



To dismantle racism, make teacher education more inclusive

BY BRANDON WHITE AND AMY RUDAT

America's legacy of racism is insidious in teacher education. The systems that determine who becomes a teacher, how one becomes a teacher, what teachers learn, and what history and content they don't learn have been polluted by the codependency between our societal rules and our internal beliefs.

Discriminatory policies and practices create biased beliefs, behaviors, and attitudes among those who stand to benefit from them, thereby reinforcing the policies and practices. Perhaps most insidiously, this process often occurs outside of conscious awareness, creating a societal pattern that, over

time, becomes a legacy in and outside of education.

The word *curriculum* (Latin origin) describes the process of racing on a track or running a course. If we are to understand and address the inequities of teacher education today, it is critical to examine the track, or *curriculum*, on which teacher education has been running since the United States' formation.

Just as teachers must deconstruct, reconstruct, and construct traditional academic curriculum for students to achieve equitable outcomes (Ladson-Billings, 2006), the overt and concealed curriculum of teacher education must involve a process of deconstruction,

reconstruction, and construction of the new if we are to decisively improve the educational outcomes for more than half of the student population in the United States.

In this article, we review the following critical actions for each part of this process:

1. The curriculum of teacher education, including recruitment, education, and retention, needs to be first **deconstructed**, or taken apart and examined by professionals, as a cultural artifact to illuminate its role in the apartheid-like United States education system.



2. Professionals invested in the education system must **reconstruct** their roles and identities within the system to appropriately re-engineer it.
3. Using new roles, identities, and patterns of behavior and thought, professionals can **construct** a revised teacher education system inclusive of teachers from all walks of life who are prepared to teach all students.

DECONSTRUCTION: UNDERSTANDING THE ROOTS OF OPPRESSION

The teaching profession in the United States has deep roots in excluding and assaulting students of color that date back to the inception of public education. From the anti-literacy laws practiced against enslaved Africans to the Native American boarding schools designed to “kill the Indian, save the man,” to the segregated Chinese and Japanese language schools during the late 1800s and early 1900s, racism informed who was taught, how they were taught, and who did the teaching.

Despite the hostile intentions of this exclusion, this model produced segregated enclaves where educators of color taught their respective communities and students thrived. These educators used their own pedagogical heritages, preparing their communities to navigate and dismantle the racism they often encountered.

This tradition has continued in some ways and some places and is a hallmark of the culturally responsive teaching we often speak of today. According to education researcher Vanessa Siddle Walker, these heritages of educators of color are what secretly fueled the fight against segregation, leading up to the landmark *Brown v. Board* decisions that declared “separate inherently unequal” (Anderson, 2018).

However, there was an inevitable backlash to desegregation that resulted in new ways to segregate that capitalized on loopholes. These included but were not limited to white flight from desegregated city schools to predominantly white suburbs and private schools, gifted and talented programs whose biased entrance criteria favored white students, and tracking

that was ostensibly but not actually based on ability (Ladson-Billings, 2004).

At the same time, new programs brought students of color into historically white schools with white teachers, but did not include a reciprocal relationship with historically Black schools. As a result, thousands of educators of color who had taught students of color in segregated communities lost their jobs despite an increase of available teaching jobs in the wake of *Brown v. Board of Education* (Goldstein, 2015).

Essentially, the backlash against *Brown v. Board of Education* turned into an affirmative action program for white teachers to teach all children without having to change beliefs or pedagogy that was so ingrained in the racism of segregation. The United States education system lost the originators of a culturally relevant pedagogy that pushed for students and the United States to be better.

Our education system has not recovered from this decimation of teachers of color. As the numbers of educators of color decreased, so did

the opportunities for students of color to see themselves in a profession that was once revered and honored in their community. Students of color became less interested in entering a profession derisive of them, which accelerated the erasure of many teacher candidates of color.

Young people of color not only see a lack of educators who look like them, they witness the invisible taxes paid by the small number of educators of color they do see (Dixon & Griffin, 2021). Educators of color are often used for their multilingualism but not their instructional capacities. They are pushed into disciplining children but not teaching them.

They deal with micro and macro aggressions from white colleagues but cannot discuss them (Delpit, 2006). They have to wrestle with the pressure of a white-centric system to avoid becoming the very teacher that they may have despised growing up. This surely reveals to students of color that education is a harsh profession that may not be desirable, obtainable, or sustainable.

When those who manage to remain curious about becoming a teacher enter higher learning programs for K-12 education, they experience programs that are dominated by white students and faculty members (TNTF, 2020). When they complete these programs, fewer prospective educators of color pass certification exams (Barnum, 2017) due to factors like cost, language barriers, and lack of exposure to high-quality educational opportunities. All of these patterns can be traced back to the strategic elimination of, and a self-perpetuated culling of, educators of color, which is a legacy inherited from a racist operating system that began well before *Brown v. Board of Education*.

It is important to gather a community of learners to explore these living legacies of white dominant culture in the mainstream education profession. A good place to start is to discuss key readings such as those listed in the sidebar on p. 57. A valuable next

step in formalizing that community is to conduct an equity audit of your education program or system, strategize, and identify the best entry point to make change.

RECONSTRUCTION: REFLECTING AND REPOSITIONING ROLES

Once these truths about our inequity-based education system are exposed, teacher educators and teacher candidates must reflect on how they have benefited or suffered from this system and “reconstruct” their beliefs about and positions within the work they have committed to. “Reconstructing” involves identifying your role in maintaining racist living legacies and deciding how to reposition yourself to interrupt those legacies.

For example, if you are a white educator who attended predominantly white K-12 schools, graduated from a majority white teaching program, and procured a teaching job with a mostly white instructional staff in a school where students are predominantly not white, consider these questions as you pursue reconstruction:

- In what ways are you influenced to inadvertently perpetuate the legacies that you deconstructed?
- How can you maneuver in a way to counter the negative racial elements of that legacy?
- Do you see and treat your students as potential educators?
- Do you speak out against and circumvent culturally marginalizing content, policies, and collegial conversations?
- How do your beliefs, mindsets, and attitudes inform your answers?

These are the same questions that education professors, teacher preparation leaders, and certification staff should be asking to begin reconstructing their roles and identities to better serve educational diversity, justice, and equity.

If you are an educator of color who managed to get through the broken

pipeline, but you still deal with the “educational survival complex” (Love, 2020) of navigating isolation and pressures to commit the same oppressive practices that you may have had to survive as a student, consider these questions as you pursue reconstruction:

- In what ways are you influenced to inadvertently perpetuate the legacies that you deconstructed?
- How do you ensure internalized racism doesn’t inform choices encouraged by the racist factors in your current environment?
- What from your training needs to be unlearned about how we educate marginalized children?
- What instructional and relational approaches can you take to allow students to see themselves in you?
- What support systems exist or need to be established to prevent the siloing and isolation of educators of color like yourself?

These reflections, which will vary based on your sociopolitical and cultural dispositions, are important to make and courageously embrace if educators in all parts of America’s education system are to re-engineer themselves from being vessels through which educational apartheid flows to being canal locks that redirect the system to champion diverse instructors (Gorski & Dalton, 2020).

CONSTRUCTION: BUILDING NEW STRUCTURES AND PRACTICES

“Reconstructed” mindsets and identities can become the foundation for “construction” of renovated policies, practices, and institution and birthing a new system grounded in a symbiosis of anti-racist policies, practices, and institutions. Leveraging the new understandings of the positions we hold can empower us to build new inclusive patterns of behavior and structures of power, whether we are science teachers, certification program leaders, or school principals, or higher education faculty. These could include the construction of:

- Commitments and actions to

change K-12 school curriculum and instruction to include positive images of students of color and nurture positive self-image;

- Partnerships between districts and colleges in support of grow-your-own teacher programs (Aguilar, 2021);
- Scholarships for students of color who want to become teachers;
- Financial aid and tutoring services to promote certification test success rates;
- Organizations for educators of color to collect and expand resources and support for themselves and the field (Center for Black Educator Development, 2021);
- Committees and leaders who change teacher preparation curriculum and instruction to incorporate work and leadership from education theorists of color; and
- Policies that promote the retention of teachers of color (TNTP, 2020).

ADDRESSING OUR RECENT PAST FOR A MORE JUST FUTURE

With an increasingly diversifying yet segregated student body and a teacher population that continues to be overwhelmingly white (Meckler & Rabinowitz, 2019), we run the risk of leaving many new teachers unprepared to establish environments conducive to authentic learning and engagement for all students.

If we want to produce teacher candidates representative of America's school population who have the content and pedagogical knowledge to educate students through meaningful, engaging, and affirming grade-level instruction, then it is critical we dive into a process of deconstructing our education system's racist past and present, reconstruct our professional identities based on the personal implications of those findings, and begin constructing

KEY READINGS ABOUT SEGREGATION AND THE TEACHING PROFESSION

- *Teacher Wars: A History of America's Most Embattled Profession* by Dana Goldstein
- *Who Decides Who Becomes a Teacher? Schools of Education as Sites of Resistance* by Julie Gorlewski and Eve Tuck
- *Latino Education in the United States: A Narrated History from 1513 to 2000* by Victoria Maria MacDonald
- *The Lost Education of Horace Tate* by Vanessa Siddle Walker
- *Silent Covenants: Brown v. Board of Education and the Unfulfilled Hopes of Education Reform* by Derrick Bell

new systems, structures, and patterns of belief and behavior to create a new educational environment — one that's more inclusive, successful, and just.

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