

# RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

## Teaching Outside One's Race: The Story of an Oakland Teacher

by Bree Picower



## The Warning

"Oh, the District placed you at Prescott Elementary? You better watch out – they hate white people. Especially that Carrie Secret – she's one of those black radicals, you know, the Ebonics people." This was the warning I was given multiple times in multiple ways when people found out that I had been assigned to Prescott Elementary School for my first teaching position, in Oakland, California in 1999. The "warners" were other white folks who were trying to protect what they saw as a young, new teacher from what they perceived to be a hostile place. However, I really didn't fit the stereotype. I had been involved with several organizations that explicitly addressed issues of race and education for several years, often as the only white person there. I was thrilled to be placed at a school such as Prescott, whose reputation for high achievement for African American children and adoption of the "Ebonics" program had placed it at the forefront of national debate.

I am writing this paper in order to reflect on my experiences at Prescott Elementary School. Here, I discuss the aspects of the school that are unique: the culturally relevant pedagogy, the other teachers on the staff including Carrie Secret, the professional development at the school, the Ebonics debate, and, finally, racial identity development and how it informed relationships at the school. A goal of this paper is to contextualize what was really being done in Oakland schools in contrast to what the media reported as teaching Ebonics.<sup>1</sup> I also hope to show the importance of successful mentor teachers of color in the development of new teachers at a mission driven school.

## Prescott Elementary School

When I was first assigned to Prescott, I drove to the school to see what it was like. It was summer and the school was gated and locked. From the outside, it looked like a barren and dismal place. There was no grass, no playground, only a huge, concrete excuse for a yard. The main building and the portables were all a drab shade of industrial yellow. When I was finally able to enter the school weeks later, the difference between what I had seen from outside the gate, and the reality of what it was really like inside was like night and day. The walls inside the main building were covered with a vibrant mural tracing leaders of African American history. Even before the school year started, kids were everywhere, helping teachers set up their rooms, playing in the yard, and welcoming me and the other new teachers. The children, primarily African American, but also Latino and Asian American, seemed to feel so at home at the school, as if they had a real sense of ownership of the place. Because I wasn't initially assigned to a room or grade, I took the opportunity to walk around and introduce myself and help the other teachers. When I did finally get my own room, filthy from being used as a storage space by construction workers, many children, from kindergartners to graduated middle schoolers, came by to help me unpack.

My class was a second and third grade Sheltered English class which consisted of a very diverse group of students reflecting the multilingual community of Oakland. While Prescott as a whole was primarily African American, my students were Guatemalan, El Salvadorian, Cambodian, Filipino, and Arabic as well as African American children. My classroom was in a building off the main school that housed three classrooms – mine, Carrie Secret's, and that of another teacher whom I had also been warned about – Aileen Moffitt. I had been told that I should align myself with Ms. Moffitt because she was "the only white person that has ever been accepted at Prescott."

## Afrocentric Environment and Culturally Relevant Teaching

The political nature of the school soon became obvious. Walking into the classrooms and viewing the bulletin boards of the veteran teachers, I could easily see how central African American history was to the school. The library was filled with multicultural texts. Carrie's and Aileen's rooms were explosions of color, with paintings, posters, and photographs dedicated to telling the story of African American people. The school assembly calendar, handed out the first day of school, listed events honoring not only Black history, but Mexican history, Cambodian dance, and multicultural art.

I breathed deep and knew I had found my home. It seemed that the teachers here fit Gloria Ladson-Billings's (1994) definition of culturally relevant teachers. "They see themselves as a part of the community and they see teaching as giving back to the community. They help students make connections between their local, national, racial, cultural, and global identities" (p.25). This was the kind of teaching that I longed to do, and I was relieved that I had found a place where it was not only going to be safe to do it, but it would also be valued and accepted. I couldn't believe my luck.

Veteran teachers who came by my room saw the same kind of respect for cultural diversity reflected on my walls, and it wasn't long before they were sharing materials and ideas to help me with my teaching practice. After Miss Moffitt saw me at the copy machine reproducing U.S. maps depicting European colonization and diminishing Native American land (from Bigelow, 1998), she came by my room to give me a song about Columbus. The lyrics began:

In fourteen-hundred-ninety-two,  
Columbus sailed the ocean blue.  
It was a courageous thing to do,  
But someone was already there.

The song goes on to describe the destruction of the land of various Native American tribes, the ensuing slavery, and the spread of disease that decimated the people. My class performed this at the Thanksgiving assembly along with other students who celebrated Native American dance and recited poetry about different forms of colonialism. Because my personal philosophy was so

closely aligned with the mission of the school, this year was turning out to be a powerful and positive experience for me.

## Carrie Secret

Prior to the beginning of the school year, I had attended a new teacher training that was led by veteran teachers from the district. The first session was facilitated by none other than the infamous Carrie Secret. Her talk was inspiring, energetic, and straightforward. She shared a wealth of actual classroom ideas that I was thirsty for as a pre-service teacher. I approached her after the session and let her know I would be teaching at her school. We ate lunch with another teacher, an older African American minister who would also be teaching at Prescott in the fall. Afterwards, I couldn't help but wonder if Ms. Secret was the same person I had been warned about, or if I had gotten the names confused. I had to question why the "warners" had felt so much discomfort and animosity towards her.

As Jordon-Irvine (2003) highlights in a story that shows the development of Kipp Academy, a white founded charter school successful with African American students, it is often veteran teachers of color who educate not only their students but other teachers as well. The school was started by two white, Teach for America interns who learned to teach under the mentorship of Harriet Ball, a veteran African American teacher. "This story of the Kipp Academies illustrates that the culturally-specific pedagogical teaching strategies of teachers of color can be taught and adopted by all teachers, regardless of their race or ethnicity. There are, in fact, many urban teachers who have survived and thrived only because experienced teachers of color have mentored and provided them with assistance and encouragement" (p.13). I know I too benefited greatly from the mentorship that I received from Carrie Secret.

Early on in the school year, I asked Carrie for her advice on a unit I was planning on African American inventors, and within the day she delivered to my room a huge bag of materials for me to use. She also gave me a book that described the historical relationship between Africans and Cambodians. This was Carrie's way. She waited for an opening, and once it was there, her generosity for working with new teachers was as endless as her historical knowledge. She shared countless ideas and materials with me and was always available before and after school to talk about issues and concerns I was having

in my class. We began collaborating on different projects and we made copies of materials for both of our classes that we thought the other would want to use.

Carrie's classroom was truly a unique place. From floor to ceiling, student artwork depicting the Middle Passage, lynching, the African continent, and more covered every available spot on the wall. Desks piled high with books, notebooks, atlases, thesauruses, markers, and other resources were pushed to the perimeter of the room and all work took place on the huge rug of the United States in the center of the room. Carrie and her students would be sprawled barefoot on the rug, hard at work, while R&B, gospel, or African music played on the boom box in the corner. I was always struck by how independent her students were. They didn't come running over for attention or approval like many children would. They just worked on their own or with friends, approaching Carrie for assistance when needed. Teacher-led lessons usually centered around the overhead projector and often involved call and response or group recitation. The kids were

always working on long performance pieces on African or Mexican history (Carrie had one Mexican student) that they performed throughout the state. Carrie always incorporated the cultural history of whoever was in her class, whether they were African American, Mexican, or Cambodian. I shared my observations with her, and Carrie and I continued to develop what I now consider to be one of the most valuable relationships of my life.



PRESCOTT ELEMENTARY STUDENTS. PHOTO BY BREE PICOWER

Carrie's approach to teaching is closely aligned with the definition that Ladson-Billings uses to describe a culturally relevant teacher. She sees teaching as an art and believes "that all of their students can succeed rather than that failure is inevitable for some" (p.25). Her special education inclusion student, Malik<sup>2</sup>, who had been labeled "uneducable," was expected to achieve at the same level as the other students and was given the support needed to be successful.

Ladson-Billings claims that "Such teachers can also be identified by the ways in which they structure their social interactions: Their relationships with students are fluid and equitable and extend beyond the classroom" (p.25). Because Carrie has taught at the school for thirty years, she has taught the parents of most of her students. She often said, "See, you're just like your mama was!" and knows this to be true. These deep and long standing relationships with her students' families allows her to educate the whole family because she still sees their parents as learners. Parents often spend hours in the classroom, grappling with the same issues that the class is

learning. The classroom itself is an extension of the children's families. At Prescott, it was expected that teachers would stay with their students for more than one grade. They believed that the splitting up of children and teachers every year mirrored the practice of splitting up African American families under slavery and therefore they made every attempt to keep classes together for as long as possible. Most teachers kept their classroom for two or three years, but Carrie moves with her students from first grade through graduation.

"Finally, such teachers are identified by their notions of knowledge," Ladson-Billings concludes. "They believe that knowledge is continually re-created, recycled, and shared by teachers and students alike" (p.25). Carrie and her students take on serious issues that affect their community. Throughout their elementary career, her students are engaged in learning about issues such as the Middle Passage, the Civil Rights movement, white supremacy, and important historical figures. Lessons often grow from students' observations and interactions with the materials and writings offered to them. Carrie is continually growing as a learner as well. She participates in book clubs at and outside of the school, takes classes, and keeps up on relevant research. For example, after reading recent brain research, Carrie started incorporating classroom lessons to strengthen the right side of the brain, which is called upon less frequently in typical school environments.

***Carrie's and Aileen's rooms were explosions of color, with paintings, posters, and photographs dedicated to telling the story of African American people.***

Several researchers have documented Carrie's practice over the last several years.<sup>3</sup> Asa Hilliard (2003) discusses the existence of "gap-closing" teachers, people who are able to move students who usually perform poorly into the highest quartiles on standardized tests. Carrie Secret is one of the teachers whom he highlights as a gap closer and whose practice deserves greater attention:

*We can say something about Secret's distinctive process. Her success seems to be a product precisely of her deep continuing study to expand her knowledge of her subjects, African history and culture, and the study of racism and its manifestations, her close family relationship with her students and their families and community, her uncompromising commitment to get her students to achieve at the excellence level, by any means necessary, her linkage to a network of teachers who share her sense of commitment and mission; her willingness, her keen sense of social justice and her sense of duty to save the children and to save African people, and others, from the negative fate that awaits many of them. (p.154)*

This rich pedagogy, aimed at sparking the genius in African American students and celebrated by leading educational researchers, was the exact same pedagogy that ignited the flames of fury and racial disruption during the national debate on Ebonics.

## Ebonics and the Standard English Program (SEP)

What did the Ebonics controversy have to do with Prescott? Right before the school year started, I lay tossing and turning at three in the morning, worried about my first teaching experience. I suddenly remembered a back issue of *Rethinking Schools* that had addressed the national debate around the controversy. I stumbled to my file cabinet and pulled it out, opening to an interview with, that's right, Carrie Secret. The interview and ensuing book on the subject (Delpit and Perry, 2002) chronicles the controversy that erupted in Oakland in 1996. It described the high academic performance at Prescott Elementary as an anomaly in the District. After presenting achievement gap data in Oakland, Delpit and Perry write:

*Against the backdrop of this dismal picture of school failure, the above average performance of African-American students at the Prescott Elementary School caught the attention of the task force members. Prescott Elementary was the only school in the Oakland school district where the majority of its teachers had voluntarily chosen to participate in the Standard English Proficiency (SEP). This statewide initiative, begun in 1981, acknowledges the systematic, rule-governed nature of Black English and takes the position that this language should be used to help children learn to read and write in Standard English. (p. xi)*

It was Prescott's success with teaching African American children that motivated the district to adopt SEP, igniting the flames of the media across the country. A great deal of research has been done to document the way in which the media misrepresented the District's decision to use SEP to improve the achievement gap.<sup>4</sup> Rickford and Rickford (2000) carefully analyze the events around the school board's adoption of SEP and the media's reaction to it. "The Oakland school board never intended to replace the teaching of Standard or mainstream English with the teaching of Ebonics, or Spoken Soul. But it did intend to take the vernacular into account in helping students achieve mastery of Standard English (reading and writing in this variety in particular)" (p.176). In *Rethinking Schools*, Carrie Secret explained, "There's a misconception of the program, created by the media blitz of misinformation. Our mission was and continues to be: embrace and respect Ebonics, the home language of many of our students, and use strategies that will move them to a competency level in English. We never had, nor do we now have, any intention of teaching the home language to students. They come to us speaking the language" (p.81).

## Staff Development at Prescott

The strategies that Carrie referred to and used were developed under the leadership of Wade Nobles at the Center for Applied Cultural Studies and Educational Achievement (CACSEA) at San Francisco State University. It was through this center that the SEP program adopted by the Oakland Unified School District was created. At a staff meeting early on at my time at Prescott, I received a CACSEA document, "Utilizing Culture in the Achievement of Educational Excellence for African American Students" (Nobles). Referencing research by Boykin, Foster, and Ladson-Billings, CACSEA laid out nine cultural precepts, nine recurring cultural themes, and effective instructional strategies for educating African American students. CACSEA developed a program called "Nsaka Sunsum (Touching the Spirit): Educational Process for Achieving Educational Excellence with African American Students" (Olson, 2001) that was used as the basis for Prescott's professional development throughout my time there. Although the SEP program had officially ended due to the national controversy by the time I started teaching, we were still trained to use SEP strategies because of Prescott's deep belief that this was the right kind of education for our students.

Led by either Carrie or Nebeehah Shakir from the disbanded SEP program, weekly staff development centered on the CACSEA program. Throughout the year, we analyzed the cultural precepts and looked for examples of them in our lives or classrooms. We observed each other's teaching, looking for the recommended instructional strategies. We explored recurring grammatical components of African American language. We discussed integrating culture into the language of mathematics and other content areas. In Perry's interview (1998), Carrie describes the program in this way:

*There are three cornerstones to our SEP program: culture, language, and literacy. Our program is not just a language program that stresses how well you acquire and speak English. We emphasize the learning of reading by incorporating a strong literacy component. Another crucial issue is that we push students to learn the content language of each area of curriculum. The Oakland SEP program is not just a grammar and drill program, but a program that emphasizes language and content and encompasses all areas of curriculum. Children are not empowered simply because they know subject-verb agreement. That is not powerful for children if they don't have content in which to use the language. Yes, we want the children to speak English and have positive feelings about themselves, but that comes about only when the children know content. It doesn't matter how well you speak if you are not able to participate in and use the language of the content areas during discussion times. The other issue is culture. If you don't respect the children's culture, you negate their very essence. (p.80)*

At no point in my training or time at Prescott was I taught to or expected to speak or teach Ebonics to my students, just as I was not expected to teach Khmer, Spanish, or Arabic. Rather, teachers were encouraged to teach in ways that celebrated and reflected our students' cultures. Ebonics was spoken throughout the school because Prescott promoted the home culture of the student and teachers were expected to understand Ebonics because it was the home language of the majority of the students. It was our responsibility to help the students translate their home language into Standard English. The way this was done was the same way I was trained to do with all of my second language learners, through techniques designed to familiarize and contrast their language with Standard English. The training taught me a great deal about the rich history of Ebonics and African American culture, and I think an important factor in this is that the program was led by veteran, successful African American teachers. Aileen Moffitt, my white ally at Prescott, explains:

*As a result of studying Ebonics through the Oakland Standard English Proficiency Project, I have also developed an appreciation of the language. Ebonics has a richness that goes beyond the obvious features (grammar, syntax, phonology, phonetics, morphology, and semantics). There are also characteristics of the non-verbal, the gestural, the rhythmic, and the emotional quality of the speech. I may be fluent in the grammatical rules of Ebonics, but I am definitely NOT proficient in these other qualities. Yet I can appreciate and admire them for the richness of expression that they provide. Poetry in Ebonics (including Maya Angelou's) can be music to my ears. (Delpit, 2002, p. 42)*

Despite the media's misrepresentation of the Oakland Resolution, and the disbandment of the official SEP program, the CACSEA training continued on at Prescott, just as it had before.

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## Racial Identity and Politics at Prescott

Because of the nature of our staff development, racial identity, racism, Afrocentricity, and white supremacy were central topics of conversation at Prescott. The staff at the school was both racially and generationally mixed. Becoming a part of the leadership structure of the school, or gaining insider status, appeared at first glance to be dependent on race. However, it became apparent as time

went on that it had more to do with your level of commitment to the mission of the school, which in turn had much to do with where individuals were in the development of their racial identity. Beverly Daniel Tatum refers to racial identity development as the “process of defining for oneself the personal significance and social meaning of belonging to a particular racial group” (Tatum, 1997, p.16). Research on this process contends that this process involves different developmental stages for whites and people of color.

*Establishment of a clear, affirming group identity and recognition of the necessity of collective action for self-determination and against racism are the hallmarks of an adult liberation perspective for people of color. White anti-racism requires parallel elements: new identity as a*

I believe a major period of development for me was in the early nineties when I was employed at a community center that worked to meet the needs of the residents of three public housing sites in Ann Arbor, Michigan. The center was directed by Rose Martin, an African American woman who grew up in over 12 foster families and had overcome her own struggles with drugs and alcohol (Martin, 2002). The center was staffed with people who had all been born and raised in the community. Starting as a volunteer, and eventually being offered a job, I was one of the only two white people who worked there. Having grown up in New York City, I was accustomed to and comfortable in diverse settings, but this was the first time that I was the real minority. I worked there for four years, eventually co-directing all K-6 programming. During my stay, I learned a great deal about that particular community and, more generally, how to live with, work



PRESCOTT ELEMENTARY STUDENTS. PHOTO BY BREE PICOWER

*White, a critique of racism and the institutions of white society, and a recognition of the necessity for collective action. In essence, all must undo the profound impact of the ideology of racism on their self-concepts and social perspectives. However, the process of change differs, reflecting the distinctions we have been making between people of color and Whites. (Sparks in Tatum, 1997, p.28)*

Because of the diversity of the Prescott staff, who they were and where they came from directly influenced their racial identity development, and therefore their status at the school. To clarify, I will highlight a few staff members in order to show how their racial identities influenced their behavior and status at the school, starting with myself.

with, respect, and be respected by people of color. I had to reflect upon my own identity as a white person, because much of my way of thinking, being, and acting was different from that of the people I spent every day with. I gained an appreciation for the importance of leadership of color when working with communities of color, having worked in prior settings that were “serving” black children, but that were run by white adults. Working as a liaison between my students’ families and their teachers, I was confronted directly with the ways in which the Ann Arbor schools were not meeting their needs, often arising out of a cultural mismatch between students and teachers.<sup>5</sup>

After several years and a move to California, I began working at the Bay Area Coalition of Essential Schools, working with schools to close the achievement gap between black and white students while raising overall achievement. Through this work, I was explicitly

addressing issues of equity and race with racially diverse faculties. Following the framework set out by Sparks for white development, these two experiences gave me the opportunity to identify and reflect upon my whiteness, to recognize types of white supremacy and racism, and to "join people of color and other exploited groups to change racist systems" (Sparks in Tatum, 1997, p.31). Because of this background, I was developmentally "ready" to be a member of the Prescott community, participating in an environment with an African American leadership structure and an explicit focus on race and racism.

Some of the veteran white teachers, such as Ms. Moffitt, had been teaching at Prescott for years, and this provided them with the opportunities to reflect upon their racial identities and build relationships with people of color. Through these relationships, they were able to work on culturally relevant teaching practice and became advocates for their students and the school, particularly during the Ebonics debate. However, some of the new, white, younger teachers arrived at Prescott without having had the opportunity to reflect on their racial identity. Ladson-Billings reflects on her white pre-service teachers:

*The average white teacher has no idea what it feels like to be a numerical or political minority in the classroom. The pervasiveness of whiteness makes the experience of most teachers an accepted norm. White teachers don't understand what it means to "be ashy" or to be willing to fail a physical education class because of what swimming will do to your hair ... The indictment is not against the teachers. It is against the kind of education they receive. The prospective teachers with whom I have worked generally express a sincere desire to work with "all kinds of kids." They tell me that they want to make sure that the white children they teach learn to be fair and to get along with people different from themselves. But where is the evidence that prospective teachers can get along with people different from themselves? (2001, p.81)*

Many new white teachers see whiteness as the absence of race, or only recognize it in opposition to "others" and this leads to a level of discomfort when issues of race are raised. Having lived in and among primarily other whites, many whites see themselves as part of a "racial norm" and believe that they are "color-blind," holding no prejudices towards others (Tatum, 1997). This "color-blindness" stops them from seeing who the students really are and the cultures that they bring with them to the classroom, and therefore limits the educational strategies that they can draw upon to teach them (Ladson-Billings, 1994, p33). At a school like Prescott, not being able to recognize culture caused whites at this stage of development to feel alienated by the racially charged discussions that permeated the school. Many of them came to teaching because they "loved children" and did not understand why "we always have to talk about race." Many of these teachers believed that they had not been

accepted by the staff of Prescott, and felt uncomfortable at the school.

The veteran African American teachers came from a very different place. Many of them had grown up in the segregated South and valued the education they had received as children from African American teachers. They came to teaching as a way to give back to their community and had a sense of responsibility to educate African American children to high standards. Similar to the findings of Michele Foster's (1997) study of black teachers, "these teachers are committed to African American children and the communities which spawn them: to believing in their unlimited potential, to working hard to provide a quality education despite difficult circumstances, to struggling against (and helping their students struggle against) all forms of racial oppression, and to building a sense of connection between students and their communities" (p. xi). According to Tatum's stages of racial development, these teachers were in a later stage, working with their students to "resist negative societal messages and develop an empowered sense of self in the face of a racist society" (p. 94).

### **Many new white teachers see whiteness as the absence of race.**

In an interview, Carrie Secret discusses the impact that her own racial identity development has had on her and her teaching practice. She recognizes a transition that she made when moving through the developmental continuum, one that she defines as moving from being "Black" to becoming "African." "When I was Black I was angry. When I became African, I was at peace. That blackness keeps you in a frenzy. Now I get disturbed about things and I respond to things, but that African sense of peace and self, knowing who I am...Therein lies my strength" (Olsen, 2001, p.76). Carrie's racial identity development has moved her to work with her students and other adults to recognize their unique cultural histories and to empower them to look at ways to transform the existing structures of white supremacy. "Grannie," a parent who worked in Carrie's classroom, talks about the effect that this racial consciousness has had on her own learning:

*She was teaching things that were awesome, okay? Especially when she started talking about being African American, because very little did I know about my history, and that was fascinating. I learned -- maybe learned is not the right word-- but I began to love myself for who I am and where I came from because of Carrie Secret and her class. I started to actually love myself from the inside out, okay? And being able to speak freely, because I am free now. I didn't want to be black like I am. I didn't want this kinky hair I got, okay? Now I am -- hey! -- I walk like a peacock with my tail feathers spread all the time. I just learned so much about African Americans in her classroom, myself, and her and her style of*

*teaching, how she incorporates everyday life throughout our history. (Olsen, 2001, p.77)*

## Oil and Water?

When this diverse group of Prescott teachers came together at our staff meetings, concentrating on racially focused content, the difference in racial identity development often directly impacted the types of interactions between people. I found that for myself, and several other newer teachers, entering the school with a desire to learn from the veteran African American teachers about the Standard English Program and culturally competent teaching pedagogy was one way to earn acceptance. The veteran teachers, the "insiders" who had been there for twenty to thirty years, had seen the full range of white attitudes that had come to the school, from the missionary to the hippie, all thinking that they knew what it would take to "save these poor kids." This attitude, reinforced and reflected in popular movies such as *Dangerous Minds* and *Music from the Heart*, showed white teachers who seemed to have all the answers and were able to rescue black and brown students from their misguided communities.

### ***When I was Black I was angry. When I became African, I was at peace.***

In reality at Prescott, every day was a struggle for these white teachers. It was striking to see the difference between the way students in the veteran African-American teachers' classrooms behaved and the way the students in the new, white teachers' rooms behaved. Something about the structure and relationships between the new teachers and their students reinforced the worst stereotypes of both groups. The students ran around, rarely listened, and talked back. The teachers yelled, threatened, cried, and complained. The black teachers yelled often as well, but there was something different in the tone of the yelling. It was more of a mother's voice pushing their child, not a yell coming from a place of lack of control or of fear. Their students were no angels, but their rooms were structured, the environments were warm, and learning was obviously taking place.

This exact issue of the racial difference in the tone of yelling was brought to the table at a staff meeting my second year at Prescott. It came up during a discussion in which several new teachers claimed that they felt no support at Prescott from the veteran teachers. The veteran teachers answered that the young teachers had no interest in learning from them and had never attempted to seek support. They were angry that the new teachers were clearly failing and were apparently doing nothing to try to improve their practice. The veteran teachers couldn't understand; why hadn't they knocked on the door of the older teachers and asked for help? Leslie Morrison, a newer black teacher, and I raised the issue that we had felt very supported, but that at Prescott, you have to prove to the veteran staff what your intentions are and that you

are willing to learn from them. Because of their stage of racial identity development, many white teachers were unwilling to recognize culture as an issue, or as a doorway for success with their students. Therefore they did not benefit from the staff development at the school, and did not know how to participate in the community.

I remember early on a debate that erupted during a meeting in which grade level teachers were charting what skills and knowledge they wanted their students to enter their classroom with at the beginning of the year. The charts were then to be shared with the teachers of the prior grade so that they could be used as a scope and sequence for the year. Ms. Charles, a veteran African American teacher with an outstanding record of success with her students, was telling Ms. Kelly, a second year, white kindergarten teacher, what she expected her students to be able to do in math when starting first grade. She was outraged by how low in skills her new class was and blamed the current kindergarten teachers and their low expectations. The low expectations were clearly identifiable by what was written on the kindergarten chart. (The kindergarten teachers had charted what they planned on teaching that year – since they couldn't control what level of education the students came to school with.) When this chart was shown to the whole staff, Carrie, Ms. Drew, and other veteran teachers exploded. Carrie confronted the newer teachers and declared that she remembered when the kids came with higher skills because the black kindergarten teachers that used to be there believed in their students and pushed them to higher levels.

This argument of a racial disparity between black and white teacher expectations has been documented in 2003 by Jordon-Irvine. She finds that "African American teachers of color, as a group, had higher expectations for black students than their white counterparts" (p.7). Jordon-Irvine also discusses the way in which African American teachers act as mentors and advocates for students of color, as demonstrated in the example of the staff meeting above:

*In addition to Mentors are advocate teachers who help black students to navigate school cultures, which are often contradictory and antithetical to their own. They serve as a voice for black students when communicating with fellow teachers and administrators; when providing information about opportunities for advancement and enrichment; and when serving as counselors, advisors, and parent figures. Teacher-mentors and teacher-advocates are willing to exercise resistance by questioning and defying rules and regulations that are not in the best interest of their students. (p.8)*

The ongoing racial conflict at Prescott was not lost on Carrie. As part of our ongoing staff discussion series, we read a book called *Black and White Styles in Conflict* by a white man named Thomas Kochman (Kochman, 1981). In his book, Kochman highlights the different cultural styles that black and white people use to approach the same



situations. As part of a staff meeting, we used this text to try to reflect on some of the conflict that had arisen in past meetings -- including the one with Ms. Kelly and Ms. Charles. Using the text, Carrie was able to explain that when she raised her voice, it showed her passion for the topic and it was not necessarily a personal attack. The meeting in which we used this text helped move the whole staff closer to each other by grounding our conversation in a cultural framework that we could all relate to. While we were not able to resolve all of the issues that we struggled with as a staff, we were unique in our willingness to name the racial differences among us and examine how they play themselves out in our interactions.

***My real teacher education did not happen in a pre-service program, but rather came from educators of color, who taught me about the importance of relationships and culture in reaching children.***

## Lessons Learned

My real teacher education did not happen in a pre-service program, but rather came from educators of colors, such as Rose Martin and Carrie Secret, who taught me about the importance of relationships and culture in reaching children. Being successful in an environment such as Prescott is not something that a "methods" course could ever teach in a semester. It requires a commitment to the cause of social justice and a true desire to change the inequities that exist within the current structure of education. It requires expanding the idea of a classroom from being a room with four walls to the community it is situated in, where you are both the teacher and the learner at the same time. It requires building real relationships with the people you are working with or for and seeing your students and their families as your employer rather than your administrators and superintendents. It requires explicitly addressing your own racial identity and taking responsibility for how it informs your interactions and power dynamics with others. Finally, it requires a continual quest for both learning more and doing more to address the root causes of racism and white supremacy in order to really teach the children you are hoping to educate.

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## Notes

1 Delpit, 2002; Perry & Delpit, 1998; Rickford and Rickford, 2000.

2 Aside from those of Rose Martin, Aileen Moffitt, Leslie Morrison, Carrie Secret, and Nebeehah Shakir, all names have been changed.

3 Olsen, 2001; Hilliard, 2003; Perry, 1998, 2003.

4 Perry, 1998; Rickford and Rickford, 2000; Delpit, 2002.



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