The Failure of Whiteness in Art Education: A Personal Narrative Informed by Critical Race Theory

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This article explores failure from the perspective of a white art educator interested in social justice and educational equity. Interconnected notions of failure are explored, including: the author’s learning from personal failure as a process of professional growth over the course of her career; the specter of “school failure” and its impact on K-12 students’ educational opportunities and experiences; entrenched, systemic inequities in public schools and their failure to serve marginalized students and communities; and the potential complicity of the author’s individual professional failures – if left unaddressed – in perpetuating racialized inequities in art education. Whiteness, or white power, knowledge, and privilege, is implicit in all these failures, both in the ways it shapes the uneven landscape of public education and in the author’s own process of professional growth as an art educator. The article is structured as a personal narrative that highlights salient professional failures over three phases of the author’s career, including: her early years as an elementary art teacher in a low-income African American community in Florida; her work as a doctoral student, which was informed by critical race theory; and her evolving practice as a university art educator working with racially diverse pre-service teachers.
Many interconnected notions of failure contextualize and inform my practice as a white art educator who is deeply invested in educational equity for marginalized and underserved students. Among the most salient of these are: my own learning from personal failure as a process of professional growth over the course of my career; the specter of “school failure” and its impact on K-12 students’ educational opportunities and experiences; entrenched, systemic inequities in public schools and their failure to serve marginalized students and communities; and the potential complicity of my individual professional failures – if left unaddressed – in perpetuating racialized inequities in art education. Whiteness, or white power, knowledge, and privilege, is implicit in all these failures, both in the ways it shapes the uneven landscape of public education (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995), and in my own process of professional growth as an art educator. I began my career as an elementary art teacher in a low-income African American community in Florida. This experience shaped my scholarship as a doctoral student, which employed critical race theory (CRT) in order to understand the systemic, racialized educational inequities that impacted my former students and others like them. My K-12 teaching experiences and my scholarship continue to inform my evolving practice as a university art educator working with racially diverse pre-service and novice teachers. I entered each of these phases of my career feeling well prepared, only to be repeatedly chagrined at my racial ignorance and humbled by the extent to which my whiteness shapes my attitudes and assumptions about race. This writing discusses interrelated personal and systemic failures of whiteness over three phases of my career, and some of the insights these failures yielded for my own work, with implications for racially equitable art education practice.

**Failures of Whiteness in Art Education: A Personal Narrative**

**F(l)ailing as an Elementary Art Teacher**

I came to art education from a fine arts background. When I started my first job, through an alternative certification program, I had an MFA and a lot of enthusiasm but no classroom experience or preparation. I naively relished the opportunity to facilitate meaningful art learning for my students and quickly realized I had no idea how to actually make this happen. I struggled with even the most basic aspects of classroom management and teaching. I marveled at my colleagues’ facility with such things as taking attendance, getting students’ attention, making transitions from one activity to another, distributing materials, and minimizing class disruptions, all of which were confounding mysteries to me. My classroom management skills were so poor, in fact, that fistfights occasionally broke out in the art room during my first few years of teaching. But my biggest struggle was against time. With a class period of only 30 minutes, it was easy for me to spend half or more of my instructional time on discussion, attendance, and giving directions, leaving a pathetic ten minutes or less for my students to work independently. The end of class always came too soon, and cleaning up always took longer and was more confusing and contentious than I anticipated. Not surprisingly given the chaotic classroom climate and minimal work time, my students’ artistic achievement was mostly lackluster, which posed serious challenges in grading their work fairly. In my first years of teaching, I went home many days in tears and wondered despairingly what my students could possibly be learning from me.
As with my veteran colleagues’ teaching and classroom management skills, their cultural competence and connectedness with the school community impressed me. Teaching in a predominantly African American context made me acutely aware of my race as a white person and painfully conscious of my lack of cultural knowledge about my students and school community. Because people of color, and particularly African Americans, outnumbered me in this context, I assumed this must be similar to being a person of color in a predominantly white context. What I did not understand at the time was that whiteness is not just another racial category; it is the axis around which other races are constructed in hierarchical relations of power and both material and psychological privilege (Haney Lopez, 2006; Wildman, 2000). After reviewing a century of legal decisions related to prospective immigrants’ racial identities, and living his own life on the margins of whiteness as a multiracial Latino, Haney Lopez (2006) concluded the following:

Whiteness exists as the linchpin for the systems of racial meaning in the United States. Whiteness is the norm around which other races are constructed; its existence depends upon the mythologies and material inequalities that sustain the current racial system. The maintenance of Whiteness necessitates the conceptual existence of Blacks, Latinos, Native Americans, and other races as tropes of inferiority against which Whiteness can be measured and valued. (p. 132)

Other critical scholars, particularly those whose work is grounded in critical pedagogy, have discussed social class as another axis of power, with middle-class and upper-class status, mores, and values, positioned as normative (Aronowitz, 2009; Darder, Baltodano, & Torres, 2009; McLaren, 1989). However, it is important to note that critical race scholars have asserted that whiteness in and of itself is a category of privilege that shapes public discourse around such interrelated topics as race, poverty, crime, and education (Haney Lopez, 2006; Wildman 2000). In order to understand the impact of racial discrimination, it is important to recognize its function in securing and maintaining white privilege. This may be a challenge, as many whites – including myself – are neither accustomed to nor comfortable with thinking about ourselves in racial terms (Haney Lopez, 2006). Writing from her perspective as a white CRT legal scholar, Wildman (2000) described the many ways whites are privileged, including the privilege to ignore race, and to choose which racial battles to fight. Although I was numerically a racial minority in my particular teaching context, I have the privilege of ignoring race in other contexts – a privilege people of color rarely have, in any context. In the midst of my cognitive dissonance as a new white teacher in a predominantly black school, I failed to understand the difference between being a raced individual and experiencing racial discrimination.

During my first year of teaching I entered my district’s mentoring program for first-year teachers, where I connected with many skilled veteran art educators who were eager to help me succeed. However, not many of these folks had experience teaching in schools like mine, in which 95 percent of my students were African American and 97 percent of my students received free or reduced lunch. Those who did seemed to attribute many of the challenges I faced to my students’ backgrounds and the school culture rather than to my own failings as a new teacher. And nearly all of them were
now teaching in schools in affluent suburban neighborhoods that enrolled far fewer students of color and low-income students than the Title I schools where they began their art education careers. Their negative perceptions of my students and school community implied several things to me at the time: I should not really expect good behavior or strong academic performance from my students because of their racial, socioeconomic, and/or cultural backgrounds; even if I improved my teaching skills, I was not fully responsible for my students’ learning because of their limited educability; I was in a hopeless teaching situation where success was impossible; and my professional life would only improve by transferring to a “better” school. While I did not completely buy in to this mindset, I certainly was overwhelmed and underprepared for teaching. At times I felt hopeless. Combine these feelings with my acute sense of being a racial outsider at my school, and my veteran colleagues’ perceptions did not seem too outrageous. It was not until I encountered critical race theory, and particularly Valencia’s (1997a, 1997b; 2010) work, during my dissertation research that I understood these perceptions and assumptions as deficit-based.

The construct of deficit thinking as elucidated by Valencia (1997a, 1997b; 2010) and others (Foley, 1997; Menchaca, 1997; Ronda & Valencia, 1994) was a “threshold concept” (Meyer & Land, 2006) that changed my thinking about social justice and educational equity. Cousin (2006) described threshold concepts as: transformative, irreversible, integrative, bounded, and “likely to involve forms of ‘troublesome knowledge’” (p. 4) that are counter-intuitive or defy commonsense understandings. Deficit thinking is at the core of the most pervasive and damaging “commonsense understandings” about marginalized students and communities. Deficit theories attribute social inequities, such as the disproportionate experiences of school failure among low-income students of color, to their own supposed internal defects of intellect, moral character, culture, or familial socialization (Shields, Bishop, and Mazawi, 2005; Valencia, 2010). By essentially blaming the victim, deficit thinking masks the role of societal factors, such as under-resourced public schools and systemic discrimination, in placing these students at risk of school failure (Bastos, Cosier, & Hutzel, 2012; Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Kraehe & Acuff, 2013; Nieto & Bode, 2008; Pollack, 2012; Shields, Bishop, & Mazawi, 2005; Valencia, 2010; Zamudio, Russell, Rios, & Bridgeman, 2011).

This kind of deficit thinking is especially damaging when it plays into the “commonsense” notion of meritocracy. Meritocracy is the idea that in the United States, education is the great equalizer that levels the playing field so that anyone who works hard enough can achieve every level of success in life. This idea has considerable allure, especially in the era of Barack Obama’s presidency. Indeed, Zamudio, Russell, Rios, and Bridgeman (2011) described the meritocracy as one of the most powerful master narratives in United States society. However, they declare meritocracy to be a myth because of the glaring inequities in the allocation of educational resources between schools in affluent, white (mostly suburban) areas and schools in poorer (mostly urban) neighborhoods that serve predominantly students of color. Kozol (1991) most notably exposed these “savage inequalities” in his searing expose of the insufferable conditions of inner-city schools in St. Louis, Chicago, and New York, compared with the well-heeled suburban schools in neighboring districts. In the contemporary educational rhetoric of No Child Left Behind (2001) urban schools
such as those that Kozol profiled are characterized as “failing schools.” However, given the disparities in the allocation of educational resources (funding, facilities, teachers, educational materials) between urban and suburban public schools, Duncan-Andrade and Morrell (2008) asserted that urban schools are not failing but are “doing exactly what they are designed to do” (p. 1) – preserve the status quo in an inequitable, racialized social hierarchy.

Like many schools serving low-income communities, and particularly communities of color, my school bore the brunt of high-stakes accountability measures under No Child Left Behind. Although our school was not among those identified as “failing” based on standardized test scores, we fought hard to maintain our academic standing and reputation against the threat of restructuring and lost funding. The pressure to avoid school failure created a high-stress educational environment for students, teachers, and administrators in which arts education was marginalized in favor of rote, skill-and-drill learning from scripted curricula in language arts and mathematics, or what Haberman (1991) described as “the pedagogy of poverty.” Against this backdrop, I felt an acute sense of responsibility to my students because of the ways the specter of school failure impacted their educational experiences and quality of life at school. If they were able to have only 30 minutes of art class each week, those 30 minutes had better be spectacular.

Over time, and with support from many mentors, I did grow to develop a relatively healthy teaching practice that included productive relationships with my students and colleagues. As my teaching skills improved, so did my students’ behavior and artistic achievement. I settled into the school community and felt more and more at home and less and less an outsider. I also felt as though I was succeeding more often than I was failing, and that I might have something to offer as an art teacher educator. This general feeling of success, which I then defined as competent classroom management, curriculum planning, teaching skills, and productive relationships, and my sense of responsibility to my students informed my decision to pursue a Ph.D. in art education. I started a doctoral program intending to focus my research on art education in low-income communities.

Engaging Critical Race Theory as a White Doctoral Student: New Frameworks for Understanding “Failure” and Cringing Reflections on “Success”

When I entered graduate school, my experiences of practice shock (Hagiwara & Wray, 2009) as a new art teacher were still fresh. These formative experiences influenced my early scholarly work, which attempted to identify “best practices for working with urban students” (Spillane, 2010). Although I acknowledged my personal failures as a new teacher, my early scholarship made the implicit assumption that the challenges I faced were unique to the context of my school and the characteristics of my students. In my case, my deficit-based common sense understanding was that teaching in urban schools was hard work and teachers needed adequate preparation for the conditions they might encounter in order to succeed in these contexts. My perspective was self-centered and disproportionately focused on supporting white teachers, without consideration of teachers and students of color. This is not surprising given that the deficit-based “culture of poverty” notion, exemplified in Payne’s (2005) A Framework for Understanding Poverty and heavily critiqued by scholars such as Foley (1997)
and Valencia (2010) formed the cornerstone of my diversity training as a public school teacher. I also failed to connect teacher (under)preparedness to the systemic inequities that contribute to conditions of chronic “underservedness” (Kraehe & Acuff, 2013) that impacted my former students and school community. In sum, my participation in deficit discourses prevented me from critically examining my complicity in unjust social structures, making it unlikely that my work could meaningfully transform them.

Critical race theory (CRT) shaped my understanding of deficit thinking and its role in systemic, racialized educational inequities. CRT is an interdisciplinary body of scholarship developed primarily by scholars of color with roots in critical legal studies (Bell, 2000a, 2000b; Crenshaw, 1995; Delgado, 2000a; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Espinoza & A. Harris, 2000; Gotanda, 2000; Haney Lopez, 2000, 2006; A. Harris, 2000; C. Harris, 1995; Perea, 2000; Wildman, 2000). Scholars in many fields who are concerned with human rights and social justice have since adapted and expanded CRT’s tenets to address racialized social inequities in education and other areas of society. Critical race theory recognizes racism as a normal and ordinary part of life in the United States, although one that is often difficult to recognize and to remedy except in its most egregious manifestations (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Racism serves the interests of whites by securing and maintaining white privilege. Although CRT characterizes racism as a normal part of life, it holds that the concept of race is socially constructed, with no basis in biology or genetics. Not only does society create races, it does so differentially, racializing different groups of people at different times in response to different societal needs, such as the labor market. CRT rejects racial essentialization, recognizing that all people have overlapping and intersecting identities and allegiances beyond their race, including gender, religion, language, sexual orientation, and social class, among others, some of which may result in intersecting experiences of oppression. At its core, critical race theory is concerned with effecting social change and eradicating discrimination of every kind. As such, it is not purely theoretical; rather, it emphasizes activism and the practical applications of social theory.

Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) introduced critical race theory to the field of education because of their conviction that race and its role in educational inequality were undertheorized. Contemporary education scholars have built on Ladson-Billings and Tate’s work, recognizing that CRT offers a powerful framework for understanding and redressing the persistent educational inequities impacting students of color (Acuff, Hirak, & Nangah, 2012; Bagley & Castro-Salazar, 2011; Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011; Desai, 2010a, 2010b; Dixson & Rousseau, 2006; Kohli & Solorzano, 2012; Knight, 2006a, 2006b, 2013; Kraehe, 2015; Kraehe & Acuff, 2013; Lopez & Parker, 2003; Lynn, 2004; Milner, 2008; Parker, Deyhle, & Villenas, 1999; Parker & Stovall, 2004; Solorzano & Yosso, 2001, 2002; Preston & Chadderton, 2012; Stovall, 2006; Yosso, 2005; Yosso, Parker, Solorzano, & Lynn, 2004; Young, 2011; Whitehead, 2012; Zamudio, Russell, Rios, & Bridgeman, 2011).
on deficit thinking, helped me look beyond a narrow focus on mitigating new teachers’ practice shock to see teacher performance as a component of educational equity. These frameworks helped me reconceptualize the knowledge, skills, and dispositions pre-service art teachers may need in order to work successfully with low-income students and students of color and moved me into the next phase of my career as a university art educator.

Failing as White Art Educator Working with Racially Diverse Pre-service Teachers

When I began my current art education faculty position two years ago, I felt much more prepared to succeed than I did as a new elementary art teacher. I had six years of public school teaching behind me and substantial theoretical grounding to do the work I wanted to do: preparing pre-service art educators to successfully teach a diverse student population and help them understand and fight their complicity in systemic educational inequities. My own process of engaging with critical race theory and rethinking my practice was quite recent, and I looked forward to discussing these issues with my art education students. I also was excited to share some of the specific insights I gained through critical (race) reflection on my years as an elementary art teacher, which included:

- Understanding individual teachers’ failures in relation to systemic educational inequity as a factor contributing to the marginalization of low-income students of color.
- The impact of deficit frameworks on school re-segregation and white teacher flight from “failing” schools.
- Valuing failure as a learning opportunity for K-12 students, especially in the kinds of complex, creative problem-solving often found in quality art education.
- Viewing failure as a natural part of learning and growth instead of an all-or-nothing proposition.

With these grand ambitions, I was thrilled to discover that my first Foundations of Art Education class comprised a racially diverse group of pre-service teachers evenly split between white students and students of color. In addition to this favorable racial dynamic, I was lucky to have a particularly engaged and thoughtful group of students who undertook the readings and discussions earnestly and respectfully. Over the course of the semester however, several students of color pointed out in frustration that many of the assigned readings were written from a white perspective and seemed intended to prepare white teachers to work with racially diverse students. Kraehe (2015) supports my students’ perceptions, noting “when race is addressed in the scholarship on becoming an art teacher, it is often within the context of supporting primarily White students’ racial knowledge (e.g. Briggs, 2012; Desai, 2010a; Knight, 2013)” (p. 200). Additionally, after reading several articles focused on African American artists, students, and school communities, a Latina student in my class commented that there are more races than black and white and more complex racial dynamics at play in the contexts of public schooling.

These failures were humbling, but I addressed them openly with my students, asked for their continued feedback, and adjusted the remaining readings for that semester in an attempt to redress their legitimate concerns. Because of this, I felt even better prepared to teach this course in my second year. But this was not to be. The new class was skewed toward a predominance of white students, with one student of African descent and one Asian
American student. Although I felt better prepared to address racial issues in my second year as an assistant professor, the racial dynamic(s) at play in this particular class proved challenging for all of us to navigate. One student of color expressed to me privately that they felt particularly on the spot, as though all eyes were on them during any discussion of race(ism). At the same time, several of my white students expressed privately that they were uncomfortable with such things as an art exhibition focused exclusively on African American contemporary artists. Although I tried to create a safe atmosphere for discussing race in art education, I failed to understand that a “safe space [rarely] exists for people of color when it concerns public race dialogue” (Leonardo & Porter, 2010, p. 139). For white people, discussions of race are often intellectualized and detached; whereas for people of color, race(ism) is a lived experience. According to Leonardo and Porter (2010):

By sharing their real perspectives on race, minorities become overt targets of personal and academic threats. It becomes a catch-22 for them. Either they must observe the safety of whites and be denied a space that promotes people’s growth and development or insist on a space of integrity and put themselves further at risk not only of violence, but also risk being conceived of as illogical or irrational. Thus, white privilege is at the center of most race dialogues, even those that aim to critique and undo racial advantage. (p. 140)

These failures revealed some of the many ways whiteness continues to obscure my ability to discern racial inequity. These failures included: (1) centralizing whiteness in diversity pedagogy, using my own experience reckoning with white privilege and my complicity in deficit thinking as indicative of all my students’ needs; (2) discussing race in terms of a black-white binary, a construct critical race scholars (Perea, 2000; Espinoza & Harris, 2000) have critiqued; (3) creating classroom conditions that essentialized the experiences and perspectives of students of color; and (4) failing to appropriately scaffold white students’ learning about racialized educational inequity.

It is well documented that the public school student population is growing increasingly diverse, and that this diversity is not equally reflected in the teaching force (Davis, 2009; Hagiwara & Wray, 2009; Kozol, 1991; National Education Association, 2003; Zumwalt & Craig, 2008). Pre-service art teachers, like most pre-service teachers, are predominantly white, middle class women (Galbraith & Grauer, 2004). However, teaching to the white majority of pre-service teachers “imposes a standpoint that disregards and subordinates the worldviews and educational needs of non-Whites” (Kraehe, 2015, p. 200) and further entrenches white art teacher identity as normative.

**Conclusion**

I began writing this article, in part, as a way of modeling a “growth mindset” (Dweck, 2006) for my students, discussing my personal failures in order to scaffold their understandings of some of the systemic failures of whiteness in art education, and to own my complicity in them. This resonates with my day-to-day teaching practice, in which I encourage my students to embrace failure as a natural part of learning and growth, especially in such complex learning processes as those involved in becoming an artist and/or a teacher. Artists and theorists have also written about the generative
possibilities and radical freedom inherent in failure as an artistic practice and way of being (Halberstam, 2011; Le Feuvre, 2010). Unfortunately, failure is rarely understood or experienced as a natural part of racial learning and growth, but rather as a high-stakes, all-or-nothing proposition – and for good reason. Not only does whiteness shape the uneven landscape of public education, including access to and quality of arts education, it tends to hijack the very racial dialogues intended to dismantle its power. Nevertheless, as Kraehe (2015) argues:

Prospective art teachers...need opportunities to acquire critical conceptual frameworks in order to understand their own personal and professional identities in relation to racialization and other intersecting sociocultural processes. Without such opportunities, important aspects of art teachers’ identities are suppressed. This is not only invalidating to preservice teachers of color, but it also diminishes the capacities of all prospective art teachers to teach equitably and reflexively in the context of social inequality. (p. 209)

As this narrative demonstrates, failure permeates the complex and deeply personal learning processes involved in developing nuanced critical race understandings. Merely acknowledging the role of failure in racial learning, however, is not enough. Transforming the racial landscape of art education demands that we all assume responsibility for the failures of whiteness as we continue to grow as individual art educators and as a profession.

References


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