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Reflections

Counternarratives of Resistance in Preservice Teacher Education

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INTRODUCTION

Recent global Black Lives Matter protests have renewed attention to police brutality and other systemic injustices against Black Americans. One area that requires additional attention is public education. Schools have served as quiet oppressors of the literacies of Black Americans, robbing them of their stories of perseverance and contributions to American history, and instead perpetuating dominant narratives that stereotype Black students and families. Curricula centers the language and literacies of White people, relegating representation of Black Americans to stories of oppression and overcoming, from slavery to the Civil Rights Movement. Even teacher preparation programs that purport to prepare educators for diverse classrooms often center texts and deficit discourses that label Black students as ignorant and delinquent, or at risk and below benchmark (Ladson-Billings, 2000; Solorzano & Yosso, 2001). Rather than addressing the system's failure of Black students, schools locate the "problem" within Black students and families.

Research has also shown that many students who belong to minoritized groups encounter discrimination from students, faculty, and staff in higher education institutions (Cabrera et al., 1999; Garcia & Johnston-Guerrero, 2015; Griffin et al., 2016; Hurtado & Ruiz Alvarado, 2015; McGee & Bentley, 2017), particularly in regards to their language and literacy practices (e.g., Baker-Bell et al., 2017; Brooks & Alvarado, 2020; Kinloch, 2005; Kynard, 2010). In this article, two female Black undergraduates (Narcarsia, a non-traditional college student and Zaria, a first

generation college student) share their counternarratives as pre-service teachers who have experienced the prejudice of the educational system and have chosen to work to change it.

We share personal stories because they counter dominant discourses of education in both content and form. Stories can be both pedagogical and methodological tools for interrogating race (Delgado, 1989), and stories from the perspective of people of color become counterstories by offering a counter perspective to more dominant understandings, aiming “to cast doubt on the validity of accepted premises or myths, especially ones held by the majority” (Delgado, Stefanic, & Liendo, 2012, p. 159). The counterstories shared here reveal legacies of family literacies disconnected from schooled literacies, exclusion from and misrepresentation in curricula, and the power of representation in texts by scholars of color that center Black identities. They illustrate, as Delgado-Bernal (2002) argues, that “[a]lthough students of color are holders and creators of knowledge, they often feel as if their histories, experiences, cultures, and languages are devalued, misinterpreted, or omitted within formal educational settings” (p. 106).

In sharing these counterstories, we aim to offer concrete examples of the ways in which current educational practices exclude the histories, experiences, and literacy practices of Black students and the profound impact of that exclusion. It is essential to improve the representation and practices that Black students encounter in the classroom, from early childhood through higher education, and to broaden our notions of what “successful” literate identities can be. To this end, we conclude by offering recommendations for change and a call to action, imagining schools that, in planning explicitly for Black children, could better meet the needs of *all* students.

ZARIA'S STORY

For as long as I can remember, my family ingrained the importance of education into me. I tried very hard in school, graduated high school, and became the first in my immediate family to attend college. My parents graduated high school, however, my grandparents did not. As a child, I would come home from school and go to my grandfather's room to play “teacher.” I was teaching him the same list of spelling words that I was trying to learn. I thought he was playing along with the game, but years later, I learned that his enthusiasm was genuine. My grandfather, Jerry King, barely had an eighth grade education and went into the military fairly young. Despite his trouble with spelling and grammar, he could do all sorts of basic arithmetic and even some complex algebra. He was also very handy, working with radios in the military. He fought in the last legs of the Vietnam War. After, he came back to our hometown, married my grandmother, and had a slew of jobs, including owning several home improvement businesses in his lifetime.

I vaguely remember talking to him about the Civil Rights Movement as a child. He told me about his experience as one of the first Black students to attend a previously segregated school in west Tennessee in the 1960s. Inspired by his resilience, I went on a search to find out more about his education. In a court case from our hometown similar to *Brown v. Board of Education*, the plaintiffs argued that Black children should not have to travel the longer distance to attend an all-Black school, and that Black parents should have a choice about which school their child attended.

The plaintiffs won the case, and in the summer of 1962, my grandfather, along with a few other Black students, integrated the previously all-White school.

My grandfather was alive to tell his story through 2018, but none of the current high school students knew of the not-so-distant history of their school. My grandfather loved children, and he would have gladly been a guest to tell his story. The school's disconnection from its own history illustrates that we can and should include more Black stories in education, but that these stories are often erased.

This was true even though I attended what used to be an all-Black school. Despite its predominantly Black history, the school system still had its racially biased moments. Black students were asked to relive the traumas of slavery and the Civil Rights Movement. These traumas were the main representations of Black people in all of my schooling.

I have a very early memory of a game played in my elementary school's gym. Teachers erected an obstacle course around the perimeter. The game included jumping through hula-hoops, crawling under draped sheets, and climbing across a horizontal rock-climbing wall. In the center were a few gym mats, referred to as the "jail." With the lights turned off in the usually well-lit gym, students were given the instructions: complete the course without getting caught by a "slave owner." If you, a "runaway," were caught, you were sent to jail. To escape? Complete whatever exercise that was given to you by the "warden." Some students were given baby dolls and bindles to carry while completing the course. Other students took on the role of the patrol, equipped with cowboy hats and flashlights. This foul attempt to teach slavery was called the *Underground Railroad Game*. Students got to play twice a week during physical education. I remember participating for most of my time in elementary school. While I only remember bits and pieces, I mostly remember the disappointment I felt when I learned we would no longer be playing. I was only a child. At that age, I could not even begin to understand the gravity of what my ancestors went through. Making centuries of trauma into a game dehumanizes the people who experienced it and trivializes the horror. The game vanished without a trace, and the teachers never spoke about it. I would like to believe that a teacher voiced their concern about the harmfulness of the game. Most likely, a parent complained, and the game got swept under the rug like many other racial incidents in this school system.

In middle school, I encountered more explicit racism. This particular teacher was a pillar of the community. They worked in the system for years as a teacher and coach, and I remember being excited to enter their classroom. The excitement was short-lived once I picked up on the many microaggressions and blatant racism perpetuated by this teacher. One incident that sticks out, though small compared to some others, occurred when we learned about slavery. As a class, we were given a choice between an informational or narrative prompt. The prompt of the narrative: Imagine you are a slave traveling across the Atlantic on a slave ship. I am sure the prompt went on, but I and other Black students gathered to express our incredulity at this first sentence. Back then, my thought process was not very clear, but I knew, "I'm just not comfortable pretending to be a slave." At the time, that was good enough. Now, I realize that some part of my being knew that it was unnecessary to place myself in a position to relive and describe the atrocities that real people went through for the sake of an eighth-grade history paper. I never reported that teacher

because eighth grade me worried about the consequences for their family and well-being. Ironically, they did not do the same for me.

In becoming an educator, I want to be the safe place for *all* of my students. I want to amplify their voices when their histories are being silenced and rewritten. But I also envision a future where Black teachers do not have to be the ones that speak up against injustice and tactlessness. All teachers can teach Black students about their history without making them experience the racial trauma that still lingers today. Furthermore, people like my grandfather should not be excluded from the curriculum or belittled with stereotypes such as “uneducated Black man.” Jerry King, cheated by the system, still made a good life for himself. He was successful not because of formal education, but despite of it.

NARCARSIA'S STORY

At a young age, my family instilled in me the value of an education, and I remember my parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles always saying, “Do good in school.” This simple phrase was repeated throughout my educational journey as a young child into my adolescence. Now that I am a parent, it is a phrase that I continue to use with my own two children. I have a wealth of family members from both my maternal and paternal sides that have college degrees, some even with multiple degrees; this includes my own parents. The achievements of my family are varied and admirable. Members of my family have become small business owners, doctors, nurses, professors and teachers, engineers, and mechanics, as well as professional entertainers and athletes. Most people would look upon the success of my family and conclude that we are an accomplished group of people and when the numbers of degrees we hold are tallied, most would also think that we are a very educated group of people.

However, though these may be true assumptions, our combined successes and degrees, does not negate that our past, the knowledge of our own people, remains unknown. Had each of us performed well in school? Yes...but at what cost? What was being lost during our educational journey? As a child I had strived to do well in school solely because I was told that it was necessary if I wanted to have a good life. But what I discovered as an adult was that I knew nothing of my origins. I knew nothing that I could share with my children, because what I had learned about Black history were the same disconnected bits of information that they were currently being taught. This made me question my education, and that of my family. Were we truly successful, or had we been successfully manipulated?

As my children advanced through grade levels, I began to develop an awareness of the gross negligence of the educational system in regards to its Black students. I began to realize that our vast history and the resiliency of our ancestry were being reduced to tales about our ancestors being captured and forced into slavery and the achievements and contributions of Black and Brown people were being excluded from the curriculum. As a parent, I sadly became more conscious of the reality that the American education system was discriminatory. It has created a disconnection between Black students and their education that has been deliberately reinforced throughout generations.

Unfortunately, when I returned to college as a non-traditional student, I found that this disturbing issue was threaded through higher education as well. I obtained an Associate's degree in Computer Sciences following high school and soon after, I married. After supporting my husband throughout his military career, and working with pre-school children and children with disabilities for over 15 years, I decided that I wanted to pursue a degree in Special Education. Never would I have imagined that I would be offended by the content written within the textbook materials required by my program. But the required history courses repeated the same limited information about Black and Brown people, further establishing a detachment that is intentional and systematic.

Even more upsetting, many of the education textbooks that I have been required to read describe Black children as being at-risk, challenging, aggressive, or even "hard to teach." They portray children of color, especially Black children, as students with the most potential to struggle academically. For example, in a section on *Cultural and Ethnic Differences*, the textbook required for my Theories of Learning course (Ormrod et al., 2019) cited studies indicating that Black students have a "greater tendency to develop a sense of learned helplessness." The text attributed this tendency to racial prejudice. Ironically, however, this book and many books like it within teacher preparation programs are perpetuating this prejudice by describing Black children as helpless or potential problems to future teachers. This text also claimed that gangs were more prevalent in low-income, inner-city schools. Though gangs may be found in these areas, the book failed to mention that suburban and rural areas have their own forms of gangs, as well (Counter Extremism Project, 2021; Gibson, 2019; Watkins & Taylor, 2016). This might provide some insight into why so many Black and Brown students are unfairly targeted in schools for behavior issues and misconduct. Instead, it should be stressed to future teachers that they should be observant of the individual behaviors of all their students, regardless of the neighborhood in which they reside.

Damaging characterizations of children of color are continuously encountered within the pre-service educational program, a program in which the majority of participants are young White women. This language become even more dangerous when considering that it might affirm the racist beliefs that some of these young women may have already been socialized into. As a Black woman and a mother of two children, it is concerning that future teachers are being conditioned to view their Black students in such a derogatory manner. It is also troubling to acknowledge that I could become co-workers with teachers who enter their classrooms with a preconceived bias against their Black students due to the information given to them during their preparation programs.

It is also very disconcerting for me to realize that the few young Black men and women entering education are being told to think of their future students of color – and, regrettably, themselves – in such a disparaging manner. Growing up within a strong circle of educated and successful Black people, I never had doubts about the capabilities of myself or other Black and Brown people. However, for a multitude of reasons, this cannot be said for all people of color. How does this affect the confidence of these young Black educators as they prepare to become teachers? How can these labels affect their confidence in educating and motivating their own young Black and Brown students?

As I near the completion of my degree, I have felt a growing disconnection from what I am learning. I often find myself unable to relate to the materials that do not accurately illustrate what I already know to be true about Black and Brown people. The textbooks I have been required to read do not properly represent children of color or their families, nor are academic works produced by scholars of color acknowledged or included. Many times, I have felt insulted by materials and lectures and have had to become my own advocate by bringing those concerns to the attention of my instructors. However, these conversations oftentimes left me feeling even more discouraged for having to do so.

I have completed over 100 semester hours, and out all of those courses, there has been only one that I felt was culturally responsive as well as respectfully inclusive. Sadly, only a single course, out of so many, has given me the feeling of being included, not only for the professor's acceptance and more importantly her encouragement of expressing one's ideas on real and current matters, but also because of the efforts made to include positive and inspirational readings by Black and Brown people. This was a welcome change from what had unfortunately become my expected norm of only reading texts about European Americans written by other European Americans. It was refreshing to read material written by people, especially women, of color and I will admit that I was more engaged in the course because of this inclusion. This course introduced a variety of authors of color; however, *Cultivating Genius* by Dr. Gholdy Muhammad (2020) was by far the most influential. Dr. Muhammad's passion to dismantle and reconstruct the current school curriculum gives me hope that one day Black and Brown students will gain an education that respects and values their cultures. Dr. Muhammad's framework would ensure that educators are reevaluating and adjusting their stereotypical perspectives. I believe that her work will help stop the educational system's unjust history of underrepresentation and misrepresentation of Black and Brown people. It is past time for this.

DISCUSSION

As these narratives make clear, the funds of knowledge (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992) and experiences that Black students bring to the classroom are too often erased or distorted in the classroom. In the interest of calling others into the work of increasing representation and conceptions of success, we share the following recommendations for educators to consider in their own practice.

Analyze Curricular Representation

Carefully consider who is represented in your curriculum, both as characters or protagonists in texts, as well as authors of those texts. Curricular texts typically reinforce dominant, White, middle-class culture, or perpetuate stereotypes about marginalized identities. It is essential for educators to consider how their curricular choices represent the students they are working with. All students should have the opportunity to see themselves in mirror texts and have the opportunity to learn about others' identities through window texts (Sims-Bishop, 1990). A complete education includes opportunity to learn about the history and achievements of Black people, as well as the histories and achievements of all marginalized groups.

Center Imagination and Joy

While diverse representation in curricular texts is vitally important, it is only a first step. Considering *how* minoritized individuals are represented in these texts is crucial, as well. The representation of Black people in classrooms is often relegated to historical experiences of suffering and oppression (i.e., slavery, Jim Crow era). While this history is important, it should not be the only representation of the Black experience. It is necessary to highlight contemporary Black experiences, particularly those that represent Black joy (Love, 2019), and to provide opportunities for all students to imagine freely who they can be in the world, and what a world (or classroom or school) that is free and just could look like.

Broaden Understandings of Literate Practices

It is essential to consider not just what curricular texts students are working with in class, but also how students are asked to work with and respond to those texts. While many classrooms (and educational discourse more broadly) often view “schooled” literacies as neutral and discrete skills, the literate practices that students bring to the classroom are deeply rooted in their cultures and identities. For example, oral storytelling, visual literacies, digital literacies, or code-meshing are practices that students may already be literate in and successful with. Educators must deepen their own understanding of their students and their families in order to celebrate and build upon the funds of knowledge they already hold.

Embrace Teaching as Political and Moral Work

There is frequently hesitation or even fear of naming racism or white supremacist culture. In classrooms, teachers often worry about upsetting a parent or administrator, or going against the decisions of colleagues. However, these decisions to remain silent or to perpetuate inequitable practices are harming Black students. Teaching is “inherently political work,” and it takes both courage and care (Nieto, 2006, p.3). It should not be the responsibility of Black students or their families to bring a critical lens to curriculum and pedagogy, or the responsibility of a Black teacher to discipline or mentor students or color, or to speak up when something problematic occurs. All teachers have a moral obligation to take up this role themselves.

CONCLUSION

Despite the failings of school systems that we have experienced, we have still chosen to pursue a career in teaching. We want to work within the system to improve it, and to change the outcomes for our Black and Brown students. Our reasons for taking on this work are twofold: our families and our students.

Though our ancestral histories are different, our families have been the catalyst for our desire to teach. For Zaria, Jerry King was the main catalyst for her interest in education. As a child, she watched an elderly Black man with minimal formal education *want* to learn and better himself

despite his experiences. Now, inspired, she fights to erase the structure built against him and create a new one, one made to work for all students. Narcarsia's family, who have experienced educational success, have always emphasized the value of education. So, it was a natural progression for her to want to continue her education. However, working with another marginalized population, students with disabilities, was the inspiration for her to become both an educator and an advocate.

Becoming a teacher means even more to us now because of our commitment to being advocates for young Black and Brown students. We would be honored to be among the too-few Black teachers who not only can relate to these students, but who can also be an inspiration for them to pursue their own educational successes. Despite the bias and misrepresentation present even in our teacher preparation experiences, or perhaps because of it, we are even more committed to dismantling and rebuilding the broken education system. In doing so, we hope that our students have the opportunity to see themselves positively represented and to feel included and valued in our own classrooms and throughout their educational experiences.

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