

Chapter 73

Dealing With the Elephant in the Classroom: Reflections From a Graduate Course That Argues That Race Still Matters in Service Learning!

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ABSTRACT

In his classic book titled Race Matters, West courageously deals with issues of race and racism in an unapologetic manner. In this chapter, the authors also unapologetically deal with issues of race and racism within the context of education and society. Specifically, the authors highlight a graduate education course within their institution that compels both students and professors to be vulnerable and truthful about race, racism, diversity, equity, systemic inequalities, and White privilege through service learning. The authors argue that his approach is necessary give the fact that historically, the aforementioned has impacted the educational experiences for students of Color, but in particular, Black and Brown children. The authors explore this work through critical race theory. The authors conclude the chapter with implications for practice.

INTRODUCTION

To engage in a serious discussion of race in America, we must begin not with the problems of black people but with the flaws of American society—flaws rooted in historic inequalities and longstanding cultural stereotypes. How we set up the terms for discussing racial issues shapes our perception and response to these issues. As long as black people are viewed as a “them,” the burden falls on blacks to do all the “cultural” and “moral” work necessary for healthy race relations. The implication is that only certain Americans can define what it means to be American—and the rest must simply “fit in.” (West, 1994, pp.6-7)

The above passage from West’s (1994) classic text titled, *Race Matters*, perfectly underscores the importance of this chapter. Even after the two presidential terms of the nation’s first Black President, issues of race and racism remain problematic within the United States (U.S.) (Nesbit, 2016). The authors strongly assert that this nation has made monumental progress since “Jim Crow America,” but, the authors counter argue that the unmet promises of *Brown vs. the Board of Education*, coupled with the current realities of neoliberal policies and the prison industrial complex, emphasize that the U.S. is still dealing with “the problem of the colorline” posited by Du Bois over a century ago (1903). The purpose of this work is to highlight the processes, challenges, and developmental possibilities associated with engaging graduate students in intentional discourse and learning assignments around issues of race and racism in a teacher education course, *prior* to participating in a service-learning (SL) project.

The aforesaid is of serious importance to the authors of this work; given our institutions commitment to academic excellence, leadership development, and social justice. Specifically, our institution was also one of the first colleges in the U.S. to offer service in the academic curriculum for credit. With that being said, the authors also believe that sentimental SL work, without exploring issues of race, racism, and White privilege, is a disservice to students, and ultimately, a disservice to the people and communities that they will serve (Green, 2003).

The authors believe and contend that engaging students in the kind of strategic discourse that Singleton and Linton (2007) call the “courageous conversation” and Stevenson (2013) identifies as “the elephant in the room,” is a necessary component to preparing students for SL and social justice work (Espino & Lee, 2011; Green, 2003). Further, the authors also argue that critical exploration and reflection on the aforementioned is foundational for the student’s professional practice. To add substance to our claim, we turn to West (1994) who argues that:

Race is the most explosive issue in American life precisely because it forces s to confront the tragic facts of poverty and paranoia, despair, and distrust. In short, a candid examination of race matter takes us to the core of American democracy. And the degree to which race matters in the plight and predicament of fellow citizens us a crucial measure of whether we can keep alive the best of this democratic experiment we call America (p. 155-156).

Our main argument in this chapter is that anti-racist activism, just like talking about issues of social justice, race, and racism, are difficult, but necessary dimensions of SL work in education. Undoubtedly, working for racial justice in SL and critical teacher reflection are all too often overlooked in teacher education programs. But in tandem with West (1994), this chapter contends that the intersection of SL and the intentional study of racism and White privilege move us collectively closer to disrupting the reproduction of racism in teacher education. Intentional dialog within a SL context also supports students’

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