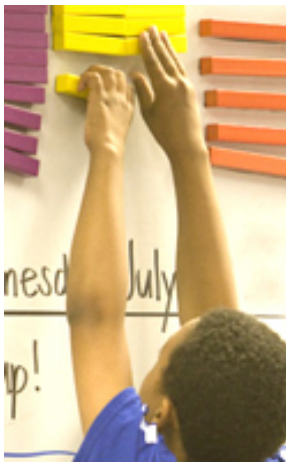




working papers



Constructing Societal
Curriculum Sites and
Instructional Practices that
Elicit Student Thinking about
Race and Education

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Constructing Societal Curriculum Sites and Instructional Practices that Elicit Student Thinking about Race and Education

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Abstract:

In this essay, Milner focuses on *what* middle and high school teachers might teach as sites to build knowledge and discourse of race with students. He also considers *how* teachers might design learning opportunities for and with students that build from and on societal issues. A central goal of the essay is to equip teachers with insights that may be useful to them as they develop racially relevant and responsive curriculum and instructional practices. Because knowledge, beliefs, and discourse inform teachers' practices, Milner draws from this empirical and theoretical literature as analytic tools to make sense of curriculum and instructional recommendations teachers might consider in their sociopolitical contexts. Perhaps more now than ever in the past, teachers must be equipped to use society as curriculum sites to help students build skillsets that will help them to more deeply understand how race influences people's experiences inside and outside of school.

My body of research has focused on the intersections of teachers' practices in urban¹ middle and high schools and teacher learning and development. I have attempted to study instructional practices of in-service teachers in middle and high schools – mostly Language Arts classrooms -- to shape my own decisions in preparing teachers to teach in teacher education programs (Milner, 2010, 2006; Milner & Smithey, 2003). My research has examined the knowledge, beliefs, mindsets, thinking, and consequently practices of teachers in schools to attempt to understand linkages to student learning opportunities (Milner, 2005, 2008, 2013, 2015). I have learned several important lessons from that research regarding dimensions of support pre-service and in-service teachers need to meet the complexly diverse needs of students in schools – especially those too often placed on the margins of teaching and learning:

- Teachers' beliefs seem to shape what they know and what they will allow themselves to come to know.
- Teachers' beliefs and knowledge seem to be strongly connected and also sometimes conflated. For instance, teachers sometimes claim "to know" when in fact they are relying on a set of unchallenged, untested belief systems.
- Teachers' beliefs, knowledge, history, and worldview influence what they say and their discursive interactions with other educators, parents, and students.
- Teachers' beliefs, knowledge, history, and worldview seem to influence what they do – their actions and practices whether consciously or unconsciously.
- The place – the sociopolitical context – in which teachers work appears to influence their own learning, beliefs, knowledge, discourse and practices.
- Perhaps for students who are most grossly underserved in schools, such as those of color – mainly Black and Brown students, those whose first language is not English, those who live below the poverty line, and those who are categorized as disabled – understanding teachers' beliefs, knowledge, talk and action seems essential to their learning and development.



Figure 1: Studying and Understanding Teacher Learning

Figure 1 (above) attempts to capture some of the connectedness of what I have learned from and about studying and supporting teachers in sociopolitical contexts and especially with students who are often placed on the margins of learning, such as those in urban and highly diverse schools.

In essence, we know that teachers' knowledge is an essential aspect to their work with students (Shulman, 1987). This knowledge that teachers have, develop and need has been conceptualized as their practical knowledge (Carter, 1990; Doyle, 1986; Elbaz, 1983), their personal practical knowledge (Clandinin, 1985; Clandinin & Connelly, 1986; Connelly & Clandinin, 1984, 1985), their pedagogical content knowledge (Shulman, 1986; Shulman & Sykes, 1986) and their racial and cultural knowledge (Banks, 2015; Cochran-Smith, 1995; Irvine, 2003; King, 1991; Foster, 1997). It is also clear that teachers' beliefs can shape their practices (Gay, 2010; McCutcheon, 2002). In particular, compelling research has demonstrated the role and salience of teachers' self-efficacy beliefs or their sense of efficacy in executing teaching tasks (Bandura, 1986; Milner & Woolfolk Hoy, 2003; Woolfolk, 2016).

Research and theory have also documented the ways in which discourse is influenced by beliefs and knowledge (Freire, 1998). Haberman (2000) explained that, “language is not an innocent reflection of how we think. The terms we use control our perceptions, shape our understanding, and lead us to particular proposals for improvement” (p. 203).

Knowledge, beliefs, and discourse inform teachers’ practices (Freire, 1998; Milner, 2010). Teachers’ knowledge, beliefs (and talk) about race and culture influence what they do in the classroom with students (Milner, 2010) and their ability, skill and willingness to develop curriculum and instructional practices that are relevant (Ladson-Billings, 2009) and responsive (Gay, 2010; Howard, 2010) to students inside of the classroom. And teachers’ knowledge, beliefs, talk and practices are shaped by the ecological nature of their learning, development and lived experiences (Milner, 2010). In other words, the context of teachers’ work is guided and influenced by the cultural, social, economic, structural and political conditions (Anyon, 2005; Payne, 2008) of place (Morris & Monroe, 2009; Tate, 2008).

In this paper, I focus on *what* middle and high school teachers might teach as sites to build knowledge and discourse regarding race with their students and *how* they might design and develop learning opportunities for them. I focus on these two areas (the what and the how) because teachers may struggle to build curriculum for their students that is indeed racially relevant to them as students, and they may also struggle to understand how to build instructional practices and design a classroom ethos that centralizes race.

DEFINING CULTURE, CENTRALIZING RACE

Culture is not only about race; however, race is a central dimension of culture and for some racial and ethnic groups, race is the most salient feature of their cultural identity (Milner, 2010, 2015). Culture can be defined as deep-rooted values, beliefs, languages, customs, and norms shared among a group of people. However, culture is not a static category “for conveniently sorting people according to expected values, beliefs, and behaviors” (Dyson & Genishi, 1994, p. 3). Culture is a dynamic concept that encompasses, among other areas, racial and ethnic identity, class, language, economic status, and gender. Gay (2010) maintained, “Even without our being consciously aware of it, culture determines how we think, believe, and behave, and these, in turn, affect how we teach and learn” (pp. 8-9).

Race is constructed physically, contextually, socially, legally, and historically. The meanings, messages, results, and consequences of race are developed and constructed by human beings in society, not by some predetermined set of scientific laws or genetics. Genetically and biologically, individuals are more the same than they are different. Thus, race is *physically constructed*: Based on skin pigmentation or colorism (Monroe, 2013), people in society construct ideas, judgments, characteristics, and beliefs systems about themselves and others. These physical constructions are sometimes inaccurate, but the constructions of race remain. It is important to note that physical constructions of race vary from one society or context to the next. For instance, constructions of race on continents such as Africa or Asia are different from constructions of race based on phenotype in North America. Although these constructions of race are different, race is still operating and salient to human experience. In this way, race is also *contextually* constructed. In short, place and space matter in how race is thought about, constructed, and talked about. Societies prioritize values and practices based in part on race.

Race is also *socially constructed*. Based on a range of societal information and messages, people socially construct and categorize themselves and others. These social constructions are connected to how groups of people perform, their preferences, values, and worldviews. Societal constructions are based on a range of issues such as history and law, and these social constructions shape how we think about individuals and groups of people regionally and contextually. Moreover, race is *legally constructed*. Laws in U.S. society (related to education), for example, help those of us in society socially construct what race is. Landmark cases and related legal policies such as the *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) and *Milliken v. Bradley* (1974) all influence our constructions and definitions of race in U.S. society. Additionally, race is *historically constructed*. Historical realities related to how people have been treated and how people have fared in a society also shape the construction of race. In U.S. society, we rely on our historical constructions to shape how we currently view raced

beings. The very fact that Black bodies were deemed as property (Harris, 1993) during slavery and that Black people were not even viewed as human influence our current constructions of race—albeit implicitly. In short, a history of Jim Crow laws, slavery, and racial discrimination shepherd us to currently construct and think about race in particular ways.

Race has been and continues being examined to address educational inequity (Gooden & O'Doherty, 2015; Grooms & Williams, 2015; Jackson, Sealey-Ruiz, & Watson, 2014; Petchauer, 2015). I argue that the examination of classroom and pedagogical practices that centralize race should do so with a clear understanding of the historical, current, social, legal, and phenotype manifestations of race.

The terms culture, ethnicity and race are sometimes misused and collapsed to carry the same explanatory meaning. African American denotes an ethnic group of people—not a singular, static cultural group; there is a wide range of diversity among and between people of African decent although there are some consistencies as well. African Americans share a history of slavery, Jim Crow, and other forms of systemic discrimination and racism that bind the group. At the same time, African Americans possess a shared history of spiritual grounding, thriving (Dillard & Okpalaoka, 2013), tenacity, and resilience through some of the most horrific situations that human beings have had to endure throughout modern civilization. However, while there are shared experiences, there are also many differences between and among African Americans. But why focus on race?

WHY RACE?

In the context of societal upheaval and turmoil regarding race, a White practicing high school teacher asked me for advice on how to prepare for and talk with her racially diverse students about race and society in the classroom. Although she teaches mathematics and one class of science, she believed that her students were grappling with race in ways that could be influencing their performance in her classes based on what they were seeing, experiencing, and hearing in society. She, like many teachers, wanted to support her students in building race talk but did not know *what* to do and *how* to do it.

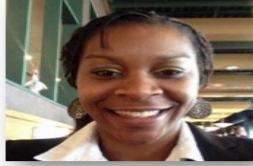
Teachers tend to struggle with race in their work (Milner, 2010, 2015). Although strong racial messages and implications are pervasive in many of the challenges we face in education related to outcomes in education such as patterns in special education (Artiles, Klingner, & Tate, 2006; Blanchett, 2006; Noguera, 2003; O'Connor & Fernandez, 2006), under-representation of students in gifted education (Ford, 2010), and office referral rates and patterns of students to the office for misbehavior who are subsequently suspended and expelled (Davis & Jordan, 1994; Skiba, Michael, Nardo & Paterson, 2002). Yet, pre-service and practicing teachers may ignore or at best minimize race, racism, and discrimination as explanatory rationales for these patterns (Milner, 2010). To illuminate, structural and systemic barriers and schools' inability to address them have perpetually underserved children of color. For instance, proportionally, Black students are 3 times more likely to receive special education services for mental retardation and 2.3 times more likely for emotional disturbances than all other ethnic/racial groups combined; further, they are more likely to be educated away from their peers than students from any other ethnic/racial groups (<http://www.usccr.gov/pubs/MinoritiesinSpecialEducation.pdf>). Black students are suspended and expelled at a rate three times greater than White students (<http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/crdc-discipline-snapshot.pdf>). Further, although Black students represent about 18 percent of preschool enrollment, in the 2011-12 school year they made up 42 percent of the preschool students who were suspended once and 48 percent of those suspended more than once (<http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2014/06/04/33milner.h33.html>). And Black and Latino students represent 26% of the students enrolled in gifted and talented education programs, but 40% of the enrollment in school offering such programs (<http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/crdc-college-and-career-readiness-snapshot.pdf>). In the next sections of this essay, I focus on societal, racial realities that could be used as curriculum design sites for teachers in classrooms. I then turn to a discussion of instructional practices and approaches essential for teachers to consider in building a classroom context and instructional practice centered on race.

SOCIETY AS CURRICULUM DESIGN

The point and focus of this section is for teachers to think about “the what -- curriculum” of their classroom design as they may be some transferable features in their classrooms. It can be argued that these societal curriculum sites are best situated and positioned in social studies, history, or language arts classrooms; however, I argue that these curriculum opportunities could be relevant across varying subject matter areas (such as mathematics, science, physical education, or art) because students are experiencing and attempting to understand these issues and related ones in different subject areas. I also believe the recommendations here are most appropriate for middle and high school students although some may be transferable to early childhood and elementary school.

Although the election of President Barack Obama led some to believe that racism had ended and that issues of race were in the past, recent shootings in Falcon Heights, Minnesota, Baton Rouge, Louisiana, and Dallas, Texas are just three recent examples that issues of race and racism are alive and as critical race theorist, Bell, would argue (1980) permanent in society – and U.S. society in particular (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). In this way, one could argue that race relations perhaps have improved in some respects but have in fact regressed in others. Thus, teachers have an opportunity to engage presidential elections (including that of Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump) – especially regarding issues of race and immigration as well as the previous election with the first Black president with Barack Obama. To illuminate, both Clinton and Trump both reference “the African American” voter and tend to talk about them as a monolithic group. The issues explored as well as the content of the issues being covered are raced and good examples of ways teachers could engage students.

In addition, although unjustifiable and counterproductive, the shooting of five White, Dallas police officers by a Black man, Micah Xavier Johnson (age 25) of Mesquite, Texas, serves as a response to a perceived and real slow pace of progress in police shootings of Black people and Black males in particular (Amadou Diallo, 23, Shot dead while unarmed, February 4, 1999; Sean Bell, 23, Shot dead while unarmed, November 25, 2006; Oscar Grant, 23, Shot dead while unarmed, January 1, 2009; Trayvon Martin, 17, Shot dead while unarmed, February 26, 2012; Jonathon Ferrell, 24, Shot dead while unarmed, September 14, 2013; Eric Garner, 43, Choked to death while unarmed, July 17, 2014; and Michael Brown, 19, Shot dead while unarmed, August 9, 2014). The span, duration, and consistency of these police shootings of Black people are good examples of the slow pace of progress in reforming policy and thus good examples of opportunities for teachers to consider in the classroom. To be clear, shootings of unarmed Black people are not about individual police officers’ decisions and actions. Rather, issues of police shootings are those that suggest the need for major policy analyses for transformation. In other words, the mere duration, the extended timespan, and range of police shootings (the unrealistic number of shootings) suggest that problems of policing far exceed what an individual or a group of individual police officers do. The challenges are systemic and require serious policy changes. These issues might seem simple and uncomplicated to students (or even teachers) but are extremely nuanced and complicated, and teachers have an opportunity to address them in the classroom with their students. The photos below provide images of some of those shot by police officers and could be used to anchor conversations.



Sandra Bland, 28
Died in police custody
July 13, 2016



Natasha McKenna, 37
Died in police custody
February 8, 2015



Philando Castile, 32
Shot to death while legally armed
July 6, 2016



Michael Brown, 19
Shot dead while unarmed
August 9, 2014



Freddie Gray, 25
Died in police custody
April 19, 2015



Trayvon Martin, 17
Shot dead while unarmed
February 26, 2012

In addition, on surface, Colin Kaepernick's kneeling decision during National Football League games might seem straightforward and not inundated with more deeply constructed lessons. As another interesting cite for curriculum design, teachers could consider power dynamics in sport or even who actually makes policy decisions in the National Football league. Focusing on Kaepernick's decision to exercise his right to sit or kneel during the national anthem at football games has strong racial messages (http://www.espn.com/nfl/story/_id/17444691/colin-kaepernick-san-francisco-49ers-sits-again-national-anthem) as he protests the police killing of unarmed Black people such as Michael Brown, Jr., Sandra Bland, Eric Garner, and Freddie Gray.

It is important to note that I do not believe the matters explored here should be considered without deep thought, reflection, and skillsets among teachers who work to build knowledge, understanding, and skillsets of students. Although difficult to convey to teachers in pre-service and in-service, a central goal of our work with P-12 students should be to build skills. For instance, we should work to help students build their critical thinking skills, analytical thinking skills, problem solving skills, and so forth. So regardless of the content being covered, my point is that students should have the skills and ability to interrogate race-related matters inside of the classroom in ways that allow them to more robustly explicate them in society.

In addition to broader societal realities, in building curriculum content that is racially relevant to students, teachers might consider including include movie clips (such as *Crash*, *Remember the Titans*), satirical comedy (such as *The Dave Chappell's Show*), network series on major television networks (such as the *What Would you Do?* series), provocative speeches (such as the *Jesse Williams' BET Awards Acceptance* speech)ⁱⁱ, as well as news clips.

RACE-CENTRAL INSTRUCTIONAL PRACTICES

As curriculum sites for teachers are constructed, teachers need tools to think about building classroom environments and instructional practices that produce effective learning opportunities for students. Drawing from a range of literature (Freire, 1998; Gay, 2010; Howard, 2010), several principles shaped the kinds of moves and instructional practices necessary for teachers to build and enact curriculum opportunities that centralize race.

- From the very beginning of the academic year, teachers should *design a classroom ethos* open to questioning, openness to varying perspectives, and that expects and encourages discourse. Designing an environment of respect (even when conversations get heated) is essential to encouraging students to interrogate and grapple with tough issues in general and race conversations in particular.
- Teachers should *reflect on and balance* their own views and positions on race and societal occurrences. Their goal is not to indoctrinate students into believing or embracing a particular point of view. The goal is not for teachers to push their own agendas as much as it is to *nuance* points related to race with students in order to sharpen their analytic and critical thinking skills. Teachers should *offer counter-views* and positions to students' positions as they participate in classroom discussion.
- Teachers should *identify and centralize* "the facts," based on evidence from varying sources and multiple points of view. They should *encourage* and *require* students to explore different sources of information and to consider positions and standpoints inconsistent with their initial thinking on topics related to race.
- *Teachers should also expect* students to draw from sources (including their own experience) in expressing their views and positions on issues of race.
- *Teachers should design for* logical inside of school curriculum connections linked to the discipline being taught. Teachers should prepare to help students understand convergence between race and the subject matter they teach.
- In the midst of supporting students, teachers should *build their own repertoire* to support race talk, cognitive, socio-emotional and affective needs of students as conversations about race emerge. They should *build networks* to support student needs that fall outside of their toolkit by working with school counselors, psychologists, social workers, and so forth.
- Teachers should *recognize* and *nurture* the affective and socio-emotional dimensions of students. Students could feel very strongly about a racial topic or issue and could become emotional as conversations develop. Teachers should *acknowledge* and *validate* these students' feelings and respond to them with affirmation and sensitivity.
- Teachers should *talk, collaborate, and partner* with parents, community members, and school administrators about their views and expectations regarding race-centered conversations and develop strategies with these groups to bolster and complement discourse inside and outside of the classroom.
- Teachers should *consider* next steps associated with race talk. Once students have engaged the issues, deepened their knowledge and understanding, help students think about their role in working against racism currently and in the future by thinking about broader more collective ways to build conversations. In other words, what can students do to fight against discrimination and racism in the collective?

CONCLUSIONS

Indeed, teachers are under an enormous amount of pressure to teach a curriculum that is tied to accountability systems, such as standardized testing. Thus, it can be difficult for them to engage issues of race inside of the classroom when they worry that such learning and engagement are inconsequential to the *real* curriculum. But for many students, race, racism, and

other forms of discrimination are *the curriculum* of their lives and so should be addressed inside of the classroom. Moreover, if we do not address these issues in schools, how will students become engaged citizens who understand how structures and systems of racism continue to maintain an unjust status quo? How will they develop tools to be change agents committed to helping us realize and reach our ideal democracy?

As teacher educators, we must help teachers build knowledge, skills, attitudes, dispositions, and practices necessary for them to be successful teachers of the students they are teaching and the communities in which these students live (and will live). Our students have changed – so must the curriculum and instructional practices that support student learning and development. However, I also recognize the complexities of building knowledge and understanding of race and racism in the teaching and learning process. James (2004) explained that our work in preparing teachers affords us “the opportunity to broaden our awareness and arrive at deeper, informed and more complex understandings of the issues facing students in the community” (p. 20). Moreover, because teacher education programs (both traditional and nontraditional) are under increased scrutiny to provide evidence of their effectiveness, we must continue to document our successes (and struggles) in helping teachers develop the competencies and skills necessary to be effective in engaging issues of race in real classrooms with students. Thus, we must document the effects and influences of our work as we engage race, society, and the teaching and learning nexuses.

Indeed, as teacher educators are developing their knowledge and skills to engage this work, they must be aware that teachers being educated to consider these issues will likely struggle to understand and work their own power and privilege. As Delpit (1995) described what she called the “culture of power” – teacher educators must deeply consider the ways in which codes and rules are developed even in the learning environments of teacher education engaging this work. Delpit described five aspects around power:

(a) issues of power are enacted in classrooms; (b) there are codes or rules for participating in power; that is, there is a “culture of power;” (c) the rules of the culture of power are a reflection of the rules of the culture of those who have power; (d) if you are not already a participant in the culture of power, being told explicitly the rules of that culture makes acquiring power easier; and (e) those with power are frequently least aware of – or least willing to acknowledge – its existence. Those with less power are often most aware of its existence (p. 24).

Indeed, Gordon (1990) wrote “critiquing your own assumptions about the world—especially if you believe the world works for you” (p. 88) is indeed a difficult and complex task. And developing and structuring learning opportunities for teachers in ways that provide spaces for critique and, at the same time, agency is not easy. Still, as I have discussed in this essay, the work is not easy but essential to the humanity and vitality of real students in real schools.

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ⁱ Urban environments (schools, districts, communities) can be characterized in three ways: Urban Intensive, Urban Emergent, and Urban Characteristic (Milner, 2012). *Urban Intensive* might be used to describe school contexts that are concentrated in large, metropolitan cities across the U.S. such as New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, and Atlanta. What sets these cities apart from other cities is their size, the density of them. These environments would be considered intensive because of their sheer numbers of people in the city and consequently the schools. In these cities, the infrastructure and large numbers of people can make it difficult to provide necessary and adequate resources to the large numbers of people who need them. In sum, urban intensive speaks to the size and density of a particular locale; the broader environments, outside of school factors such as housing, poverty, and transportation are directly connected to what happens inside of the school. Urban intensive environment would be those with one million people or more in the city. *Urban Emergent* might be used to describe schools which are typically located in large cities but not as large as the major cities identified in the urban intensive category. These cities typically have fewer than one million people in them but are relatively large spaces nonetheless. While they do not experience the magnitude of the challenges that the urban intensive cities face, they do encounter some of the same scarcity of resource problems, but on a smaller scale. In these areas, there are fewer people per capita; the realities of the surrounding communities are not as complex as those in the intensive category. Examples of such cities are Nashville, Tennessee, Austin, Texas, Columbus, Ohio, and Charlotte, North Carolina. *Urban Characteristic* could be used to describe schools that are not located in big or mid-sized cities but may be starting to experience some of the challenges that are sometimes associated with urban school contexts in larger areas that were described in the urban intensive and the urban emergent categories. An example of challenges that schools in the urban characteristic category is an increase of English language learners to a community. These schools might be located in rural or even suburban districts but the outside-of-school environments are not as large as those in the urban intensive or urban emergent schools.

ⁱⁱ I am grateful to Ira Murray for his recommendation of this provocative speech.