White Out: A Case Study Introducing a New Citational Format for Teacher Practical Knowledge Research Nancy Dibble Fresno (CA) Unified School District

Nancy Dibble  
Fresno (CA) Unified School District

Jerry Rosiek  
University of Alabama

Abstract
This case study describes a biology teacher who comes to see her European-American racial identity as mediating her attempts to counsel Mexican-American students to pursue further science education. The teacher's journey to this understanding involves reflection on the structure of the science curriculum, on her personal history, and dwelling on uncomfortable feelings that contain kernels of insight that eventually grow into deeper understanding. The authors consider the whole of this process, and not just some specific conclusion that can be represented in form of summary propositions, to be the content of the practical knowledge the case study conveys. To represent this kind of knowledge adequately, this case study uses a "sonata-form" that has been introduced and explained in other articles. To this it adds the innovation of side notes, a system of notation designed to connect teachers' narratives with research from outside their experience without suggesting that teachers' experience is derivative of that research.

Theoretical Preface

Among the most interesting and pressing problems facing the field of contemporary teacher education research is the challenge of developing widely shared modes of representing teachers' practical knowledge. The past two decades have seen the case made for conducting research on teachers' "wisdom of practice" (Shulman, 1987), "personal practical knowledge" (Clandinin & Connelly, 1996; Connelly & Clandinin, 1999), and "craft knowledge" (Leinhardt, 1990). A wide variety of ground-breaking empirical studies have highlighted specific aspects, as well as the complex nature, of this knowledge (Ball, 1996; Elbaz, 1983, 1991; Grossman, 1990; Clandinin and Connelly, 1996; Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 1993; Wilson, 1989, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1994). So far, however, the styles and formats used for reporting on this practical knowledge have remained almost as unique as the scholars and teachers conducting the research.

This kind of divergence is not surprising. Newly emergent areas of study are often characterized by widely differing research methods, as well as by intense debates about the epistemic status of its findings (Kuhn, 1962). Eventually, however, the field of teacher practical knowledge research will need to coalesce around some common, albeit evolving, questions and tentatively agreed upon modes of representing its insights. It needs to do this if it is to become a fully formed area of scholarship, capable of generating a body of insights that build and comment upon one another (Shulman, 1999).

One of the chief obstacles to developing shared modes of representing teachers' practical knowledge is the tension between the discourse of the educational research community and the discourse of working teachers. The vocabulary, priorities, conception of salient details, and desired educational effects are frequently different in these two communities (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 1995). The question therefore arises: whose vocabulary, whose priorities, whose conceptions and desires will drive the representation of teachers'
practical knowledge?

The extreme answers to this question do not really suffice. Teacher practical knowledge research was founded on the idea that the exclusion of teacher concerns from the research discourse was a mistake (Shulman, 1987; Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 1993). On the other hand, privileging the discourse of local teacher communities to the point of excluding commentary from an academic community is also problematic. It cuts the teacher conversation off from a source of insights that can inform their practice. More importantly, communities of teachers, like any group, can fall into insular patterns of thought and feeling—ways of thinking that systematically ignore any disconfirming evidence. In such cases it takes critical voices from outside that community to interrupt those patterns. The challenge then is to find modes of representing teachers' practical knowledge that are germane to the lived experience of teaching, but that also permit space for voices grounded in a different experience, academic or otherwise.

A New Format: A Sonata-Form Case Study with Sidenotes

The case study that follows attempts to address this tension by using an innovative case study format. The main body of the text uses what we call a "sonata-form" (Sconiers and Rosiek, 2000; Chang and Rosiek, 2001). This format has been described at length in other articles, so we will only highlight its main features here. These case studies develop two themes. The primary theme is some aspect of the subject matter—in this case the prerequisite structure of the science curriculum. The secondary theme is some aspect of the cultural context of teaching, seemingly not related directly to the curriculum—in this case the students' and teachers' ethnic/racial identity. As in a musical sonata, the secondary theme is emphasized and given full development, constantly relating it to the primary theme. The case study ends with a recapitulation of the primary theme and an effort, albeit partial, to weave the two previously separated themes into an integrated view of teaching practice.

Sonata-form case studies are written in first person from a practicing teacher's point of view. They are written in the present tense. These conventions of syntax better permit the evocation of the lived experience of teaching. The goal here is not to gain objective distance, but to explore phenomenological possibility.

With this goal in mind, sonata-form case studies are written as hypothetical fictions. They are based on real experience, but they represent a teacher's conception of the possibilities in that experience. The case studies are designed to juxtapose conflicting discourses that shape teaching practice and describe possible ways of navigating these conflicts from the perspective of the teacher. A complete epistemological and ontological defense of the use of fiction in research representations is beyond the scope of this paper. It may help to note, however, that the idea is not new. For a defense of the practice from an anthropological perspective see Wolfgang Iser's (1993) The Fictive and the Imaginary: Charting Literary Anthropology, and from a cultural studies perspective see Anna Banks & Stephen Banks (1998) Fiction and Social Research. For a defense more broadly of the use of aesthetic forms of judgment in educational research see Elliot Eisner's (1988) The Enlightened Eye and Thomas Barone's (2001) Touching Eternity. For a defense specifically of the sonata-form case-study's use of fictionalized teaching accounts grounded in pragmatic philosophy, see Tom Barone's (2001) "Pragmatizing the Imaginary: A Response to a Fictionalized Case Study of Teaching." Suffice it to say here that fiction is not a synonym for "lie," nor is it the opposite of truth. In this instance a fictionalized narrative is used as a means of documenting possible ways of looking at key elements of real teaching situations that a teacher recognized only after reflecting on his or her experience. Nel Noddings (1995) summed up the basic rationale for this kind of research representation in straightforward terms:

Every researcher should be honest about the status of his or her work as report, philosophical fiction, or speculation. But if the confessed purpose of a narrative is to encourage readers to "try looking at it in this way," the truth of the account may not be of
In trying to identify better ways to see teaching practice, sonata-form case studies do not limit themselves to portraying discrete "best practices." Instead their goal is to explore the full range of what Jean Clandinin and Michael Connelly (1998, 1999) have called "teachers' professional knowledge landscapes"—a territory of vague impressions and concrete difficulties, of curricular imperatives and personal concerns, of ethical dilemmas and occasionally uncomfortable situations. This is undertaken on the assumption that not all teacher practical knowledge is about discrete solutions to discrete pedagogical problems, but that some practical knowledge deals with more diffuse issues—such as the meaning of racial identity in a classroom.

Sidenotes

This case study introduces an additional format innovation: sidenotes. Sonata-form case studies are designed to represent the possibilities within teachers' lived experience in a register germane to that experience. To the extent that this is accomplished, there is still a need for critical analysis from outside that experience, as well as to identify connections with other relevant research.

The standard footnote and endnote citational format was considered as a way of achieving this dialogue with other discourses. However, footnotes and endnotes carry the implication that they are necessary to justify the statements to which they refer. It privileges the authority of the text used in the citational notes over that in the main text. In cases of traditional academic writing, where the main text and that of the footnotes are drawn from the same discourse community, this privileging applies only to the specific sentence referenced. However, when the main text is written in a completely different register than the citational notes, the implication can be that the entire discourse community represented in the main text requires that its thought and insights be justified by the discourse community in the citational notes. In other words, using footnotes and endnotes as a place for academic commentary on the voice of teacher reflection in the sonata-form case study would imply that ultimately teachers' thinking needs to be justified by reference to university research. This is precisely the implication that, as teacher practical knowledge researchers, we wish to avoid (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 1995; Clandinin and Connelly, 2000; Sconiers and Rosiek; 2000).

The sidenote convention that we introduce below is intended to signify that the justification runs both ways between teacher discourse and the discourse of university academics. On the one hand the significance of a teacher's observation of a certain classroom dynamic is expanded by the fact that academic research in the sidenote has identified the same dynamic in other contexts. On the other hand the university research findings are corroborated by the teachers' identification of them in a practical situation. More importantly, the significance of the academic research finding in the sidenote is expanded (or diminished) by the explication of its relevance to the particulars of teaching practice.

The Research Process

The case study was produced as part of a collaborative teacher research project in Fresno, California that involved ten teachers, two administrators, and a university faculty member. The grouped worked together for over a year discussing issues of equity as they played out in science classrooms. At the end of this period, teachers developed series of written anecdotes and/or draft narratives that documented the way their understanding of ethnic, linguistic, and racial marginalization in some way intersected with the specifics of their science curriculum. The university faculty member, Jerry Rosiek, then collaborated with the individual teachers over the next three years attempting to 1) find a format that would adequately convey the experiences the teachers described and; 2) craft the individual case studies into a publishable form.

While writing the initial drafts, the teachers observed that they were giving retrospective accounts of their experience that had been informed by group discussion. In other words, they found it impossible to see the meaning of their
past experience outside of the new understandings they had gained from the group discussions. In fact, it was the making of new meaning out of their experience that interested them. For this reason, the initial draft writings were arguably already fictionalized and already collaborative documents that emerged out of the experiences and discussions of the whole group before the collaborative writing with the university researcher began. The university researcher used his writing experience and his knowledge of the research literature to focus the narratives on specific episodes of teaching that permitted a specific theoretical point to be made about the preparation of science teachers. Chronologies in the story were occasionally altered. Some accounts of real persons were synthesized into composite characters. Specific dialogue and teachers’ reflections were elaborated upon and enhanced to make a point more clearly. The main events of the case study, however, as well as the dilemma that drives the narrative, represents the real experience of the teacher-author.

The case study drafts went back and forth several times between the teacher-author and the university-author. Where this case study is concerned, the process took over four years, with teacher comments on one occasion precipitating a complete rewrite. No case study went forward without complete agreement by both authors that every sentence, and the overall story, represented either the facts or the real possibilities of classroom experience as they saw them.

This Case Study: Whiteness and the Science Curriculum

In the case study that follows, Rebecca, the teacher-protagonist, describes coming to understand that there was a conversation about ethnic identity going on among her Mexican-American students. This conversation, she learns, is influencing her students’ decisions about what science classes to take and when to sign up for them. Her encounters with students, as well as her encounter with research literature such as Fordham and Ogbu’s (1988) now famous article “Black students’ school success: Coping with the burden of ‘acting white’,” helps her to see a relationship between her students experience of their racial identity and the structure of the high school science curriculum.

After reflecting on interactions with her students and encounters with other forms of education about institutionalized racism—such as Lee Min Wah’s video “The Color of Fear” (1996) and conversations with her colleagues—Rebecca comes to see her own European-American racial identity as mediating her attempts to counsel students to pursue further science education. She realizes that she had not previously thought about her own racial identity that much, and that this lacuna in her vision was itself a feature of her European-American identity. She concludes that any substantive effort to educate white teachers about promoting equity in their teaching—and in science teaching specifically—would need to include critical interrogation of the meaning of their white identity for themselves and their students.

The teacher’s journey to this understanding involves reflection on the structure of the science curriculum, on her personal history, and dwelling on uncomfortable feelings that contain kernels of insight that eventually grow into deeper understanding. The authors consider the whole of this process, and not just some specific conclusion that can be represented in the form of summary propositions, to be the content of the practical knowledge the case study conveys. Fittingly, therefore, it ends not with the teacher articulating a neat solution to a profound challenge, but with the teacher demonstrating a greater appreciation of difference in the classroom and its implications for teaching high school science.

This article now shifts to the voice of Rebecca, the teacher in the case study narrative.

White-Out: A Sonata-Form Case Study of the Intersection of White Identity and Science Teaching

I black out the mark I made, and try to enter the correct grade in the unmarred corner of the tiny square in my grade book. The box is too small, and the resulting mark ends up darkening the entire square. I sigh and look up
distractedly. My eyes fall on the almost perfectly dark silhouette of a student standing by the wall of west-facing windows in my room. The late afternoon sun that casts long shadows across the shiny classroom floor circumscribes her shape with a thin white incandescence, making her look almost religious, like some portal to another world. It takes me a moment to realize Maria is facing me and watching me.

“What?” she asks in innocent response to my stare, breaking the spell. Maria, who has been hanging around after school recently, has been trying to make small talk. “Do you ride horses, Ms. Wallace?” she inquires off-handedly, knowing the answer. Yes, I do. Have you ridden horses? I respond politely, preferring to talk with her, but feeling nagged by my grade book. I promised my students their grades by tomorrow, but I don’t see how I will make it. Another school restructuring meeting is happening at 3pm and I need to go. On top of that we’re having a dinner with Mark’s parents tonight that I’ve already postponed once, so I can’t stay late today. I can’t come in early because I have to take the boys to school. Maybe Mark, who picks the boys up, could also drop them off tomorrow, just this once, so I can come in early in the morning. No, wait, he has an appointment in Merced in the morning, so he can’t do it. Shoot.

“No. But my cousin in Mexico has one,” Maria answers my question. “But it is old.” One of my horses is getting old, too, I tell her. The other one is just a year old. Maybe someday you could visit and I could show you how to ride her. That’s not an offer I would make to any student, and Maria looks at me with clear interest.

A car passes by outside with its stereo bass pounding loudly. A voice Maria recognizes yells something in Spanish and she begs pardon to return to the window. Maria has to crane her neck to yell out the school style crank window, which only opens a crack to let her voice out. I try to follow the conversation. She is 15 years old, a freshman, and can’t drive yet, so maybe she is negotiating a ride. I could give her a ride after my meeting, if she still needed one. I listen to what she is saying and hear her mention going home, but her Spanish is spoken too fast for me to really understand.

By default I turn back to the gradebook and the darkened square. How strange it is, I think, that this little string of marks is the primary record that will be left of what goes on in my class. All the personality, the emotions, the different cultures and histories in my classroom find no representation here.¹ No wonder the square got completely filled, I muse, there is so much that needs to fit into that box that can’t. I begin to see the illegible blur as a whole year of children’s lives compressed to a ¼ inch block.

¹ The last three decades have seen the development of many more holistic approaches to student assessment. There are formative, as opposed to summative, assessments (Black & Williams, 1998; Daws & Signh, 1996). There are portfolio approaches to assessment (Cambridge & Williams, 1998 Kent, 1997) and an “authentic” assessment movement (Schurr, 1999; Strickland, Strickland, and Stillman, 1998). Some of these modes of assessment have been used in the classroom upon which this case study is based. However, the school never abandoned the assignment of a final summative grade.

Also related to Rebecca’s point is Nel Noddings’ more global critique of an exclusive emphasis in our schools on subject matter learning. In The Challenge to Care in Schools Noddings (1992) suggests that it is morally bankrupt to relate to students only, or even primarily, as subject matter learners. A curriculum and pedagogy that treats children more holistically is needed.

Reluctantly, I reach into my drawer for the white-out. I don’t like to use it. It is toxic, bad for the environment. The cap sticks, then comes loose, flinging a few crusty flakes on my lap. I put my finger over the top and shake the bottle, hoping to get a little more out of it. No. It is empty. I gaze at its black and white label, sigh, then toss the thing in the trash with a rattle and clunk. Leaning back in my chair, I resume listening to Maria. I hear my name in a series of Spanish syllables, and I realize that whatever she is talking about, it has something to do
Looking Difference in the Eyes: A Surprising Conversation

Maria and I, I observe, are a study in physical contrasts. Maria is broad shouldered, strong-legged, and sienna-skinned. She has long black hair with lots of hairspray and lots of make-up. She wears the dark lipstick with the almost black outline that some young women are wearing now. She wears a tight, short cut tee-shirt, baggy Levis, and sneakers. In addition to being more than 20 years older than Maria, I am thin, alabaster-skinned, and blonde. I generally wear little make-up. Right now I am wearing black slacks, a blue polo shirt, loafers. During labs I wear a white lab coat and keep my shoulder length hair pinned up.

Despite the physical differences, Maria and I share a lot in common in other ways. Maria is quiet, but on friendly terms with almost everyone in her class. She is smart, but uncomfortable appearing too smart. She blanches when I publicly acknowledge and encourage her enthusiasm for science. Just today she was visibly embarrassed when I praised her in front of her work group. She asked me later not to say "those things" in front of other people. I felt the same way when I was her age. Girls aren't supposed to be smart, they are supposed to be pretty, etc.²

That this kind of socialization is still affecting young girls is well documented in Gender Gaps: Where Schools Still Fail Our Children, published by The American Association of University Women (1998) and Failing at Fairness: How our Schools Cheat Girls (Sadker & Sadker, 1995).

The afternoon sun is now glinting off of the lab table faucets in the back of the room, and off the glass cabinets behind them, obscuring the jars containing preserved fetal pigs, calf brain, and other things that titillate or repulse first year science students. My Hmong students, in particular, are turned off in large numbers by the dissections. I recall that Maria, however, showed no aversions to the dissection labs. In fact she seemed to enjoy them—something else we share in common. The thought makes me remember that I am running low on cows' eyes, which we dissect during an integrated lesson on optics. I reach for the new supply catalog on my desk and start flipping through it distractedly.

Maria's friends outside drive off. She drags a desk up next to mine and sits down. Do you need a ride home? I inquire, almost without looking up. "No, Miss." She rocks her desk forward, until it makes a hollow metal knock against mine. Her eyes find my open grade book and she asks, "My counselor says 'Can I know my grade in here?" You are doing well, I reply, closing the catalog. Really well. Mid-nineties I'd say. I'll have everyone's exact grade ready by tomorrow. After thinking about it for a moment I follow up, Does your counselor need your grade? I will write a note for you. Maybe she has talked to the counselor about her schedule, I find myself hoping. I have been trying to get her to sign up for Honors integrated Science II next year. "No, I don't know," Maria coyly demurs, "I was just thinking about taking more science next year." It feels to me like she wants the gratification of being told—one more time—that I think she can do it. I oblige, though I worry that some of the energy has gone out of my voice after saying it so many times. You should. You are good at it. I will tell your counselor.

We settle into a comfortable silence for a moment, until I risk a question. Maria, can I ask you something? It seems like as good a time as any to bring this up. "Sure, Miss." I consider my words, Today...when you were working in your group, she watches me closely, why did you ask me not to tell other people how good you were doing? Maria looks away, over at the wall with the fetal pigs, then looks back down at her desk and rocks it slowly forward and back. "I don't know Ms. Wallace. It's embarrassing." I wait for her to look up, but she doesn't. So I ask. Is it because you think boys won't like you because you are smart? I prepare myself to respond with talk about how not all boys think that way—that she shouldn't let what boys think of her get in the way of getting a good education. Too many of my students seem to feel girls are supposed to be pretty, not smart. I prepare to give a familiar speech, It is perfectly natural for girls and women to be as good at science as—
"No," Maria interrupts my train of thought before I really get started. "Everyone knows girls are better at school stuff than boys." Hmm? It takes a second for this to settle in, her answer is so contrary to what I expected. I wonder if she is just covering up? Maybe she anticipated what I was going to say. Maybe I sound too judgmental. The thought gives me pause. I don't want to sound smug or patronizing. "That stuff is just personal, I guess," Maria adds, continuing her thought.

We get quiet again, then Maria starts another topic, "Tell me about your little boys." She leans forward, looking curiously at me. Her question barely registers through the distracting echoes of her previous remarks. Who told her girls are better at school, I wonder? They are considered more compliant, maybe. I wrestle my attention back to her question and give her a choice, Which one? "The little one." Jeff? I warm to the topic quickly. He's a pistol. Yesterday he got his hot little hands on Mark's aftershave and... I go on for a while.

When I look at the clock, I see the faculty meeting is about to start. I tell Maria that I need to go and start to collect my stuff. "Wait!" Maria urges me. I'm sorry Maria, but I have to go to the faculty meeting they're having, I explain. This one might be important. "Wait just a second, please," she asks again. "Look at me." What? I say, not yet sure whether I need to be concerned, and drop back into my chair ready to listen. "Can you look at me for a moment?" she asks, causing me to brace myself for anything. Is she pregnant? Dropping out? Lord, I hope not. Maria looks at me intently and silently for a moment. Finally she comments, "Your eyes, they're so blue, with flecks of gold." I feel touched and slightly annoyed. Is she trying to flatter me? Her tone had suggested she had something important to say, and here she was commenting on my eye color. What's the matter? I chide her as I rise. Haven't you ever seen blue eyes before?

"No." Maria states, and then hesitates, as if she is trying to surmise the motivation behind my question. "I've never looked into a white person's eyes before. Not really looked."

Wow. I don't know what to say to that, so I continue picking up my things. Maria doesn't wait for a response. Dutifully she grabs her things and we walk out into the hall together. I turn and lock the door with a jangle of keys and a click. I feel moved, sad and embarrassed at the same time. You sure you don't need a ride? I offer. The meeting won't be too long. "No. I'm riding with Belinda. Thanks, Ms. Wallace." We say goodbye and I say I'll see her tomorrow and she walks out the door at the end of the hall.

The door floats shut behind Maria as I head in the opposite direction down the empty hallway. I walk fast, because I'm late, the sound of my footsteps echoing off the lockers. Her comment follows me into the library where the faculty meeting has already started. A few people make eye contact. Jenny waves. I sit in one of the back seats.

Maria is a freshman. She is 15 years old. She grew up in Fresno, one of the most ethnically diverse places in the world. She has gone to public schools for nearly a decade with students of a wide variety of backgrounds and she has almost certainly had a majority of European-American teachers. Could it really be that she has never, until today, looked closely—or deeply—into a white person's eyes?

I find myself wondering later how Maria and I got to that topic. Maria and I had been talking about her being good at science. I had been trying to talk to her about her schedule of science classes for next year. Then we were talking about my eyes. I have learned over the years that students' comments are far less random than they appear. One thought triggers another, and if you listen closely enough, sometimes you can discern the connections. But what could my having blue eyes have to do with her taking science classes?

Breaking the Silence about Whiteness
A few weeks later the issue of “whiteness” comes up again with two friends of Maria’s. Again, it is in a conversation about their schedules and my desire to see them take more science courses. I don’t think much of this at first, since late April is the time of the year that students begin requesting their classes for the next year.

During this time I occasionally ask students about their schedule requests. I act like it is my job to inspect and approve of their science courses. I know that’s supposed to be the counselors’ job, but long ago I realized that counselors were overworked; they don’t really have the time to get to know each student and put together a schedule that fits their needs. They certainly don’t have the time to coax the less forward students out of their defenses, to get a real picture of their potential. One of the tragic consequences of counselors’ overwork is that class size limits and scheduling problems often dictate the schedules of the least vocal students.

This is high stakes stuff. Science courses, almost as much as mathematics courses, are gatekeeper courses. Even though we have tried to work against this with our integrated science curriculum, the prerequisites for the honors courses remain in force. A bad class schedule as a freshman or sophomore can limit not only a student’s junior- and senior-year opportunities, but also their access to colleges and scholarships. Since I get them early in this process, I look their class choices over. As of today there are two weeks left till the end of the scheduling period.

Maria, Jaime, and Alberto are lingering after class. They are writing their names in ornate calligraphy on my board as I grade papers. It isn’t the gang tags the police officers have warned us about and that some students scrawl on boards when teachers aren’t looking, just elaborate versions of their real names. A student, Jim Whitfield, short, dark haired, student council member, band major, honors student, comes marching into my room, leading with an official paper. He asks politely without explanation “Would you sign this, please, Mrs. Wallace.” I take the scheduling form from him. Jim is an excellent student. I have no doubt he is signing up for the most challenging courses that can follow my honors Science II class. I look briefly at his schedule, and then sign the paper. He exclaims “Thanks!” and marches back out of the room.

As my eyes follow him out, I find myself looking at the trio at the board, and realize that I still have not seen their schedules. Honoring Maria’s request for privacy, I don’t single her out. I call out Jaime, instead. He stops writing at the board to look at me, “Yes Miss?” Where is your schedule? I need to see it before Friday. “It’s o.k. Mrs. Wallace. I’ll just do like this year.” Like what? “Like this year. I’ll just do it the first week.” He means he’ll do it the first week of school in April, as of today there are two weeks left till the end of the scheduling period. He exclaims “Thanks!” and marches back out of the room.

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They are always amused by my Spanish, which isn’t very good. “It’s weird when you speak Spanish, Miss,” Alberto remarks, emphasizing the ‘weird’ as he puts down the chalk and approaches my desk. Jaime follows him. What’s weird about it, I inquire innocently. It is the end of the day and I am just making conversation. Does my accent sound weird? “No. Your accent is good. It’s not that. It’s you.” He comments cryptically as they pull up desks. “You speaking Spanish is weird.”

What do you mean me? Alberto pulls his desk directly up in front of mine. Jaime remains a couple feet away, slouched in his seat. Maria is still at the board, her nose almost to the slate, making some intricate design on her name. Alberto averts his eyes as he dodges the question, “You know. You.”

Now I am getting curious. No, I don’t know, I lay my pen down and draw back from the papers I had been grading. After a brief silence Jaime says “Guerra.” [Literally, blond woman.] which makes Alberto laugh in a restrained way. Jaime is older than the other two; a sophomore who I believe has been held back in an earlier grade. I have heard the migrant education teachers discuss rumors that his uncle is a union activist among the local field workers. But Jaime has never said anything about this to me. I have also heard that his brother has been in trouble with the law recently and he told me his sister is a student at UCLA. As I watch the boys, they seem uncomfortable with where the conversation is going, but it doesn’t bother me—yet.

Well? Alberto cuts a shy mischievous grin that makes him the object of several young women’s affections, but he can’t hold it—like it is a stock response that isn’t going to work. Then he does it again, and holds it long enough to say, “It’s weird because you are white, Miss Wallace.” Mmmm, that’s odd. Him calling me “white” doesn’t bother me, but his using a Spanish word to say it does unsettle me. Maybe its his inflection, but “Guerra” sounds like something bad. My response is flip and logical. You’re Mexican-American and I don’t think its weird for you to speak English. So why should it be weird for— I almost say ‘a guerra’, but instead I say—me to speak Spanish? It’s the same thing, right? Alberto looks at me for a moment, then nods his head in reluctant agreement, “Yeah, I guess so. I hadn’t thought of it that way.” A quiet settles between us, highlighted by the click of Maria’s chalk on the board.

Maria has finished at the board and now joins us in a desk to my left, closer to me than to the two boys. Can we talk about your schedules now? I ask, adding Con permiso. [With your permission.] Alberto and Jaime nod assent, which gives me a slight feeling of relief. With them both sitting there, I realize that like Maria, Jaime avoids public praise for his work. Clearly he is not worried about what the boys think of him, at least not the way I thought Maria might be. I saw gender issues in her recoil from my praise a few days ago, but that doesn’t explain Jaime’s avoidance of praise. Jaime is inconsistent in getting his work done; which makes me think about Maria’s comment that girls are better at school than boys.

I pull my thoughts back to their schedules. Whatever the source of their ambivalence, the fact is none of them are used to the work expectations for advanced classes. Maria is probably the most prepared for it. But I believe they can all adjust to the higher expectations of advanced classes, given the opportunity and encouragement. Do you want to take more science classes?
Acting White

On Friday, a few days later, Jaime comes by my room at lunch time and our ongoing conversation about class schedules takes an unexpected turn. He is looking for Alberto and Maria, but they aren’t here. I invite him in and he ambles into the room, wandering along the chalk board. When he gets over near me, I ask again about his courses for next year. He expresses the ambivalence I have come to expect, and I politely explain, *The more science you take, the better it looks for your college applications.* The conversation is predictable. It almost feels choreographed.

He is quiet, standing by my desk, and I let the silence hang thinking I am in familiar territory in this one-on-one conversation. I have learned that planning a course of study four years in advance is not something that occurs to most freshman. It is a learned behavior. For students who come from low-income homes, with few relatives who have gone to college, this kind of planning has to be taught. All the assumptions that middle class college students come to school with have to be taught—like college is possible, or that some colleges are good for some things while not so good for others. It is usually in one-on-one conversations that students feel most comfortable admitting they do not know things. So I start to explain. *If you want to go to college, you have to start planning now. You have to decide what you want to take your senior year and make sure you have the courses that you need for those next year. Have you thought about your senior year classes?*

There is a long pause. Jaime’s reply is reluctant. “No, Mrs. Wallace,” then he adds, “We don’t do that.” I wait for elaboration. *We?* I finally ask. “That’s what guerros do,” he appends. He misreads the confusion that must be evident on my face, and explains the word. “The guerros. White people. Look around, Miss. White people are the ones who go around talking about their senior classes in their freshman year. Mexicans don’t do that.”

I am disappointed in his response. I was being genuine in encouraging him to go to college, and he is being sarcastic. *Be serious, Jaime. This is important.* “I’m not joking,” he says straight-faced. I struggle to hide my frustration. It is one thing to talk to me about my being white. It’s another to use race as an excuse not to do hard work. I always try and hear what my students are saying to me and I expect them to be respectful enough not to mislead me about important things. *Are you serious? You really think that?* “Really,” he emphasizes. “It’s the white kids who are always talking about their classes for next year. If we did that they’d say we were trying to act white.” *Who would say that?!* “The other kids, Ms. Wallace” *White kids?!* “Noooo!” he laughs, “the Mexican kids would say it.”

Now it is my turn to be quiet. The “Mexican kids?” If this is a dance, one of us is out of step. I am having a hard time with what Jaime is telling me. As I consider his remark, however, I have to admit that many of my Latino students do avoid my schedule inquiries. Of course the exceptions occurred to me, and I offer the names without thinking about it. *What about Lupe Sifuentes? Or Roberto Garza? Selma Aguilar? They are Mexican-American and they are in the senior honors classes. That doesn’t just happen, you know. They have been planning for it since their Freshman year.*

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6 Signithia Fordham and John Ogbu (1992) identified this exact dynamic in their article “Black Students’ School Success” (1992). Fordham elaborated on the dynamic in her book, *Blacked Out.* Nancy Dibble’s classroom experience corroborated Fordham and Ogbu’s finding among a group of three Mexican-American students. It is this experience upon which this case study is based.
“Los Cocos,” [Coconuts,] Jaime says with a wry expression and picks a pencil up out of my pencil tray. I feel further out of my element with each comment. I wait for an explanation, and when I don't get one, I ask. **What does that mean, Jaime?** He performs the role of cultural translator again, looking at me and speaking softly. "Coconuts, brown on the outside, white on the inside." White on the inside? Wow. It is a tight, if destructive, logic. Academic planning is something white students do. If the Latino students do it, they are ‘white on the inside.’

I still think you should sign up for science courses next year, I assert, trying to fend off a feeling of helplessness. Jaime doesn't seem distressed, as much as resigned, and intrigued to be telling me these things.

**What Makes Something White?**

Jaime is in my class the next day. Students are working on their term portfolios. I sit at my desk in my lab coat, which I am wearing just because I am cold. It is raining. The rain always creates a kind of pent up energy in the school. It is affecting Jaime and Alberto, who are being idle, so I ask them up to my desk. "What did we do, Mrs. Wallace?" Alberto protests, even though I have never singled him out for chastisement before. *You're not in trouble, I reassure him, I just have a question to ask you, if you have a minute.* They pull up the squeaky chairs with wheels that were supposed to be for the computers, but that drift all around the classroom as coveted objects.

"What up, Mrs. Wallace?" Alberto volleys. *It's about acting white,* I broach abruptly, directing my remark mostly to Jaime. **What makes something white?** At first they are both confused at my question, and I realize I am making the mistaken assumption that Jaime has been thinking as much about our previous conversation as I have. "Oh, the other day." Jaime calibrates and looks around. "What?" Alberto asks him. "The schedules y las Bolillas." [A brand name of small loaves of white bread popular in northern Mexico.] "Aii!" Alberto flinches and laughs at the word Jaime used. *If its profanity, don't tell me* I advise them. "No miss," Alberto snickers, "It's not a curse, it's a little bun…" and he holds his hands up to describe a small object, which makes him laugh more. "It's a kind of white bread sold in Mexico," Jaime explains and is laughing, too. His parents are from Tijuana, where he had visited this weekend. His cousin used the word to refer to American tourists, he explains matter-of-factly. It seems to be getting easier for him to say these things in front of me. I am glad; it feels like maybe Jaime is opening up a little to me.

After they settle down, I gently remind them, *So? So?* Alberto repeated—then "Ooh. Being white." "What's the question again," Jaime asks, and I get quiet like I do when I am waiting for their full attention. Maybe this isn't such a big deal after all, I find myself reconsidering. "No, really," Jaime appeals and leans in. "What is the question?" I wait a second and then reiterate, **What makes something white? You told me last week that filling out schedules ahead of time was a white thing. What makes it white?** Alberto seems to understand the question, although I can't tell if this is because he and Jaime had talked about it or not. Jaime ponders the subject for a moment, but can't come up with a specific answer. "I don't know, Miss Wallace," Jaime offers uncomfortably. "White people do it." We are all three talking more quietly than ordinarily we would, I notice, like its a secret we are talking about. I press the question. *Some Mexican Americans make out their schedules ahead of time. But you said they didn't count. You said that made them white.* I try to get Jaime to see the circular logic of his assertion, but this only serves to confuse the conversation.

Amy, a freshman, approaches my desk and asks me about an assignment she needed to make up. As I explain her options, I get an inspiration. I ask Amy if she would mind telling what science classes she plans to take in high school. I explain that Jaime and Alberto were talking with me about their schedules and I wanted them to hear some other students' plans. Amy explains what she needs to do to take the maximum amount of science that the high school has to offer. When I ask her why she is taking so much science, she says "To get into a good college, which will help me get into medical school." *So there is no other reason?* I ask Amy, suppressing an impulse to catch Alberto's and Jaime's eyes. "Like what, Mrs. Wallace?" **Well let me ask this way, is there anything about you
that would make you more qualified to be a doctor? She seems confused, "You mean like being good at science?" Yes, that's one reason you'll do well. Are there any others? She looks at me uncomprehendingly. I know this sounds strange, Amy, and I appreciate your putting up with me. I'm almost done, I promise. Let me put the last question another way—what would suggest someone shouldn't be a doctor? She looks upward as she thinks about it, then meets my eyes again. "You mean like not liking the sight of blood?" Yes, that would be one thing. Are their any other things that should keep someone from signing up for the classes that would help them get to medical school? "I don't know what you are asking Mrs. Wallace. I guess you have to be willing to work hard? Is that what you want?" I shrug. I am not sure what I want, Amy, besides to hear your thoughts on the matter. Thank you for being so helpful. "Can I go?" Yes. And thank you again.

I turn back to Alberto and Jaime and as soon as Amy is out of earshot I say, See? She didn't mention being white anywhere in her reasons for planning her courses ahead of time. Alberto looks at the floor. Jaime just stares. Their silence makes me feel self-conscious. The bell rings, startling me. Before the two of them leave, I urge them one more time, You two should go today at lunch and sign up for the Honors Science II.

As I watch them walk away, I know they won't sign up for the classes. And they don't.

**Alone with My Questions**

Jaime, Alberto, and Maria don't come by during lunch the next day, or the next. Maria doesn't come by after school. They come to class and at first little seems different between us. But I begin to have a vague feeling of trepidation when I talk to them. I find I am reluctant to bring up their schedules again. It is like I am wading in murky water and there is something I can't see just below the surface. Are they mad at me? I wonder if they sense hesitancy in me, and whether that is causing them to pull away. Thinking all this makes me feel tangled up and frustrated.

It is not my habit to dwell on students' feelings about perceived slights. Adolescents are volatile creatures. Anything can set them off. A week later they will be over it and on to some new melodrama. Usually their emotion makes sense to me, even if I think it's silly. But this time it is different. Some part of this I really don't understand. I mean, how can planning a schedule be "white?" I believe Jaime thinks it is. My being white was on Maria's mind, too.

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That weekend, while working in my garden, I keep turning the episode over in my mind. The fresh smell of the newly turned soil soothes my frustrated thoughts. I drift back to a presentation I saw at a teacher in-service last year—a Mexican-American woman who talked about "multicultural learning styles." Among other things she told us that Mexican-American students were from a "fatalistic" culture and had an "external locus of control." I gathered eventually that this meant the children believed their fate was out of their hands. Therefore, she explained, Mexican-American children should not be expected to respond to high-pressure situations. Their learning style required stability and predictability.

7There is a large body of research literature that has documented the presence of different learning styles among K-12 students generally (Cavanaugh, 1981). This learning style theory has been used by some scholars to explain the low academic performance of cultural minority students (Grasha, 1996; Dunn, et. al., 1993; Shade, Kelly, & Oberg, 1997; Ramirez, & Castenada, 1974; Banks, 1988).

8For a review of the general literature on "locus of control" research see Lefcourt (1982) and Presson & Benassi (1996).
Sweat trickles into my eye, causing me to squint and wipe my eyes with my sleeves. Personally, I disliked the presentation. I found out later that Ana Muñoz, the head of the ESL program, was livid about it. The implication seemed to be that we should avoid insisting on hard work or high academic ambitions from Mexican-American students. Or, worse, that the learning needed to be rote repetition. I thought at the time that maybe I misunderstood. I wanted to be wrong. I felt embarrassed for the presenter, who seemed to be insulting her own ethnicity. But Ana and some of the other ESL teachers made it clear in an email to the whole staff how they felt. They accused the presenter and the administration of trafficking in stereotypes. A lot of people were upset.

Research on culturally specific learning styles was part of a larger movement called "difference theory" (Banks, 1988; Brice-Heath, 1983). Difference theory was offered as a response to "cultural deficit theories" (Banks, 1988; Valencia, 1997) that assumed something was wrong with the cultural minority student and sought ways to "fix" individual students. Difference theory locates educational equity problems in the culture of the school and the way it fails to serve students who are different (Banks, 1988; Valencia, 1997; Varenne & McDermott, 1999).

When closely scrutinized, however, difference theories often appear to be yet another form of deficit theory. (Banks, 1988; Valencia, 1997). Learning styles associated with cultural minority groups are consistently those which are least valued or have the most limitations (i.e. see Ramirez & Castenada (1974) on field-sensitive learning styles.)

In the back of the flower bed I find a weed with a deep tap root. It resists my easy pull, so I begin digging around it, trying to get to its bottom without uprooting the flowers around it. As I think about Jaime, Alberto, and Maria's withdrawal, I find myself wondering if maybe the presenter was right after all. Maybe I am pushing too hard. Then I wonder if thinking this means I am succumbing to stereotypes. I have considered talking to Mrs. Muñoz about my concerns, but I don't know her very well. And, to be honest, I am afraid of how I would sound. I might sound racist myself and that might only alienate me from her. I don't want that.

I brought the subject up with some of my "white" colleagues—Gary, and then with Sherri—but they offered only generic advice. "Send them to the counselor." "Tell them science can get them a good job." "You can only do so much, Rebecca," etc.—none of which was very helpful. When I persisted with the questions, Gary, my Department chair, looked at me like I was a little weird and made a joke to deflect it, "Not everyone can be in honors Science, Rebecca, then it wouldn't be an honor." I didn't really appreciate that. I quit bringing it up with him.

I break off the root as deep as I can reach and fill the soil back in. My knees are hurting. I stand up and stretch my back. I can hear the boys shout as they help Mark rake up the grass clippings in front.

Inside the house I wash my hands in the sink and look out the window at the flower bed in which I had just been sitting. For a moment, I feel how alone I am with my questions about Maria, Jaime, and Alberto. I feel sad. If I was having trouble with something else at school, I could ask many other teachers about it. But about this, I have no ready place to turn. I feel too vulnerable to ask strangers. And those close to me avoid talking about it.
I am not completely isolated, I recall. Tonight, I have a meeting of a teacher research group I am a part of. Our district science coordinator put it together to discuss these kinds of culture and teaching issues. I have been feeling ambivalent about the group since it started. They pay me to attend, but it hasn't seemed very practical and it takes me away from my family one weekend a month. Tonight, however, I find I am looking forward to the group's conversations.

The Fresno Science Education Equity Teacher Research Group was sponsored by the Fresno Unified School District and the California Science Project. It was comprised of twelve teachers active in science curriculum reform and committed to promoting educational equity. Two administrators also participated. A University researcher and an experienced teacher researcher facilitated the group meetings. The group met once a month and had discussions that alternated between research literature (on colonialism, race, class, gender, and the curriculum) and on teachers' practical experiences with these issues. This process involved building trust in the group, so that the more sensitive aspects of these issues could be collectively discussed. For a fuller description of the research process, see Sconiers & Rosiek (2000).

"The Burden of Acting White"

I set some lasagna out of the freezer for dinner and retreat to my bedroom where I dig through my desk to find the article we were supposed to read for tonight's meeting. I always wait until the day of the meeting to read it, so it will be fresh in my mind for the discussions. This time however, it is as if I lived the article before I read it. It hits so close to home that it gives me chills.
The article is by a woman named Signithia Fordham, co-authored by John Ogbu. Its title is "Black Students' School Success: Coping with the Burden of Acting White." It describes how African-American students can come to associate behaviors that lead to academic success with "acting white" and so avoid these behaviors in the interest of maintaining important social ties with their community. It is like she interviewed Jaime!

11Here we see one of the most interesting and promising features of this format for representing research on teacher knowledge. In much contemporary educational research writing, the meanings of research findings are assumed to be invariant across different contexts. Teachers are assumed to understand research findings correctly when they understand them as professional academics would.

Teacher practical knowledge research, however, is founded on the premise that there are ways of knowing that arise within a practical context that are qualitatively different than the ways of knowing valued by traditional educational research practices (Shulman, 1988; Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 1995; Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). This, presumably, would include understanding research findings differently than do researchers themselves. Nonetheless, it is assumed that these two ways of knowing intersect, overlap, and can compliment one another.

To date, most research publications have focused exclusively on representing one or the other of these modes of knowledge. What is needed is a mode of representation that puts teachers' ways of knowing into dialogue with academic discourse, without privileging either one outright. This side note format permits such dialogue.

In the passages that follow we see how this is the case. Not only do references to the literature appear in the sidenote bars. They also appear in the primary text of the case study narrative. However, where in the sidenotes these references are treated in a traditional academic fashion, in the main text of the case study the research findings are represented as experienced by teachers in the context of their other concerns.

I wish I had read the article earlier. I might have felt a little less confused over the last few weeks. I want to pour over it again, but I hear the boys come in. I meet them in the living room and remind them all too late not to track grass on the carpet. Little Jeff gets a bath from me while Mark takes a shower. Then I hand Jeff off to Mark while I take my shower. I put the lasagna on to cook and set the timer, telling Mark to be sure to listen for it. Mark tells me to take the truck because the car is low on gas and he wants to fill it up.

I am re-reading the Fordham article at stop lights as I drive to the meeting.

A Teacher Research Group

Our group discussion of the Fordham & Ogbu (1988) article is less than satisfying. I finally work myself up to mention that I have seen what Fordham & Ogbu (1988) describe in my classroom, only with Latino students instead of African-American students. But I feel like it doesn't come out right. The others are not as struck by my situation as I am. The people of color in the room, particularly Zack and Sarah, our African-American members, are not very moved by the content of the article. They consider the point it makes obvious and are frustrated that Fordham & Ogbu (1988) do not offer any practical remedies. I try again to bring up my situation by describing my response to Jaime and Alberto in class that day. This is met by an uncomfortable silence. Maria asks me bluntly, "Why would you do that? Of course white students don't think science is white. They just feel entitled to it." Her comment raises more questions for me, but others are trying to talk so I become quiet.

The conversation starts to move very fast, too fast for me to follow all of it. The facilitator reminds us of an earlier article that had addressed insider/outside
issues. I am clearly an outsider to Mexican-American culture, I know. But I don't know what that means for my teaching. What surprises me is how, among the people of color in the group, there are insiders and outsiders among the insiders and outsiders. For example, when it is revealed that John Ogbu is an African immigrant and he was Signithia Fordham's professor, Sarah and Zack exchange a knowing glance that I find quite incomprehensible. As an African immigrant, Ogbu is apparently considered an outsider to African-American culture. Assad, an immigrant from Somalia in our group, verifies this. He says he actually has an easier connection with his immigrant students than with his African-American students—a comment that seems to frustrate Sarah. One of the facilitators, James Cruz, mentions the difference between being a Spanish speaker and non-Spanish speaker in parts of San Jose where Spanish is the primary language.

John Chang, who works in my building, brings up an interesting question. He points out that not all insiders are right about everything they know. As a young boy in Laos, he gives an example, he had been taught Hmong legends about America—specifically, that it was populated with blond haired blue eyed giants that ate small dark haired people. I am amazed at this. "Look at me now," his hands wave outward before him, "I live and work among the giants." Bill von Felten, who is sitting next to me, shifts uncomfortably in his seat. A few moments later, Roy Mendiola brings up John's remark, and warns "As a person of Native-American ancestry, I want to encourage you, John, not to dismiss the stories of your ancestors completely. Because while it may not be literally true, it may contain a metaphorical truth that your people need to survive in this country." Metaphorical truth? That Americans eat small dark haired people?

The group reluctantly takes a break as the hotel staff brings out dinner. This was by far the best conversation we have had yet. All of us can tell something is happening. My friend Bill and I are leaning against the wall next to Gene Wyman, one of the group facilitators. Bill looks at Gene and observes, "It seems to me that a lot of people in this room have given a lot of thought to what it means to be white...and most of those people are people of color." Gene seems impressed. "That's a very astute observation. I think you are right. We should talk about why that is tomorrow." Bill tells me, however, after Gene leaves that he isn't sure he wants to be the one to bring it up.

On the way out of the meeting that night, I catch Gene and James in the hotel lobby. I want to try one more time to talk about my situation with Maria, Jaime, and Alberto if they are willing to listen. I tell them about Maria, when she looked at my eyes and said she had never looked in a white person's eyes before. "Why would she say that to me?" Gene looks skeptical. He says he would need to know more about the context of the remark to even try to interpret it. James, however, is quiet for a moment. Then he holds my eyes and emphasizes "I believe you should take her remark very seriously." I do, I affirm, but I don't understand it. Why would she say that to me?" I don't know exactly why," James admits, "but I think it shows a lot of trust. I could probably have said the same thing as Maria at her age. I grew up avoiding white people," he explains. "In fact, Gene may be the first white person whose eyes I held for a long period of time, and I was in graduate school when I met him." Gene seems astonished by this remark but makes no comment.
The Color of Fear

The next morning Gene introduces a video entitled "The Color of Fear." He says that the video is famous. Excerpts from it have appeared on the "Oprah Winfrey" show, he reports. "It is about a group of men—two European-Americans, two African-Americans, two Mexican-Americans, and two Asian-Americans—who come together for a weekend to discuss race and racism. This conversation involves a lot of story telling about family experiences, arguments about history, and strong emotion, including anger and tears." The video, he continues, will take about ninety minutes to watch and the rest of the day to discuss. As I sip my coffee and eat a bagel, spending an entire day discussing one video seems excessive to me. I want to return to the topics of conversation from the previous night.

The video, it turns out, does address the topics we discussed last night, and then some. Everyone, including me, is quickly enthralled. The conversation between the men gets to issues like the history of colonialism and how it makes people of color feel about being American. I have never heard these kinds of issues discussed so forthrightly before. Many parts of the video stand out to me, but one part in particular shakes me more than any other. One of the European-American men in the video, David, angered and frustrated the other men in the video by repeatedly insisting that race is mainly a problem in the minds of people of color. If "they" simply tried, he felt, they would be accepted as "normal" Americans. I knew he was being naive about this, but I didn't appreciate the depth of the misunderstanding.

Eventually an African-American man in the group named Victor confronts David. Sitting in a small director's chair, Victor's arms gesture with increasing emphasis as he spells it out...

"There is a way in which 'American' and 'White' and 'human' all become synonyms. 'Why can't we just all treat each other as human beings?' To me, when I hear that from a white person, it means 'Why can't we all just pretend to be white people?'"

Judging by their expressions, Victor seems to be speaking for the other men of color. Victor begins to mock the attitude he feels some white people have, causing Roberto, an older Mexican-American man to start laughing.

"I'll pretend you are white and then you can pretend to BE white. Why don't you eat like I eat. Why don't you drink like I drink."

Victor's voice begins to rise.

"Why don't you think like I think. Why don't you feel like I feel."

Roberto's laughing has stopped. Victor's sarcasm has turned to rage. He is shouting now.

"Goddamn it! I am so sick and goddamned tired of hearing about that! I'm sick of that! 'Why don't you come the hell over here,' that's what I hear every goddamn day! And you know I can't come over there. You know that this skin and that this hair, and that this way that I talk and that what I think and feel will NEVER be"
included because I am unpalatable to this nation!"

His voice drops, almost to a whisper...

"Because you don't want to…"

The whole group, both in the video and those of us watching it, is silent except for the sound of Victor's heavy breathing for several seconds, then he adds.

“You think it will all be fine when we all treat each other like ‘human beings.’ And what that says to me is ‘Don't be yourself. Be like me. Keep me comfortable. Connect where I am ready to connect. Come out to my place. Uh-uh. That is bullshit.’

Victor's anger is hard to listen to. I feel mad and embarrassed at the David character. I want him to quit talking, but he keeps on. Later in the tape someone asks David what being white meant to him. He considers the question and replies that he hadn't thought much about it. This causes Victor to accuse David of avoiding the question. Lawrence, the other African-American man disagrees, and says something that reminds me of Bill Von Felten's observation the day before.

"I think this is one of the major problems with racism. I think he [David] did just answer the question. As a white man, he doesn't have to think about his position in life, his place in the world. The history books tell him, as they are written, that this world is his. He doesn't have to think about where he goes, what he does. He doesn't have to think 'like a white person.' The way the world has been set up, America in particular, white IS human. So he doesn't have to worry about how do I think like a “white person.” I don't know, but I would assume that doesn't enter a white person's mind, because they don't have to deal with that from day one. They step into a world that is theirs."
When the lights come up, so to speak, everyone is quiet. Our facilitator, Gene, insists on starting our discussion before any bathroom breaks—"while the feelings are fresh." The discussion is awkward at first. Talking through lunch, people share personal stories—about being harassed by policemen, about family histories that include lynchings and slave ownership, about immigration. We rewind the video and listen again to certain parts. The point that comes out is that no group can be considered the "normal" group, without others being "abnormal." It is never enough just to be nice and want to include others in our way of life, because that amounts to trying to silence or erase other cultures.

Gene explains the way some people now make a distinction between respecting "diversity"—which is trying to fit different cultures in our own culture by incorporating them into a story we already have of basic sameness—and respecting "difference"—which is about letting difference remain different and letting someone else tell the story sometimes. Coming on the heels of last night's discussions and my experience with Maria, Jaime, and Alberto, the effect on me is like a crack in a dam. I feel flush with many different emotions at once.

It is a long ride home that evening. As I traverse the dark highway, few other cars in sight, I alternately experience feelings of expansiveness and embarrassment. I feel like I have learned things that put a lot in perspective, not just about school, but about daily life, politics, why things are the way they are. On the other hand, I now feel embarrassed about what I said to Jaime and Alberto. Just like David in the video, I insisted to Jaime, Alberto, and Maria that everyone is basically the same, that science means the same thing to everyone. And just like David, I have felt that opinions to the contrary needed to be corrected and put aside as quickly as possible, not listened to. I did that with Jaime and Alberto. I kept asking them to ignore race, to get beyond it. But it is impossible for them to ignore it the way I do, because they are not the majority. They have to deal with cultural difference even when they do not want to.

It occurs to me that Jaime, Alberto, and Maria have been trying to tell me what was really going on, by bringing up the subject of whiteness. They had been reaching out to me, not me to them—even though I made every effort to explain their comments away. I feel very sad. What must it feel like to have to rely on adults who understand so little? The more I think about it, the more moved I am that they tried to talk to me about it.
Gravel crunches beneath the tires of my truck as I finally pull in at home. I drop out of the truck and walk out to the barn to feed my horses before going in for the night. As the cool night air envelops me, I breathe deep and think about what I have and all the things that I probably take for granted. Not just material stuff, but other stuff...of being considered...normal. My hair. My way of talking. My eyes. I think about school tomorrow and seeing Maria, Jaime, and Alberto. I wonder how it will feel and what I will say to them. As I slide the barn door open, I imagine it will be like walking into an entirely different school tomorrow.

Returning to the School

...Maria looks at me intently and silently for a moment.... “Your eyes, they're so blue, with flecks of gold.” Is she trying to flatter me? Maria's tone had suggested she had something important to say, and here she was commenting on my eye color. What's the matter? I chide her as I rise. Haven't you ever seen blue eyes before?

“No.” Maria states, and then hesitates, as if she is trying to surmise the motivation behind my question. “I've never looked into a white person's eyes before. Not really looked.”

I am thinking about Maria on Monday morning as I unlock my door when she walks up behind me. “Buenos dias, Mrs. Wallace” she greets. ¡Buenos dias! ¿Como estas? I reply. “I'm o.k.” she replies. "I'm hungry." She follows me briefly into my room, which makes me glad, but she does not linger for much conversation. “Do you really think I should take honors science?” she asks as she often does when there is nothing else to talk about. I think about it for a moment, and say simply, Yes, of course, but I do not elaborate. She says "O.K." A few seconds later she says “Breakfast is almost over,” and begs pardon to leave to the cafeteria. She is so polite.

That afternoon in third period I ask Jaime and Alberto to stay after class. I know they don't expect or require it. I am not even sure they will understand it, but I apologize anyway for my earlier attempt to dissuade them from their impressions about whiteness. Without burdening them with more information than they need, I tell them a little about the video we watched, the discussions that weekend, and how my views about some things are beginning to change. I don't have any answers, but I can see now how—and I hesitate before I say it—white people don't have to think about race. And how annoying it can be when...we...try to convince others that it is not a real concern.

“Sure Mrs. Wallace.” Alberto sweetly reassures me. “Its no big deal. We're cool.” Jaime is more reserved. He simply nods his agreement with Alberto's affirmation. Alberto quickly changes the subject. “So what about our sappos verdes?” he asked. He is referring to our terrarium with the frogs. I announced today that they will need a home for the summer, which includes taking the tank, food, and other equipment. Alberto was one of the students who volunteered. We will have to come up with a way for deciding who gets the frogs. “But they like me best!” he claims.

On an impulse I look at Alberto and offer, "I'll give you the frogs for the summer if you sign up for Honors Science II this week. "Ooohhh, Ms. Wallace,” Alberto sighs and I instantly feel self-conscious. Am I doing it again? Imposing my expectations for what is normal? The noise of students moving between class spills into the room. Students from my next period began trickling in. Alberto changes the subject again, “Can you write us a pass?” he requests. I decline. You still have plenty of time to get to class.On the way out Jaime asks, “What was the name of that video?”

Alberto comes to my classroom after school on Wednesday. He has his revised schedule form. He had signed up. I promise him the terrarium at the year's end.

A Surprise

Friday we have another faculty meeting about school restructuring in the library. I walk in late and several people wave at me from their small fiberglass chairs and round tables. I like these meetings, if only because I get to see so many
When I sit down, Mark Gonzales, looks at me and says sarcastically “Right on time.” Mark is a mathematics teacher. He is light-skinned and doesn’t speak Spanish. He is young, a recent graduate of Fresno’s teacher education program. I try to pay attention but soon grow weary of the talk about school policy. I can see Mark is impatient with it, as well. Mark, I lean over and whisper to him, can I ask you a question? “Sure,” he says while watching the new vice-principal try to summarize everyone’s comments and only end up making everyone mad. “What a disaster!” he whispers emphatically. “Where did he get his principal’s license, Wal-Mart?” I smile at his joke, then follow my impulse before I lose my nerve, “When was the first time you looked into a white person’s eyes?” Mark turns and looks at me strangely, “What?” I mean really looked. Mark made bug-eyes at me and whispers “Like right now?” Come on. If you think it is a dumb question just say so. Mark turns back to watch the vice-principal get politely upbraided by several people. “Why do you ask?” he says, with a resigned tone.

I tell him a little about Maria and he shrugs his shoulders, “I see.” He waits for another moment when everyone is talking and then explains, “Rebecca, I grew up in a mostly white neighborhood, with white friends, white girlfriends, never feeling anything but white myself. My parents are from Mexico, but in Mexico they are considered white. For all practical purposes, except for the way the district uses my name to meet quotas, I am white. So I don’t know if I can help you.” Sorry, I offer, I am just worried about a student. “It’s alright. I don’t mean to be short.” He pauses before adding, “I just get really tired with the labels sometimes. ‘White,’ ‘Latino,’ ‘Hispanic,’ ‘Black,’ ‘Brown.’ Sometimes I just wish people would let it go.” He looks at me plaintively, “You know? I mean why can’t we all just be human?”

On the way out the door of our school Library I catch Glenda, Maria’s counselor, and ask if she has a moment. “Sure” she says with a forced enthusiasm, brushing out the wrinkles in her expensive and professional looking skirt. I need to talk to you about Maria Maldanado. It is about her science class. “Is there a problem?” Glenda asks anxiously, switching her purse from one arm to the other. Scheduling is thankless work, I know. No one is ever satisfied. I almost drop the question out of sympathy. No. Or, yes. Actually, I don’t know. She looks at me expectantly. I just want you to know that I have been talking to Maria this week and I am trying to convince her to change her schedule. Glenda looks more worried, “I don’t understand.” Well, I try to clarify, I don’t think she is going to make the change, so it probably doesn’t matter. But if she wants to, I think she should be allowed in Honors Science II, even though it is late. “She’s already in.” Glenda says cautiously. Huh? “We made out her schedule last week. Honors Science. Honors History. She told me you suggested it, and since it was late, I went ahead and submitted it. Her grades were good.”

It takes me a moment to process what Glenda is telling me. So Maria had...
already signed up when we were talking on Monday? I shake my head and laugh to myself. I feel like I am in a tug of war and the other end of the rope just went slack. If I needed any more evidence that I don't fully comprehend the inner workings of Maria's mind, well... “Is it alright?” Glenda follows up in a worried tone, “I can change it back tomorrow.” No, Glenda, it's perfect. Don't change a thing. “Are you sure?” Yes, thanks. I did suggest she change her schedule. I just wasn't aware she had already done it, I say and start following the crowd out, feeling very strange about it all.

**End of the Year: Making Connections**

Over the next month some ease returns to my interactions with Maria, Jaime, and Alberto. It is not the same ease as earlier this year. I find that I hear comments that I do not recall hearing before. I notice the way students self-segregate more than I used to. It is somewhat painful to watch how oblivious some students and teachers are to the cultural difference in front of them and I continue to wonder about myself and how much I miss. On the other hand, I feel included in a new kind of joy and amusement as I notice the way my Latino students play with that difference.

These new feelings are finding their place among the push of school details, changing the nuances of what I do, making me rethink my priorities.

Soon, the last day of school is upon us. Alberto comes in after the final bell and asks for the terrarium. He has been talking about it all month. Now that it is time to take it, he is anxious and asks me numerous questions about how to take care of the frogs. “What if they die, Mrs. Wallace?” If you feed them, keep them cool, and keep them watered, they'll be fine Alberto. His nervousness on behalf of the frogs is cute. He puts the frog food in his pocket and takes the terrarium carefully out to his brother's car.

Maria didn't volunteer information about her schedule. I finally had to ask. She minimized the decision, but was sweetly grateful for my support. “I couldn't have done it without you, Mrs. Wallace," she claimed, even though I didn't feel like I helped very much. Interestingly, she asked me about the video. I had never mentioned it to her, so I can only infer that Jaime and Alberto talked to her about what I said to them. The deadline for schedule changes passed and Jaime did not sign up for the class. Maybe he will try in the fall, like he said he would.

I have had some time, now, to think about what Jaime said to me and about the connections between race and the science curriculum. Do I really believe signing up for courses is a "white thing?" No, not in any final sense. But I do believe it carries that meaning for Jaime, Alberto, Maria and some of their friends and that it does no good for me to dismiss that.

At one level a certain kind of connection between the culture and the science curriculum was not hard for me to fathom. Science is a progressive curriculum. Courses build on each other. In order to get the maximum science education in high school, a student really needs to start planning for that in 8th grade! If signing up early for courses is considered "acting white" and "acting white" is something to be avoided among some Mexican-American students, then the students' conceptions of their cultural identity will inhibit their science learning.
My problem, I think, was stopping there. It left me with two choices: either the science curriculum needed to be changed or the students needed to be fixed. The first doesn't seem viable to me. We might try to improve the science curriculum, I guess, and make it more accessible. But whatever we do, it is going to remain progressive; one course is going to build on the next. Stoichiometry requires algebra. Bio-chemistry requires knowledge of basic chemistry. Some long range curriculum planning will be needed.

Fixing students' attitudes therefore can seem like the only other option. I tried to convince Jaime and Alberto one-on-one that signing up early for courses was not "a white thing." The problem is, these beliefs about school are not just individual beliefs, but beliefs belonging to whole groups of people. Beliefs held in common by whole communities do not change easily, nor should they. Looked at in this way the situation can seem hopeless.

In other words, a deficit theory (Valencia, 1996).

Signithia Fordham's (1996) book, Blacked Out, expands upon the analysis of the article she wrote with John Ogbu (Fordham & Ogbu, 1988). In this book she lays out in detail how African-American students' experience of academic achievement as a "white thing" is not just socially constructed, it is the consequence of a long history of colonialism and oppression. As such, it has ballast that will not be moved easily.

What is missing in this analysis is any focus on the culture of the school. Our own culture can be invisible to us. But it is not invisible to our students. Students do not just encounter the science curriculum free-floating in space. They encounter it through the institutions and people presenting it to them—most of which are white. But in all of my in-services and teacher professional development seminars, we have always talked about their culture. We never talk about what the "whiteness" means to students. It seems to me now like a huge thing to leave out. Our silence about it, I think, imposes it on our students as an expectation that they can never meet. Until teachers...especially white teachers...understand that, I fear all of our efforts to teach science equitably will fall short.


Here then is the unique contribution of this case study to the literature. It seeks to explicate the way the dynamic in which students perceive academic achievement as "acting white" identified by Fordham and Ogbu (1988) intersects with particular subject matter—in this case science. It also seeks to document the intersection of a critical understanding of white identity to a particular subject matter—again, science. The larger point being that it will not be enough to study the production of racial identity in general in our schools, but that there will be a need to map out the particulars of that territory as it relates to specific curriculum content, including that subject matter content thought to have little or nothing to do with race, culture, and ethnicity—like science.
I close the classroom door behind me and lock it. This consciousness of my whiteness will be enabling, I think, but I'd be lying to say it wasn't unsettling. It's not just one more technique or insight that I can slip into my teaching practice. It is more like Darwin's discovery that there are no fixed species. It changes the meaning of everything and makes the world seem less reassuring. Things that I took for granted as universal and obvious to everyone turn out to be neither. It was more comfortable to think that my way of seeing the world is normal and to consider everything but the most superficial differences abnormal. But that comfort came at the expense of my ability to listen to, respond to, and ultimately to respect my students.

The connection then is:

1) Science curriculum is progressive. For students to get the maximum benefit out of their science education, they need to receive advisement from teachers about which classes to take.

2) This advice is not offered, however, in a cultural vacuum. It is received and processed through students' pre-existing cultural frameworks which a teacher needs to understand.

3) Neither can a teacher take for granted that they are considered a neutral source of good advice. The teacher's advice will be interpreted as coming from someone with a raced, classed, and gendered positionality. A teacher, therefore, needs to reflexively understand their own identity as it is experienced by students and how that identity influences the trust students can have that their situation is being understood.

What we have had in the past is too much of #2 and not enough of #3, which leads to deficit theory blaming of children—their attitudes, their family, their culture—for the problem. What this case study suggests is that what we need is an integration of these two in teacher education curriculum and more explicit ties of both to curricular particulars.

As I walk out the doors of the school, I hear my name being called. "Mrs. Wallace!" It is a figure by a car in the West parking lot. I can’t see her face because the sun is setting behind her, creating a halo effect around her, but I can tell it is Maria. I think about how fond I am of her, and yet how little I still know about her. Her enigmatic silhouette waves at me. I wave back as she enters the car, which pulls out, and slowly heads off to destinations I can only speculate about.

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About the Authors

Nancy Dibble is a high school teacher in the Fresno Unified School District in Fresno California. She currently works at the Center for Advanced Research and Technology (www.cart.org) where she teaches courses in Biomedicine and Chemistry.

Jerry Rosiek is an Assistant Professor at the University of Alabama where he teaches qualitative research methods. Recent publications include "Historical perspective as an important element of teacher knowledge: A sonata-form case study of equity issues in a chemistry classroom" in Harvard Educational Review (70)3 and "Pragmatism's unfinished project: What William James has to offer teacher knowledge researchers," book chapter in William James and Education, edited by Jim Garrison. Currently Jerry's research interests include the social and emotional dimensions of teachers' practical knowledge, and the challenges of representing this knowledge in research on teaching.

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