to see the continuing relevance of racism in schools.

Of course, these understandings are not independent of each other. They serve as complementary understandings to develop with teachers in working toward color consciousness.

**Challenging Neutrality—Racializing Whiteness**

Within this outcome, we see multiple goals. The first is merely making Whiteness visible—essentially racializing the White experience. This includes
helping preservice teachers understand their schooling history as racialized, seeing privileges bestowed, and recognizing the historically contingent nature of being “White.” While color consciousness is often seen as developing more knowledge or understanding of “other” cultures, a first step is understanding oneself as a cultural and racial being. Without this, culture is something that only people of color have.

We start this section by looking at the practice of autobiographies. Preservice teacher autobiographies are frequently mentioned in the literature on teacher education and equity (Banks, 2001; Cochran-Smith, 1995; Hollins, 1990; Johnson, 2002; Kailin, 1994; Ladson-Billings, 2000; McIntyre, 2002; Schmidt, 1998, 1999; Xu, 2000). Numerous researchers ask prospective teachers to write their own autobiographies as a way of questioning their personal ideologies. In relation to challenging a color-blind ideology, this practice can make Whiteness visible by having students engage their past experiences as racialized rather than race neutral. By racializing Whites’ experiences, making Whiteness visible, and framing access and opportunity in terms of unearned advantages, autobiographies encourage teachers to take a critical perspective.

One of the central figures in the use of autobiography in teacher education is Marilyn Cochran-Smith (1995). She describes having prospective teachers write personal narratives about the shaping of their views of race, culture, and diversity. In this activity, teachers reflect on themselves, provide an image of themselves to others, uncover their own interpretive frameworks, and place themselves as beings within institutions granting them certain privileges and constraints.

Banks (2001) offers a similar approach to autobiography: the “family history project.” Preservice teachers are asked to analyze how race, class, and gender have influenced their life with a particular look at family history and its influence on student experience. Similarly, Xu (2000) and Schmidt (1998) use the ABCs of Cultural Understanding and Communication Model to elicit an autobiography, eventually leading up to students conducting a cross-cultural comparison with a student who is culturally different. Across this work, the goal is to develop a written record of life events related to education, family, religion, culture, race, gender, and class.

For students, the critical piece is analyzing the autobiography for interpretive frameworks and placing preservice teachers within a particular context to limit generalizations. Having students question their life history and place it within a context situates their experiences within a unique time and place, recognizing advantages and/or constraints, to help students racialize and “re-experience their own subjectivity” (King & Ladson-Billings, 1990). This
situating of a life history can make visible positionality, Whiteness, power, and how one’s vision can be colored despite averring color blindness.

In addition to autobiographies, there are a number of readings that help address similar goals. McIntosh’s (1989) article, “White privilege: Unpacking the invisible knapsack” details various everyday forms of Whiteness, enumerating the different ways that she experiences advantage in being White. It pushes students to see Whiteness in the everyday and sometimes minute moments of life. The reading serves more as a way to identify privilege than to understand the ideological construction of Whiteness.

Additional readings push beyond to look at the construction of Whiteness and the resulting racism. In How Jews Became White Folks: And What That Says About Race in America, Brodkin (1998) writes about shifting notions of race, the need to assimilate into Whiteness, and changing objects of racism. It shows how tenuous the definition of White is and how it is defined in subjugation of “Others.” This book provides a broader notion of White than autobiographies necessarily will, because of the argument that it is beyond individual experience that the ideological construction of White is made on the subjugation of its ideological opposite, Black (Morrison, 1993). Ignatiev’s (1995) How the Irish Became White, is another example of how the Irish moved from being discriminated against to embracing racism.

We offer three books that specifically deal with Whiteness and education. Paley’s White Teacher and Kwanzaa and Me both take an inward look at a White teacher’s understanding of race as she interacts in her classroom (Paley, 1979, 1995). In White Teacher, Paley examines her own role within her integrated classroom in the 1970s, questioning her own understanding and positionality within the classroom. Paley does an exceptional job of showing her perspective as nonneutral and being unabashedly honest in seeing race play out in her classroom. In Kwanzaa and Me, she examines subtle forms of racism in classrooms and schools and the plurality of perspectives that this leads to in regard to best serving students in public schools. Again, in all of her honesty, she raises questions about how educators can best serve students of color and discusses how Whiteness frames the behavior of people of color as abnormal and deficient.

Another useful title is McIntyre’s Making Meaning of Whiteness: Exploring Racial Identity With White Teachers. McIntyre recounts a class aimed at helping a group of prospective White teachers recognize their privilege and racialized perspectives (McIntyre, 1997). Looking at the struggle and successes that arose, this book is a lesson in the difficulties of making Whiteness visible.

Video can also help highlight the impact of Whiteness. The Color of Fear shows a multiracial men’s group discussing issues of race and the
unconsciousness of one White member in particular (Wah, 1994). The “color-blind” White member of the group defends his perspective in multiple ways, maintaining neutrality, devaluing others experiences, and averring a postracial society. Slowly, through the other members’ vulnerability and strength, he questions his own ideology. While not focusing on institutional racism, the video makes plain the different values and ideologies being employed and the transformation in the views of one White man.

These practices contain personal, interpersonal, and political dimensions to decentering Whiteness. Autobiographies are inherently personal while the books by Brodkin and Ignatiev discuss the political and institutional dimensions contributing to the construction of Whiteness. Last, the “Color of Fear” displays Whiteness interpersonally. All of these interventions can aid in racializing White experiences from multiple vantage points.

Validating the Experiences and Perspectives of People of Color

While the previous category focused on deconstructing Whiteness and neutrality, this group of practices focuses more on validating the stories of people of color. They are complimentary understandings. Deconstructing one’s own values coupled with understanding the cultural norms of others allows for plurality. In this way, autobiographies are a complement to the biographies discussed below. These two practices together allow for a comparison and further questioning of students’ histories and values and form a powerful way to build both consciousnesses.

Writing biographies can foster important new perspectives about “otherness” (Schmidt, 1999; Xu, 2000). This activity requires students to write a biography from in-depth interviews with a person who is culturally or racially different. Students are then asked to do an analysis of cultural differences, explaining personal discomforts. The key is in having students question their own perspective, much like in autobiographies, so that they are not applying their own values as neutral to the people they are interviewing. In contrast to autobiographies, however, biographies can break down generalized stereotypes and disturb narratives that limit seeing “Others” as human. This in turn limits deficit views about intelligence, motivation, and culture being applied to individuals and can enable teachers to see themselves in another. Last, the cross-cultural analysis can reframe the values that prospective teachers’ bring to the classroom as just that, cultural, personal, and racial, rather than normal, ideal, and unbiased.
Biographies serve as counternarratives to the dominant discourse about students of color. They place educational participation within a historical context, adding nuance to understanding how the system might not be serving children by simply telling diverse stories. These counterstories can frame access and opportunity in society and serve as a contrast to the autobiographies of many White teachers, placing cultural and racial issues front and center rather than leaving their influence invisible. Developing biographies through interviews is not the only way to accomplish this goal. Having a diverse student population within teacher education would bring contrasting autobiographies to bear. Unfortunately, teachers themselves do not generally reflect the diverse students that they will end up serving. Given this limitation, there are a number of readings that present narratives challenging cultural norms and postracial notions of society.

A number of texts use autobiography to develop counternarratives of people of color, women, class, and immigrants. Some of the readings like those by Frederick Douglas and Maya Angelou are autobiographies about how racism shapes experience (Angelou, 1969, 1993; Douglas, 1845). In addition, Rodriguez’s (1982) *Hunger of Memory* and Hoffman’s (1990) *Lost in Translation* examine immigrant issues coupled with language. Richard Rodriguez in particular looks at assimilationist forces within education as it affects immigrants. Other memoirs illustrate “otherness” in the United States, such as *Always Running: Gang Days in L.A.* or *Working in the Dark*, both depicting Latinos living in impoverished conditions (Baca, 1994; Rodriguez, 1993). Some autobiographical readings draw more on issues of women. Examples of intersectionality within these texts are *The Road from Coorain* or *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*, which likens Whites to ghosts, and is a girl’s memoir of being caught between these racialized ghosts and her mother’s gendered ghosts left behind after emigrating from China (Conway, 1989; Kingston, 1999). There are many more autobiographical texts used within the teacher education classroom, but this is a sampling that legitimizes the experiences of people of color.

Other readings include fictional accounts used to illustrate cultural practices and explicate racism. Possibly the best know in this group is *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Lee, 1960). But more recently, novels like *Push*, *The Joy Luck Club*, and *Wild Meat and the Bully Burger* are examples of fiction that embed color consciousness within them (Sapphire, 1997; Tan, 1991; Yamanaka, 1997). *Gorilla, My Love*, is a collection of short stories that forces the reader to switch positions and feel the confusion and pain caused by racism and classism (Bambara, 1972). Again, while there are numerous readings that could
be included, these push students to understand experiences of racism, challenge the dominant narrative, and develop cultural awareness.

One issue to be particularly wary of in readings across both fiction and autobiographies is that racism can be framed as historical within some of these texts. While this can help students understand the history of racism in the United States, it can also support the idea that we are a postracial society. The connection from these writings to current experience is critical and must be explored in discussions centered on this work. In addition, while the biographies and readings described here develop mostly personal narratives, it is not clear whether they also help support more systematic understandings of institutional racism and oppression.

**Naming Racist Educational Practices and Developing a Color-Conscious Repertoire**

Educational practices can be limiting or freeing, depending on the ideology employed. When the experiences of students of color are delegitimized, cultural practices framed as deficient, and home language forced to stay home, students suffer. These nonneutral practices privilege the cultural values of Whites and the upper class. In contrast, an educational practice that leverages culture as an asset, makes plain the rules of institutions, and brings a critical perspective to the classroom are liberating for students (King, 1991). In this section we examine practices that both help preservice teachers challenge assimilationist perspectives as well as work toward more color-conscious educational perspectives.

Field experiences in communities of color are often used to decenter new teachers and allow them insights to feeling like an outsider. By placing teachers in the contexts of the students they will teach, the hope is that they will question the stereotypes, norms, and values they bring with them into students’ communities. Many small-scale studies have shown this practice to increase knowledge, change attitudes, and connect classrooms to communities of color (Sleeter, 2001). Ladson-Billings (2000) highlights this practice as promising for preparing teachers to work with African American students but says that helping students manage the mismatch between their expectations of entering urban settings and the reality is important. Specifically, the support for prospective teachers in managing the disequilibrium between what color blindness tells them they see and the reality will determine the effectiveness of the practice.

Readings too numerous to mention deconstruct the color-blind assimilationist perspective in education. Some classic options are listed below. Delpit’s
(1995) Other People’s Children is one of the best known readings aimed at this goal. She examines how deficit views result in poorer educational experiences for African American students in particular and how the rules of school are hidden from students. Similarly, Valenzuela’s Subtractive Schooling scrutinizes the education of Mexican American students and how their definitions of education are dismissed and how minimizing culture and language produces assimilationist policies and practices (Valenzuela, 1999). Kohl and Gilyard also look at language and culture in education and forms of resistance to inequitable practices (Gilyard, 1991; Kohl, 1991). Rose’s Lives on the Boundary recounts his own schooling experiences as he examines literacy practices in schools that disenfranchise or enable underserved students (Rose, 1989). Last, To Teach: The Journey of a Teacher is an account of one educator’s growth and struggle to teach, providing ways to reform education and build relationships with students (Ayers, 1993).

In addition, many of the numerous writings in multicultural education detail positive practices that challenge color blindness. While not all of the readings within this field counter color blindness, since that depends on the perspective of the author (see Banks, 1993), we reference a select few here. Nieto’s (1992) Affirming Diversity: Sociopolitical Context of Multicultural Education, Sleeter and Grant’s (2007) Making Choices for Multicultural Education: Five Approaches to Race, Class, and Gender, and Banks’ (1994) An Introduction to Multicultural Education are examples of works that deconstruct color-blind ideas. While some books fall into antiquated understandings of people of color, such as viewing Native Americans as a historical people without current cultural practices (Kivel, 2002), these texts do not.

A number of videos have also been produced both looking at educational practices that oppress as well as those that are culturally responsive. Unequal Education details the schooling of two middle school boys in New York, a few miles apart, but worlds away in terms of educational quality (Camp & Morris, 1992). It illustrates the difference that class and race can make in the opportunities and access afforded children. As a contrast, in Good Morning, Miss Toliver, students, parents, and teachers speak about a classroom that validates community knowledge, family experiences, and gives voice to student concerns (Foundation for the Advancement of Science, 1993). It is an example of practicing culturally relevant pedagogy, based in the belief that all children can learn, achieve, and succeed. A third video, A Class Divided details an experiment in an all-White third grade classroom during desegregation in the 1970s. Students are divided by eye color—with one eye color being best—which results in students acting prejudicially (Williams, 1984). It shows how grouping even by surface attributes serves to create a culture of
oppression. One limit to this video in particular is that organizing society by skin color, while superficial, entails very real economic and institutional consequences. These three videos are powerful examples of the successes and failures of public education as well as the construction of difference through racist policy.

While we have looked at educational practice here, blaming education alone for reproducing color-blind ideologies and inequity does a disservice to educators by placing the burden for society’s ills on their shoulders. Surely, educators have a part to play, but broader institutions set policy and law that affect education. We now turn toward teacher education practices that aim to unmask the racism that color-blind perspectives produced at the institutional and policy levels.

**Challenging Neutrality of Policy/Seeing Institutional Racism**

In our experience, there seems to be less literature looking at practices that develop understandings of oppression at the institutional and policy levels. Here we look beyond school contexts to see how supposed neutral institutions support passive racism. While some of these readings look at policy historically, structural color blindness is a current issue and connections to the present circumstance must be made to understand how color blindness cloaks contemporary racism.

One practice used to look at issues more broadly is having students develop ethnographic research skills to study communities (Narode, Rennie-Hill, & Peterson, 1994). Ladson-Billings (2000) notes that this practice moves teachers outside the bounded classroom. In a study by Narode and colleagues (1994), student teachers used ethnographic methods to study various programs within one urban community including a tutoring project, a gang task force, church activities, and a teen pregnancy program for 30 hours. The extensive work in the community led to student teachers better understanding the degree with which schools served parents, both negative as well as positive influences on urban youth, and racism within the school institution. While conceptual growth was noted across many studies using this practice, Sleeter (2001) notes that some students resisted placing communities within broader institutions and relations of power. Ethnographic methods seem to push students to see experiences as racialized, to understand how culture functions within communities, and to get beyond damaging metanarratives, preparation for using these methods cannot be underestimated (see Narode et al., 1994). In addition, helping students process the experiences they
have cannot be underemphasized. For instance, having students bring a color-blind framework into studying communities of color would most likely reproduce that same ideology, leaving their own view neutral while placing blame on local communities and cultures for being “lazy” or not “pulling themselves up by their bootstraps.” Instructors would need to help students understand and rethink some of what they see to build new ways of viewing communities of color. Again, this entails developing self-consciousness about one’s own values and perspectives, questioning Whiteness, recognizing privilege, and naming racism. This illustrates just how interconnected all of the understandings we discuss here really are.

Spring’s (1994) Deculturalization and the Struggle for Equality: A Brief History of the Education of Dominated Cultures in the United States provides a history of Anglo-American racism and school policies affecting dominated groups in the United States. The text focuses on the educational, legal, and social construction of race and racism and on educational practices related to deculturalization, segregation, and the civil rights movement. An understanding of these historical perspectives is critical to teachers’ success or failure in today’s diverse classrooms. Kozol’s many books are powerful examples of taking both a micro and a macro look at racial inequities in schools (Kozol, 1992, 2005). In addition, Tatum’s (1997) “WHY ARE ALL THE BLACK KIDS SITTING TOGETHER IN THE CAFETERIA?” AND OTHER CONVERSATIONS ABOUT RACE looks both at racial identity formation as well as larger macro-aggressions and institutional racism on a systemic level. Mcleod’s (1995) Ain’t No Makin’ It: Aspirations and Attainment In A Low-income Neighborhood, examines opportunity—or the lack thereof—available to underserved teens. In particular he discusses how education serves to reproduce racism rather than provide access to move up in society. There are certainly others.

Three other readings also challenge color blindness at the systemic level outside education. Lipsitz’s (1995) A Possessive Investment in Whiteness is a well-known example of looking at policy that is seemingly neutral but serves the interest of Whites. TERROR, SILENCING, AND CHILDREN: INTERNATIONAL, MULTIDISCIPLINARY COLLABORATION WITH GUATEMALAN MAYA COMMUNITIES is an article looking at the impact of international policies on the lives of indigenous Guatemalans (Lykes, 1994). Last, Fine and colleagues’ (2004) edited volume, Off White: Readings in Power, Privilege, and Resistance is so extensive it could have been placed in developing any of the understandings discussed in this article. From looking at teacher education, to representations of Whiteness in film, to the historical construction of race, this book is an outstanding resource for educators looking to develop color consciousness with students.
We highlight two videos that scrutinize color-blind policy. The first, *In Whose Honor?* details the construction of "Indian" by the dominant group and how it is institutionalized through the case of the Illini versus the University of Illinois (Rosenstein, 1997). As Banks (2001) discusses his use of this video in classes, he notes how it shows the mainstream construction of the "other" in U.S. society, underscoring how institutions reproduce unconscious ideologies. Another, *The Shadow of Hate*, examines the history of discrimination in the United States from African Americans to Jews and the Irish (Guggenheim, 1995). Both videos take broader structural looks at discrimination in the United States and how policy reproduces inequity.

Two activities, different than any we have discussed so far, attempt to help prospective teachers understand institutional racism. Frykholm's (1997) card game "Barnga" simulates inequity by making multiple tables and having players work their way to the top table. However, the rules change from table to table, which causes conflict, anger, and misunderstandings as students move tables. The activity is made all the more difficult by there being no verbal or written communication. In his paper studying the effects of the game on future teachers, Frykholm documents the emotions that arise from the game. He uses these experiences to illustrate how cultural rules are not explained.

The second author uses data from 1982, 1992, and 2004 to understand inequity that arises from color-blind policies through participation in mathematics coursework across race. Battey (under review) uses this activity to calculate the average salary for students based on different amounts of mathematics coursework 10 years after high school. Examining differences across race and then adding layers of a simulated 40-year work-life, a generation, and finally pay differential, it serves as an example of stratifying opportunity and how this effects generations and the accumulation of wealth. While the estimates are conservative, the differences between Whites and Latinos and Blacks total in the trillions of dollars. It serves as an example of how a seemingly neutral institution (mathematics education) actually impedes certain students through policies of tracking, steering students of color toward lower mathematics, and unfair access to AP courses and high-quality teachers. While mathematics often signifies neutrality and culturelessness for prospective teachers, this activity aims at showing its role in reproducing racial disparity.

**Conclusion**

We have worked toward two goals in this article. First, we wanted to theoretically map out the various meanings of color blindness. In addition, we
wanted to ground particular color-conscious teacher education practices within the understandings about race and racism that they support. We wanted to be explicit about our theoretical orientations and how they guide us in our instructional choices. By doing this, we hope to challenge the field of teacher education to be more theoretically explicit about which practices they select to engage pre- and in-service teachers.

The idea for this article arose in part from the extant literature around race and teacher education and its lack of specificity about the rationales employed in choosing particular practices. There are certainly instances where this is not so (see Banks, 2001; Cochran-Smith, 1995). But, more often than not, specific materials are shared with merely implicit notions about the kinds of student understandings that these practices were intended to develop. Thus, it is unclear why teacher educators decided on certain interventions. For instance, say an author uses “Color of Fear” in his class. In using this video, he could be trying to generally build racial awareness. However, more explicit and detailed understandings might also be his goal, such as how Whites defend their neutrality, how color blindness serves to devalue the perspectives of people of color, or how being complicit with a particular racial ideology serves to reproduce racism. These lines of inquiry would yield very different ends. Because of this lack of clarity and intention we sometimes see, we have tried to connect the understandings we seek with the practices used to support these ways of thinking.

That said, we think there is a need for future work that illustrates how practices and materials used within teacher education classrooms build on theory. This level of specificity is important. We have experienced colleagues who include “multicultural” materials in their courses that have little critical impact. Thus, in this work, the degree of detail matters. Thorough descriptions of the goals and the thinking behind teacher education practices would also allow the field to more fully apprentice new teacher educators in techniques that deconstruct racial ideologies for future teachers. Both connecting our theory and practice in a more detailed way and detailing our practices in action would move the field forward in finding interventions that push for color consciousness.

In addition, all of us in the field of race and education have felt the pressure to justify our work and its relevance to K-12 settings. Discussions of color blindness and color consciousness and their importance to teaching practice are often looked at as peripheral and lacking rigor. To be frank, many practitioners in school settings continue to see this line of inquiry as fruitless. It is hard to insert color blindness as a factor in low student achievement when all conversations on the topic center on standards and tests. In this vein,
we would like to offer some additional suggestions for further research that would continue to build the empirical and theoretical rigor of our field.

Rather than course-based research, we must also have programwide research exploring color blindness and its impact on future teachers. While course-based research is a beginning, only when these understandings are embedded beyond a 15-week semester will we know the impact that these practices have on preparing teachers. Color blindness is a pervasive ideology in society as it links with the powerful paradigms of individualism, meritocracy, and Whiteness. Only through extended opportunities to challenge this ideology will we see deep change for teachers. Therefore, we must research change in understandings across various coursework, documenting the change in preservice teachers’ perspectives with respect to the students they will be teaching and the communities they are beginning to engage. This might require the development of an interview protocol or survey to document this change across an entire cohort. In addition, we suggest following a subset of these prospective teachers into their field placement to see how they are engaging students. But this is only a beginning.

Also, as with the broader teacher education literature, it is imperative to understand how these newly developed understandings make or do not make their way into classrooms. To strengthen our understanding of our work and its capacity to move teachers forward, we must begin to research what happens across transitions from methods courses, to student teaching, and into the teaching practice. In which ways does color consciousness matter in the classroom? Does what we do as teacher educators reduce classroom microaggressions, increase culturally relevant practices, and develop better relationships between teachers and students? How do teachers who are color conscious versus color-blind affect their students?

Sleeter (2001) states that almost none of this work investigates how preservice teachers actually teach children. This brings a risk of finding out that we are having less of an impact than we would like. But it is also the only way to make our case in policy and within schools that what we do has an effect within the educational system. One example would be to follow comparative cases of preservice teachers with varying levels of color blindness/color conscious into their student teaching or 1st year teaching. This could mean selecting cases that isolate understanding of racial injustice with respect to content knowledge, pedagogy, and the like, to find out how this one difference affects interactions with students of color. Another possibility would be to develop a protocol to determine how Whiteness is enacted in the classroom. This would allow measurement of variance in color consciousness and its effects on equitable teaching or racial microaggressions in the classroom.
Which brings us to our last point—does this work fundamentally improve student outcomes? This does not necessarily mean student test scores. Student outcomes could refer to motivation, relationships, learning (measured more meaningfully), college attendance rates, perseverance within school (vs. dropping out) and engagement with subject matter. Every educational effort should be judged on how it changes learning or access for students. This work is no different. Connecting the dots between change in teacher education to effects on classroom practices and finally their impact on students themselves is critical for building our understanding of and research base on color consciousness in teaching.

To make a case that what we do is critical, we must better understand what we are doing well and what we could be doing better to support color-conscious practices. It is clear that color blindness has indelible ramifications. We have clear moral and ethical reasons to educate children in environments that respect their cultural dignity and distinctiveness. This requires that we fundamentally can specify the understandings we are attempting to change and the practices focused on changing them. To challenge such deeply engrained ideologies, we need to be theoretically sound, develop practices that hold up to scrutiny, and investigate their effects on real classrooms and students.

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Notes


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**Bios**

**Kerri Ullucci**, is an assistant professor in the School of Education at Roger Williams University. Her research interests include race and poverty issues in schooling and the development of culturally relevant teaching practices. She also prepares K-8 teachers for urban schools.

**Dan Battey**, is an assistant professor of mathematics education in the Graduate School of Education at Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey. His research focuses on issues of equity, particularly focusing on race and racism as they relate to mathematics teaching, teacher education, and professional development.