

The (Im)possible Multicultural Teacher

A Critical Approach to Understanding White Teachers' Multicultural Work

Charise Pimentel

Foreword by H. Richard Milner IV



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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Foreword	vii
<i>H. Richard Milner IV</i>	
Dedication	ix
Chapter 1: Introduction	1
The Detached Teacher	3
The Deficit Thinker	8
The Rugged Multicultural Teacher	11
The (Im)possible Multicultural Teacher	14
Mr. Potts	16
Ms. DeGraw	16
Megan	17
Chapter 2: Mr. Potts' Dual Language Classroom	19
Viewpoint Elementary	22
Mr. Potts' Dual Language Classroom	26
Mr. Potts' Promising Practices	29
Latinx Advocacy in Peril	35
Concluding Remarks	42
Chapter 3: Ms. DeGraw's ESL Classroom	43
Ms. DeGraw's Critical Perspective	46
Drew Middle School	47
Sociopolitical Context	48
Ms. DeGraw's Class	54
Concluding Remarks	66
Chapter 4: Megan's School Success Class	69
Megan	71
Esplanade	73
Sociopolitical Context	78
Teacher as Savior	80
Megan as Humble Learner	81
School Success Class	85
The (Im)possibilities of School Success	89

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter 5: Conclusion	95
What Can We Learn from Case Studies?	95
What Brought the Teachers to Multicultural Education?	96
How Did the Teachers Approach Multicultural Education?	96
What (Im)possibilities Emerged from the Teachers' Multicultural Practices?	98
What Are the Best Multicultural Practices?	100
What Is the Significance of This Study?	101
Is It All Worth It?	102
Appendix: Methodology	105
References	115
Index	119

FOREWORD

Charise Pimentel's *The (Im)possible Multicultural Teacher: A Critical Approach to Understanding White Teachers' Multicultural Work* is a welcome addition to the teacher education literature. This is a powerful book – sure to advance what we know about the preparation of teachers to meet the needs of students who are most grossly underserved in schools across the U.S. What are particularly noteworthy about this book are the (1) explicit links between theory and practice made throughout the book; (2) scholarly, yet accessible writing approach of the author; (3) vividly rich case studies that illuminate real teachers' practices at the elementary, middle, and high school level; (4) careful attention to micro-level realities of teachers and schools, and (5) analyses of macro-level systems that advance or stifle school success. Consistent with scholarship that complicates the work of teachers and teaching for social justice, Pimentel reminds readers that teachers have the potential to reinforce as well as challenge social justice and the status quo in schools. But what is especially refreshing throughout this book is an underlying message that teachers' justice work tends not to fall in some neatly packaged binary where they are either “for” equity or “against” it in practice. But rather, disposition work of teachers as they work to become critical multicultural practitioners is much more nuanced than what a polarized way of thinking about equity for practice might suggest.

Drawing from a case study methodological approach, the book showcases the work of three White teachers: Mr. Potts, Ms. DeGraw, and Megan. Although different, each of these teachers is committed to enacting multicultural education in their classrooms and schools. Indeed, Pimentel explains that “teachers' multicultural practices, even when they put forth their best efforts, are necessarily conflicted and incoherent, rather than static assemblages of pure pedagogical practices.” Especially for those teachers learning how to teach in pre-service teacher education programs, the struggles of teachers in the cases allows for spaces to understand how successful pedagogical practices are a consequence of teachers' own learning, reflection and development over time. Moreover, the cases demonstrate how teacher learning is constantly evolving and dynamic and never (should) end. Thus, in many ways, the book gives teachers *permission to develop* – to *Start Where They are* – as they work against what can be considered the grain of maintaining inequity, racism, discrimination and other forms of the status quo.

In addition, conceptually, the book provides powerful analytic principles in explaining teacher disposition orientations that can in fact be dangerous for too many students who are underserved in school. These students include but are not limited to: Black and Brown students, students whose first language is not English, Muslim students, Jewish students, immigrant students, students with ability differences, LBGQT+ students, and students who live below the poverty line.

FOREWORD

Pimentel describes The Detached Teacher – where the emphases of curriculum, assessment, and instructional practice are on the student population with the majority presence in a school or community. A second descriptor of teachers with a problematic disposition is The Deficit Thinker – where educators “blame the victim” for their academic and social challenges and focus on what students do not possess instead of the many strengths that they do have. And the Rugged Multicultural Teacher – describes teachers who focus on themselves as the hero as an individual who will ‘save’ those students who tend to be underserved in schools. Of course, each of these dispositions is troublesome, and this book allows teachers to identify features of such practices, mindsets, and educator with special attention placed on how to disrupt and work through them.

Thus, as we continue to grapple with and work through a schooling and sociopolitical landscape that are indeed “anti-immigrant, anti-bilingual, and pro-White American,” this book is a must read for any of us committed to supporting teachers to realize and reach their full capacity to develop and enact learning opportunities that are emancipatory and concurrently transformative. This book pushes the boundaries of what we know and do in the preparation of teachers for racial and social justice. I strongly recommend and endorse it.

H. Richard Milner IV
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DEDICATION

I dedicate this book to my bilingual, bicultural, and biracial family: Octavio, Quetzin, Quetzalli, and Maya Pimentel. As a family, we collectively fight the Eurocentric and English monolingual school and social system, and like the work of the teachers featured in this book, this process is anything but straightforward. Our family provides me both the strength and insight to relentlessly seek social justice in not only our personal and public lives, but for all those who continue to be underserved in a racist and English language elitist educational and social system. Octavio—thank you for providing me a solid foundation to raise our family and teaching me to prioritize what matters most. Also, thank you for your ongoing support for pursuing critical projects and reaching my personal best. Quetzin, Quetzalli, and Maya—you provide me purpose. This work is as much about your own schooling experiences as it is about the hope you hold for the future. Young critical scholars yourselves, you have already proven your critical perspectives and desires to create a more just world. As you continue to grow into young adults, I will relish the distinct, but purposeful directions your lives will take. I am so proud to be your mom.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

U.S. society is plagued with racial injustices, and the schooling experiences of children, are no exception to this reality. Whether implicit or explicit, intentional or unintentional, individual or institutional—racism has been a constant in U.S. schooling experiences and outcomes. Countless educational scholars have documented and brought attention to the racial inequities in schools, signifying these schooling experiences and outcomes with terminology such as: The Chicana/Chicano Educational Pipeline (Yosso, 2006), Subtractive Schooling (Valenzuela, 1999), Stolen Education (Alemán, 2013), the School to Prison Pipeline (Laura, 2014), and The Achievement Gap (Valencia, 2015)—to name just a few.

No doubt, teachers play a central role in students' educational experiences, and in extension, the racial equity issues students face in schools. While it may be debatable exactly how much input and what impact teachers have on designing educational programs, curricula, policies, and even pedagogical practices, most scholars agree that teachers do have the potential to reinforce as well as challenge the racial status quo in schools. As Freire (1985; 2000) has made clear, no teaching act is politically neutral. Further, White teachers in particular, whether they realize it or not, have a significant stake in racial educational equity issues. White teachers not only represent 82 percent of the teaching work force (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013), but they are ultimately the benefactors of the racial inequities that emanate from schools and the larger society. Thus, what White teachers do in their classrooms and schools to address racial inequities has the potential to not only alter the social positioning of their students of color, but their own social positioning as well.

Even with their own social standing at stake, I believe it is fair to say that most White teachers are in favor of educational equity. Indeed, it would be difficult to find a White teacher who openly admits that s/he does not want all her/his students to achieve, regardless of their students' diverse circumstances, identities, and backgrounds. With this being said, I venture to say that most White teachers are roughly working from the same educational equity goal: All students should have an equal opportunity to achieve in school. However, having the same educational equity goal does not mean that teachers' methods for realizing such a goal are the same. To the contrary, teachers' approaches to addressing educational racial inequities, and the overall effectiveness of their methods, vary widely (Banks & McGee, 2013; Sleeter & Grant, 2009).

Multicultural education scholars, for example, have brought attention to the fact that teachers do not work from a monolithic definition of multicultural education

CHAPTER 1

and not all approaches to multicultural education yield educational equity (Banks & McGee, 2013; Lee, Menkart, & Okazawa-Rey, 2008; Nieto & Bode, 2012; Ramsey, 2015; Sleeter & Grant, 2009). From this work, we see that some of the most popular approaches to multicultural education actually do little to transform racial inequities in schools. Among the most popular is the celebratory approach to multicultural education, whereby teachers promote educational equity for their diverse students by celebrating superficial characterizations of culture and cultural artifacts, such as food, dress, and dance (Lee, Menkart, & Okazawa-Rey, 2008; Nieto & Bode, 2012). Lee et al. (2008) point out that educators working from this celebratory approach often do little to alter a Eurocentric curriculum, beyond highlighting certain “multicultural” heroes and holidays. Rightly so, Nieto and Bode (2012) refer to this superficial and safe conception of multicultural education as “fairyland multicultural education” (p. 4). In a similar fashion, Banks and McGee (2013) critique what they call the “contributions approach”, which is characterized by educators simply adding in diverse references and readings to an already whitestream (Urietta, 2009) curriculum. Needless to say, these approaches to multicultural education are ineffective because they fail to address the complex social and historical power relations that penetrate our school systems, promote racial ideologies, and reinforce racial inequities. Simply put, celebratory and contribution approaches to multicultural education fail to address the sociopolitical context of schooling. The sociopolitical context of schooling, according to Nieto and Bode (2012), refers to the constellation of “laws, regulations, policies, practices, traditions, and ideologies” (p. 4) that create inequitable power relations and give rise to not only racism, but also linguisticism, sexism, classism, religious oppression, heterosexism, ableism, among other forms of oppression.

If educators truly want to achieve educational equity, they must confront and challenge the aspects of schooling that give rise to racial inequities (Banks & McGee, 2013; Milner, 2015; Nieto, 2010; Nieto, 2017; Nieto & Bode, 2012; Ramsey, 2015). That is, educators must work from a critical multicultural perspective. This calls for a transformative approach to education, whereby educators actively attempt to transform foundational aspects of schooling, including but not limited to, the curriculum, pedagogy, assessment practices, language policies and programs, disciplinary policies, and class size (Milner, 2015; Nieto & Bode, 2012). While there is a clear call for teachers to work from a critical multicultural perspective, it is not clear what critical multicultural teachers are able to achieve in school and social settings that structurally and ideologically uphold the racial status quo. In an effort to address this query, the purpose of this book is to examine what transformative possibilities lie specifically in the transformative pedagogical practices of White teachers who work from a critical multicultural perspective. With this goal in mind, this book takes readers into the classrooms of Mr. Potts, Ms. DeGraw, and Megan—three critical multicultural, White teachers who teach at elementary, middle, and high school levels. Within the case-study chapters in this book (chapters 2, 3, and 4), I detail these teachers’ specific pedagogical practices, and in doing so, reveal that