

Lessons from a preservice teacher: Examining missed opportunities for multicultural education in an English education program

By: [Amy Vetter](#) and [Jeanie Reynolds](#)

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Abstract:

“I had to get to know them [his students]. Because I am disconnected from Black culture a lot, honestly. You get people who assume I’m Black or I’m not. Before I even started teaching the very first question that I got asked was what color are you? And I never knew how big of deal that would be.” This was one of many experiences that James described in an interview after being asked how his multiracial identities shaped his student teaching experiences. James was one of six preservice teachers that we followed in our program for three semesters in an attempt to learn more about how to better educate future high school English teachers. As his former instructors in undergraduate English Education courses, we viewed our job as providing support, facilitating dialogue, and sharing expertise with James and other teacher candidates to help them deal with the challenges of student teaching, including those related to race, class, gender and sexuality. It was not until this interview after he graduated, however, that we learned about how James’s multiracial identities shaped his student teaching experiences. We realized that as White, middleclass female instructors and researchers, we lacked insight into what it was like for James to be both an insider and outsider within the context of a public high school. In fact, we made assumptions about James and his needs rather than asking him to reflect on how his race and ethnicities shaped his experiences. As a result, James’s described experiences challenged us to transform our teaching practices and curriculum to engage all students in critical examinations about how race and culture shapes teaching and learning (Banks et al., 2005; Cochran-Smith, 1995).

Keywords: identity | multicultural education | multiracial identities | students and teachers | English education

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Amy M. Vetter
UNCG, amvetter@uncg.edu

Jeanie Reynolds

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Lessons From a Preservice Teacher: Examining Missed Opportunities For Multicultural Education in an English Education Program

Amy M. Vetter and Jeanie Reynolds

University of North Carolina Greensboro

I had to get to know them [his students]. Because I am disconnected from Black culture a lot, honestly. You get people who assume I'm Black or I'm not. Before I even started teaching the very first question that I got asked was what color are you? And I never knew how big of deal that would be.

This was one of many experiences that James described in an interview after being asked how his multiracial identities shaped his student teaching experiences. James was one of six preservice teachers that we followed in our program for three semesters in an attempt to learn more about how to better educate future high school English teachers. As his former instructors in undergraduate English Education courses, we viewed our job as providing support, facilitating dialogue, and sharing expertise with James and other teacher candidates to help them deal with the challenges of student teaching, including those related to race, class, gender and sexuality. It was not until this interview after he graduated, however, that we learned about how James's multiracial identities shaped his student teaching experiences. We realized that as White, middle-class female instructors and researchers, we lacked insight into what it was like for James to be both an insider and outsider within the context of a public high school. In fact, we made assumptions about James and his needs rather than asking him to reflect on how his race and ethnicities shaped his experiences. As a result, James's described experiences challenged us to transform our

teaching practices and curriculum to engage all students in critical examinations about how race and culture shapes teaching and learning (Banks et al., 2005; Cochran-Smith, 1995).

Multiracial Students and Teachers

As we embarked on this study, we understood that many teacher education programs struggle to meet the needs of teachers of color. Scholars suggest that teacher candidates are not representative of the cultural and linguistic diversity of the students in public schools (Gay, 2000; Su, 1997). There is also a lack of research focused on the experiences of teacher candidates of color in the U.S. (Dilworth & Brown, 2008; Kohli, 2009), in particular multiracial teacher candidates. Of those that do exist, researchers suggest that the experiences of multiracial teachers in education are very different from the experiences of White, middle-class females (Castaneda et al., 2006; Ivine, 1992) who currently make up the majority of preservice teachers.

Although James used the term "mixed" to describe his racial identities, we use the term "multiracial" because it is most widely used in the literature related to education. Despite the lack of research about multiracial teacher candidates, there is much research related to the academic, social, and personal experiences of multiracial students in K-12 and postsecondary schools (Basu, 2006; Chiong, 1998; Mohan & Chambers, 2010; Renn, 2004; Schwartz, 1998; Wallace 2004a; Wardle &

Cruz-Janzen, 2004). These researchers state that multiracial children are a fast-growing segment of the U.S. school population and as a consequence are recently gaining attention from researchers and practitioners (Mohan & Chambers, 2010; Renn, 2004). With the increase in research on this topic, Mohan and Chambers (2010) warn against making the assumption that multiracial individuals are part of one distinct group and argue that there is no fixed, general identity that all multiracial individuals take on.

Most scholars would argue, however, that multiracial individuals share a central dilemma of negotiating insider/outsider positions related to their race and ethnicity (Bettez, 2007; Hyman, 2009). For example, Schwartz (1998) stated that multiracial students have unique advantages and challenges that include a more “enhanced sense of self and identity, and greater intergroup tolerance” while at the same time “several struggle developing a positive identity” and experience prejudice (p. 2). Nakazawa (2004), who conducted a study on the experiences of multiracial students, argues that “Multiracial kids are caught between not existing at all... and existing so far outside the perceived norm that people can't pass them by without commenting on their appearance” (p. 24). At the same time, Brown (2009) found that multiracial individuals are more likely than single-race individuals to interact with a variety of people and understand various perspectives. Such research illustrates how multiracial identities are both marginalized and adaptable to various contexts.

Multicultural Education

To reach the needs of all students in education, Wallace (2004) argues for multicultural education that challenges students to make changes in their world and curriculum that addresses the diverse needs and realities of students. Multicultural educators (Banks et al., 2005; Cochran-Smith, 1995, 2003) suggest that teacher education should help educators to:

- (1) uncover and identify their personal attitudes toward racial, ethnic, language, and cultural groups;
- (2) acquire knowledge about the histories and cultures of the diverse racial,

- ethnic, cultural, and language groups within the nation and within their schools;
- (3) become acquainted with the diverse perspectives that exist within different ethnic and cultural communities;
- (4) understand the ways in which institutionalized knowledge within schools, universities, and popular culture can perpetuate stereotypes about racial and ethnic groups;
- and (5) acquire the knowledge and skills needed to develop and implement an equity pedagogy, defined by Banks (1995) as instruction that provides all students with an equal opportunity to attain academic and social success in school (p. 3).

From our interview with James, we realized that we missed several opportunities to integrate multicultural education into our curriculum. Although discussed theoretically, we needed to work on the weekly and consistent practices of challenging students to reveal how race and culture shaped their pedagogy as student teachers. As a result, this paper focuses on what James’s experiences taught us about those missed opportunities and related implications for our program and courses.

The Project

Context

This teacher research project drew from a larger study that focused on the identity constructions of six pre-service teachers at Southeastern University. Southeastern University (SU) had approximately 17,157 students (31% male, 69% female) from 49 states and more than 70 countries at the time of the study. Students in the English Education Program majored in English and begin taking education courses their junior year in classes such as *Diverse Learners*, *Differentiated Instruction*, and *Literacy in the Content Area*. Students engaged in a 50-hour internship during their first semester senior year and a 10-15 week student teaching experience during their final semester. Most students in the program are White, middle class females.

The Researchers

Both of us (White, middle-class females) taught James in three English Education courses and

supervised his internship and student teaching experience at Southeast University. Amy taught James in Teaching Practices and Curriculum of Secondary English, which included a 50-hour internship. Amy also taught him in an English Education seminar that occurred during his 12-week student teaching experience. Jeanie taught James in the Teaching of Writing during his junior year.

As stated, this paper grew out of concern that we were not fully challenging our students to engage in reflection and dialogue about race and pedagogy. Our own teaching philosophies drew from theories that suggest learning to teach is an identity process (Lave & Wenger, 1991). In our classes, we developed assignments, readings, and discussions that asked students throughout their courses about how their race, class, gender and sexuality shapes their pedagogy. We realized, however, that these attempts often produced surface-level reflections and that we needed to improve how we engaged in critical dialogue about these issues on a consistent basis.

Our interpretations of James's experiences are certainly shaped by our racial and economic identities and by the fact that we were his instructors (Appleman, 2003). To broaden these partial views (Haraway, 1988), we shared this written version of the story with James who read and clarified our interpretations. Because much of the data was collected while he was a student, James may have provided us with a teaching philosophy, lessons, and reflections that attempted to give us what we wanted, rather than his authentic beliefs. Although he was no longer our student when we interviewed him formally and informally, he may have continued to feel obligated to say what we wanted to hear rather than express his honest experience. Sharing our interpretations and assumptions with James, we believe, opened significant opportunities for dialogue about teaching and teacher education. In hopes that the reader would get to know James, we included several excerpts of his comments from interviews and assignments throughout the paper to "show rather than tell" his perspective and school experiences (Appleman, 2003, p. 83). We also asked several colleagues who were experts in

this topic to read our interpretations and offer multiple perspectives. One of those experts, a multiracial educator and scholar, provided an outsider's perspective on James's experiences and challenged our interpretations as White educators by asking us specific questions about our positionality and challenging us to examine our own assumptions as teacher educators of diverse students. Below, we focus on how James answered the interview question: How did race shape your teaching? To organize his answers we divide them into two categories: Talking about race and revealing race through talk. After each category, we stop to discuss missed opportunities to practice multicultural education and plans for future instruction in our English Education courses.

James's Story: I Can't Identify With Any Group of Students

James was an undergraduate student at SU in Secondary English Education at the time of the study. Throughout James's courses, he consistently stated his belief that teachers should be facilitators that related curriculum and instruction to the lives and needs of students. When describing himself as a teacher on his teacher blog, he hoped that he would be someone "that students can confide in" and as "interacting with the class as much as possible." He viewed his job as preparing students "for life outside of high school and giving them the tools to become successful readers and writers in their respective communities."

In our interview, James used the term "mixed" to describe his multiracial identities. He elaborated about his cultural background and how it shaped his own school experiences: "And then my dad is Black and my mom is White and my granddad is Indian [Native American] and Hispanic. So I have so much. I'm a mutt... I'm fine with it, just don't call me that." During his childhood, James spent summers with his grandparents who spoke Spanish. He was from a working-class family that deemed him the responsible child. He was the only one in his family to graduate with a college degree and he took care of his ill parents and young nephew. For James to succeed in school, he

had to negotiate his family expectations with his school expectations, which obviously collided in some instances.

James decided to become a teacher after his experiences in community college where he learned the “joys of writing” and that writing was a way for him to “vent and express” himself. After working at McDonald’s, he went home and read books to take his mind away from an unappealing job. He came to believe that writing was empowering and that he could use words to advocate for his beliefs. He stated, “It was these feelings of empowerment and knowledge that led me to the field of literacy.”

James completed his internship and student teaching at Stuart High School (SHS), which consisted of students from forty-four different countries. He worked with an African American female teacher who had been teaching for over twenty years in high school English classrooms. The majority of his classes consisted of African American and Latino/as students, some of which spoke English as a second language. SHS did not meet Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) for the year and was designated a priority school with expected growth. This meant that 50 to 60% of their students were at grade level based on standardized exams. James was initially hesitant to work at SHS. In a previous internship he worked in a predominately African American school and experienced difficulties connecting with students. James recognized that he could immediately be viewed as an outsider at SHS if he did not alter his outward appearance to conceal his Whiteness. The struggle with why and how to reveal his multiracial identities to students was one that persisted throughout his narratives.

Talking About Race: What Color Are You?

As stated, James was originally fearful that he would not succeed in this school and illustrated the emotional tension related to negotiating his multiple races/ethnicities within a homogenous group. When he found out that he was placed at SHS he stated:

It really caught me off guard... The black community is hard for me, because I don't come off as black. I go to SHS and it is shock all over again. I just wanted to come in and fight someone. Why did this happen to me? It just felt like I was hit in the stomach. No not again. Honestly that was my first impression. I wanted to be at a school with a mix of students. I didn't want to be at a school that was all White or all Black.

Already anxious about how his race mattered to students, James was immediately confronted with their questions about his multiracial identities during his first full-teach lesson.

Before I even started teaching the very first question that I got asked was, “What color are you?” Right then I was caught off guard, and I said that has nothing to do with the novel. “We are not going to address that right now.” I didn't give them an answer. I don't know if I should have. I thought about it afterwards and maybe it would have helped me.

As described, the ways in which students situated James as a teacher was dependent on his race, especially during the early weeks of his teaching. He realized that the answers to these questions could build or break down barriers with students, but he was unsure about how to answer their questions at this point in his student teaching. We asked James how he dealt with this dilemma throughout the semester. He said that he never addressed the question about his race directly. At first, he attempted to conceal his Whiteness in order to be accepted by students at SHS.

I can't identify with any group of students. I am one of those people that doesn't follow just one set of culture. I pick what I like and I take that with me. Like my crazy hair. It is unacceptable. My sister called it a flippy White boy cut. If I went to SHS with hair down, they would murder me. I pull it back in a ponytail when I teach... As the semester progressed, they knew I wasn't White and that was all that made a difference to them anyway.

James' example highlights how he attempted to

negotiate his multiracial identities indirectly and nonverbally. As he grew more comfortable in the classroom, however, he dealt with questions and assumptions about his race verbally by integrating curriculum that opened opportunities for him and his students to make connections. In the interview, he stated:

... I talked to the kids. During class I did journal writings. I had them write and I listened. I made five people read everyday... So we read to each other and they asked me questions and I asked them questions. That was how we started our discussions. I tried to make connections.

James continued to reflect on how to talk to his students about his multiracial identities. At this point, he seemed to be contemplating several questions: Is it appropriate and necessary for me to talk about my multiracial identities and if so, how do I engage in that conversation in ways that will benefit the community of these students? At the end of this conversation, James considered the idea that being more explicit about his culture could actually help relationships between him and his students, but he was not sure how to do that, as seen in the next narrative.

Maybe I Should Tell Them That I'm Black

In another instance, James described a time when students in his classroom returned from lunch smelling like marijuana and disrupting class.

They talked loud. They ate chips. They passed cologne. They giggled and laughed. ...That day, I walked out. I told her [cooperating teacher] that I needed to step out of the room for minute... I had no outlet or options. I was just stuck. It stressed me from there to high heavens. I can't do this. There is not way I can make this class respect me so I just thought maybe I'm not cut out for this.

After being asked how he got “unstuck”, he stated:

I went in the classroom and addressed the issue directly with the students. I said... I don't approve of it. I'm not accepting of it and it's

not going to happen again. If it does, I promise you I will take necessary steps. You can get arrested. This is your high school career and your job and your future and possible your life. It could mess your life up. They stopped.

For James, this incident challenged him to think about his potential to be a role model, especially for this group of students.

I really want to make a difference with these kids. ...I have one student who was arrested before graduation and I see things like that happen. I hope to be a role model to them because... maybe I should tell them that I am Black because I am doing something else and I am not following what I see on TV or the stereotype. I want to be an example.

James believed that his multiracial status, specifically his African American male identity, might make an impact on students' future decisions. This is especially interesting in the case of James because he was initially afraid of identifying with his African American students. Tatum (2009) suggests that, “African American males are not engaged in a great conspiracy to fail themselves...They continue to underperform in school as they wait for educators to get it right.” In an attempt to “get it right” James's narrative indicated that he pushed against those assumptions that schools and society seemed to hold about the potential of African American male high school students by confronting the dilemma and holding high expectations in his classroom. James, however, never explicitly talked to students about his African American identities. We cannot help but wonder about the kind of impact that conversation could have made with students at this school.

Missed Opportunity

From James's narratives, it became evident that we missed the opportunity to engage our students in critical discussions about what it means to talk to high school students about personal racial identities in ways that break down rather than build barriers. As James's instructors, we made assumptions that it would be easy enough for him to discuss his multiracial identities with students

because we assumed that his students did not view him as an outsider. He illustrated to us that talking about these very personal identities made him even more vulnerable in a space in which he needed to be an authority. Because James didn't "identify with any one group" he struggled to talk about his multiracial identities in ways that did not exclude some identities over others. This resulted in James deflecting some questions while answering others in indirect and sometimes nonverbal ways. Answering the questions that the students posed was complicated and James needed time to reflect and process how best to respond.

We also explored our own reluctance to consistently push students to talk about issues of race in our courses. When reflecting on James's experience, we asked ourselves why we did not do more to push James and our students to engage in this kind of identity work. Was it because of our own fear of discussing race? Were we waiting for a safe space or opportunity that never came? We positioned ourselves as experts in English and left the identity work to other professors who specialized in diversity issues. Author 1 often found herself saying, "I am not the expert of these issues. Who am I to approach these topics with limited experiences?" It was not until we asked James about his multiracial identities that we were able to better understand his experiences. We realized that by not asking students to tell their stories and not pressing students to address or interrupt issues of race within their educational context, we were actually perpetuating and reinforcing White racial knowledge and experiences.

Future Instruction

We cannot help but wonder what would have happened to James and his sense of confidence if he could have "come out" as multiracial to his students. Although there is not one right way to deal with these dilemmas, we think that students would benefit from exploring when and how to share their lives with students, especially when they are asking students to do the same. One way to foster such exploration into our courses is by engaging students in collaborative scenarios of what they would do when confronted with the kind of questions James encountered. Video-

taped lessons and transcriptions of interactions would also provide preservice teachers the opportunity to critically analyze how race shapes our daily interactions and enactments (Rex & Schiller, 2009). Finally, we plan to ask students to write case studies about how their race, class, gender and sexuality have shaped their learning and teaching experiences at multiple times throughout their program (Gay, 2000).

All of these activities, however, are likely to be ineffective if we, as instructors, are not prepared to engage our students in discussion about race on a consistent basis. Teacher educators would benefit from professional development about multicultural education that specifically discusses how to approach dialogue about race and other markers of difference throughout all educational courses. From James, we learned that individual conferences were one way to begin those conversations. Facilitating dialogue in small and large groups in the classroom needed to begin with our own case studies about how race shaped our pedagogy followed by clear expectations about how to engage in these sensitive conversations (Bolgatz, 2005; Galman, 2010). Teacher educator programs would also benefit from engaging in conversations about how to develop conceptual frameworks about multicultural education that consider underlying assumptions, discrepancies and political agendas (Chocran-Smith, 2003).

Revealing Race Through Talk: Why Do You Talk Like You're White?

They don't think that I'm African American. They asked me directly. 'Why do you talk like you're White?' And I addressed that as... That is not talking like a White person. I'm talking like an educated person.

James's narrative indicated his recognition that students were confused about his multiracial identities. He also understood that "talking like a White person" would not gain him social status from the perspective of his students. At the same time he believed that it was important to engage students in conversations about code switching, or the practice of moving between variations of languages in different contexts (Godley et al.,

2006). We recognize that James's use of the word "educated" could be viewed as problematic since there are certainly many ways of talking in an educated way. We highlight this example, however, to illustrate how James negotiated the complex relationship of race and language in an attempt to learn and do what he thought was in the best interest of his students (code switching).

To further explain his beliefs on the matter, James described how he integrated some of these strategies in his classroom.

Last week I tried to make my students aware of this [code switching] when presenting their research. I said, "You don't talk like you're at home with grandma, you talk as if you are presenting to a board who is evaluating your presentation." Code switching in speaking is just as important in writing. We have to be able to adapt our messages...

James attempted to tell his students that knowing when and how to speak various dialects is an important skill for them to have in order to be successful in various aspects of the world. He related teaching this skill to caring about his students and attempted to put code switching into a relatable context. During a lesson, he explained to them how to present themselves within professional spaces: "You can't go into an interview and say 'Yo! Wassup!' *If I see you on the street, I'll say, 'Yo! Wassup!' You can't carry one thing across all contexts. I'm going to be professional. I can't come in here and curse you out and do whatever I want to do.*

At the same time, James sometimes used informal languages that spoke to both his African American and Latino students. For example, when teaching *Frankenstein*, he stated that he used the phrase "choked him out" rather than strangled him to death. James indicated his belief that using informal phrases like that helped students relate the topic to their lives and world and opened the conversation to discussion that incorporated their cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

James's cooperating teacher, however, shared a completely different view of code switching that

represented an institutional and societal perspective. He described his cooperating teacher as a "true grammarian" of 20 years who could "grammar it down" in the classroom with her students. He said: *The only thing Mrs. H. told me was that my grammar is bad and that my speech isn't that great.* After using the phrase "choked him out," his cooperating teacher told him that he needed to think about how administration would view him as an English teacher.

That is what I say and what they [his students] say. Mrs. H. says I can't say that. I think it's okay. I don't see a problem with it. She just said if I am being observed they might write me down for it.

Mrs. H. worried that if he did not speak "proper English" with his students, especially when he was being observed, administrators would penalize him. When asked what he might do if someone "wrote him down," he said:

Why would I say something different? My students at this school tend to grasp things like I do. If they don't then I play with it... I really want to reach my students. It just scares me that I may not do it like everyone else wants me to do it and then I'll get in trouble. It's not bad, but it's not standard.

In this example, James seemed to understand the value of using students' informal languages as a resource rather than a deficit (Godley et al., 2006; Rex, 2006). He had to negotiate, however, with institutional and societal expectations about what kind of dialects are appropriate for teaching English literature to students. In other words, he had to wrestle with questions about his reputation as a teacher that directly related to his multiracial identities.

Missed Opportunity

As teacher educators, we missed the opportunity to engage our preservice teachers in a critical examination of the ideological assumptions related to race and language. As James illustrated, the use of dialects other than standard English as a high school English teacher is controversial and potentially impactful of his professional

reputation. James reminded us that our students needed opportunities to discuss and evaluate what it means to negotiate conflicting expectations and needs from students and administration that relate to issues of race, class, gender, and sexuality. We also needed to foster more dialogue about how teachers often view dialects of English as indicators of low intelligence (Godley et al., 2006; Smitherman, 1977). Such a view stigmatizes dialects as deficits and labels home language as “wrong,” which has been found to negatively shape the academic success of students (Blake & Cutler, 2003). Although James seemed confident in his belief of using multiple dialects to instruct students, he would have benefitted from explicit guidance and curriculum on how to talk about these issues with students.

Future Instruction

We plan to ask our preservice teachers to videotape and transcribe classroom interactions and examine how they use various dialects and languages to situate their students as readers, writers, and participants of the classroom. Such analysis could help preservice teachers become aware of the impact of talk in the classroom. Specifically, we plan to engage students in conversations and case study analyses about how to teach students to choose the dialect most appropriate for the time, place, audience, and purpose (Godley et al., 2006). Godley et al. (2006) suggest incorporating dialect diversity for preservice teachers with the following three focus areas: (a) anticipating and overcoming resistance to dialect diversity; (b) addressing issues of language, identity, and power; and (c) emphasizing practical, pedagogical applications of research on language variation. Some specific ways of doing this in teacher education include challenging teachers to examine their own linguistic practices and how they code switch and engage teachers in discussions that take a critical approach to ideologies about language with the use of media, such as *Do you Speak American* (Bloome, Carter, Christian, Otto, & Shuart-Faris, 2005; Godley & Minnici, 2006; Cran, 2005). We also plan to integrate scenarios that ask questions, such as “Why do you talk like your White?” to provide students the opportunity to process questions related to race and language before they

get to the classroom.

Final Thoughts

By simply asking James how his race shaped his student teaching experiences, we learned about what it was like to be on the boundary between races. As a result, his narratives challenged our assumptions about the experiences of multiracial teachers and students and provided insight into how he concealed some racial identities while capitalizing on others at various moments during his student teaching. This teacher research project had powerful implications for us about the need for using narratives consistently across our program to integrate tenets of multicultural education, specifically those that challenge students to critically examine how race shaped their teaching and learning experiences.

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