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Hiding in Plain Sight: Understanding and Addressing Whiteness and Color-Blind Ideology in Education

by David Gillborn

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Abstract

The author argues that color-blind ideology amounts to a refusal to deal with the reality of racism, which protects and extends White racial advantage, as well as shares thoughts on dismantling Whiteness in education.

Key words: *antiracism, color-blind ideology, racism, Whiteness*

I find what you're saying quite offensive.

In fact, I'd say you're being racist about White people.

As part of a day-long event celebrating advances in pedagogy and research in higher education, I recently gave a presentation about racism to colleagues at my university. Alongside a senior colleague of color, we set out ideas for how universities could challenge the systemic race inequities that characterise the British system where, for example, White students are more likely to achieve a higher degree classification than any other ethnic group; minoritized staff and students experience persistent and highly damaging racist micro-aggressions (that humiliate them, sap their energy, and deny advancement); and Black staff are routinely challenged about their fitness to teach (Bhopal, 2016; Bhopal & Chapman, 2019; Rollock, 2019).

As we answered questions from the audience, a White man objected to our reference to White racism as an insidious, persistent, and immensely damaging aspect of university life; he stated that we were “being racist about White people.” It is an accusation that I hear with growing frequency. I have researched race inequity in education for more than 30 years and, although most White folk have never been at ease with my work (e.g., Gillborn, 2008, pp. 162–169), I encounter these accusations more often, and with greater anger, than ever before.

The last few years have seen a marked rise in the confidence and frequency with which politicians, commentators, activists, and academics argue that White people are somehow a disadvantaged group in need of protection and advocacy. “Rights for Whites” discourses, which used to live at the margins of political debate, now occupy the mainstream, with nationalist populism winning general elections in Europe, Australia, and North and South America. The year 2016 saw the election of President Trump and, in the United Kingdom, the vote to leave the European Union. There are numerous factors behind these events, but the influence of racist anti-immigrant sentiment is undeniable (Dorling & Tomlinson, 2019). Discussion of Whiteness has moved from the pages of academic journals and into the political spotlight.

This article critically reflects on the nature of Whiteness in education and how we each, as educators, can address it. In particular, I explore the arguments surrounding so-called *color-blind* approaches; recent political moves to present White people as *just another ethnic group*; and the significance of impoverished White people in wider discussions of race, oppression, and racism. I begin by addressing a simple, but crucial distinction between Whiteness and White people.

Whiteness and White People: Not the Same

It is useful to remind ourselves that Whiteness and White people are different things. In general terms, *Whiteness* refers to a system of beliefs, practices, and assumptions that constantly centre the interests of White people, especially White elites. People who identify or are identified by others as *White* often act in the interests of Whiteness, but that is not automatic nor inevitable. White-identified people can challenge Whiteness, just as people of color can sometimes become vocal advocates for Whiteness. As Zeus Leonardo (2002) reminded us, “‘Whiteness’ is a racial discourse, whereas the category ‘white people’ represents a socially constructed identity, usually based on skin color” (p. 31).

From Color-Blind to Color Evasion and Racism Denial

I think that the true racist sees everything in terms of race, or colour. Surely what we should be aiming to be is colour blind. –Philip Davies, Member of Parliament (Sweeney, 2014)

This quotation is from a Conservative politician criticizing a company's moves to increase the diversity of its employees (in this case, the BBC—a national broadcaster funded in part by compulsory public subscription). Davies' comments exemplify a long-standing critique of attempts to look critically at race disparities in society. Any focus on race, so the argument goes, is by definition racist; so, the only legitimate way ahead is to refuse to recognize race—to be “color-blind.” A favorite move is to invoke Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s famous statement: “I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.” But as Ronald Turner (1996) has demonstrated, using King's words to silence critical discussion of race inequity is a perversion of everything that he stood for and a gross (oftentimes deliberate) mischaracterization of his meaning.

Numerous critiques show how a claim to be blind to color—to simply treat all people alike—tends to benefit the already powerful by defending and extending White racial advantage (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Burke, 2019; Haney-Lopez, 2007; Wells, 2014). Put simply, research over several decades, and in numerous countries, shows that White teachers (whatever their *conscious* intent) tend to treat Black children as having less than average ability but presenting a heightened disciplinary challenge (Gillborn, 2008; Irvine, 2018). Advocates of color-blindness often portray themselves as occupying the moral high ground—that is, as rising above petty racialized disputes in order to see the true worth of people and the arguments they make. In practice, however, color-blindness has become an argument to ignore race inequality and silence critical discussion of racism in all but its most crude and obvious forms. A recent addition to the critical literature, by Subini Annamma, Darrell Jackson and Deb Morrison (2017), is especially important because it makes the case for a new term, *color-evasiveness*, to explicitly name the tactic at the heart of so-called color-blindness:

Color-evasiveness as an expanded racial ideology acknowledges that to avoid talking about race is a way to willfully ignore the experiences of people of color, and makes the goal of erasure more fully discernible. In other words, to use the term “evade” highlights an attempt to obliterate. (p. 156)

The term *color evasion* has several advantages; it makes clear that adopting this stance is a deliberate act. Color evasion is neither innocent nor passive; it is an active refusal to engage with race inequality. Regardless of the moral, theoretical, or practical arguments that might

be marshalled to defend color-blind ideology, in practice the position is an assertion (in effect if not intent) that the experiences of minoritized groups are not important enough to be considered or acted on. In essence, the stand neatly acts as both *color evasion* (we shouldn't talk about race) and *racism denial* (racism isn't important enough to discuss). The new term also avoids feeding into patronizing and exclusionary assumptions about people with certain dis/abilities: People with visual impairments are able to perceive the world in great complexity, but the term *color-blindness* equates this with a kind of ignorance or lack of perception.

White People: *Not Just Another Ethnic Group*

A Whiteness trope that is growing in popularity, on both sides of the Atlantic, trades on the assertion that White people are just another ethnic group. This is an unusual tactic because historically Whiteness has gained a great deal of its strength from asserting the absence of ethnicity, as if an ethnic identity is something that Other people have; hence, *ethnic* is often used as a code for non-White, and *White* is synonymous with “normal” (Delgado & Stefancic, 1997). However, White racism is quick to morph to new conditions and opportunities (Gillborn, 2018). When White people seek to embrace the status of an ethnic group, you can be sure that it brings certain privileges for them. Current proponents of this view, in the United States and the United Kingdom, construct a worldview where White racism is presented as merely a natural preference for one's own. Most tellingly, this tactic presents White people's actions in defence of their existing advantages (and their continued oppression of others) as a legitimate form of identity politics. This kind of racist intellectualizing has been championed in the UK by Policy Exchange Limited (2017), a think tank and registered charity that describes its mission as “The non partisan advancement of education in the economic, social and political sciences and their effect on public policy and the policy making process in the UK and the promotion and publication of objective research” (p. 1).

Policy Exchange declares an income of more than £3 million a year and benefits from charitable status (reducing its tax liabilities) but does not declare the identity of its funders. The website Who Funds You? (2018), which campaigns for transparency in think tank funding, gives Policy Exchange its lowest possible transparency rating. In 2017, Policy Exchange published a report entitled '*Racial Self-Interest' is not Racism*, authored by Eric Kaufmann, Professor of Politics at Birkbeck College, University of London. Kaufmann

subsequently expanded the arguments into the book *Whiteshift: Populism, Immigration and the Future of White Majorities* (2019). The latter begins:

We need to talk about white identity. Not as a fabrication designed to maintain power, but as a set of myths and symbols to which people are attached: an ethnic identity like any other. (p. 1)

And so, the second line of the book sets out one of its dominant themes: White identity deserves the same respect and understanding as “any other” (non-majority) identity. The book’s release was covered in *The Times* newspaper with the stunningly insensitive (or perhaps deliberately crass and provocative) title “don’t lynch me for spelling out what immigration means” (Hemming, 2018). Kaufmann’s argument is that commentators have been too quick to denounce White group interests as racist and that this has closed down debate and forced White people toward extremist nationalist positions. Launching Kaufmann’s (2017) report, Policy Exchange’s Head of Demography, Integration and Immigration David Goodhart, argued,

The challenge here is to distinguish between white racism and white identity politics. The latter may be clannish and insular, but it is not the same as irrational hatred, fear or contempt for another group—the normal definition of racism. . . . The liberal reflex to tar legitimate majority grievances with the brush of racism risks deepening western societies’ cultural divides.

Note that a false distinction is drawn here between White racism (limited to the most extreme and obvious forms of “irrational hatred, fear or contempt for another group”) and White “identity politics” (which is described as “legitimate” grievances). In this way, racism is redefined in the narrowest way possible as “irrational hatred.” This means that systemic inequities that persistently and significantly favour White people (e.g., in the economy, health, the criminal justice system, and education) are simply ruled out of bounds. Such differences cannot be racist in the Goodhart/Kaufmann universe (even though they favour one group at the expense of others) because they do not arise from plain, simple, deliberately, and overtly fascist politics. In this way, such arguments close down critical discussion of pernicious and widespread structural racism. The move is disguised as thoughtful, even academic, but the consequence of this argument is that White people would be free to say and do pretty much whatever they like (short of violence) to protect their own racial self-interest. But White people in countries like the United States and United Kingdom are not “an ethnic

identity like any other”—they are decidedly *unlike* any other. They are the dominant holders of power, and their move to protect their existing slice of the cake is not a romantic strategy to protect some folkloric image of red-cheeked children in an innocent past; it is an attempt to safeguard an oppressive and racist status quo. Whiteness enforces its power in numerous ways, sometimes subtle, sometimes less so. Kaufmann (2019) strikes an ominous tone early and often:

The loss of white ethno-cultural confidence manifests itself in other ways. Among the most important is a growing unwillingness to indulge the anti-white ideology of the cultural left. When whites were an overwhelming majority, empirically unsupported generalizations about whites could be brushed off as amusing and mischievous but ultimately harmless. As whites decline, fewer are willing to abide such attacks. (p. 2)

And so, the view of White people as just another ethnic group (which happens to control the levers of power across society) is married to an implicit threat: Don't call us racist because you'll make us angry, and you won't like White people when we're frightened and angry.

White people exert disproportionate power and influence. They cannot merely look out for their own interests because, in contrast to Black and Latinx movements, for example, White movements are not pursuing equity and social justice; they are generally seeking to preserve inequity and injustice.

What About the White Poor?

Ricky Lee Allan (2009) wrote that growing up poor and White, the only time he heard “nonpoor” Whites express any concern for his kind was when White racial privilege was being questioned. He argued that poor and nonpoor Whites form a racial bloc—a “White hegemonic alliance” (p. 211)—from which *both* draw benefits (emotional, psychological, and economic). In particular, White elites are able to use poor Whites to question the existence of any such thing as White privilege—and thereby defend Whiteness from critical scrutiny (see Bhopal, 2018). Nolan Cabrera (2019) has reacted to this frequent misunderstanding of the idea of privilege to argue that a more useful term is “White immunity.” That is, White people—even poor ones—expect to stand outside of certain threats and limits; they expect to be treated as race-less in a world that treats racial Others as by definition less-than Whites.

What Can Be Done?

There is no magic bullet of pedagogic and curricular changes that will fatally wound the overarching operation of Whiteness and White racism in education. However, antiracists have been struggling with these issues for a long time, and certain approaches have proven helpful in changing the racial dynamics in schools (see Gillborn, 1995; Picower, 2009; Pollock, 2008). The following are some useful starting points.

Worst-case scenario? Even individuals change lives.

Antiracist work is emotionally, physically, and mentally tough. My first advice to teachers trying to change their schools is to find like-minded colleagues and work collectively. However, even if you are the only person in the institution who feels this way, there is still much that can be done. Research with minoritized adults who have achieved success in education and the economy reveals that many will name a single teacher, decades after the event, who changed the course of their lives. Drawing on research in the United States and the United Kingdom, Nicola Rollock and her colleagues stated:

The presence of just one positive, supportive teacher who pays attention, has high expectations and nurtures a child can have a remarkable impact, even amid the routine racism of low expectations and heightened surveillance faced by Black children in contemporary schools and society. (Rollock, Gillborn, Vincent, & Ball, 2015, p. 180)

Counting is a good place to start.

Any critical discussion of race inequity tends to quickly escalate into an emotionally charged and, frequently, confrontational situation (Matias, 2016). One approach that can sometimes put the discussion on a different footing is to begin with some simple calculations: *How representative of the school's overall population is the profile of different academic classes? How are Black and Latinx kids represented among gifted and honors classes? Are certain groups overrepresented among low-status tracks? Looking at data on detentions and expulsions, do any patterns emerge?* In successful antiracist schools that I have worked with, when the calculations reveal that certain minoritized groups tend to be overrepresented in the least desirable statistics, the next step is to ask colleagues what *we* might do to change this?

Be positive, not defensive.

Try to avoid being pulled into arguments about who is to blame. Revealing that schools do not serve all communities equally is not news to critical researchers, but it tends to feel like a personal assault or accusation to many teachers. This kind of exchange can combust into a mixture of deficit myths (about the failings of minoritized students, their parents, and communities) and confrontation (“Are you calling me a racist?”). Such discussions require careful handling and support—especially from the school leadership. A good way forward is to frame the discussion on the basic assumption that, no matter how complex the underlying problems, there must be something that *we*—as teachers, as a school—can do about the situation. We might not change the picture entirely (though we shouldn’t rule that out), but what can *we* do to make a difference? It is both challenging and empowering to embrace the idea that, as educators, we have the power to make a difference—albeit a small one in some cases.

Involve knowledgeable people (of color).

Involve people with expertise that you don’t yet possess. This may mean reaching out to academics or people involved in educational change movements elsewhere. The effort should also include reaching out to the very communities that currently experience the problems. Black and Latinx communities understand their exclusion very well; these communities possess enormous reserves of wisdom and strength (Yosso, 2005). It is essential to find ways to engage local communities and bring members inside an educational and transformative dialogue that respects them as equals.

Closing Thoughts

It is unlikely that any of us will live to see the complete eradication of racism from our schools and universities. Whiteness is an enemy that hides in plain sight; the interests and voices of White-identified people are always front and center, and yet they are usually seen ‘normal’ and unremarkable. The scale of the task facing antiracist educators is huge but there are countless examples of genuine change, usually led by communities of color alongside committed educators, that have transformed education for the better (ranging from single classrooms through to entire nation states).

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