A Faceless Bureaucrat Ponders Special Education, Disability, and White Privilege

Anne Smith
U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs

The other is a way of distinguishing those who are different from us. Being the other can be based on skin color, language, culture, ethnicity, religious affiliation, class, sexual orientation, gender, and presence of disability. The nature and construction of individual and group identities inform our understanding of race, ethnicity, and disability and are inextricably linked to issues of ethics, power, privilege, and context in determining what is normative and how we become sorted into us, them, and the other. This article uses a critical approach to social analysis and knowledge construction that suggests two conjoined projects: a critique of what is and an advancement toward an ought. The first part of the article is a critique of categorical approaches to special education, overrepresentation of minority children in special education, inclusion and exclusion and White privilege. The second part of the article describes the potential of multicultural education, transformation, and participatory leadership approaches to address the issues raised in the critique.

DESCRIPTORS: special education, disability, categorical approaches, classification, labeling, overrepresentation, race, inclusion, exclusion, White privilege, multicultural education.

In 1995, on the first day as a volunteer in my Baltimore neighborhood public school, two kindergarten students taught me, in a manner that perhaps Cornell West (1993) could not, that yes indeed—Race Matters. I’d spent about two hours with the class that morning in a school that was composed of predominantly African American administrators, faculty, and students. Donte and Von summoned me to the back of the boy’s lunch line to stand with them. As we stood waiting, Donte moved closer to me and said in a loud stage whisper, “Miss Smith, you’re awful light.” I nodded my head yes. He continued to look at me intently and then asked in a quieter tone, “Are you White?”

When I responded, “Yes,” Von nudged Donte in his ribs and said, “I told you so.” Donte then looked closely at me and asked, “Why?” Why indeed—unpack that. I became acutely aware that I was perceived as the other by many in this school and was reminded of various life experiences as the other including being a new graduate student at Gallaudet University where I “signed like a hearing person.”

Situating a Perspective

The other is a way of distinguishing those who are different from us. Being the other can render one “invisible” and can be based on skin color, language, culture, ethnicity, religious affiliation, class, sexual orientation, gender, and presence of disability. Defining the other is dependent upon the dynamics of ethics, power, privilege, and context. The categories we create to describe people are fluid and permeable as many of us cross these ever-changing borders daily.

For example, in my neighborhood school, I learned boundaries were less about skin pigmentation than about shared time and experience, residence in the neighborhood, economic status, education levels, opportunities, and privilege. Gradually, I became a member of the school community to the children, teaching staff, cafeteria workers, and parents with whom I shared time and purpose during my two years as a school volunteer. Yet I continued to be a visitor to those with whom I did not have direct, ongoing interaction. Even this visitor status was fluid and permeable because over time there was increased recognition and acknowledgement and decreasing gradations or degrees of otherness—although they were the other students, teachers, and parents and I was in the other classes—we had an emerging sense of community.

At Gallaudet many people made assumptions about hearing status based upon fluency in American Sign Language (ASL). A fellow graduate student, who was profoundly deaf and “oral” (educated in the auditory/oral tradition and who spoke, used amplification systems and speech-reading), was perceived as hearing by those who could not hear her voice because she was a novice signer. Similarly, after a year of working as a dormitory resident advisor, some mistakenly identified me as deaf because of my increased fluency in ASL. In

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Address all correspondence and requests for reprints to Anne Smith, Office of Special Education Programs, 330 C Street SW–MES Room 4621, United States Department of Education, Washington, DC 20202.
this context, the construction of deafness had less to do with objective measurement of hearing loss in decibels than with the cultural and linguistic patterns or norms of the surrounding community that involved perceptions and values. Perhaps such life experiences have provided me fleeting opportunities to be the other; and a “border-crosser.”

Since 1989, I have been an Education Research Analyst and the agency expert on school inclusion in the Office of Special Education Programs of the United States Department of Education. Being a civil servant has permitted me to observe and participate in dialogue and ongoing interactions with a diverse array of governmental officials and stakeholders working on education and disability issues from across America and from around the world. Social interaction and physical proximity conspire to blur the boundaries of us, them, and the other through shared experience and increased understanding of shared humanity. Keith (1998) comments that spending time with people who belong to different social worlds—worlds separated by class, race, language, age and other social divides—may facilitate discovery of common interests and lead to greater understanding of self, others and society by linking experience and learning.

My life experiences and my interpretations of them are consistent with Tetreault’s (2001) observations that (a) key aspects of our identity are markers of relational positions rather than essential qualities and (b) their effects and implications vary according to context. Issues of power and status, hierarchy and privilege, agenda and voice emerge as themes and subtexts within and across the situations and communities I traverse, and make me mindful of the relational dynamics of positionality. “Both societal structures and the varieties of specific contexts are always at play. Positionality marks identity as both sturdy and fluid and always reflective of societal power arrangements” (Grant & Ladson-Billings, 1997, p. 216). The nature and construction of individual and group identities inform our understanding of race, ethnicity, and disability and are inexorably linked to issues of ethics, power, and privilege in determining what is normative and how we become sorted into us, them, and the other. Sleeter (1993) argues that educators bring to their profession perspectives about the meaning of race based upon constructions of their life experiences and vested interests. These perspectives hold true for disability as well.

As I write this, I struggle with issues of propriety concerning the role of ordinary knowledge (Tharp, 1981), personal narrative, and situated perspective in “scholarly writing.” I am further chastened by Apple’s (1997) words that by disclosing my “social location in a world dominated by oppressive conditions, such writing can serve the chilling function . . . of privileging the white, middle-class woman’s or man’s seemingly infinite need for self-display” (p. 127). Am I a bureaucrat, an advocate, or an “advocrat?” Where does my voice belong in a JASH series devoted to multiculturalism? How does multiculturalism relate to disability? In 1997, Concha Delgado-Gaitan observed,

Diverse abilities are rarely discussed within the broad context of multiculturalism . . . the areas of diverse abilities and multiculturalism share the same label: “differences.” Questions of culture, language, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, and race as well as physical and mental diverse abilities interconnect all people under the guise of multiculturalism. The importance of locating issues related to diverse abilities within the discourse of multiculturalism is that in American culture, when people are classified as different, they are subject to prejudices and exclusion. (p. xiii)

The purpose of this paper is to ponder some deeply felt, contested, provocative, and problematic ethical issues involving exclusion when people are classified as different by exploring how dimensions of special education and White privilege relate to construction of the other. Such critical analysis has ethical, change-oriented elements of open-ended inquiry and collaborative discovery, and its strength is dependent upon whether discourses and processes that extend the boundaries of current systems are generated (Keith, 1996). In undertaking such a task, this article uses a critical approach to social analysis and knowledge construction that suggests two conjoined projects: a critique of what is and an advancement toward an ought (Keith, 1996). Capturing the essential components of a critical framework is inherently difficult because there is no unitary approach to social analysis, and by attempting to critically approach issues, one risks omissions and oversimplifications (Keith, 1996). Given the magnitude and complexity of this task as well as the necessity for multiple voices and perspectives, I rely on frequent citations and quotations in a dual attempt to (a) authentically explore these issues and (b) facilitate collaborative discovery by permitting readers to render their own meanings.

**A Critique of What Is**

**Special Education and Disability**

In 2000, the 25th anniversary of PL 94-142—the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EHA), now PL 105-17—the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA 97) provided us with an opportunity to reflect upon a quarter century of special education accomplishments. Since the passage of the EHA we have learned a great deal about how rights, public policy, attitudes, values, pedagogy, research, and innovative strategies are interrelated and must be aligned using a systemic approach at federal, state, and local levels (Smith, 1997). Despite this progress, complex policy
and practice implementation issues still confront us. Special education reforms have focused on access and equity but have not adequately addressed the complex issues of exclusion and discrimination at individual or institutional levels, nor have they addressed the disability rights movement (Rivzi & Lingard, 1996). Ethics, power, and privilege are interrelated and influence all aspects of teaching, teacher preparation, policy development, decision making, curriculum, and instruction (Patton and Townsend, 1999) as well as our constructions of special education and disability.

**Defining special education and disability.** Traditionally, coursework and professional licensure in special education have used discrete categorical approaches to disability. These categories are further defined as being of mild, moderate, severe, or profound degree. One of the underlying assumptions in this approach is that these labels describe learning characteristics to help parents and professionals establish appropriate goals and objectives. Although learning characteristics are associated with these labels, far too often scant attention is paid to the context of the individual involving social, cultural and environmental factors.

In addition, categories to describe special education and disabilities can change by crossing geographical and professional governance borders. For example, upon completion of Interrelated Special Education and Elementary Education undergraduate studies, I earned “provisional certification” in Nursery, Kindergarten Grades 1–6, Special Classes of the Mentally Retarded, Orthopedically and Similarly Handicapped, and Blind and Partially Seeing. Graduate school coursework in Education of the Multi-Handicapped Hearing Impaired yielded “permanent certification” in these categories as well as the Deaf and Hearing Impaired. When I crossed state borders these became “credentials” for Preschool, Grades 1–12, Adult Classes, Learning Handicapped, Severely Handicapped, and Communication Handicapped.

Although these labels may change according to context, one constant remains—some disability labels carry greater stigma than other labels, and degree or level of involvement of disability is a cofactor. Disability labels are not benign, and individuals with “severe disabilities” are often discriminated against. Issues of vulnerability and diminished power and privilege involving people labeled with cognitive disabilities are illustrated by this October 2000 posting on the American Association on Mental Retardation web page.

There has been a long history of oppression and callous disregard for the lives of individuals with mental retardation. This tradition, together with the societal pressure to devalue individuals with mental retardation, make it essential that those charged with their support and care be aware of the increased risks that individuals with mental retardation continue to face. They must be especially vigilant to protect the autonomy and right to equal protection under the law of individuals with mental retardation. (http://www.aamr-humanrights.htm)

A concurrent posting on the Arc web page expresses similar concerns stating,

The education of students with disabilities has been under assault on numerous fronts by the press, school officials and the public. Expenditures on behalf of students with disabilities are seen as taking away resources from non-disabled students. A small segment of our citizens oppose providing educational opportunities to children with severe mental retardation. (http://www.mr-arc)

Categorical labels often serve to overshadow individual characteristics and can serve to reinforce negative attitudes and stereotypes. The lives of children with disabilities are limited less by their disability than by societal attitudes and how people view others (Gartner & Lipsky, 1999). For example, I repeatedly encounter special educators and school administrators who refer to their students as “the severes,” and “the TMRs.” I interpret such verbal behavior as a means of identifying the other and wonder about their underlying values and beliefs about pedagogy and disability as well as the educational outcomes of their students. Such verbal behavior serves to diminish the humanity of the children and to reinforce the tyranny of lowered expectations for students with disabilities. Consider the attitudes, values and beliefs about students with significant disabilities and inclusion expressed in a New York Times Magazine article entitled, “Special Education Is Not a Scandal” (1997).

On children’s television, the kid in the wheelchair has become a kind of mascot, beloved by all in his gang. But imagine a real-life classroom where all of the children are nondisabled except the one who drools uncontrollably, who hears voices or who can’t read a simple sentence when everyone else can. Diversity is a noble ideal. But many disabled children would be marginalized and ridiculed in the mainstream . . . special education was never intended as a permanent place for any except the most profoundly handicapped students . . . But the central goal was always to educate children who had traditionally been viewed as ineducable. (Staples, 1997)

Issues of ethics, power, and privilege play an important role in the determination of disability as children are sorted and classified in our schools. Slee (1999) observes that teachers and others typically get their ideas about disability at a distance from nondisabled people who are “experts” or “specialists” through an
“ignorance-inducing form of educational organization” (p. 123). He further notes that:

Many educators fail to see educational disablement as an issue of human rights. For them, the education of the so-called “special education needs” student is a technical issue to be played out through a highly bureaucratized medical model of diagnosis and treatment . . . This is not so surprising. Our understanding of disability has been shaped by an ensemble of powerful knowledge that establishes impairment as individual defect and disabled people as objects for treatment and research by professional experts . . . understanding of disablement in schools and other educational sites remains incomplete. (Slee, 1999, p. 119)

Oliver (2000) questions whose needs are being met in the special education paradigm by contending that it serves the interests of a variety of stakeholders, organizations, and institutions—only one of which are the children so labeled. Special education practice incorporates explicit assumptions about disability and education (Isaacs, 1996). Brantlinger (2001) observes that an underlying assumption of labeling a student with a disability “is that special education service has positive influences on subsequent school or post-school careers of students” (p. 4) despite efficacy studies that do not substantiate this claim (e.g., Dunn, 1968; Reynolds & Wolfe, 1999). Concerns about the effects of disability labels for special education eligibility are of widespread concern. Patton (1998) asserts that socio-cultural construction of categorical labels of mild mental disability, learning disability, and serious emotional or behavioral disability have definitional and validity problems with serious negative implications for African American students.

Overrepresentation. When predominant models of special education involve segregation from the mainstream, special education becomes a vehicle for legitimizing the ongoing segregation of students who differ from dominant cultural norms (Meyer, Bevan-Brown, Harry, & Sapon-Shevin, 2001). Oliver (2000) contends that both research and direct experience reveal systemic bias in special education as indicated by proportionately more Black than White children, more working class than middle class children, and more boys than girls are in special education. For example, according to the Twentieth Annual Report to Congress on the Implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (1998) African American students represent 16% of elementary and secondary enrollments, but they constitute 21% of total enrollments in special education. African American children are 2.3 times more likely to be identified by their teacher as having mental retardation than their White counterparts. Latinos, American Indians, and Asian/Pacific Islanders are disproportionately represented in special education and children with emotional disturbance labels are more likely to be male, African American, and economically disadvantaged. These patterns have existed for the past 30 years and have been resistant to attempts to ameliorate them. Artiles (2000) argues that special education needs examination in the context of a larger cultural and political process of education reform to examine underlying values, views of competence, and current reform goals that may increase the likelihood that poor and minority students will be further disadvantaged. Draper (1999) asserts this notion in the following:

Our nation cannot afford any longer to have disposable children. No longer can systems and policies be built on practices that restrict and restrain; that categorize and seek to find and separate the children and youth who do not “fit” our profiles of successful learners. We must acknowledge that such practices and beliefs have actually done harm to children, disproportionately limiting and constraining the opportunities for children in poverty, children of color, children with disabilities and children with cultural and language differences (Draper, 1999).

Including and Excluding the Other

Including children who are from impoverished backgrounds, who speak English as a second language, who have disabilities, and who are not members of the “dominant” culture presents educational demands that fuel widespread debate about whether both equity and excellence can be achieved in America’s public schools (Smith, 1998). Right to education litigation spanning decades provides a sense of how intractable issues of inclusion and exclusion are, given the Brown v. Board of Education Supreme Court decision (1954) stating that “separate education is inherently unequal” and the Oberti v. Board of Education Federal Court of Appeals decision (1993) stating that, “inclusion is a right, not a privilege for a select few.” Children from diverse racial, cultural, linguistic backgrounds and children with disabilities continue to be excluded and segregated in school.

Exclusionary practices identify some students as the other by differentiating them from us and by segregating them from mainstream education. While the inclusive education movement has emerged as an empowered voice about disability rights and improving educational services for students with special education needs, it has been “painfully silent about the plight of minority students (Artiles, 2000).” Segregation, overrepresentation, exclusion, and inclusion are highly complex phenomena involving volatile issues of hierarchy, ethics, power, privilege, and construction of the other. The pain and sense of urgency to rectify these long-standing and deeply entrenched patterns and practices
may be contributing factors in the lack of synergy and collaboration among the overrepresentation and inclusion discourse and practice communities.

Often the “rights of the individual” to pursue school inclusion is framed as “incompatible with the common good” (Smith, 1998). Such underlying assumptions about inclusion of the other; are repeatedly played out for both children of color and children with disabilities as a rationale for exclusion and segregation. Rioux (1999) states that backlash to inclusive education reveals societal attitudes and assumptions that (a) some children are more worthy of teaching than others, (b) the presence of children with disabilities is viewed as lowering school standards, and (c) the child with a disability is educated at the expense of non-disabled students. This holds true for ALL children who are the other as these children are considered as less worthy of education and are accused of lowering school standards and squandering precious resources. For example, consider the tremendous amount of attention given to Herrnstein and Murray’s (1994) best seller The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life. The book presents a theory of social stratification based on inherited cognitive differences that cause class and racial inequalities. In this scenario, little can be done to improve the lot of poor people because their poverty results from inherited low intelligence, children born on the bottom tend to stay on the bottom, and African Americans are over-represented among the unintelligent.

White Privilege

In our usual ways of thinking about this, whiteness is something you don’t have to think about. It is just there. It is a naturalized state of being. It is “normal.” Anything else is “other.” It is the there that is never there. But, it is there, for in repositioning ourselves to see the world as constituted out of relations of power and privilege, whiteness as privilege plays a crucial role. (Apple, 1997, p. 127)

According to McIntosh (1998), White privilege is an interlocking oppression that involves both active, observable forms as well as embedded forms operating in invisible systems that members of the dominant group do not recognize but that confers dominance. White privilege is an institutional rather than individual set of benefits granted to those with white skin by people who dominate powerful positions in our institutions and the extent of White privilege varies depending on gender, socioeconomic status, age, sexual preference, and size (Ewing, 2001). Sheets (2000) cautions that by using the term “White privilege” as a benevolent and socially imposed prerogative of Whites to describe racism, feelings of superiority may be reinforced and thus facilitate construction of personal and group White identities that are based on the devaluation of others.

Though difficult by all means, it is much easier to discuss power and privilege associated with gender and class issues than it is to discuss or think about the matter in the context of skin color or race. For most individuals it is uncomfortable to acknowledge or discuss unlimited benefits or unearned merits accrued by some individuals based on white skin color. The potential moral or ethical “I stand accused” or “I’m guilty” dilemma which will likely surface is not an emotional encounter most individuals are willing to confront purposefully (Ewing, 2001, p. 15).

The following personal narrative captures the symbiotic relationship of traditional schooling, White privilege and White supremacy and provides a glimpse into the construction of us, them, and the other.

My schooling gave me no training in seeing myself as an oppressor, as an unfairly advantaged person, or as a participant in a damaged culture. I was taught to see myself as an individual whose moral state depended on her individual moral will. At school, we were not taught about slavery in any depth; we were not taught to see slaveholders as damaged people. Slaves were seen as the only group at risk of being dehumanized. My schooling followed the pattern which . . . Whites are taught to think of their lives as morally neutral, normative, and average, and also ideal, so that when we work to benefit others, this seen as work that will allow “them” to be more like “us.” (McIntosh, 1998)

The Race Initiative. In 1997, I became involved in President Clinton’s Race Initiative requesting Americans to examine the current state of race relations through dialogue, study, and action. By doing so, the U.S. Department of Education worked to increase employee’s understanding of race and to propose policies and solutions to make a difference in the workplace and in the larger education community (U.S. Department of Education RACE INITIATIVE WORKING GROUP, Annual Communications Report, 2001). West (1993) advises that to have a serious discussion of race in America, we must not begin with the problems of Black people, but with the flaws of American society which are rooted in historic inequalities and longstanding cultural stereotypes. The OSERS Diversity Workgroup was formed to address the complex issues of race and disability and convened a series of employee listening and discussion sessions.

I shared an editorial that ran in the Baltimore Sun paper, White Privilege Shapes the U.S. (Jensen, 1998) with OSERS Diversity Workgroup colleagues in which
the author acknowledges, “I walk through the world with White privilege.” The reaction of my African American and Latino colleagues to Jensen’s article was markedly similar to those published by the author one year later, “Of course there is White privilege. I’ve been pointing it out to my White friends and co-workers for years. Isn’t it funny that almost no one listens to me, but everyone takes notice when a White guy says it.” (Jensen, 1999). The reaction of my White colleagues appeared to validate McIntosh’s (1998) observation that “Whites are carefully taught not to recognize White privilege” and Jensen’s (1998) perception that “White privilege, like any social phenomenon, is complex. In a White supremacist culture, all White people have privilege, whether or not they are overtly racist themselves. There are general patterns, but such privilege plays out differently depending on context and other aspects of one’s identity.” Fine (1997) notes the widespread supposition that “White people speak for the common good, and people of color speak for self-interest.” (p. 61) and implores colleagues to challenge it. One of the ironies of White privilege is the ability to escape social and intellectual scrutiny (Fine, Powell, Weiss & Wong, 1997). These are manifestations of White privilege that I became acutely aware of during the OSERS Diversity Workgroup’s tenure.

White privilege in education. According to Winant (1997), the U.S. was once a nearly monolithic racial hierarchy “in which everyone knew his/her place.” The challenge of understanding the concepts of power and privilege is daunting, particularly in the context of discussions concerning race, gender, and social class aspects of schools (Ewing, 2001). Patton and Townsend (2001) assert that ethical issues that are heavily laden with power and privilege implications have rarely been explored in the context of educating African American students in special education. Both in and out of school, Whiteness accumulates “privilege” and “status” while color accumulates “deficits” or “disadvantages” — in classrooms teachers display power through discipline, praise, attention, and use of curricular materials that highlight the existence and the contributions of Whites to the history of America (Ewing, 2001; McIntosh, 1998).

While the phenomenon of power and privilege corresponds with racism, it is essential to recognize that racism functions not only through overt prejudice and discrimination but also in the unconscious attitudes and behaviors of our society that presume but do not acknowledge the pervasiveness of White cultural norms (Ewing, 2001). All educators must be mindful of their responses to these complex issues of ethics, power, and privilege on the lives of students and their families because “whether or not we address these issues overtly, in “whispers” or not at all, they remain as critical factors” (Patton & Townsend, 2001, p.1). Ewing (2001) observes, It is spurious to deny that every aspect of schooling is layered by race, social relationships, ability grouping, tracking, special education labeling and classification, discipline referrals, suspensions and expulsions, and composition of the teaching force. The social structure in schools sustained by instructional arrangements, pedagogy, content in textbooks, and a predominantly White teaching force raises serious moral/ethical questions that should be opened to interrogation and reflective thinking cultivated in teacher education programs (Ewing, Winter, 2001, p.13).

An Advancement toward Ought

Given the complex dynamics of hierarchy, ethics, positionality, power, and privilege in the construction of the other—as well as the volatility and pain involved in segregation, overrepresentation, and exclusion—how can the overrepresentation and inclusion practice and discourse communities come together to mobilize for school change? In the face of such complicated and deeply entrenched problems, this requires a balancing act in which we confront their gravity but do not allow our anger, pain, and sense of urgency to render us ineffective. Instead of allowing anger to divide us, consider the perspective of Audre Lorde (1984) that anger is loaded with information and energy and can be mobilized into action in the service of our vision. Understanding our worldview—individually and collectively—has enormous implications for how we assess situations, determine the nature of issues and problems, and construct strategies to address these issues and problems. We must remain cognizant that how these discussions are framed shapes our perceptions, our vision, and our strategies.

“Recognising and valuing difference, not as a contrast to a normal, right way of being and thinking but as a resource to our learning (Booth & Ainscow, 1998, p.4)” appears to be a good starting point. Most of us can (a) identify when we have benefited from privilege and (b) make assumptions about the harm or suffering of those who did not (Patton & Townsend, 1999). Reflection and dialogue—individually and collectively—about differences, about who benefits and who suffers from power and privilege, about how we perceive us, them, and the other in our educational systems is essential. “Ultimately the best solutions to racism will come from multiracial coalitions in which White people participate but do not dominate” (Sleeter, 1993, p. 169). Similarly, viable solutions to “handicapism” are dependent upon forging alliances of individuals with and without disabilities in which nondisabled people participate but do not dominate. These communities must come together and mobilize for equity and inclusion in our schools.
Multicultural education

To address the overrepresentation of “minority” children in special education, as well as issues of inclusion and exclusion, educational systems need to pursue as James Banks (2001) recommends, a true multicultural value system that encompasses simultaneously a concept, a process, and a reform agenda. Multicultural education is based on the notion that all students must have equal access and acknowledges that in our current school system some students are advantaged by their socio-cultural and economic status, ethnicity, and gender (Banks, 2001). In a truly multicultural education system, the practices and climate of schools that convey privilege associated with class, gender, language, ability/disability, ethnicity, and culture are no longer present so that us, them, and the other become we.

Pursuit of a multicultural approach can guide school improvement across dimensions of content integration, prejudice reduction, the knowledge construction process, an equity pedagogy, and an empowering school culture and social structure (Banks, 2001). This is a complex and daunting task that requires action on multiple dimensions. For example, Sleeter (1993) notes that while multicultural teacher education is important, it is not a substitute for making our predominantly White teaching profession more racially and culturally diverse. In addition, she recommends structured immersion experiences in minority communities paired with instruction about racism, historic experiences, culture, and creative contributions of those minority groups to facilitate reexamination of one’s perspectives concerning White privilege (Sleeter, 1993). I certainly concur but must also explicitly state that increasing the numbers of individuals with disabilities as educators is also essential if we are to authentically include disability in multicultural education curricula. In addition, curricula must be developed to explore disability culture and to examine one’s perspectives about disability.

Transformation

One factor contributing to the status quo of our schools is the difficulty of transformation (Butler, 2001). In a transformation approach the fundamental goals, structures, and perspectives of the curriculum are changed (Banks, 2001) to reveal both the unity and diversity among human beings by acknowledging the benefits of these interactions for groups and individuals (Butler, 2001). Butler (2001) suggests a transformation framework that:

- establishes nonhierarchical terms and contexts for human interactions;
- respects the interaction and existence of both diversity and sameness;
- balances interaction between the individual and the group; and
- advocates a concept of humanity that (a) is based upon a sense of self that is both individually and communally defined and (b) embraces the interdependence of human beings and the world environment as well.

Leadership and Participatory Approaches

According to Keith (1996) critique and action can join in praxis to create democratic, participatory approaches that emphasize movement, critical reflection, and transformation. Participatory approaches acknowledge the divisive potential of power and status, hierarchy and privilege, agenda and voice in creating viable strategies for sustained school improvement through transformation and uses collaborative problem solving to ensure democratic participation of stakeholders. Leadership is not about “position” — instead, leaders are those who use information to create needed change. Chalmers (1997) cautions that by misjudging our positions as agents within the matrix of power, we render ourselves ineffective in using our influence to further the agenda of educational justice for all children. Use of Butler’s (2001) framework for transformation holds great promise for participatory approaches to address issues of overrepresentation, inclusion and exclusion.

Leadership involves significant influence over people’s lives and there is therefore a need to develop a sensitivity to the ethical aspects of that influence both in terms of the way the influence is exerted and in what people are being influenced to do. In doing so, educational leaders will need to address and overcome those issues related to power and privilege in educational settings (Williams, 2001, p. 45).

Concluding Thoughts

When the subject under discussion is race, in particular on the white side . . . much seems repressed and open conversation about race is considered unnecessary and risky, if not taboo in decent company. (Lelyveld, How Race is Lived in America, 2001, p. xi)

When I attended the first meeting of the OSERS Diversity Workgroup, I found I was the only member who was White and nondisabled and I immediately questioned the propriety of me being there —

- Were “diversity issues” only the domain of “people-of-color?”
- Was I the other and if so was I a “credit to my race” for being there or was I a “just a token?”
- What is the impact of race plus disability?
- Who has “authentic voice” concerning race and disability?

My colleagues on the OSERS Diversity Workgroup expressed both concern and regret, but not surprise,
that there were not more “White people” involved in the Race Initiative. I wonder if this is yet another manifestation of White privilege or a reflection of discomfort at confronting difficult issues. When we discussed the lack of involvement by Whites, we joked about me being a “token White” and tweaked the stereotype of being “a credit to one’s race.” Underlying the jokes and levity, a shared understanding emerged about how hierarchy, power and privilege operate to benefit and harm and contribute to the creation of us, them, and the other. It is also important to note that no such jokes were made about disability status and I wondered why. Perhaps it is because people with disabilities, especially people of color with disabilities, continue to experience high levels of unemployment, poverty, discrimination and segregation that we could find no humor in the situation. It is clear that issues regarding the impact of race and disability need far greater attention and have major policy, research, and practice implications. While all stakeholders have “authentic voice” regarding race and disability, use of democratic, participatory approaches need to be employed to ensure that some voices do not dominate the discourse.

When I told a colleague, a person of color, about this paper the response back was a sly smile and the question, “Whatever possessed you?” This article grapples with and interrogates important issues that have confronted me for years and is preliminary attempt to generate deeper personal reflection and thoughtful discourse. I share Apple’s (1997) basic wish to “recognize that we live lives involved in dominance and subordination in very hidden ways” (p. 126) and also hope that others will explore these issues individually and collectively. The solutions to the complex problems posed in this article are to be found in the hearts and minds of the readers and their colleagues. By breaking some of the taboos concerning open discussion of special education, disability, and White privilege, I have attempted to continue my conversation with Donte and Von to more fully understand “Why.”

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