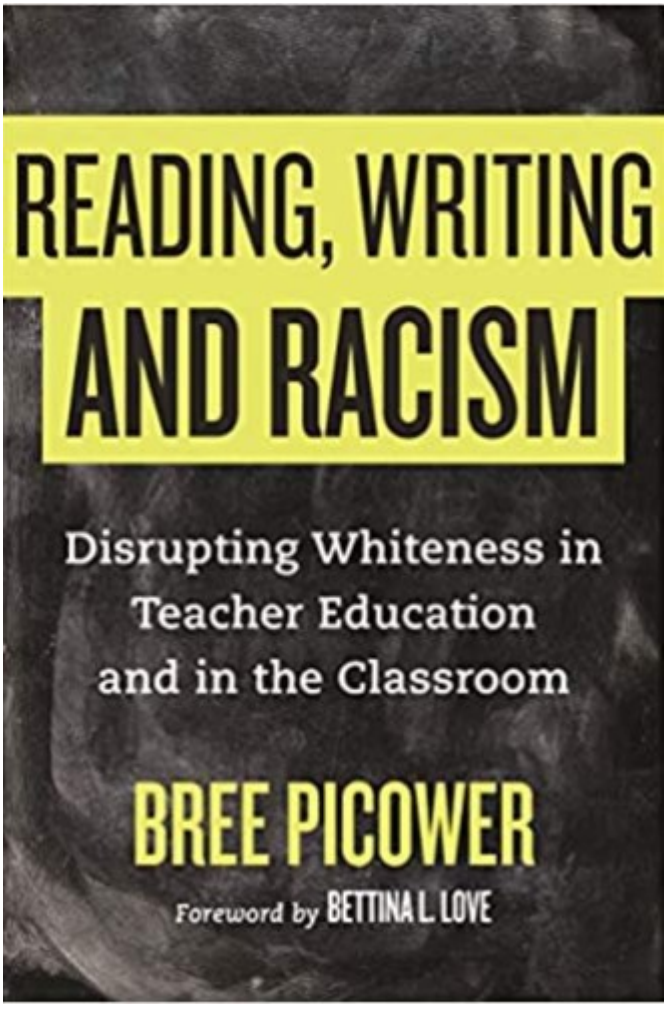
What would it take for #CurriculumSoWhite to stop trending?

According to Bree Picower, it starts with the teachers—80 percent of whom are White.

by Maggie Vandermeer in the November 17, 2021 issue

In Review



Reading, Writing, and Racism

Disrupting Whiteness in Teacher Education and in the Classroom

By Bree Picower
Beacon
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In 2016, the hashtag #CurriculumSoWhite emerged on Twitter, inspired by #OscarsSoWhite the previous year. It's been used to track examples of racism in classroom materials and assignments. Captured mostly by students and parents of color, examples from #CurriculumSoWhite include an assignment asking students to list the pros and cons of slavery, an Atlantic slave trade map labeled "Patterns of Immigration," and a Canadian textbook that teaches, "When the European settlers arrived, they needed land to live on. The First Nations peoples agreed to move to different areas to make room for the new settlements."

In *Reading, Writing, and Racism*, Bree Picower draws numerous examples from #CurriculumSoWhite, categorizing them as "curricular Tools of Whiteness" and analyzing how they operate to uphold White supremacy. These examples are revelatory and have invoked viral outrage online, but Picower finds the usual response to them—disciplinary action against individual teachers who are seen as "bad apples"—to be missing the forest for the trees. Instead, she suggests, these examples are the tip of an iceberg of White supremacy in American education that is systemic, self-perpetuating, and all-encompassing.

Interestingly, Picower does not proceed to advocate for an overhaul of curricula as the solution. Instead she identifies a deeper source of the problem: the ideology to which the teachers who select and teach these lessons are beholden. She argues that teachers—especially White teachers, who make up more than 80 percent of the educator workforce—have been so thoroughly socialized into Whiteness that they are often incapable of identifying it and thus become complicit in its perpetuation by default. She explains:

> Because White people tend to categorize only explicit hate crimes or racial slurs as racist, we often do not recognize how all of these other manifestations either consciously or unconsciously find their way into how we engage in the world. It is often because of these ways Whiteness is masked that seemingly caring White teachers perpetuate racism in their curriculum.

Part of the problem, Picower writes, is that White people are socialized to see Whiteness as the default—as normal, good, and ever-present. Raised to be unconscious of their own racial identity, White people who do not actively disrupt this socialization can become unwitting perpetrators of racial injustice. And if they're teachers, they'll continue to teach what they learned.

Picower shares an effective metaphor to illustrate how racism operates. Overt racists are like people walking forward on a moving walkway (White supremacy), which eases and accelerates their efforts. But even while standing still (doing nothing), one will be carried along with the racist system. Only by running in reverse on the walkway (being actively antiracist) can one disrupt racial injustice.

Because Picower positions the root cause of #CurriculumSoWhite as ideological, she sees teacher education programs as the locus of potential change. Drawing from her own experience directing and teaching in the Newark Teacher Project, a racial justice program (RJP) at Montclair State University, she presents case studies of four White teachers she's worked with, illustrating the various degrees to which they were able or unable to critically examine their beliefs and challenge racist ideology. These case studies illustrate a continuum of responses to antiracist teacher education: defensiveness, open-mindedness, questioning, and transformation.

After demonstrating how White teachers wield the curricular tools of Whiteness, Picower argues that "teacher education must attend to transforming foundational beliefs rather than tinkering with curriculum." But how is this done? Through interviews with eight teacher educators or administrators who work in five different RJPs, Picower identifies the common traits that make these programs unique and effective.

One essential ingredient is an "explicit shared commitment among all stakeholders to center race and address racism." These programs are designed for Black, Indigenous, and other people of color and are generally led by BIPOC faculty. White educators are admitted selectively, when they have demonstrated an open-mindedness and willingness to interrogate their own racism. There simply isn't enough time, Picower explains, to enroll resistant students and expect transformation. While this may sound harsh, she reminds us that these teachers often teach predominantly BIPOC students, and protecting those children is the priority. "This unapologetic allegiance to children of Color is embedded in the mission, philosophy, and structures of the RJPs," says Picower.

Students in these programs can expect to work in cross-racial cohorts, something RJPs prioritize because of the importance of relationship-building and community. They also spend time in affinity groups and in intense one-on-one sessions with faculty, who continue to provide mentorship for years after graduation. Picower explains that this kind of connection within the program is essential to its success: “The radical care in the student-teacher relationships within the RJPs is authentic, but it is also intentional because it is within these relationships that the deeply vulnerable work of dismantling Whiteness happens.”

Early in the book, Picower identifies the well-known four I’s of oppression: ideological, institutional, interpersonal/individual, and internalized. Throughout the book, she analyzes how oppression shows up on each of these levels and in their intersections, not only in curricula but also in students who are socialized into Whiteness.

In the face of the iceberg of oppression, Picower highlights small, selective teacher education programs that invest huge amounts of time and energy into relationship-building. And yet instead of feeling like a feeble attempt, this approach brings to mind the words of Audre Lorde: “The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house.” These programs are transformative precisely because they center children of color rather than White teachers, prioritize relationships over lucrative enrollment numbers, and seek knowledge from communities of color instead of blaming them for supposed deficits.

Picower is a White author who recognizes the problem of White academics making a profit by popularizing the ideas of people of color. She regularly directs readers to the BIPOC thinkers she has learned from, and she is donating all the profits from this book to two grassroots organizations led by people of color. As a White reviewer of a White author writing about Whiteness in a predominantly White profession, I receive Picower’s book as nothing less than a handbook for White people to relinquish power to people of color while also committing to laboring for justice in cross-racial educational communities. This may be a hard pill for the predominantly White teaching profession to swallow, but as Kay Fujiyoshi, one of Picower’s educator interviewees, says, “Do you want sweet poison or do you want bitter medicine?”

Bettina L. Love writes in her powerful foreword, “The United States is not just racist; it is anti-Black.” It’s no coincidence, Picower writes, that almost all examples of #CurriculumSoWhite are anti-Black or anti-Indigenous in nature. Such “textbook”

examples, she says, are implicated in a “broader settler colonial project, maintaining White innocence in the story of how land and labor were acquired through ‘agreements’ and ‘immigration’ rather than genocide and enslavement.”

While angry White parents across America continue storming school board meetings to decry critical race theory and insist that their White children will be unduly burdened by guilt and self-loathing if they’re taught the true and full history of America, Love offers a profound response: “What American schools fail to understand is that curriculum rich in the stories and lives of Black, Brown, and people of color humanizes not only students of color but White students as well. The work of decolonizing the curriculum helps decolonize all children’s thinking, and that is what education for social justice should be.”

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “Teaching White.”