

Sherry Marx. *Revealing the Invisible: Confronting Passive Racism in Teacher Education*. New York: Routledge, 2006. 196 pp.

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A recent study by Public Agenda and the National Comprehensive Center for Teacher Quality surveyed 641 first-year teachers about their teacher preparation. Seventy-six percent of those surveyed indicated they had received some preparation in teaching strategies for diverse populations of students, but only 39 percent said this preparation had helped them in such classrooms. Intriguingly, teachers working in urban, high-needs schools felt better prepared than those working in suburban schools. The report states:

Contrary to the popular view that suburban schools are not racially integrated, suburban teachers in focus groups mention that they increasingly find themselves with a wide range of populations from cultures from Asia, Latin America, the Asian subcontinent, Eastern Europe, and the Middle East.¹

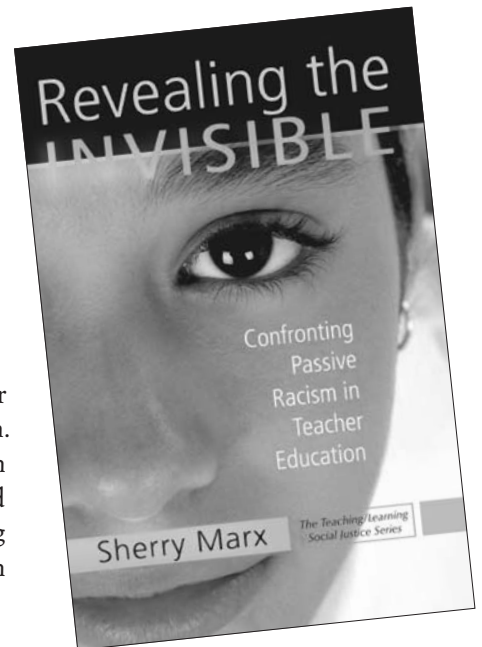
Welcome to the future of schooling and American society in general. The U.S. Census Bureau predicts that by 2040 the nation will tip towards a society that is non-white. In 2006, in every state except West Virginia, the population of so-called “minorities” and immigrants was growing rapidly.² The chief accreditation organization in teacher education, NCATE, demands that accredited members prepare teachers for working with diverse students, no matter where the college of education is located.

These facts are widely known across the world of teacher education today. And, unless teacher educators are modern-day versions of Rip Van Winkle, they surely know how critical attention to diversity is for their work—at least in theory. Nevertheless, adapting the practices of teacher education to new demographic realities often stumbles when it comes to

doing so consistently, comprehensively, and effectively. Sherry Marx’s book helps teacher educators understand why the task is so tough, and why, even in the case of the kinds of concerted efforts Marx documents, success in changing attitudes about diversity among future teachers—and thus, behavior—can be so elusive.

Marx, who is white, tells a story of her efforts to combat racism among a small group of English language tutors enrolled in her course on second language acquisition (SLA). Students were required, as part of the class, to tutor an English language learner for 10 hours during the semester. For most of Marx’s students, this assignment was the first experience they had with individuals whose backgrounds were very different from their own. Marx describes her students as White, middle class, English-only females who, for the most part, had grown up in mono-cultural environments.

Over years of teaching this course, Marx discovered that her White students had very low expectations for the youngsters they tutored. She wanted to know why. So, she decided to develop a research project to investigate students’ notions of race and racism:



[O]ne fall semester I explained to the students in the SLA class that I wanted to learn more about the beliefs of White, female preservice teachers who spoke only English regarding race, racism, Whiteness, and the children they tutored, and I appealed to the class for volunteers. I chose students with these characteristics because they represent the dominant face of teaching, and their beliefs about children of color and English-language learners needs to be better understood.²

Much has been written about the problems of race and racism in teacher education, and Marx draws upon a good deal of the foundational research here. But she takes pains to put some distance between her ethnographic style and what she characterizes as the more confrontational approach found in some literature. Her primary goal was to create a “trusting, safe, discourse environment” with the students who volunteered for her project.³ During the course of the semester, she interviewed nine women at significant length about their White identities; visited them while they tutored; read their journals as well as those of

the other 76 students enrolled in the SLA course. Marx acknowledges that her research was inflected by the power dynamics associated with instructor-student relationships, but discusses the ways in which she attempted to mitigate that imbalance.

The result of her research project is this book, divided into six chapters: (1) Talking about Race, (2) Illuminating the Invisible, (3) The Eye of the Beholder: Tutors Define Racism, (4) Looking in the Mirror: Confronting Racism with Tutors, (5) Changes of Heart: How Tutors Came to Recognize Their Racism, and (6) Becoming Empowered by Recognizing Racism. As is probably apparent from these titles, Marx wants to tell a story here—of students coming to terms with their own racism and White privilege. Although in many ways it is a positive story, it is also one that illuminates just how intractable the problem of facing up to one's own racism can be, even among a group of teacher education students who volunteer for such a project.

In the early pages of the book, Marx describes her project and subjects. In chapter 3, she offers her definition of racism and then shares the views of her subjects about its meaning. She admits that her definition, a “system of advantage based on race,” is one not widely held by most Americans or her students.⁴ Indeed, her subjects defined racism in contrasting ways at the outset of the project—as the views held by members of the Ku Klux Klan, Nazis, or other White supremacist groups. Since these women did not see themselves as hate-filled, they did not see themselves as racist. They distinguished racism from prejudice, which, Marx notes, they saw as “much more benign and forgivable.”⁵ They readily admitted to finding both racism and prejudice among the people they knew. They also argued that people of color could be racist. They clearly resented the notion that White people carried the sole burden of racism. They saw themselves as “good people,” and thus somehow immune from racism. They also resisted the notion of “White privilege” and the notion of

“Whiteness.” Marx concludes chapter 3 by summarizing how racism is a systemic rather than individual problem:

Understanding racism as a system that advantages Whites and disadvantages people of color is tremendously useful in that it rejects color-blindness and accounts for the systematic, institutionalized nature of racial inequality and the passive ways it is reproduced. All members of society contribute to this reproduction of inequality simply by going about ‘business as usual’ (Tatum, 1999, p. 11). In this way, all members of society are responsible for racism, just as we are all influenced by it. With this understanding of racism, everyone is charged with dealing with it, not just people of color because they are unfairly victimized by the system, but Whites because they are unfairly advantaged by it. This systemic understanding of racism encourages us to examine not just the actions of the Ku Klux Klan and ‘those other racist teachers,’ but our own actions and how they contribute to both equity and inequity.⁵

Subsequent chapters address Marx's efforts at confronting—respectfully, but firmly—her students with their own racist beliefs and developing their understanding of the concept of racism. In the end, she makes progress with most students in moving them along what Janet Helms calls the “stages of White racial identity development.”⁶ Marx concludes the book with recommendations for integrating research and teaching on Whiteness, racism, and White privilege into teacher education curriculum by deconstructing these notions in teacher education classes, building trust in classes that take up these topics, requiring all teacher education students to take classes in second language acquisition, and improving field experiences and the supervision of these placements, with an emphasis on these issues.

This book offers an important perspective on the ethos of social justice found in many teacher education programs these days. Teacher educators seem the most appropriate audience for the book, and a range of professionals, both new and more experienced, in social studies would profit from reading it. The book is repetitious in places, and would have benefited from some editing. Portions of the book could be used with pre-service students in undergraduate or master's programs in teacher education. Much of what Marx lays out here will be familiar to social studies researchers with an interest in diversity and multicultural education. What is novel—and compelling—is the description of her research and the sobering conclusion she reaches about how difficult it is to change racist attitudes in the context of teacher education. Still, her message is ultimately a hopeful one—that by recognizing and talking about racism, future teachers can be empowered: “As we change ourselves and help others to change, we thus change the world. It is imperative that we not let our fear of entering the discussion prevent us from doing so.”⁷ 📖

Notes

1. This survey was discussed in an article called “New Teachers Say They Are Ill Prepared for Classroom Diversity and Special-Needs Students,” by Paula Wasley that appeared in the *Chronicle of Higher Education's* daily online report (May 21, 2008), at chronicle.com/daily/2008/05/2907n.htm.
2. “Report: Diversity Growing in Nearly Every State,” MSNBC online report, August 17, 2006, at www.msnbc.msn.com/id/14348539/.
3. Marx, 23.
4. *Ibid.*, 25.
5. This definition comes from Beverly Tatum's book, “*Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?*” *And Other Conversations about Race* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 7.
6. Marx., 79.
7. *Ibid.*, 91.
8. Janet Helms, *Black and White Racial Identity: Theory, Research and Practice*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1990.
9. Marx., 174.

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