

Standardization and Whiteness: One and the Same?

Gary Weilbacher

ABSTRACT

The article “There Is No Culturally Responsive Teaching Spoken Here: A Critical Race Perspective” by Cleveland Hayes and Brenda C. Juárez suggests that the current focus on meeting standards incorporates limited thoughtful discussions related to complex notions of diversity. Our response suggests a strong link between standardization and White dominance and that a focus on standards has helped to make White dominance and the discussion of race, class, gender, and language virtually invisible in teacher preparation.

This article is a response to:

Hayes, C., & Juárez, B. (2012). There Is No Culturally Responsive Teaching Spoken Here: A Critical Race Perspective. *Democracy & Education*, 20(1). Article 1. Available online at <http://democracyeducationjournal.org/home/vol20/Iss1/1>

IN “THERE IS No Culturally Responsive Teaching Spoken Here: A Critical Race Perspective,” some of the comments of Cleveland Hayes and Brenda Juárez (2012) remind me of the work of Nat Hentoff (1969), James Herndon (1968), and Herbert Kohl (1967), who were questioning structures of Whiteness before Critical Race Theory (CRT) was articulated (Ladson-Billings, 1998). For instance, Hayes and Juárez (2012) write:

Most teachers continue to enter public school classrooms unprepared to “effectively teach African American and other students of color” (Blanchett, 2006, p. 27); they begin teaching with little to no knowledge of themselves as racial beings or social groups outside of their own and are unprepared to identify, implement or assess culturally responsive teaching and learning strategies (Bell, L. A., 2002; Cochran-Smith, Davis, & Fries, 2004; Cross, 2005; Juárez, Smith, & Hayes, 2008). (p. 1)

In a similar light, Kohl (1967) called into question the degree that he could be prepared to teach Black students:

The children entered at nine and filled up the seats. They were silent and stared at me. It was a shock to see thirty-six black faces before me. No preparation helped. It is one thing to be liberal and talk, another to face something and learn that you’re afraid. (p.13)

Kohl and his contemporaries realized that their curriculum, both that assigned officially by the administration and that unofficially created by social norms and expectations, was not

culturally relevant to their students and the communities in which they lived. In short, these educators knew that they were White, realized that their educational system was White, and developed the understanding that there was a serious, almost insulting, disconnection between the aims of the educational system, the resources it provided, and the desires, needs, and dreams of their students. It seems evident that Kohl (1967) wanted to make his students aware of the presence of White dominance:

I wanted the children to see themselves in the perspective of history, to know the changes of fortune, the balance of wealth and power, that have constituted history, and of the equally real change of the oppressed into the oppressor. I wanted them to be able to persist, revolt, and change things in our society and yet not lose their souls in the process. (p. 55)

Kohl clearly understood that teachers had the important responsibility to provide students with skills and beliefs that would

GARY WEILBACHER is an associate professor of curriculum and instruction at Illinois State University and the coordinator of the middle-level education program.

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make society more just. It also appears that building this awareness was a struggle that led to deep reflection:

It was the most romantic and idealistic thing I ever attempted and the one I believed in the most. I am not so idealistic or romantic now. My recollections of 6-1 are tinged with bitterness and too clear knowledge of the present and what I failed to give the children, what I couldn't give them. (p. 55)

Based upon his own comments, Kohl was a culturally relevant teacher and was most likely influenced by the social turmoil around him. I would also argue that he was an exception and thankfully thought beyond today's standards for becoming a teacher.

The resistance to White dominance in American education, such as the movement of which Kohl was a part, has had no lasting impact (Urban & Wagoner Jr., 2009). White people and agendas have historically and deliberately controlled U.S. education since its inception:

In teacher education and elsewhere in U.S. society and its institutions past and present, the supremacy of Whiteness—that is to say, the systematic and historical privileging of Whites' collective interests, accomplishments, values, beliefs, and interests—doesn't just unfortunately or accidentally happen, and it is no mere or innocent coincidence that it continues to reappear as if out of nowhere. (Hayes and Juárez, 2012, p. 2)

A current, powerful example of the deliberate nature of dominance exists in educational standards. Members of White corporate America stand to make significant profits through the creation of tests, test-preparation materials, and computer-based educational programs being implemented across the country (Ravitch, 2010). There is nothing accidental or innocent about this group being tasked with writing the Common Core standards.

Standards have become so entrenched in the American consciousness that the idea of improving education by raising standards has become common sense (Apple, 1999), making any opposition appear unpopular or foolish. Earlier this year, Exxon Corporation aired a series of television commercials that touted the importance of the Common Core standards. It's interesting, and not surprising, that these commercials aired during the Masters Golf Tournament, as Augusta National Golf Course, the tournament host, is itself a notorious symbol of White-male dominance. Exxon's message was essentially that if "American students [are] fully prepared for the future, our communities will be best positioned to compete successfully in the global economy" (ExxonMobile, 2012). Current, visible "reform" efforts that draw public attention to newer, higher, and therefore more rigorous educational standards tend to reduce the visibility of the impact of Whiteness, making issues of race less conspicuous to casual observers than they were during the 1960s, a time when race was at the forefront of American society. One possible reason why culturally responsive teaching is not spoken here may be because in some important ways, standardization *is* Whiteness.

It is important to remember that the relationship among standards, Whiteness, and a viable economy has deep historical roots in the social efficiency movement of the early 1900's. Remarkably similar to today's narrow emphasis on education as the way to compete in a global economy or to find gainful employment, leaders of the social efficiency movement believed that students needed to be sorted into separate groups in order to be provided with an "education according to [their] predicted social and vocational role" (Kliebard, 2004, p. 84). Contrary to the tenets of CRT, social efficiency does not call into question the dominant order, does not value experiential knowledge, and does not view race and racism as central issues in education (Hayes & Juárez, 2012). In short, social efficiency has little to do with social justice. Today's updated vision of social efficiency is embedded within a context of accountability that is exemplified by meeting standards and increasing test scores, as we've been led to believe these efforts will make the U.S. able to compete globally. Classroom teachers are expected to shape students in ways that will allow them to produce and consume in the global marketplace. To aid in this economic assimilation, this dehumanizing process, teachers are frequently handed scripted, standardized curricula. The bottom line seems to be that, much like Whiteness, standards have also become "an identity that is neither problematized nor particularized" (Hayes & Juárez, 2012, p. 5) in most social and educational settings. In other words, standards have become part of the everyday economy of public schools and teacher-preparation programs that go essentially unquestioned, unless the question is how to meet them.

Since the 1990s, all accredited teacher-education programs have required teacher-candidates to pass through a gauntlet of performance-based assessments that are based on competencies tied to teaching standards, including diversity. Candidates are certified as being prepared to teach when they are:

aware of different learning styles and adapt instruction or services appropriately for all students, including linguistically and culturally diverse students and students with exceptionalities. Candidates connect lessons, instruction, or services to students' experiences and cultures. They communicate with students and families in ways that demonstrate sensitivity to cultural and gender differences. Candidates incorporate multiple perspectives in the subject matter being taught or services being provided. They develop a classroom and school climate that values diversity. Candidates demonstrate classroom behaviors that are consistent with the ideas of fairness and the belief that all students can learn. (National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education, 2008)

The diversity standard above comes from the White-dominance perspective, especially when compared with the tenets of CRT, as mentioned by Hayes and Juárez (2012). Race is not at the center of this standard nor does this definition call into question the dominant perspective. While the diversity standard mentions the need to address "multiple perspectives in the subject matter" (National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education, 2008), social justice appears to be absent, which suggests the likelihood of

a “contributions, add and stir, or human relations” (Grant & Sleeter, 2011, p. 185) approach to multicultural curriculum.

One reason for this language may be that because standards need to be measured, assessing approaches that highlight minority groups’ historical contributions appears easier than assessing efforts that transform the curriculum into one that places the experiences of minorities at the center of events. However, simply adding multiple perspectives also implies that there is little desire to challenge dominant points of view. As the diversity standard indicates, instruction and services are to be connected to the students’ experiences and cultures, but their experiences and cultures are not necessarily central to or used to draw out curricular themes, the implication being that dominant versions of instruction and services are placed upon the students’ experiences. For example, in observing social studies lessons designed to incorporate cultural diversity, most teacher-candidates demonstrate how non-White groups have made musical, artistic, culinary, or athletic contributions to U.S. society. Rarer are the kinds of lessons that centralize and critique the outcomes of inequitable power dynamics and equate Westward expansion with genocide and manifest destiny with imperialism. While lessons like the first can allow non-White students to see their culture as a part of the whole, the alternative lessons cause students to consider White dominance as murderously problematic (Hayes & Juárez, 2012).

My program’s NCATE accreditation visit was the week before I wrote this paper. I was present for two sessions that involved conversations on the diversity standard, specifically on diverse placements. In order to continue meeting NCATE requirements, our program did not have to share what successful teacher-candidates did while placed in diverse schools, only that they spent time in diverse settings. I came away from those meetings convinced that, at least in this limited experience, adherence to the NCATE standard for diversity reduces the complexity of the concept, making it relatively simplistic and additive in order for diversity to become a commodity that can be measured by a performance. In this instance, the performance was the number of hours that teacher-candidates spent in schools considered to be diverse placements. Culturally relevant teaching was not spoken here.

While being placed in diverse settings can be valuable, it seems more important for teachers in all settings to be able to incorporate multiple perspectives of the subject matter, value diversity, and believe that all students can learn. Teachers who successfully do that are successfully culturally relevant. As one who helps prepare teacher-candidates, I spend a great deal of time in public middle-grade schools. My experiences have taught me that culturally relevant teachers are rare. Incorporating multiple perspectives requires a kind of depth in subject matter that generally comes from extensive scholarship. Culturally relevant teachers have the academic freedom and political conviction to deviate from pacing guides and textbooks. And the accountability movement has pressured teachers into increasing their attention to meeting standards (especially reading across the curriculum), using test-prep materials, and teaching scripted curricula. An emphasis on math and reading scores has led to a de-emphasis on

teaching social studies and the arts, making even the cultural stories and accomplishments of White Europeans less valued than literacy and numeracy.

A more obvious reason for a lack of culturally relevant teachers is that most teacher-candidates are White and female. Many of the teacher-candidates I work with frequently show signs of discomfort when working with students from cultural and economic backgrounds that differ from their own. Teacher-candidates who often feel the pressure to write standards-based lesson plans, prepare students for high-stakes tests, and maintain classroom control spend little time valuing diversity, especially when students coming from non-White backgrounds challenge their authority and the legitimacy of what they are trying to teach. Frequently, these challenging students quickly “earn” a reputation that labels them as incapable of learning. Such reputations almost ensure that teacher-candidates come to believe minority stereotypes while simultaneously rejecting the tenets of CRT, regardless of how frequently they may have been exposed to CRT constructs during their teacher training. What teacher-candidates may not realize is that if they make an effort to value their students’ experiential knowledge, make interdisciplinary connections, and address issues of social justice, they may be able to reach some of the students who challenge them because they are making an effort to connect with them culturally.

While they graduate, meaning there’s a check mark next to the standard for diversity on their list of requirements, many teacher-candidates adamantly state that they want to go back home to teach. Deep down, teacher-candidates know that they have a long way to go to become culturally relevant regardless of what their transcripts state. So most of them want to avoid that cultural journey by returning to familiar turf and teaching students with backgrounds just like theirs. In essence, by returning home to avoid cultural diversity, they become culturally relevant to their own culture, while limiting conceptions of diversity in the process. They likely grow quite comfortable with teaching content that matches the standards that were written by people like them to students much like themselves, all the while feeling relieved and satisfied that they met the diversity standard.

In contrast, truly culturally relevant teacher candidates do not need the stamp of accreditation approval. Rather, they come to know that they are culturally relevant authentically by seeing the ways that diverse students respond to them (Ladson-Billings, 1994) and not because a supervisor or professor at a university passes their performance on the diversity standard. In addition, culturally relevant teachers take a critical stance toward knowledge and view it as dynamic, ever-changing, and tied to experience (Ladson-Billings, 1994). Maybe most important is that such teachers are willing to listen to and learn from their students. My hope is that these culturally relevant teachers stay within the system and continually challenge forms of standardization and reductive teaching while encouraging their students to think critically about race, gender, culture, and class.

A culturally relevant stance calls into question the need for standards. Because standards are written by members of the dominant culture, standardized knowledge is grounded in the

White dominant perspective that minimizes the importance of experiences and contributions from multiple cultures. By definition, standards must be met by all; therefore, the outside governing body imposing the standards upon the learners, likely minimizes or negates the lifelong accumulation of an individual's cultural experiences. An extensive quote from John Dewey (1998) is useful here:

No one would question that a child in a slum tenement has a different experience from that of a child in a cultured home; that the country lad has a different kind of experience from the city boy, or a boy on the seashore one different from the lad who is brought up on inland prairies. Ordinarily we take such facts for granted as too commonplace to record. But when their educational import is recognized, they indicate the second way in which the educator can direct the experience of the young without engaging in imposition. A primary responsibility of educators is that they not only be aware of the general principle of the shaping by actual experience by environing conditions, but that they also recognize in the concrete what surroundings are conducive to having experiences that lead to growth. Above all, they should know how to utilize the surroundings, physical and social, that exist so as to extract from them all that they have to contribute to building up experiences that are worthwhile (p. 35).

While much of the language in this quote is specific to Dewey's era, one of the messages is timeless: In order for students to grow, their teachers need to understand and use the students' early experiences in the process of educating them. Teachers must know their students and their environment—the physical and social experiences that have acted as the foundation for what the students know—as such influences provide students with continuity in their own world.

Basing education on standards ignores this foundational knowledge steeped in cultural experience. Forcing teachers to start with standards causes them to present students with fragmented or inconsistent learning experiences because the standards are written by people who do not know all students and all of their physical and social surroundings. In addition, those who write the standards often have experienced more privileged physical and social surroundings than many of the students on whom the standards are imposed. Standards can never truly be educative for all students because they fail to take into account the physical and social surroundings of *all* students. As an example, it's noteworthy that the word *culture* does not even appear in the Common Core standards for seventh-grade language arts.

In terms of the NCATE teacher-preparation diversity standard, similar lines of thought can be followed. As Dewey (1998) compared traditional education to a more progressive version, his words also moved well beyond the notion of “awareness” found in the NCATE standard:

There was no demand that the teacher should become intimately acquainted with the conditions of the local community, physical, historical, economic, occupational, etc., in order to utilize them as educational resources. A system of education based on the necessary

connection of education with experience must, on the contrary, if faithful to its principle, take these things into account. (p. 36)

“Intimately acquainted” is difficult to measure but seems to suggest a deeper level of acquiring community knowledge than being able to “demonstrate sensitivity to cultural and gender differences” (National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education, 2008). “Demonstrating sensitivity” suggests a paternal or even patronizing attitude toward those who are culturally different from White dominance. To its credit, the NCATE standard goes on to address the importance of surroundings in education, as it expects that “candidates connect lessons, instructions, and services to student experiences and cultures” (National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education, 2008). To NCATE's detriment, the students' experiences appear to be secondary to lessons and instruction, the implication being that teachers must start with the standards. A subtle, but critical, difference between the NCATE standard and what Dewey promoted is that Dewey encouraged teachers to start with the students' experiences and use those experiences as key educational resources. Doing so creates opportunities for teachers both to value their students' experiential knowledge and to centralize race, processes that are consistent with culturally responsive teaching. While the language of the NCATE standard recognizes culture and values diversity, it does not place rich notions of diversity or the students' experiences at the center of education. If local communities and teachers were allowed to construct their own standards, and a new definition of them—as learning principles that are grounded within the “conditions of the local community” (Dewey, 1998, p. 36)—they could also hold themselves educationally accountable to their own ideals. Instead, each community is forced to de-center its cultural knowledge and attempt to reach standards that are written and imposed by entities that have little or no knowledge of the community's physical location, history, and economy and the unique social relationships to those factors.

This de-centering of culture and its related knowledge seems to have trickled up from K–12 schools into higher education. As issues of race, culture, class, and language have found their way onto lists of professional teaching standards at the state and national levels, reasons for thoughtfully discussing the impact of diversity in college classrooms seem less necessary than in the past. For instance, rarely do my program's faculty meetings on standards-related activities for teacher-candidates involve discussions on the complexity of race, class, language, and gender issues between students and teachers. Rather, our conversations center around creating observable, measurable, and standards-based assessments that can provide data for ongoing NCATE accreditation and that teacher-candidates can pass. Pragmatically, we remind ourselves in our meetings that teacher-mentors must measure the ways a teacher-candidate “performs” diversity within the confines of a fifty-minute lesson, which is one of the performances designed to meet the standard. Our meetings tacitly support the idea that diversity is a one-time performance that is held to a particular standard and little else. Critical political and philosophical questions related to how (and maybe more

important, why should) young, White teacher-candidate women learn to connect with all their students, regardless of background, are often never asked. The notion that mainly White professors are the ones grappling with creating assessments to meet the diversity teaching standards written by the White majority also gets lost in our meetings. And they shouldn't, because our current diversity assessments fail to promote social justice and counter the achievement gaps between White and non-White public-school students, partly because they offer no progressive alternatives to the curricular and instructional status quo put in place by standards like the Common Core (Braun, Chapman, & Vezzu, 2010).

In looking at diversity standards from the teacher-candidate perspective, adherence to standards has redefined the addressing of complex teaching issues as the amount of time a teacher-candidate spends in schools simply labeled as diverse. It is possible that this checklist approach dominates any thoughtful readings or discussions in courses that even try to consider multifaceted notions. Given that most teacher candidates are white and female, diverse schools may look quite different from ones they themselves attended as K–12 students. But standards demand that teacher candidates “pick up” or “put in” clinical hours in schools that have White, Black, Hispanic, Asian, gifted, ELL, and special needs students. Such excursions to diverse educational settings relate closely with events described by Hayes and Juárez (2012):

Taking their bodies into spaces of the Other and coming back to tell about it does not make them experts on diversity or culture—it makes them people who love to visit the margins of Whiteness and then return to talk about exotic-ness. (p. 8)

As mentioned previously, spending time in diverse schools has led to student comments like, “Yeah, I get that diversity stuff now, but I just want to go back home to teach.” Clearly, teacher-candidates can pass the diversity standard simply by “doing time” in schools containing multicultural populations of kids, and the graduation certificate implies that such students are qualified to teach all students. But many of my students have little interest in wanting to be employed in such settings. In addition, as Hayes and Juárez (2012) imply, rudimentary exposure to students of varying backgrounds may cause teacher-candidates to objectify those students by classifying them as exotic, making it even less likely that such candidates will seek employment in traditionally underserved schools. Seeing others as exotic hardly values diversity but, sadly, teacher-candidates’ clinical hours spent in schools that are considered diverse does help a university to maintain its NCATE accreditation.

Part of me believes that because we have standards for diversity we also have made gains have in recognizing that culture, race, class, language, and gender do exist in our educational system, that they actually play a part in making us unique human beings. For many teacher-educators, being color blind is no longer perceived as a good thing (Paley, 1989) and hasn't been for quite some time—rather we need to “develop a school climate that *values* [emphasis added] diversity” (National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education, 2008). As a White professor, I believe that is

exactly what my institution and accrediting body wants me to say, if not believe. Yet a larger part of me believes that “teacher education wants diversity, yes—but only certain, tame forms” (Hayes & Juárez, 2012, p. 9) and especially forms that are measurable by performances tied closely to standards. Most of the time, I am inclined to feel the anger described by Hayes and Juárez (2012)—anger directed toward an educational system that has done little to address the longstanding, shameful, and systemic inequities pointed out by people like Counts (1927), Kohl (1967), and Kozol (2005) but essentially ignored for nearly a century at the national political level. Currently, it seems that diversity is only valued as a standard that eases (or supports?) the collective conscience of White dominance. A teacher-candidate can check it off as one of the tasks that, with completion, moves her closer to graduation and certification, and closer to teaching back home. I believe that rich, complex notions of diversity that were being explored toward the end of the last century (Connell, 1993; Delpit, 1995; Nieto, 1999) have been gutted by the Common Core and other teacher-preparation standards, much like thick forms of democracy have been replaced by schools of choice and charters funded by some of the same conglomerates that write the standards and tests taken by all of our students. If we unquestionably accept standards, we also unquestionably accept White dominance, as the standards are the voice of White dominance. By contrast, challenging the standards calls into question White dominance by putting a target on an inequality that is very visible everywhere.

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