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White Women's Work: Examining the Intersectionality of Teaching, Identity, and Race

by Tanya Christ, Ph.D.

Hancock, S., & Warren, C. (Eds.). (2017). *White women's work: Examining the intersectionality of teaching, identity, and race*. Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing. ISBN 978-1681236476



Hancock and Warren's (2017) edited volume, *White Women's Work*, provides ample opportunities for considering issues of race, privilege, and identities in teaching and learning from multiple perspectives. Chapter 1 introduces the concept of the *Cultural Disability of Whiteness* (Morton, Jackson, Frazier, & Fasching-Varner), which underscores the inadequacies of White teachers' good intentions and the institutional embeddedness of White middle- and upper-class privilege in teacher education. Later, in chapter 6, Matias and Nishi unpack this a bit more, as they explain that, "White teachers as White saviors...pathologize Black and brown bodies as those representing a deficit and needing help" (Matias & Nishi, 2017, p. 114). The impact of the cultural disability of whiteness on students is well illustrated in chapter 2 (Michael, Coleman-King, Lee, Ramirez, and Bentley-Edwards). Each author provides a narrative account of her experiences in school, and how White teachers' culture and privilege affected her experiences. The stories collectively show that space for cultural pluralism is not the norm; and that teachers often lack cultural competence.

Chapters 2, 3, and 6 present examples of White teachers either not being comfortable sharing their vulnerability with students or resisting developing genuine and close relationships with students, making the development of cultural competence less likely. Across these and other chapters, the challenges created by White teachers' resistance to exploring their own identities and



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privilege are well presented. In chapter 9, Henry, Jr. and Warren aptly summarize the consequence of this: "White women teachers, who may be well intentioned yet desirous of conforming their students to meet idealized norms and standards of whiteness...are engaging in spirit murdering by way of cultural erasure" (Henry, Jr. & Warren, 2017, p. 189).

Methods that might potentially help White teachers develop deeper cultural competence and work toward cultural pluralism in their classrooms are presented across the book. In chapter 4, Hancock presents the concept of *double image* as a way to develop "understanding of how Whites see themselves and are seen through the socioracial lens of others" (p. 72). Teachers can work toward developing double image through critical reflection. The goal is to develop "awareness of diverse perspectives of whiteness, and...how cultural others might perceive their actions and intent" (p.73). While the first several chapters in the book provide an excellent opportunity to gain insights about "how cultural others might perceive...actions and intent.", chapter 6 provides a model of critically reflecting on teaching episodes to investigate teachers' "investment in whiteness" (Matias & Nishi, 2017, p. 110). In chapter 8, Warren and Talley describe how through both of these efforts, teachers might "remedy this interpersonal disconnect between teachers and students" and develop "learning atmospheres that build on, maintain, and extend the cultural brilliance young people bring

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to school” (pp. 149-150). Further, they assert that White women develop culturally responsive teaching by acknowledging racial difference and White privilege, and “how whiteness shaded...[their] ability to see and understand students’ points of view” through interactions “with others who were different” and using “their vulnerabilities as an asset to their development” (Warren & Talley, 2017, p. 155).

Rather than feeling hopeless about how inadequately White teachers grapple with their own race and privilege, and the negative effects this has on our students, I view this book as a call to action for White teachers to do the inner work of self-exploration and the outer work of developing more culturally inclusive teaching practices. If you have not thought much about whiteness yet, this book is a great first step to broadening your thinking about whiteness and White privilege, and how they affect teaching. If you have already been grappling with these issues, this volume will undoubtedly provide additional perspectives. But, Henry, Jr. and Warren warn in the closing chapter:

No one book or class or conference can give educators the tools necessary to unpack their privilege and work to dismantle racial injustice. Because racism evolves and morphs...educators must remain vigilant. Being a culturally relevant educator is a life-long project. (p. 194)

So, if you have not started this life-long project yet, now is definitely the time. And, if you have started already, stay vigilant. In either case, this book is definitely worth the time to read.

Author Biography

Dr. Tanya Christ is an Associate Professor of Reading and Language Arts at Oakland University. She teaches courses related to reading assessment and instruction for K-12. Her research focuses on early childhood vocabulary, comprehension, and digital literacies learning and instruction; culture, access, and equity in literacy education; and literacy teacher education. She has taught both inclusion and general education in Title 1 classrooms in Brooklyn, NY. Her work appears in journals such as *Journal of Literacy Research*, *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, *The Reading Teacher*, and *Young Children*. She can be reached at christ@oakland.edu.

