

# Preparing for Discussions on Race and Racism: The Critical Voices in Teacher Education Course

Felicia Moore Mensah<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

*This study speaks to elements of theory, practice, and research with emphasis on the preparation of future teacher educators and teachers in the development of racial literacy. The participants in this study were graduate students interested in becoming teacher educators. This study reports on their learning to address issues of race and racism in a 16-week teacher education course, Critical Voices in Teacher Education. The pedagogy and curriculum of the course utilized large and small group interactive discussions, group assignments, course readings (i.e., reports, published articles, and book chapters), movie/video clip Pre-Post reflections and discussions, and engagement in small research projects. The findings of the study reveal how discussions of race and racism tied to teacher education expanded the graduate students' understanding of not only issues of race and racism for students but also about themselves as future teacher educators. The findings also reveal how the content, interactions, and discussions in the course assisted them in developing racial literacy. Implications are discussed for course development that center on race and racism in teacher education.*

## Keywords

Race and racism, racial literacy, critical race theory, teacher education, doctoral preparation, future teacher educators

## Introduction

Higher education has been challenged by increasing attacks and criticisms in national and global spheres regarding educational reform and policies. Consequently, there is opportunity for highly engaged discussions on the impact of reform on several areas, such as teacher education, teacher professional development, and student learning, and within specific content areas, such as science. Furthermore, the context of increasing student diversity, changing school demographics, accountability, assessment, and persistent achievement and opportunity

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<sup>1</sup> **Corresponding Author:** Felicia Moore Mensah, Teachers College, Columbia University

Email: [fm2140@tc.columbia.edu](mailto:fm2140@tc.columbia.edu)

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gaps have become areas of deep interest for research and policy in higher education and issues of equity for all students. Keeping with the tenet of critical race theory that racism is an inherent and normalized aspect of American society (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002), teaching about issues of race and racism is important in higher education, and specifically in the preparation of future faculty or future teacher educators who will serve in the capacity of preparing teachers who will work in increasingly diverse school settings.

With growing attention to the preparation of teachers and the quality of their teacher education programs, there is little attention given to those who prepare the teachers, or teacher educators. For example, Stillman and Anderson (2014) stated that relatively few doctoral programs prepare graduate students for the work of teacher education. Similarly, in a study conducted by Goodwin and colleagues (2014), they investigated the views and perspectives of 293 teacher educators seeking to understand the foundational knowledge needed to be teacher educators, how they evaluate their own preparation, and what can be learned from their experiences that can be used to inform the preparation of teacher educators. The researchers reported that the majority of participants identified as White and expressed feeling less prepared to handle issues of diversity than teacher educators of Color. The researchers suggested that there is unevenness in the field in terms of multicultural teacher education curriculum and teaching teacher educators' level of commitment to or understanding of diversity or equity. However, the researchers did not ask questions pertaining to race and racism and how prepared teacher educators perceived their preparation was to teach or talk about issues of race and racism as teacher educators. Therefore, this current study is unique in its approach to discuss issues of race and racism within a specially designed course for masters and doctoral students interested in becoming teacher educators. The emphasis for their learning was on developing racial literacy, and critical race theory was the overarching theoretical framework for this study.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### **Critical Race Theory**

Critical scholars in education, such as Gloria Ladson-Billings and William Tate (1995) and Rich Milner (2007) argue that race is undertheorized in education and teacher education. To that end, Critical Race Theory (CRT) acknowledges as a basic premise that race and racism are defining characteristics of American society and a primary factor in educational inequity. As a theoretical framework, CRT reveals how the dominant ideology of colorblindness and race neutrality act as a camouflage for the self-interest, power, and privilege of dominant groups in American society (Delgado, 1989; Lopez, 2003). One goal of the theory is to contest all forms of racial, gender, and class subordination by linking theory to practice, scholarship to teaching, and the academy to the community (Lynn & Parker, 2006; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Villalpando, 2003). Furthermore, Solórzano and Yosso (2002) assert that CRT “challenges the dominant discourse on race and racism as it relates to education by examining how educational theory and practice are used to subordinate certain racial and ethnic groups” (p. 2). With teacher education as a major field of professional learning, CRT may be useful in also revealing how dominant discourses in education can be challenged.

Matsuda, Lawrence, Delgado, and Crenshaw (1993) named six unifying themes that define CRT<sup>1</sup>, but two are emphasized in this study: Critical race theory recognizes that racism is endemic to American life and critical race theory expresses skepticism toward dominant legal claims of neutrality, objectivity, colorblindness and meritocracy. These are discussed in relationship to the development of racial literacy.

## Racial Literacy

Sealey-Ruiz (2013) defines racial literacy as “...the ability to read, discuss, and write about situations that involve race or racism” (p. 386). This definition of racial literacy is informed by scholarship that recognizes race “as a signifier that is discursively constructed through language (Hall); as fluid, unstable, and socially constructed (Omi and Winant) rather than static; and not rooted in biology, but having ‘real’ effects in the lives of individuals (Frankenberg)” (p. 386). As an English educator, Sealey-Ruiz uses many forms, or pedagogical practices, such as dialogue, reading, viewing, and listening to critical texts and journaling so that students can develop critical thinking and conversation skills around issues and topics involving racism, discrimination, and prejudice. In discussions of race and racism, “issues of diversity [become] central rather than peripheral” to the development of racial literacy (Villegas & Lucas, 2002, p. 21); yet, students need practice in developing these skills through curricular and pedagogical approaches to support it. For example, Quaye (2014) discusses several strategies teacher educators use to facilitate discussions of race, such as group work and discussions and debriefing.

## Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to engage students in discussions and activities in the development of racial literacy. This addresses the need for future teacher educators to develop the ability to read, discuss, and write about their learning that involves race and racism. Therefore, the research questions for the study were: In what ways does a course in teacher education support the development of racial literacy for participants interested in becoming teacher educators, and what do these students learn about race and racism in teacher education?

## Method

### Context and Participants

The context of this study was in a teacher education course, Critical Voices in Teacher Education, which lasted one semester, or 16 weeks. The course utilized large and small group interactive discussions, group assignments, course readings (i.e., reports, published articles, and book chapters), movie and video clips for Pre- Write discussions, Post-Write reflections, and small-scale research projects applicable in teacher education and urban classrooms. The course was designed to facilitate conversations about race and racism and to prepare future teacher educators to have conversations and facilitate such discussions.

The participants in the course were five second- and third-year doctoral students (science education and social studies education programs). Two masters level students (science education program) interested in becoming teacher educators also enrolled in the course. In total, there were four females and three males. Except for three of the students in the course, all were current inservice science and social studies teachers. The participants were culturally and racially diverse. Out of the seven, four of the students were students of color, and three were international students.<sup>2</sup>

One masters level preservice elementary teacher served as the teaching assistant in the course. Brian, an African American male, had taken Science in Childhood Education, an elementary preservice science methods course the previous fall semester with me. This is a required course for initial New York State teacher certification. We developed a close relationship, particularly around Brian's teacher education program. He would meet weekly with me outside of class to discuss his learning and mainly frustrations in his teacher education program as the only African American male in his cohort. He appreciated the content and discussions in the science methods course about culturally relevant teaching and having a faculty member of color with whom he could relate to.

From our conversations, I invited Brian to be my Teaching Assistant in the Critical Voices course. We discussed how exciting it would be to have multiple stakeholders in the conversation for learning about race, racism, and teacher education and to focus on the educational experiences of young Black males and students of color in urban classroom settings. We also discussed the necessity of preparing future teacher educators who will teach students of color in teacher education programs, giving the overwhelming presence of White, female teacher candidates and curriculum that addresses their needs and not teachers of color (Mensah & Jackson, in review; Sleeter, 2001). A classic Venn Diagram shows this relationship (Figure 1). In this arrangement, Brian contributed perspectives on his needs as a male teacher candidate of color, and he was presented a population of student teacher candidates that the doctoral students would teach in their role as future teacher educators or professors. My role was to serve as a bridge between the two, not only preparing doctoral students as future teacher educators but also keeping in mind Brian and his experiences as Black male teacher candidate. This arrangement was fruitful in establishing a sort of all stakeholders having a seat at the table where our collective purpose was to learn together about issues of race and racism in teacher education and the development of racial literacy to talk about these issues in the context of a teacher education course.

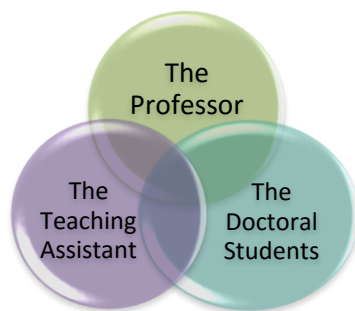


Figure 1. Participants in the Critical Voices Course

The course met once per week for 1 hour and 50 minutes. At the beginning of each session, the students were showed a movie clip or video (Appendix 1) and were given five minutes to record their initial thoughts on the movie clip or video as a Pre-Write activity. Then, we either immediately engaged in conversation of the movie clip or video as an introduction to the discussion for the class session, or it was discussed throughout the class session, making reference and insights in small groups, large group, and class activities. At the conclusion of each class session, we ended with a five-minute Post-Write. The Post-Write instruction, similar to the Pre-Write, was to record thinking from the discussion of the day. On a few occasions, a prompted question was provided for response that summarized the class session or had emerged from class conversations. Everyone was asked to keep the Pre- and Post-Write comments in the journal feature of Blackboard, the course learning platform. This served as a journal for the semester as well as a hub for submission of course assignments. They were also encouraged to keep additional reflections in this journal during the semester. A final assignment in the course was to re-read all their Pre- and Post-Write entries and write a final reflection, called the Final Thoughts. The purpose in doing this was to see how their thinking changed over the course of the semester and to assess their personal learning of content in the course. They were to discuss any themes they found in their writing, how they developed over the course of the semester for racial literacy, and to pose any final thoughts about discussions of race and racism in teacher education. At the end of the semester, students were asked to complete a Course Evaluation (Appendix 2) that consisted of questions pertaining to their learning about issues discussed in the course and connections to their interest in teacher education.

## Data Collection and Data Analysis

The primary data collected for this study were the Pre- and Post-Writes, Final Thoughts, and Course Evaluation. All the students in the courses were asked to submit these writings electronically as active consent for participation in the study. Once all collected, a case record for each student was created such that all entries for one participant were gathered into one Word Document for data analysis. Data analysis process consisted of reading, re-reading, and making memos as a process of constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006). For example, I used the "Review Feature" of Word to write memos and notes in the margins as I read through each person's Pre-Post-Writes, Final Thoughts, and Course Evaluation for initial *in vivo* open coding. As I highlighted and made comments in the data from each individual, re-occurring ideas became evident for comparative analysis across each file. The next level was axial coding and consisted of chunking, sorting, synthesizing, and organizing the data and then reassembling the data in new ways (Creswell, 2013).

For the next level, I used racial literacy and racial consciousness as lenses to assist in the analysis. I was curious to learn how they developed racial literacy in talk, discussion, and writing about race and racism through the activities and assignments in the course. Hence, I paid particular attention to "when, where, why, who, how, and with what consequences" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 125) that they used words like "race", "racism", "multiculturalism", "colorblindness", "consciousness", and "privilege" and other words associated with race

conversations. These terms were explicitly stated as participants discussed personal stories, content and pedagogy of the course, and their own biases about race and racism. Peer debriefing and using multiple data sources for triangulation were used as elements for rigor of qualitative data analysis (Guba & Lincoln, 1989).

As an emergent design and analysis for this course on understanding the development of racial literacy for doctoral and masters level students interested in teacher education, the analysis process produced three themes that were established from the coding process. They are presented below. Consistent with CRT methodology of storytelling (Howard, 2008; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002), the voices of the participants are maintained as they share in the various writings how they tussle with developing racial literacy in the context of the Critical Voices in Teacher education course.

## Findings and Discussion

This study reports on the learning of future teacher educators in the development of racial literacy in a teacher education course. In the findings section, I present three themes that emerged from the analysis of course writings in the course. As I present the findings I also engage in some discussion, connecting the themes to relevant literature. At the conclusion of this section, I offer implications of race and racism in teacher education and the necessity of developing racial literacy for future teacher educators.

### Theme1: Colorblindness

CRT moves conversations about racism past arguments about *whether* racism exists or not and into analyses of *how* it exists” (Baidisdell, 2005, p. 31). One mechanism of how racism exists is colorblindness. Colorblindness is a dominant theme of CRT and an area of focus in learning about race and racism in teacher education (Milner, 2007). When teachers or students talk about avoiding discussions of race and racism, Paul explained that using socioeconomic status as proxy for race and racism makes colorblindness evident:

I really think the SES and race discussion was interesting. Low SES is kind of a code for black or Hispanic in NYC, so the two are really the same thing in many ways. Ironically, this almost presents the perfect point of view for a “color blind person” -- the “it is not race but SES that defines academic success” view. (Paul, Post-Write, May 1)

From participating in the course discussions and videos, the participants shared early thoughts about race. For example, Eli stated in the Pre-Write to the Black Doll Experiment, “The video shows an unfortunate but realistic view of what reality is. It shows no matter how people may try to deny the existence of race, it is very much there” (Eli, Pre-Write, February 6). This speaks to the notion that race is endemic in society (Omni & Winant, 2014). It is a matter that also touches very young children in how they select Black or White dolls. Tracia reflected on discrimination in her past. She noted that our class race conversations about privilege opened up for her sociocultural consciousness and a language to talk about her experiences:

During our discussion today on the topic of privilege, overt and subtle racism, I thought about incidents in my past that I may have glazed over but have actually been instances of discrimination against me. I thought of experiences where my cultural identity was questioned as well as my language and fluency in English as well as the presumption that because I come from a different country, I speak a different language. (Tracia, Post-Write, March 13)

The movie clips which prompted discussions of race and racism allowed for personal reflection on the students' views of themselves. As a result of the discussions in class, there was an increased awareness of race and racism that the students had not previously considered. For example, at the end of the semester, Tracia discussed that perhaps subtle events in her life may have been racist acts:

The videos and discussions also increased my awareness of racism against me personally. I never really thought about others being racist towards me but thinking deeply about certain situations has made me realize that subtle events have occurred in the past that would be considered racist. (Tracia, Final Thoughts, May 10)

Sociocultural consciousness has to do with ways of thinking, behaving, and being that are deeply influenced by such factors as race, ethnicity, social class, and language (Banks, 1996). Colorblindness has an effect in "not seeing color", and students in essence are not there, invisible, and not seen. If teachers are not aware and unable to read forms of race and racism in their own lives, they are not able to see it in their students. For instance, Tracia, as an international student, stated also, "I consider myself 'blind' to racism, but I think it also depends heavily on the context of where and how these experiences have occurred" (Tracia, Post-Write, March 13). Ullucci and Battey (2011) explain that when people use colorblindness, racism is minimized, thus contributing to "a collective ignorance" that "relieves individuals from fighting against the impact of racism" (p. 1196), and can shut down as there is no need to discuss inequity. Rosenberg (2004) stated that colorblindness allows people to deny that race, especially skin color has consequences for a person's status and well-being; and that blindness to skin color and race remains a "privilege" available exclusively to White people" (p. 257).

From watching and discussing the movie clips, the students shared emotional reactions in their writings. For example, Aletha's Pre-Write revealed past experiences of being an African American young girl who was teased for her White features. The video of the Black Doll, White Doll Race Experiment touched an emotional chord for her:

This video evokes very strong reflection and responses for me. I am disgusted. This is inextricably tied to my upbringing as well. I mostly had white dolls growing up. My parents never had explicit conversations with me regarding my beauty as an African American girl. I was always praised for my "white" features as being the ones that are beautiful- my long hair and hazel eyes. These features often separated me from my other African American counterparts. I was teased as a young girl by most of my peers and really ignored my identity as a black woman. I was able to get by most of my life color blind. (Aletha, Pre Write, February 6)

Aletha lived most of her life ignoring her racial identity as a Black woman. The video of little Black girls and boys preferring to play with a White doll was emotional for her and brought back

painful emotions of being teased on one hand and being ignored on the other. Playing with White dolls, though not physically looking like them, her parents did not engage in race conversations with her or assist Aletha's Black racial identity development as a young Black child. Thus, coming to understand these ideas of separation and invisibility for Aletha as connected to race were powerful. Similarly, Tracia talked about only having White dolls growing up in Trinidad for her to play with as a young girl. In addition, colorblindness was depicted in her story:

While I recognize the racial undertones of this experiment [Black Doll, White Doll Race Experiment], I also think that in this time, media exposure and consumerism may have played a factor into which doll the children choose. As a child myself, I only remember playing with 'white' dolls and this was all I knew. In fact, the most popular dolls were the Barbies, which are all white dolls. (Tracia, Pre-Write, February 6)

Tracia diverted some of the attention away from race and racism tied to colorblindness, not quite understanding a broader focus on its impact in her life. Indeed, few dolls of color were on the market, yet a broader analysis does show how race and racism reveals itself in a colorblind ideology. Here as critical race theorists claim, race is a key organizing category for inequality and because of the permanence of racial ideology in American society (Omi & Winant, 2014), not having dolls of color to play with reveals this permanence, and that Whiteness is the norm, even in child's play. Bush (2004) argues that Whites benefit from a variety of institutional and social arrangements that often appear to White people as having nothing to do with race. However, even for students of color, their understanding of the impact of Whiteness on their upbringing and their views also bears upon issues of race, racism, and colorblindness.

In the two examples of Aletha and Tracia, there is a "White norm" (Foster, 1999), even for baby dolls, that race and racism in early years has an impact on how the participants understand self and their views of colorblindness. Therefore, educators must be careful also not to make assumptions that teachers of color understand how to talk about their experiences with race and racism, or that their development of racial literacy is not required. From understanding their personal history with race and racism, students of color gain ways of talking about and developing a language to discuss their experiences. For instance, Aletha stated the following at the end of the course:

I have also come to understand that my development of my sociocultural awareness has been facilitated by my reading and reflection as well as being given the space in class to work through verbalizing my own sociocultural awareness. (Aletha, Final Thought, May 8)

Notions of colorblindness are often discussed in the context of preparing White teachers (Baidzell, 2005). Therefore, opportunities for self-reflection about historical oppression and current educational inequity should be areas of discussion in teacher education for all students.

Brand (2014) explains, "teachers who are socioculturally conscious understand the need to function as advocates to locate resources that will help students who are socioculturally disadvantaged overcome their life circumstances and not view themselves in terms of their disparities" (pp. 76-77). For instance, Sara commented on making connections between



colorblindness and fairness and questioning her practices as a teacher so that her students are able to reach their potential. She stated:

I had a personal breakthrough as an educator today in thinking about colorblindness and fairness. Fairness does not equate to teaching all our students the same way. Each of our students need different things from us, based on a number of things. It is important that we as teachers do not overlook the power that we have to connect to our students on a social-emotional level in order to bring out the best in our students and to help them to reach their potential. (Sara, Post-Write, February 2)

Sara continued to think and reflect on her ideas of colorblindness. After re-reading her Pre-and Post-Writes, she commented for Final Thoughts her understanding of colorblindness. She learned about the concept of colorblindness and its impact on her students and the kind of learning environment she created for them. In addition, she questioned her practices as a teacher and relationships with her students of color. She wrote:

Before taking this course, I'm not sure I ever gave much thought to what it means for a teacher to be "colorblind" and how that might affect a student of color. Honestly, I have always thought of myself as a teacher who provides a safe and challenging learning environment for all of my students, regardless of their race. The discussion of colorblindness has led me to question whether or not I am colorblind if I don't acknowledge the different races in my classroom. Am I making my students feel bad and not knowing it? Do my students of color need more from me, or something different from me? How can I tell? How can I find out? I fear that there is something that I am doing to make some of my students feel bad, and not even realizing. (Sara, Final Thoughts, May 21)

Sara's questioning was reflective and she wanted to act in more affirming ways with her students of color. Her understanding of colorblindness now served as a self-reflective mirror to look at herself.

Connecting Sara's comments of race, teaching, and colorblindness, Young (2010) demands "raising educators' race consciousness is not something that can be done in one college course, in a professional development seminar", or in her study, eight weeks of inquiry groups sessions over the course of 3 months" (p. 258). I argue, however, that it can happen even in short time. The notion of race consciousness and racial literacy entails coming into awareness and questioning your level of understanding. In the case of Sara, attending to her students' needs, talking about her biases of colorblindness, and now offering reflective questions are ways of raising her race consciousness and development of racial literacy.

## **Theme 2: What Teacher Education Needs**

The participants shared at various times in their Pre and Post Writes, Final Thoughts, and Course Evaluation what is needed in teacher education to promote better understanding of race and racism. They also shared what they had and had not gotten out of their teacher education program and their current doctoral and teacher education programs regarding discussions and content on race and racism. In other words, they saw a need for racial literacy

in their graduate education and thought discussing issue of race and racism was important. For example, we had discussions about well their teacher education programs prepared them for teaching and the relevancy of their course work in preparing them to be classroom teachers who can address racial literacy. However, when asked about how well they were prepared, Tracia and Paul both replied that her teacher education preparation did not prepare them for urban classroom teaching no less understanding racial issues tied to teacher education:

This question assumes that the teacher preparation coursework actually taught me something about how to teach in the classroom. I think more than this, my experiences growing up with parents who were teachers and being educated in a different school system made a stronger impact on my teaching philosophy than my teacher education coursework. (Tracia, Post Write, January 23)

I also am aware that despite taking a multicultural education class here at [the College], I was very much underprepared for the realities of a NYC classroom with respect to issues of race and racism. While I have not been afraid to talk about the issue with students, I do not think I was correctly prepared for how to do this, or what to expect from my students and why. For any teacher entering the profession, these skills and understandings are essential to operating a successful classroom. ...I believe that it is critical to engage in incorporating race/racism coursework in all preservice teaching programs. (Paul, Final Thoughts, May 16)

Discussions of race and racism are not highly emphasized in teacher education nor in the preparation of teacher educators (Goodwin et al., 2014; Quaye, 2014). Likewise, teacher education course work did not prepare Tracia or Paul adequately for teaching and talking about issues of race and racism in urban schools. Both got on the job training, but this was not ideal. Both much more preferred to have had issues related to race and racism addressed during their teacher preparation program.

Other participants commented on desiring spaces to have race conversations. For instance, the wanted a forum to discuss race and racism in teacher education and in their doctoral education. They found the critical voices class to be such a space to talk about issues relevant to student learning:

Essentially, this course provides a forum for preservice and inservice teachers to express their opinions on certain significant aspects of urban schooling that are ignored by administrators, but affect students' growth both emotionally and academically. (Tracia, Final Thoughts, May 10)

It was this forum or space provided in the course to talk and to develop racial literacy that allowed the participants to grow as teachers so that they may also impact the emotional and academic development of their students.

One participant, Robert, noted also how he was pleased with the critical perspectives he was receiving from his professors, describing them as "critical theorists." Yet, Robert stated, "In that respect, the culture of the department is critical in nature. What I did not have is a strong background in its application to race" (Robert, Course Evaluation, May 12). He added:

In that respect, I think the incorporation of race [in the course] certainly widened my research interests. Furthermore, I never really knew how strongly race played a role in science

education. Although this is not my initial field, I was very interested to see how educators and participants conceptualized science class relying on dated stereotypes that are perpetuated by current institutions and required curricula. (Robert, Course Evaluation, May 12)

Many of the participants asked probing, curious questions about what to do in teacher education and professional development to support their students' learning. For example, regarding her students of color, Aletha asked, "How do we teach our students of color to navigate around this real constraint of seeking equality in a world that is heavily Eurocentric?" (Aletha, Pre-Write, March 13); and she asked questions about her professional development as a teacher, inquiring, "I am wondering what 'interventions' will look like to support teachers with developing a consciousness that supports multiculturalism in the classroom" (Aletha, Post-Write, April 17). Sara asked other questions related to preparing future teachers such as, "How do we prepare teachers to approach their classrooms through a multicultural lens? How do we give teachers, preservice and inservice, the safe space to have these conversations that are so critical to what they are doing in their classrooms" (Sara, Post-Write, March 27)? The participants agreed that inservice and preservice teachers needed to have "purposeful discourses" about race in order to build their "sociocultural awareness." Thus, racial literacy was critical to building classroom learning environments that support their students of color and their learning:

Preservice teachers must engage in purposeful discourses around sociopolitical awareness of students of color, what it means to be a student of color in a place like NYC and how to make these students feel safe in the classroom. (Tracia, Post-Write, March 6)

Noting that discussions of race are "complex", Paul commented that discussions of race and racism in education should be addressed in teacher education courses:

Today was really great. I really enjoyed being able to discuss the topic of race in education and society as a class. Several things hit me during our discussions. Race is not purely black vs race - it is way more complex than this, yet the media loves to paint things in this light. Life experience and the "education" that is provided by this [talking about race] can be very effective in creating awareness and opportunity. ... [and] teacher training of educators must ensure that these topics are effectively addressed in courses. (Paul, Post-Write, March 13)

As we engaged in discussions about what was needed in teacher education, some of the participants wondered what they needed in their current doctoral studies in learning about race and racism. They questioned how and under which situations they were able to have race discussions in their course work. For example, Aletha noted:

My only professors who mentioned race are professors of color. Students of color at [the university] have a more difficult time progressing through the graduate school programs. I, myself, as a graduate student, have had challenges going through the program. I will not blame those on issues related to equity; however, I do wonder if my trajectory has been affected by issues of race that I am not knowledgeable about. (Aletha, Post Write, April 24)

Having faculty of color at Predominantly White Institutions speaks to having a certain level of relatability for students of color (Mensah & Jackson, in review). When students become aware of who teaches race and how race is discussed, it implies that discussions of race and racism is not a priority for the rest of the institution (Quaye, 2014). Thus, covering race and racism as curriculum in teacher education is necessary, and it is needed for “all educators” who will serve increasingly diverse educational settings:

I think that all educators who face diverse students should participate in this course simply because there are so many topics and issues that are not addressed in coursework and programs. It is really of critical importance that educators are presented with this information. (Tracia, Course Evaluation, May 12)

With sociocultural awareness, our discussions entertained larger systems of oppression. Institutional racism can set up a binary of what is good is White and what is bad is Black. Robert discussed this in reference to a video we watched on *Brown v. Board of Education*:

What we see here is a strong version of institutional racism. We denote that white equals good and black equals bad. This is something that is a statement of class, privilege, and power. When we are able to understand this and really unfold this, we are engaging in a critical dialogue to rewrite inequalities perpetuated by this line of thinking. (Robert, Pre-Write, February 6)

Teachers throughout K-12 education have to reinforce messages of equality, but how they can or will they, if these message are not even discussed or brought up for discussion. Therefore, teacher education programs must find a way to supply every teacher with racial literacy skills so that present a consistent message to students of all races, ethnicities, and backgrounds that issues of race matter. Paul commented about the importance of invisibility of race discussions:

For me, race/racism is the prevalent unspoken topic in teacher education today. It is an issue present in every classroom in NYC, across the US and the majority of the World. Yet the recent push for educational reforms fails to mention this issue in any way shape or form. (Paul, Final Thoughts, May 16)

Moreover, the participants assessed their teacher preparation programs and their learning from the course. Tracia commented, “After reading through these pre and post write statements, I realize that this course has helped me to evolve my way of thinking about diversity in the classroom and about the many deficiencies that teacher preparation programs a plagued with (Tracia, Final Thoughts, May 10).

### **Theme 3: Learning from Engaging in Race Discussions**

For theme 3, the participants in the class discussed several times how they changed or evolved in their thinking about race and racism in teacher education over the semester. Eli, for example, shared that he learned from reading Mensah (2013) that “through course readings how ‘theoretically speaking’ the issues were and how the classroom environment made [him] realize how to ‘practically’ carry out a conversation in a safe environment”, and the process of

engaging in race discussions was “a very enlightening experience” for him (Eli, Post-Write, May 8). Engaging in weekly Pre-Post Writes and re-reading them at the end of the course allowed the students to note how their thinking changed and progressed over time. For example, Aletha commented, “The weekly pre and post writes allowed me to see patterns in my thinking and growth and clarity on my viewpoints” (Aletha, Course Evaluation, May 12). Similarly, Tracia commented how she was able to re-evaluate herself and opinions she had about her students of color, who were mainly immigrant students:

With our round table discussions surrounding issues that teachers face in classrooms today, the class allowed me to re-evaluate some of my own opinions about my students and about the many cultural backgrounds they come from. (Tracia, Final Thoughts, May 10)

On the Course Evaluation, Tracia added, “the realization of how impactful it is for preservice and inservice educators to be familiar with these topics is indeed game-changing” (Tracia, Final Thoughts, May 10). Her learning about race and racism and topics discussed over the semester were beneficial for her professional growth as a doctoral student and current science teacher. The discussions have been “invaluable and influential in shaping relationships with students and my views on race and culture” (Tracia, Final Thoughts, May 10). Race discussions put into perspective the challenges that students of color are having in the educational system and ways that teacher education can support future teachers in dealing with these issues.

The participants across the two programs and degree levels were able to come together to discuss issues of race and racism from their perspectives as students and teachers. The different subject areas did not matter so much but served as a context of their experiences to think about issues of race and racism in teacher education. What mattered the most was coming to an awareness and making meaning across the different areas in the development of racial literacy. Specifically, many of them mentioned how the discussions allowed them to develop a shared language for understanding issues of race relevant in teacher education. For example, Robert commented: “Science and social studies educators were able to come together and ‘speak the same language.’ This is what I think Dr. Mensah (2012) meant when she said that diversity and critical theory should be ‘ubiquitous’ in teacher education” (Robert, Post Write, January 30).

In addition to engaging in race discussion in the development of the “same language”, teacher educators needed to provide classroom learning environments that would support the kinds of discussions we had during the semester. They participants noted as future teacher educators, they “need to have a diverse set of students in mind when educating teachers as well as a socially constructed epistemology that enables the classroom structure to be collaborative and inviting of all perspectives” (Aletha, Course Evaluation, May 12). Furthermore, in the role of teacher educator, Robert added: “As teacher-educators, we can infuse critical inquiry into our preparation programs to help preservice educators see how these inequities persist in public education” (Robert, Final Reflection, May 10). This is necessary so that teachers do not maintain ideologies of race that uphold structures of White supremacy (Picower, 2009) that continue to produce education inequities.

Paul commented that the course “challenged” him to look at himself and the success of his education journey. Being reflective was “hard and uncomfortable experiences” (Paul, Final

Thoughts, May 16). Still, he valued the opportunity to engage in a process of racial literacy development as it revealed educational inequities and challenged his thinking about a range of issues. Nonetheless, he also felt it was important to this growth as a student and teacher to engage in race discussions with others:

This was hard and uncomfortable to do but I feel this was necessary in order to expose the critical differences in opportunity and equality of access to white individuals and everyone else. I also feel that having had these uncomfortable experiences I would not be afraid to re-engage in this kind of exploration in the future. This is something that I believe needs to occur again and I feel that each time I engage in this kind of critical inner dialogue I will grow as an educator. More than this, I think I would be confident enough to lead others to this place of reflection. (Paul, Final Thoughts, May 16)

In summary, the participants in the study learned a great deal about themselves and the importance of having race discussions in the development of racial literacy in their teacher and doctoral preparation. Though the conversations were challenging, emotional, uncomfortable, and revealing of their own biases and assumptions, the effort to do so was worth the unease and discomfort. They also began to think about educational inequities, noting their roles in educational inequity, while also imagining ways to improve it. Eli summed up his learning and that of others, "All the efforts being taken at times seems like a drop in the ocean. Even then, one has to remember that it is those drops which makes up the ocean" (Eli, Post-Write, April 24).

## Implications and Conclusion

The findings of the study reveal first how discussions of race tied to teacher education expanded the participants' understanding of not only issues of race about students but also about themselves as teacher educators, and the influence of their positionality as teachers in understanding race and racism (Mensah, 2016; Moore, 2008; Rivera Maulucci, 2013); and second, the content, interactions, and discussions in the course assisted participants in gaining greater understanding of how to connect race issues to larger issues in teacher education and society. Not limiting racial awareness as strictly for White students, the students of color in the course also became aware of self and their knowledge of race.

Racial literacy, as defined by Sealey-Ruiz (2013), is "...the ability to read, discuss, and write about situations that involve race or racism" (p. 386). Development of racial literacy involves understanding the unique perspective of who we are, which is the identity work we need to do in teacher education. It involves understanding and learning about the common and unique perspectives of others and their identities toward understanding our society more fully. Engaging in discussions of race and racism involves creating opportunities for improving dialogue about race relations and racism that is manifested in classrooms of higher education through our pedagogy and curriculum (Mensah & Jackson, in review). It involves recognizing the educational benefits of learning with, from diverse others, and in diverse learning environments where discussions of race and racism become central in teacher education and not avoided. As future teacher educators, neglecting to engage in conversations about race and racism perpetuates racial and educational inequity, with colorblindness not being challenged. Garcia and Van Soest (2000) stated that faculty must develop comfort with

discussing issues related to diversity. Future teacher educators must be taught how to participate in honest discourse on race and racism so they do not feel the need to shy away from these topics when discussions about race and racism arise. There should be space for open dialogue and space for quiet reflection to tussle with their own thinking and personal histories as well as others in the development of racial literacy. Much work is needed in teacher education to transform its pedagogy for facilitating discussions about race and racism in society and how it impacts teacher education.

Fundamentally, the study has implications for teacher educators in the design a course to focus on constructive discussions of race and racism in teacher education. A design should promote collaborative and critical reflection of race and racism. Using large and small group interactive discussions, assignments, course readings (i.e., reports, published articles, and book chapters), movie/video clips and various reflective writings throughout the Critical Voices in Teacher Education course, this pedagogy and curriculum supported the development of racial literacy for a class of doctoral and masters level students interested in becoming teacher educators. Quaye (2014) also reports the various pedagogical strategies that White teacher educators use to facilitate racial dialogues, which are similar to those used in this study. Thus, the development of racial literacy with participants interested in becoming teacher educators requires diverse approaches to facilitate discussions of race and racism.

Transforming teacher education or higher education is hard due to deep roots of traditional teaching, avoidance of talking about race, and faculty who are not equipped to facilitate these discussions. To overcome these obstacles, CRT in education is one approach (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2005). But constructive discussions about race, racism, diversity, and equity must occur in teacher education. Creative formats like book clubs to discuss diversity and equity are helpful (Mensah, 2009), and Pre-Post Writes with movie clips also are effective for racial literacy development, as this study shows. Others have engaged in other pedagogical methods, such as the development of heuristics for engaging in “thorny” conversations (Alexakos et al., 2016). Engaging in practices that lead to better understandings of how race matters in teacher preparation and in the lives of teachers and students is important. Moreover, a critical consciousness leads one to empathize with the struggles of oppressed others, resulting in social action and the eventual transformation of teacher education and the world (Freire, 2000; Kincheloe, 2005).

The various literacy practices used in the course, such as the Pre-Post Writes, Final Thoughts, and Course Evaluation were purposely designed, such that students begin a process of racial literacy toward race consciousness. The discussions and writings supported the participants to not only develop a language for talking about race but also to develop sociocultural awareness. Discussions about race and racism can start much earlier in the educational history of students, and certainly in teacher education preparation, and in short time (16-weeks) can develop racial literacy. If discussions do not start and educators are not optimistic that change can happen, race conversations may not occur at all in our teacher education programs. By preparing future teacher educators who will prepare teachers to meet the demands of a complex, diverse, and exciting society, we have to set as a priority our engagement as faculty in discussions and courses that center race and racism.

## Notes

1. Matsuda, Lawrence, Delgado, and Crenshaw (1993, p. 6) named six unifying themes that define CRT. Critical race theory recognizes that racism is endemic to American life.
  - a. Critical race theory expresses skepticism toward dominant legal claims of neutrality, objectivity, colorblindness and meritocracy.
  - b. Critical race theory challenges ahistoricism and insists on a contextual/historical analysis of the law ... Critical race theorists ... adopt a stance that presumes that racism has contributed to all contemporary manifestations of group advantage and disadvantage.
  - c. Critical race theory insists on recognition of the experiential knowledge of people of color and our communities of origin in analyzing law and society.
  - d. Critical race theory is interdisciplinary.
  - e. Critical race theory works toward the end of eliminating racial oppression as part of the broader goal of ending all forms of oppression.
2. All names in study are pseudonyms. Because the class was only seven enrolled students, specific racial, ethnic identity is not given for anonymity.

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## Appendix 1

### Movie and Video Clips and Main Topics of Discussion

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#### Movie Clips for Pre-Write and Discussion

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Taylor Mali "What Do Teachers Make? (Introduction to the Course)

- <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h5yg0u1MkDI>

This Is the Life (Setting the Agenda)

- <http://movieclips.com/23YXj-buena-vista-social-club-movie-this-is-the-life/>

Black Doll, White Doll Race Experiment (Issues Relevant to Students and Teaching)

- <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ybDa0gSuAcg>

Guess Who's Coming to Dinner (#1 Curriculum)

- <http://movieclips.com/SkMW-guess-whos-coming-to-dinner-movie-guess-whos-coming-to-dinner/>

I Speak Jive (#2 Positionality of the Teacher)

- <http://movieclips.com/6L2F4-airplane-movie-i-speak-jive/>

Interracial Relationships (#3 Pedagogy and Empowerment)

- <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ynYwTU7z6BI>

NYC Stop & Frisk (#4 Segregation, Tracking, and Immigrant Status)

- <http://www.nytimes.com/video/opinion/10000001601732/the-scars-of-stop-and-frisk.html>

Teen Sentenced to Probation (#5 Class Privilege, Resources & Racism)

- <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MOLj6tdSq64>

Standardized Testing (Accountability)

- <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3VqrtN-w3RA>

What Do You Think We're Gonna Do? Ask? (Evaluating Our Roles)

- <http://movieclips.com/6y2ZA-tupac-resurrection-movie-what-do-you-think-were-gonna-do-ask/>

If I Only Had a Brain (Evaluating Our Roles)

- <http://movieclips.com/gCujE-the-wizard-of-oz-movie-if-i-only-had-a-brain/>

Are My Hands Clean (Future Directions)

- <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ev733n-5r4g>
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## Appendix 2

## Final Course Evaluation

1. How important is the conversation of race/racism in teacher education?
2. What issues should be discussed in the preparation of teacher educators, and why?
3. What new ideas emerged for you during the course about race/racism in teacher education?
4. Which reading(s) and video(s) from the course helped to shape your ideas about teacher education, race/racism, and why?
5. In doing your final project, how does your final project connect to teacher education issues, and what new questions can be generated from doing your project?