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'I'm not racist; my high school was diverse!' white preservice teachers deploy *diversity* in the classroom

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ABSTRACT

This study employs ethnographic methods to explore the ways that white American preservice teachers in two different *Social Contexts of Education* classes conceptualise *diversity* and use this term to accomplish discursive goals. Data collected from observation notes, interviews and written assignments suggest that participants simultaneously seemed to ascribe positive value judgements to their own experiences in racially diverse environments yet ascribe negative value judgments to the potential diversity of their hypothetical future students. Participants voiced abstract commitments to diversity in order to position themselves as good, non-racist people; however, these positive endorsements of diversity did not extend to appreciation of the potential racial diversity of their future students. The data suggest that although participants have learned to engage in a discourse that celebrates diversity, at least on abstract terms, they may still lack key understandings fundamental to providing effective instruction to all students.

As millennial generation students come of age, we can only hope that they bring new ways of seeing the world and connecting with others.

– Antonio Castro, 'Themes in the research on preservice teachers' views of cultural diversity'.

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#7: Diversity. White people love ethnic diversity, but only as it relates to restaurants. Many white people from cities like Los Angeles, San Francisco and New York will spend hours talking about how great it is that they can get Sushi and Tacos on the same street. But then they send their kids to private school with other rich white kids, and live in neighbourhoods like Santa Monica or Pacific Palisades. But it's important to note that white people to do not like to be called out on this fact.

– *Christian Lander, excerpt from blog stuffwhitepeoplelike.com.*

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The task of preparing white, monocultural, monolingual prospective teachers to teach students who are ethnically, racially or linguistically different from themselves has been a focus in teacher education research in the United States for the last 30 years. Researchers

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have found that the majority of American preservice teachers, who are overwhelmingly white, female, middle-class and who speak only English, hold deficit beliefs and stereotypes about diverse students. These beliefs may translate into pedagogical actions that result in inferior instruction and second-rate learning opportunities for racially, linguistically and culturally diverse students (Gay and Kirkland 2003; Sleeter 2008).

However, a longitudinal meta-analysis of this literature, referenced in the first epigraph, also suggests that each generation of prospective teachers is more likely to embrace cultural, linguistic and racial diversity than its predecessor (Castro 2010). Still, some academics remain sceptical about this apparent progress. These researchers suggest that perhaps rather than have a genuine appreciation for diversity, prospective teachers born after 1985 (Millennials) and 1995 (Generation Z) may simply have learned to participate in an educational discourse that only purports to eschew racism and value diversity (Castro 2010; Hollins and Guzman 2005). In other words, perhaps these young prospective teachers do not actually have more positive attitudes towards children from backgrounds that differ from their own, but are simply more savvy (or politically correct) about the ways they talk about students from diverse backgrounds. The second epigraph, from the blog *Stuff White People Like*, illustrates this narrow and convenient appreciation for diversity, poking fun at white Americans who like to eat ethnic food but prefer to live in homogenous White neighbourhoods.

In this research, I ask: How do American white preservice teachers enrolled in one of two *Social Contexts of Education* courses talk and write about diversity? I draw from a subset of data collected for a larger study (Pezzetti 2016) in order to explore the ways that the concept of *diversity* was employed and discussed by prospective teachers enrolled in two sections of an undergraduate teacher education course.

In this study, I also explored a related sub-question. Some research suggests that white preservice teachers who have had significant previous experiences with people who are racially, ethnically, and linguistically different from themselves (a) may be less resistant to learning about issues of race, diversity and privilege; (b) are likely to have more positive attitudes toward and beliefs about students from diverse backgrounds; and (c) may even become better teachers of diverse student populations (i.e. Dee and Henkin 2002; Hollins and Guzman 2005; Pohan 1996). Recently, however, a handful of studies have questioned the nature of this link between previous experiences with diverse others and attitudes toward (and interactions with) real students (Castro 2010; Crowley and Smith 2015; Laughter 2011). We lack a theoretical understanding of the link between previous experiences with diverse others and the correlated outcomes listed above. This study seeks to contribute to our understanding of the nature of this relationship. Specifically, I asked, how, if at all, do participants draw on their experiences attending racially diverse or predominantly white high schools as they engage with course content about racial diversity?

Studies of teacher education courses that prepare preservice educators to teach students of all racial backgrounds have thus far produced mixed results. Some suggest that these kinds of courses may have a large impact on students (Ambe 2006; Bradley-Levine 2012; Gay and Kirkland 2003; Gayle-Evans and Michael 2006; Pohan 1996). However, other studies find just the opposite: many white prospective teachers are just as likely to view diverse students from a deficit perspective after taking these classes as before (Banks 2005; Brown 2004; Ladson-Billings 1995; Sleeter 1995; Vavrus 2002). Regardless of the efficacy of these courses, however, many teacher education programmes in the United States require

prospective teachers to take a course like *Social Foundations of Education* or *Multicultural Education*. A key goal of many of these courses is the reduction of prospective teachers' stereotypes and deficit beliefs about racially and culturally diverse youth.

Theoretical framework

In this research, I draw on socio-cultural understandings of identity and the role of the local context in identity construction and exploration. Specifically, I rely on the work of Holland et al. (1998) who propose the *figured world*, 'a socially and culturally constructed realm of interpretation in which particular characters and actors are recognized, significance is assigned to certain acts, and particular outcomes are valued over others' (52). A figured world is at once both collective and individual; it is a stable, shared, idealised way of interpreting the surrounding world (Michael, Andrade, and Bartlett 2007; Robinson 2007). Figured worlds are located in particular historical and social settings and they are recreated through the interactions of the people who inhabit them. In this study, I approached the two sections of *Contexts* as small figured worlds that were nested within (yet conflicted with) a larger shared figured world of dominant American colour-blind ideologies (Bonilla-Silva 2010). In the figured worlds of *Contexts,* students actively shaped new identities as they developed understandings of key course concepts, including the concept of *diversity*. This theoretical lens foregrounded the ways that participants came to develop understandings of themselves as people and as prospective teachers in dialectic relationship to their understandings of *diversity*.

Context

I studied two sections of a *Social Contexts of Education* (henceforth, *Contexts*) course taught by two different instructors at Urban University[1] (UU). UU is a large, predominantly white university in the north-eastern United States that publicises its commitment to diversity. In fact, many participants told me that they chose to attend UU because of its location in a racially diverse neighbourhood and its reputation for embracing diversity. *Contexts* is a required course for undergraduate preservice teachers and it is the only required class in the teacher education programme that deals explicitly with the role of race in schools. According to both syllabi, a primary course objective was for students 'to be able to describe the ways that issues of race, class and gender influence students' experiences in schools'. Both course instructors were black, while most (27/28 in one section; 31/35 in the other section) of the students identified as white.

Although there were significant differences in the two instructors' educational philosophies and practices, they also had much in common. Both instructors assigned course readings from scholars such as Gloria Ladson-Billings, Beverly Tatum, John Dewey, Jonathan Kozol, Lisa Delpit, Pedro Noguera, Peggy McIntosh and Diane Ravitch. In both courses, students took turns presenting the various readings to their classmates and submitted written assignments (that I also collected) designed to gauge their understanding of the readings. All the students completed a project in which they researched local public schools both online and in person, wrote papers in which they were asked to apply key course concepts to explain their research findings, and presented their conclusions to their classmates. The final assignment in each course was a written Philosophy of Education statement.

From the outset, judging from the course descriptions and syllabi, it appeared that *Contexts* would take up the concept of diversity along several axes: minimally, along the lines of gender and social class in addition to race. In fact, the role of race was officially scheduled to be the focus for only one week in one section of the course and four weeks in the other section. In practice, however, conversations about race, racism and racial diversity occurred in almost every class meeting in both courses, whereas conversations about social class and gender occurred in just one or two class meetings. In interviews, both instructors explained that they saw race as the most important – and most difficult – axis of difference for American prospective teachers to understand and therefore worth spending more class time on. Consequently, while my study originally intended to explore differences and similarities in students' conceptions of various kinds of diversity, the focus of this study necessarily narrowed to participants' writing and talk about *racial* diversity.

Participants

Most students enrolled in the sections of *Contexts* that I studied were white, female, 18–20 years old and in their first year of college. Coming of age between 2013 and 2020, they belong to Generation Z. I invited all the students in both courses to participate in my study. Consent entailed allowing me to audiorecord, observe and take notes about them in class, and read the assignments they submitted for the course. All the students (28/28) in one section agreed to participate; all but three (32/35) students in the other section agreed to participate. Two of the three students who declined to participate were people of colour, one was White. Most participants also consented to be interviewed twice about their experiences in the course.

To examine how previous experiences with racial diversity might influence students' experiences in the course, I began by asking students to identify the high school they attended. I researched the racial demographics of each school. I then chose as focal participants the eight students in each section that (a) I perceived to be white and, (b) who had attended the most – and the least – white high schools. This sampling plan was not ideal since the racial diversity of a student's high school is an incomplete proxy for experience with racial others. Not only does it not account for extracurricular experiences but, furthermore, many students who attend racially diverse high schools actually have little meaningful interaction with students from other races due to in-school segregation practices and policies like racialised tracking systems (Oakes 1985; Tyson 2011). However, perhaps luckily, my sampling plan provided me with a set of students who identified as white and who had very different experiences both in high school and in *Contexts*.

I interviewed the 16 focal participants at the beginning and end of the semester. Descriptive data about the focal participants is provided in Table 1.

Methods

A close inspection of participants' understandings of and uses of the term *diversity* was not an original intended focus of my dissertation study. However, from the first few course meetings, I noticed that the term was a powerful discursive tool that students employed frequently yet contradictorily in both sections of *Contexts*. Curious, I began attending to the occurrences of both the term *diversity* as well as instances in which the concept was

Table 1. Focal participant demographic data.

Instructor	Pseudonym	Intended subject	% of white students at HS, 2013–2014	% of students receiving free or reduced lunch at HS
Nakia	Lucas	HS English	19% white	57
	Ashli	Elementary	39% white	19
	Naomi	HS Art	54% white	32
	Pam	Elementary	84% white	11
	Ava	Elementary	86% white	18
	Tiffany	HS History	91% white	5
	Steve	HS History	94% white	15
	Nick	Middle Math/English	96% white	n/a
Andre	Hazel	HS Art	5% white	66
	Charlotte	Elementary	33% white	31
	Ben	HS English	62% white	23
	Diana	Elementary	63% white	12
	Abigail	HS Spanish	89% white	17
	Noreen	HS Art	91% white	n/a
	Hannah	HS Science	91% white	n/a
	Jessica	HS English	94% white	n/a

discussed in other words (for instance, a participant's mention of a school where 'all the students come from different backgrounds'). I added this new focus on diversity into the data collection plan for my larger study which relied on ethnographic methods, specifically, participant observation, document analysis and interviews. Throughout the process, I strived to remain aware of how my positionality as a white, middle class, queer woman in her 30s shaped the data I collected as well as the meanings I made from these data.

Participant observation

I attended every course meeting for each section of the class for a total of 73 observation hours. I took copious fieldnotes in class and then typed them up directly afterwards. Additionally, I audiorecorded most course meetings.[2] I transcribed those sections of class that dealt with issues of race, diversity and power, and added these transcriptions into my fieldnotes.

Student work

I analysed all the assignments that participants submitted for each course. These included a pre-assessment, short reflective writing assignments, quizzes and tests, an educational autobiography, a Philosophy of Education paper, and a final course reflection.

Interviews

I interviewed 16 focal participants and both instructors at both the beginning and end of the semester. Most interviews lasted about 30 min. I audiorecorded and transcribed all the interviews.

Data analysis

I analysed data iteratively throughout the data collection process. I wrote memos about emerging themes at the conclusion of each set of fieldnotes after each observation, and

these initial themes shaped further data collection. After uploading all the data into a qualitative data analysis programme and reading through all the data a first time, I applied an initial deductive coding scheme derived from Holland's theoretical framework (1998). The findings presented in this paper are based on the data that I coded *diversity* in which participants or instructors mentioned the term diversity or talked about the concept of diversity but used a different term. The date-set consists of 86 excerpts from observation notes, interview transcripts and written student work. These excerpts and range in length from three sentences to several paragraphs.

Using the data analysis software, I looked for patterns in the occurrences of the data in this subset between course sections, over the course of the semester, and among students who attended racially diverse versus predominantly white high schools. Once I felt confident that I understood the larger patterns of occurrence, I carefully analysed the data subset. I created sub-codes to represent finer-grained patterns in the data, for example, to distinguish between instances when participants assigned a positive versus negative value judgement to diversity. I looked for the patterns among these sub-codes as well as counter-examples and outliers to those patterns.

Findings

The white preservice teachers in this study appeared to hold two contradictory understandings about racial diversity. On one hand, participants valued racial diversity in the abstract, as well as when they were discussing their own educational and life experiences. On the other hand, when considering their own future teaching, they saw the potential diversity of their future students as a liability or challenge.

Theme 1: Participants voiced appreciation for racial diversity in the context of their own lives and experiences

The participants in this study seemed to value diversity in their own lives for two primary reasons. First, at various points throughout the course, as well as in interviews, many participants spoke positively about how interactions with peers from racially diverse backgrounds had exposed them to new ideas and experiences and prepared them for living and working in a diverse society. In order to imply or state outright that they were good, non-racist[3] people, participants often drew on their experiences with people of colour. The logic model underlying these assertions seemed to be that attending a predominantly white school or growing up in a white neighbourhood led naturally to the development of bad, racist beliefs. By the same logic, people who grew up in racially diverse environments were considered, by default, to be good, non-racist people. In both of these cases, describing one's previous experience with or commitment to racial diversity helped to position a student as good, open-minded and tolerant – the greater the previous experiences with diversity, the better. I share examples of these discursive uses of the concept of diversity in the sections below.

Valuing racial diversity in their high school experiences
In our first interviews, I asked students to describe the racial demographics of their high schools. I compared their answers with the publically available demographic data about their schools. Most of the students who offered actual numbers overestimated the percentage of

students of colour at their schools. Whether these students were intentionally inflating the percentages of minority enrolment at their high school or accidentally overstating them, it seemed evident that participants valued racially diverse environments and wanted to appear as though they had grown up in them. Below, I share some of the characteristic ways that participants described the demographics of their high schools. I have arranged these students' comments in order from those who attended the most white high schools to those who attended the least white high schools. In each instance, participants submit the strongest possible commitment to diversity that they could, given their circumstances.

Nick (Interview 1, high school = 96% white):   [My school] was a little bit of everybody.

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Noreen (interview 1, high school = 91% white):   Race was kind of diverse. We had a lot of exchange students. From, like China. That's where we got a lot of kids from. So they would come and stay with people and go to school. And I feel like slowly it's become more and more diverse.

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Pam (interview 1, high school = 84% white):   I think overall it's a good school to go to compared to things I've heard or read about other schools. I think they have like strong programs. There is a little bit of diversity, like I said.

Author: What would you guess, like, percentage-wise?

Pam: I'd probably say 70% white? It's mostly white, but I think that there's a decent – compared to other places … like my best friend went to [Castle Academy] … and she knew like 2 black kids in her school. Do you know what I mean?

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Diana (interview 2, high school = 63% white):   Some of my friends, they went to Catholic school and I feel like sometimes they are very close-minded, on some, like, especially current topics. Because they didn't go to a school that was like as diverse. I would say that my school was a little more diverse than their school. 'Cuz it was public … I feel like having diversity makes people more open-minded to like society and makes them more aware of what's going around. And not having it kind of hurts people because they don't know how to deal with everyone.

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Naomi (Interview 1, high school = 54% white):   So it actually was, like, really diverse. Like, I hear a lot of people … that I've met, saying, like, I went to an almost all white school. And I'm like WHAT? My high school was probably like only half white people and then the other half black, Hispanic, Asian, a lot of, like Middle Eastern, Indian people. Yeah, so it was really diverse.

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Ashli: (Written Autobiography assignment, high school = 39% white) I was very fortunate for the diversity I got from [City] High School. The school district I grew up in was very diverse. I had friends from all different religious, ethnic, and economic backgrounds. Because of our differences we all had very different beliefs. Sometimes these belief differences would cause misunderstandings, but we were better for it. We grew up learning to respect one another and became more prepared entering the real world.

In each of the excerpts above, participants appear to value racial diversity. Those who attended mostly white schools make sure to highlight those aspects of their schools that were more diverse, like Noreen, whose Catholic high school hosted exchange students from China. On the other hand, the students who attended racially diverse high schools were quick to note that fact and often spoke, without prompting, about the benefits of attending racially diverse schools.

The only exception to the pattern above was Abigail, whose small rural high school was 89% white. She was the only focal participant who did not overstate the diversity of her high school:

Author: How would you describe the race and class diversity or not-diversity of your high school?

Abigail: Not diverse! [Laughs a little.] There might have been maybe 20–30 African Americans.

Author: In your school or in your class?

Abigail: In my school. There might have been a couple of Asians. So it was very not-diverse.

On the surface, Abigail's response seems quite different from those of her classmates. However, it was clear that Abigail, too, valued racial diversity. As I explain below, immediately following this admission that her school was mostly white, Abigail asserted a commitment to diversity by explaining that in choosing to attend UU, she was rejecting narrow, small-town ways of seeing the world and, instead, embracing diverse perspectives.

After sharing that her high school was 'not-diverse,' Abigail explained, unprompted, that she was admitted to two universities, one in a small town and also UU. She explained that her parents wanted her to attend the small-town university because they believed it was safer, but Abigail was afraid that the small-town university was too 'single-minded'. She elaborated, 'I come from like a very small, rural … area … so that's a very focused mindset, I think. And then coming here, there's just so many more ideas and people and definitely opening up to, like, how I guess I interact and my viewpoints, I guess. They're definitely changing, which is really cool, I think'. In this excerpt, Abigail sets up a dichotomous contrast between 'single-minded' people from small towns, on the one hand, and the process of 'opening up' and 'changing' that happens in cities. It is clear that she wants to position herself as a person who values the latter. In similar ways, throughout both sections of *Contexts*, I saw participants articulating their appreciation for diversity when they were considering their own lives and experiences.

Using experience with diversity to assert moral goodness and non-racism

The white prospective teachers in this study began the semester as active participants of a colour-blind figured world in which racism was understood to be an act of meanness committed by an evil, racially prejudiced individual. This figured world served as a realm

of interpretation through which participants had developed understandings of themselves as normal, good people who did not see race.

Through *Contexts*, however, participants were introduced to different understandings of racism; racism as structural (and larger than an individual action); and racism as subconscious (e.g. racism could include having implicit negative beliefs about people of a different race). As students grappled with these new understandings, they remained committed to maintaining perceptions of themselves as non-racist. One of the ways they performed these non-racist selves was through discursively positioning themselves as people who celebrated diversity.

Throughout the semester, participants called on their (real or exaggerated) experiences with racial diversity in order to perform non-racist selves.

For example, in this group interview excerpt, Xavier, whose high school was 68% white, explains how his own experience with diverse classmates influenced his views about race and racism:

Xavier: I agree with the fact that it feels kind of surreal that like racism would exist, kind of? Like I acknowledge that it exists and everything but, like, it's one of those things. Like our school was like 50/50, and so when I think about that –

Author: 50/50 what and what?

Xavier: Like 50 white and 50 minority

Author: So like minorities of different races?

Xavier: Ah, I forget, I looked it up. Anyway, we learned all about race relations and everything. The fact that someone was racist was like a pretty big – people would just look at you and be like, 'Wow, you think like that?' Like it seems like such a far concept from where I'm from. And I think it's because everything is so integrated. But I can definitely see if you're from an area … if you come from an area that's all white, I can definitely see, it's like, you never, if you've never interacted with a different race, I feel like you automatically have these biases even though you've never met them.

In this excerpt, Xavier positions himself as non-racist by asserting that since his school was '50/50', and since they were taught about 'race relations and everything', racism was strongly censored by his peers. He makes the opposite connection as well, suggesting that a person who grew up in 'an area that's all white' would 'automatically' have 'biases' against people of different races. Indeed, through participation in these courses, students seemed to develop an understanding of a direct but implicit link between previous experiences with racial diversity and 'goodness' or non-racist-ness. Similarly, Kailin (1999) and Vaught and Castagno (2008) both found that some practicing teachers equated teaching students of colour as an assertion of anti-racism. Participants in the present study who had attended racially diverse high schools engaged in a parallel leap by claiming that their previous experiences with racially diverse peers automatically denoted a non-racist perspective.

The same dynamic plays out in the group interview excerpt below in which participants discussed the type of student who learned the most in *Contexts*. The students in this conversation are in agreement that students who come from racially diverse backgrounds have an easier experience in *Contexts* than those from mostly white environments. They also believe that students from racially diverse backgrounds are less likely to be racist than their peers who grew up in mostly white environments.

Naomi: I came from a really diverse high school, with, like, parents who always … taught me about political issues … And I already kind of like have known these concepts and everything, but, then for you guys coming from … an all, mostly white high school and neighbourhood and town, I guess this is probably like, you guys said it was eye-opening, so …

Lucas: I came from a really big high school, probably similar to yours [nods toward Naomi], very diverse … So for me, I think racism is almost like cartoon-y super-villain-y … 'Cuz it's like, we all grew up, you know, you watch like Saturday morning cartoons, and it's like, we all need to get along. And then we come to a city … and you find out that a lot of people don't get along, and it's like, didn't you watch Saturday morning cartoons? …

Laura: I think [*Contexts*] might be shocking for people that weren't around other races that much. To come to, like, an urban place and then, like, be sitting in a class where you talk about issues like this … So like coming to [UU, which is] putting diversity into their classes … that's a big thing for them. And that's one of the reasons I came here actually.

In their statements above, Lucas and Naomi position themselves as non-racist since they attended racially diverse schools. Lucas extends this idea, suggesting that he is so far from being racist that he did not even know that racism still existed until coming to UU. Laura, who attended a predominantly white high school, submits her value for diversity by explaining that she attended UU because the university incorporates 'diversity into their classes'. In each of these comments, the subtext is clear: good people value diversity.

Near the end of the semester, Ashli, whose high school was 39% white, and I talked about this issue directly.

Author: Lots of times when you talk about your high school experience in class, you mention that it's racially diverse, you talk about how lucky and fortunate you are to have had that experience. I was hoping you could just talk for a second about why you think that was a good experience.

Ashli: I'm not shocked by anything, ever, in this class … I feel comfortable talking about these things, I don't know, I don't have a lot of awkwardness about it. And I went into college knowing like what diversity was like and some people don't. Some people come here and they're like totally shocked. They haven't seen this and I grew up around it.

Author: Some of your classmates, when I ask them if their high school was diverse, they really want to say, 'yes'. And they're sort of embarrassed if the answer is no.

Ashli: Yeah, I'm like proud of it, yeah

Author: Yeah, it's interesting. Um, cuz like, it's a cool thing, but like, in some ways, it's not like you made a bunch of decisions and your classmates made different decisions to end up at those places? Do you know what I mean? Like I'm trying to sort through why someone would feel embarrassed to have gone to an all white school? When like, it's …

Ashli: I think they're afraid of how people will view them. They just view them as, you're just a White person who doesn't get it. And they're trying to get it. You know, the *it*.

As this exchange suggests, students who had previous experiences with racial diversity occupied a relative position of power in both sections of *Contexts*. Ashli, for example, was proud of attending her racially diverse high school, and, in class, frequently spoke about the benefits of attending this school. At the same time, students who attended mostly white

high schools, according to Ashli, were 'afraid of how people will view them' as though the demographics of the schools they attended evidenced racist beliefs.

Students who grew up in predominantly white neighbourhoods and attended mostly white schools could not assert themselves as non-racist by making references to their previous experiences with diversity. Instead, these students tended to opt for more explicit endorsements of diversity. For example, Tiffani, whose high school was 91% White, shared the following during a class discussion:

> I think that my school was, there was 0% African Americans. So it was like crazy. And the highest minority was like 7% Asians. So, I think, I think it benefits when you have a more diverse crowd because I think it helps you personally, it helps you build relationships with certain other people and get along better with people.

By asserting that she values racial diversity, in this context, Tiffani suggests that she is a good, non-racist person despite the fact that her high school was almost all white. She calls the racial demographics at her high school 'crazy', signalling her disapproval of its homogeneity.

Through *Contexts*, white prospective teachers who attended predominantly white schools came to feel that they were at a disadvantage. As one participant explained in her final Philosophy of Education assignment, 'Even though I am a white woman who has grown up in the suburbs, I will strive to understand my students and make myself aware to the stereotypes society has set in place and the unconscious biases I may posess'. With the words 'even though', this participant alludes to her understanding that her background is an obstacle to her becoming an effective teacher of students of colour.

Theme 2: Despite the fact that they valued their own experiences with diversity, the white preservice teachers in this study saw the potential diversity of their hypothetical future students as a challenge, threat or liability

One might imagine that all this talk about valuing diversity might translate into prospective teachers mentioning, discussing or alluding to the potential diversity of their future students as an asset or benefit. However, in almost every mention of diversity in relationship to future teaching or students, the participants in this study seemed to conceptualise diversity as a challenge or liability.

For instance, Charlotte, whose high school was 33% white, wrote the following in a reflection at the end of the semester: 'My toughest challenge when trying to create my ideal classroom will definitely be racial and cultural differences'.

Other students shared this fear of difference. In our final interviews, I asked participants to share a worry or concern about becoming a teacher. I was surprised to find that most of the focal participants brought up the diversity of their future students as the issue they were most concerned about. For instance, Diana, whose high school was 63% white, said that her biggest fear when she thinks about becoming a teacher is working with students who come from backgrounds different than her own. She elaborated, 'I think not knowing how to deal with a student if they have an ethnic, like, difference … Say there's mostly White students and a few other races. And one of them doesn't celebrate Halloween but everyone else does. Like, how would I deal with that?' Diana seems to have an understanding of students from diverse backgrounds as liabilities, exceptions who ruin the fun for everyone because their religion or values prohibit them from doing the things that kids from backgrounds similar to Diana's do.

Although one of the goals of *Contexts* was to challenge prospective teachers' deficit beliefs about students of colour and culturally diverse students, the participants in this study still seemed to hold onto those beliefs at the end of the semester. These beliefs became especially apparent during presentations made on the final day of class in each section. The course instructors had assigned students case study schools to study over the semester so that students could apply what they were learning in class to real learning environments. In order to challenge their students' stereotypes about urban and suburban schools, the instructors intentionally assigned schools that varied in terms of location, racial demographics and standardised test scores, purposefully including some high-performing high-minority schools as well as low-performing majority-white schools. As part of the assignment, students were required to articulate the criteria that made a school successful and then evaluate their case study schools by these criteria. Students consistently stated that diverse student populations made difficult working conditions for teachers and suggested that high-minority schools were less successful than majority White schools even when the data students collected (e.g. standardised test scores and graduation rates) suggested otherwise.

For example, Reba explained that her white, suburban case study school was very successful. Rather than attribute this success to a systemic factor like funding, Reba explained this school's high test scores by explaining that 'it might be easier to teach [at this school] because there isn't high diversity. You don't have to worry about background cultures'. Reba diminished the value of ethnic, racial and linguistic diversity into the phrase 'background cultures' and suggested that the primary reason the school is successful is that it is culturally homogenous rather than diverse. Focusing on the teaching, rather than the learning, experience, she also asserts that cultural homogeneity makes teaching easier. Beliefs like Reba's were reiterated by most of her classmates as well as the students in the other section of the course.

For instance, talking about a different school and in the other course section, Jessica, whose high school was 94% white, explained that the success of her case study school was due to the mostly White neighbourhood it was located in. She explained that if the school were hypothetically picked up and moved to an urban area, it would quickly decline. In her words,

> Moving the school to a struggling urban environment would probably take its toll … while the school would have more diversity, that would be challenging for the teachers already there because they haven't experienced that and they would have to incorporate new teaching styles and new ideas into their curriculum which some teachers might not be as comfortable with.

Jessica frames diversity as a burden for teachers who have to create 'new teaching styles and new ideas' in order to reach diverse students. Jessica suggests that this would make some teachers feel uncomfortable.

Throughout the presentations, schools that were mostly white were consistently determined to be better schools and easier working environments with little apparent regard for the data students had researched about the schools, or for the course readings about factors like inequitable school funding, high teacher turnover in urban schools, and the impacts of poverty. For example, Ellen found that her case study school was successful primarily

> because of the lack of diversity, most students share similar beliefs and values, so it's easier on teachers to kind of represent everyone in the classroom. There's not as much conflict with

representing other cultures and beliefs … there's a more positive relationship between teachers and parents, which is not always the case when there's more diversity present in the school.

Ellen did not offer any evidence to support her claim this school had a 'more positive relationship between teachers and parents' than other schools; she simply made what was, to her, a logical inference.

Over the course of the semester in both courses, I collected only one example of any prospective teacher speaking about the racial or cultural diversity of their potential future students as an asset rather than a liability. Ashli, whose high school was 39% white, wrote the following in a reflection during the third week of class in which the class was asked to consider what stereotypes they might have of 'urban' or 'inner-city' children. After listing some typical stereotypes, Ashli suggested some alternatives as well:

I am starting to consider more than just the negative perspective. The children in urban education may be more down to earth because they grow up in such a diverse area and therefore [it might be] easier to talk to them about the world because they will already understand.

Ashli suggests that growing up in a 'diverse area' makes children 'more down to earth', and that this, in turn, might make teaching them easier since 'they will already understand' about the world. This was the only instance in my data of a prospective teacher ascribing a positive value judgement to working with potential students from diverse backgrounds.

Participants in this study appeared unaware that their deficit beliefs and attitudes about racially diverse classrooms seemed to contradict their claims that they valued diversity. The only acknowledgement I heard of this contradiction came in the fourth week during a whole-class discussion of Horace Mann's goals regarding moral education. Reba raised her hand and commented,

I'm not saying diversity is a problem or anything, but when it's … a bunch of different people in one country and not everyone agrees to the same thing or has the same values and morals. So it's just like everyone believes different things but they're all in the same school. So what do you do?

Reba's statement, 'I'm not saying diversity is a problem or anything', seems to index an understanding that it would be taboo to critique diversity directly. Therefore, Reba sidesteps the issue by assuring her classmates that she knows that diversity is not a problem. However, she does want to bring up some legitimate questions about working with diverse populations – how do you decide whose morals to teach if everyone has 'believes different things?' The conversation moved on, though, and Reba's question did not get taken up by her classmates or instructor.

Discussion and implications

The white prospective teachers in this study began the semester as participants in a colour-blind figured world in which racism was an ill of the past and experiences with racial diversity were something to take pride in. In *Contexts*, however, as participants struggled to understand the rules of a new colour-conscious figured world, they learned that racism still exists and that students' experiences in school can be influenced by their skin colour. This deeply unsettled participants, making them worried about the likelihood of their own success as teachers of students of colour.

At the end of the semester, participants continued to ascribe positive value judgements to their own experiences with diversity, but feared racial diversity in the context of their future teaching. It seems that participation in *Contexts* may have at least temporarily undermined participant's senses of self-efficacy for working with racially diverse youth. In a follow-up study with the same participants, I hope to learn whether the dissonance in participants' personal and professional beliefs about racial diversity was a short-term symptom of a shifting racial identity (Helms 1990; Tatum 2003) or whether it might be a more permanent feature of the racial ideologies of this newest generation of white American teachers. Either way, the data from this study support the argument that a single course in a topic like *Social Foundations* or *Multicultural Education* is insufficient in single-handedly changing white teachers' attitudes, beliefs, dispositions; increasing their critical consciousness; or preparing these teachers to work with diverse youth (Castro 2010; Hollins and Guzman 2005; Ladson-Billings 1999; LaDuke 2009; Lowenstein 2009; Markowitz and Puchner 2014; Picower 2013; Sleeter 2001). It clearly takes more than a semester to unlearn a lifetime of colour-blind racial messaging.

It seems important to consider how the instructors' race may have influenced participants' talk and writing about diversity in *Contexts*. This racial dynamic – black professor, white students – is not entirely unusual. At UU, as at many other institutions, faculty and graduate students of colour are more likely to be asked to teach courses about race and diversity than their White peers (Stanley 2006). In interviews for this study, participants talked about how much they respected and admired their instructors and how they were getting more out of the course because their instructor, as an African-American, was able to share an authentic perspective on race and racism. It seems possible, then, that some of participants' vocal appreciation for diversity in class might have been intended as a means of expressing their approval of (and, more cynically, their desire to get good grades from) their instructors. If this is true, though, it only sets in starker relief participants' negative attitudes towards future students of colour as well as their apparent obliviousness to these negative attitudes despite their instructors' explicit attempts to challenge deficit beliefs about people of colour. If participants were at times parroting what they thought their instructors wanted to hear, they were way off the mark when they talked about their future students.

For researchers, this study's findings suggest both a caution as well as an opportunity. The caution: if, as in this study, white American prospective teachers born in the late '90s have learned that there is a 'right' answer to questions about diversity, then researchers must be increasingly careful about the methods they use to assess this population's real beliefs about and attitudes toward people of colour. This issue might be explored further with studies that distinguish between participants' attitudes about diversity in their own personal and academic lives and their attitudes about diversity in the context of the future professional lives. At the same time, this study raises many questions about the role of courses like *Contexts* in shaping students' attitudes about diversity. For instance, the two sections of the course that I studied focused primarily on racial diversity. Would students have retained the same inconsistent beliefs if the notion of diversity was expanded? How much of this study's findings are the results of the context, an urban American university with a publicised commitment to celebrating diversity? To answer these questions, future investigations could take up similar research questions in different instructional contexts. Also warranted are longer term studies that follow teacher candidates into their careers and document the impact of teachers' attitudes and beliefs on their students' learning outcomes.

In terms of practice, this research suggests that teacher education discourses about celebrating diversity might inhibit genuine discussion of the real challenges that white teachers may face when working with students who come from diverse backgrounds. The fact that Reba had to say, 'I'm not saying diversity is a problem or anything but …' suggests that at least some students may have had concerns about teaching diverse students that they were worried to speak about for fear of being labelled as a bad or racist person who did not appreciate diversity. If students cannot address these fears in class, where can they resolve them?

Furthermore, the notion that previous experiences with racially diverse peers may prepare white teachers for working with racially diverse students had serious unintended consequences in these learning environments. This understanding was adopted by participants who attended racially diverse high schools to position themselves as non-racist and to position those who attended mostly white high schools as racist. This allowed white students from racially diverse backgrounds to believe that they had no further work they needed to do to learn about teaching students of colour, and it left students from white schools and neighbourhoods feeling, at best, defensive, and at worst, as though they were unlikely to become successful teachers of students of colour. While this research corroborates recent studies that suggest that there are dangers in thinking about white prospective teachers as a monolithic, homogenous group (Laughter 2011; Lowenstein 2009; McDonough 2009), I also argue that we need to be cautious about transmitting a belief that some kinds of backgrounds and experiences are inherently better than others.

Finally, a glimmer of hope lies in the fact that all the participants in this study expressed at least a superficial appreciation for diversity. Perhaps teacher educators could draw on this positive value judgement, unpack it, and have their students practice using this appreciation as a lens for viewing their prospective students. At the very least, instructors could point out the dissonances in White preservice teachers' beliefs about the benefits of diversity in their own lives and their fears of the diversity of their students. In his meta-analysis of the literature, Castro (2010) found that students born in the last two and a half decades are much more likely than previous generations to have positive attitudes about racial and cultural diversity. Perhaps the task facing teacher educators now, then, is to guide prospective teachers in translating their appreciation for their own experiences with diversity into informed, asset-based perspectives of racially diverse students and schools.

Notes

1. All names are pseudonyms.
2. I had a conversation and a follow-up email exchange with each of the three non-participating students about the possibility of audiorecording their class sessions. I offered (a) to study a different section of the course altogether, (b) to study their sections but not audiorecord or (c) to study their sections, but discretely pause the recorder when they raised their hands in class. Each of the three students assured me that they were fine with option C, and although I had some initial misgivings about whether or not that would negatively influence these students' experiences in class, it turned out to be a workable solution. In fact, perhaps because they were not participants, two of these students became quite friendly and comfortable with me, often choosing to sit next to me in class.
3. I use the term 'non-racist' rather than 'anti-racist' here intentionally. I understand 'anti-racist' to describe those people who actively position themselves against racism and work to bring about a more racially just society. Many of the participants in this study, however, held a dysconcious view of race in the United States; they generally believed that race no longer

influences one's opportunities or the discrimination one faces. Rather than being against racism; these students were simply strongly opposed to being labelled as 'racist'; therefore, I use the term 'non-racist'.

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