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“We didn’t have to go through those barriers”: Culturally affirming learning in a high school affinity group[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Using data from interviews, student work, and classroom observations in a “History of Race” course at a private predominantly White high school, this article examines the racialized tensions that led the teacher (first author) to create an unofficial affinity group for students of color that met outside of class. The authors argue that the teacher’s attempt to implement a curriculum that was culturally affirming for students of color by de-centering Whiteness led to White students’ resistance that necessitated the creation of an unofficial “safe space” outside of the classroom for the students of color. The need for such a group demonstrates the difficulties inherent in presenting a more honest account of the role of race and racism in the United States that challenges narratives of historical progress. The article concludes that while students of color ideally should have access to culturally affirming knowledge *inside* social studies classrooms, this experience demonstrates why that kind of knowledge can only be engaged effectively within learning spaces that challenge the norms of conventional social studies education.

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Introduction

“It’s like I’m being painted as a bad guy like all the time...all white people are inherently oppressors just by mere existence...as a white person that’s actively trying to be like an ally for people of color and to understand their experiences, I feel like that should separate me from people that don’t, or [are] very like actively advocating for things that, you know, continue white supremacy or like, you know, ‘we’re Neo-Nazis.’”

“[White students] want the brownie points and they want it on their transcript that they did a good job learning about race in this cute little liberal school.”

This set of quotes illustrates some of the racialized dynamics present in a social studies classroom at a predominantly White private high school that is the focus of this article. Using data from interviews and classroom observations in a “History of Race” course, this article examines the racialized tensions in the classroom that led the teacher (first author) to create an affinity group for students of color that met outside of class. Using Kumashiro’s (2002) framework for anti-oppressive education, we examine how the teacher attempted to create a classroom space that was culturally affirming for

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students of color by de-centering Whiteness. We argue that the implementation of a curriculum that was “critical of privileging and othering” (p. 44) led to White students’ resistance to the “unlearning” this curriculum necessitated and that this resistance made necessary an unofficial “safe space” outside of the classroom for the students of color. We argue that the need for such a group demonstrates the difficulties inherent in presenting a more honest account of the role of race and racism in the United States that challenges narratives of historical progress and instead situates the country’s history as “ugly, convoluted, complex and incomplete” (King, 2016, p. 1314).

We contend that while students of color ideally should have access to culturally affirming knowledge *inside* social studies classrooms, this experience demonstrates why that kind of knowledge can only be engaged effectively within learning spaces that challenge the norms of conventional social studies education. While we agree with researchers who assert that talking about race and racism in U.S. social studies classrooms is foundational in dismantling the everyday White supremacy present in schools (Blum, 2012; Chikkatur, 2013; Ellsworth, 1989; Epstein, 2000; Howard, 2004; King, 2014; 2016; Levy, 2016; Martell, 2013, 2017; Woodson, 2016), this study demonstrates how the continued presence of racialized power relations in our schools can make it difficult to do so. We start by describing the research methodology and theoretical framework and by situating the classroom context and the study. Next, we discuss the goals and purposes of teaching such a class from the teacher’s (first author) perspective, goals that included a deep re-examining of the conventional story of race in the U.S., and the students’ conflicting expectations of the classroom space. We then describe the racialized tensions that permeated class discussions, culminating in a heated debate about Thomas Jefferson and ultimately the creation of an affinity group. Finally, we examine the learning opportunities present for students of color within the affinity group space. We conclude with implications of this study for what is possible *inside* classrooms and schools. We suggest that the students’ ability to co-construct culturally affirming knowledge in the affinity group space provides us with important insights about how teachers can teach social studies in all contexts.

Method and data sources

The motivation for this project was the teacher-researcher’s desire to challenge the school community’s conventions of what it meant to talk about and understand racism with the hope of making the classroom a more productive site of anti-racist discourse. As such, situating this work in practitioner research made the most sense because of the explicit methodological attention it gives to the relationship between theory and practice. As Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) assert, “practitioners are deliberative intellectuals who constantly theorize practice as a part of practice itself” (p. 2). Thus, in developing an anti-racist classroom environment, the first author called upon his experiences in the classroom and knowledge of theory simultaneously to attend to this goal. Additionally, our aims fit well with the notion of “inquiry as stance” (p. 118) that suggests practitioner research not only values the practical pedagogical and curricular changes that arise, but also the process of understanding the political and social implications of “what to get done, why to get it done, who decides, and whose interests are served” by ongoing institutional practices (p. 121). This critical approach served as the foundation of all our conversations and collaborative efforts as we sought to dismantle troubling racialized conventions within the classroom.

This work specifically employed the action research approach to practitioner research. Featuring a collaboration between one teacher-researcher conducting an investigation in his own classroom (first author) with an outside researcher (second author) observing and participating in class, we focused on shaping a curriculum that challenged conventional means of discussing race and racism in a history class, which led us to question foundational beliefs about racism in classrooms and what, as well as who, defined a productive discussion. While aspects of this article might appear more to fit a self-study model of practitioner research, as parts of the text are crafted in autobiographical form, the driving force of this piece remained the collaboration between the practitioner and the outside researcher. It was important for us to explore the idea of unofficial and unconventional spaces for social studies learning for students of color through an unconventional article structure, by moving between the teacher’s first-person reflections and the analytic voices of both authors. Like Martell (2013), we hope that this analysis of a classroom leads to reflection and changes in practice among other teachers and provides a model for how educational researchers can work collaboratively with K-12 teachers to create more effective anti-racist educational spaces for students of color and for all students.

The research study centers the perspectives of the teacher and of students of color in the History of Race course taught in spring 2017. To examine the classroom dynamics that led to the unexpected creation of an affinity group, we draw on various sources of data: individual interviews with seven students over the course of the semester conducted by the teacher (first author); focus group interviews with four students of color conducted at the end of the semester by the second author; the first author’s journal entries, detailing classroom conversations; the first author’s informal conversations with students; and the first author’s experiences working at the research site. The individual and focus group interview transcripts were open-coded independently by both authors, noting important themes within and across interviews. We then discussed together our independent analyses, noting common themes particularly as they related to the idea of why an affinity group became necessary.

Conducting research in one’s own classroom raises important ethical questions. After receiving IRB approval from both the University of Minnesota (where the first author is a graduate student) and the high school, the first author introduced all students to the research project at the beginning of the term and obtained parental consent to use classroom discourse and

student work from the course. All families gave consent and all students agreed to participate in the study. He sought permission again from each student before conducting formal interviews. While it is not possible to gauge whether the students' participation was fully voluntary given their positionality as students, the first author tried his best to assure the students that there would be no negative repercussions if they chose not to participate. The first author also regularly reflected with the second author on the complexities of being a teacher/researcher. We hope that the benefits of the research, including the ongoing opportunities for deep reflection on the teacher's part and the in-depth view of school-based discourse around race and racism, outweigh the potential drawbacks. We use pseudonyms for the school and the students to protect the students' identities, though we acknowledge that students in the course might recognize themselves in this article.

Theoretical framework

This study draws on Kumashiro's (2002) theoretical framework on anti-oppressive pedagogy that delineates four main ways that educators and researchers understand oppression and envision ways to work against oppression. Kumashiro notes that educators and researchers often "blend and modify" these four approaches and that all pedagogical approaches make "some insights and changes possible and [make] others impossible" (p. 49). This insight was particularly helpful in understanding the unfolding dynamics in this classroom and the decisions made by the teacher.

The first approach ("Education for the Other") posits that oppression works to detract from the experiences of students deemed as "Others" because of their membership in identity groups that "are traditionally marginalized, denigrated, or violated...in society" (p. 32). To remedy this situation, educators would create safe, affirming separate spaces and by working to make all school spaces safe and affirming for these students. The second approach ("Education about the Other") works to end oppression by ensuring that *all* students are provided with accurate knowledge about "the Other" (p. 39). Materials included in the "History of Race" course attempted to include a wide range of perspectives on the topic, prioritizing the perspectives of people of color that were often not present in the school's curriculum.

The third approach ("Education that is critical of privileging and Othering") assumes that having additional and accurate information about the Other does not necessarily lead students to develop empathy nor does it engender action to change society (p. 44). Rather than teaching about "the Other" and thereby risk reifying static notions of individuals and groups, this approach teaches students about the dynamics of oppression and what it means to act against oppression. While this approach addresses some of the weaknesses of the first two approaches, it also entails risks, such as having students develop "more entrenched resistance" when they are confronted with the task of unlearning what they took for granted about their society and their world and go into crisis (p. 48), which is what we argue happened in the classroom in this study when White students were challenged to revise their perspectives on historical figures that are generally revered in American history classes and in society. In response to the classroom dynamics created in part by the White students entering into crisis, the teacher drew on a strategy from the first approach and created a separate affinity group space for students of color.

The final approach ("Education that changes students and society") argues importantly that "oppression and harm are produced not merely by the actions and intentions of individuals or by the imperatives of social structures" but also by discourse and by the repeated citing of certain discourses (p. 50). The teacher, the course materials, and the students of color in this study attempted to push the class towards considering a more complicated narrative about the United States and its history and towards a narrative that how those in power have often "acted in contradictory ways" (p. 59).

Situating the study

Larger sociopolitical context

In a recent review of research on race in classrooms, Brown, Bloome, Morris, Power-Carter, and Willis (2017) note that there is a dearth of studies that examine "classroom conversations, race, and the disruption of inequality" (p. 454). Our study aims to fill this gap by focusing on student and teacher discourse on race both within the classroom and outside of the classroom in one high school history course. Brown et al. (2017) contend that we need to take into account the larger discursive context in which school and classroom discourse on race happens. The course we analyze in this article was taught at a time when discussions about whether the election of President Barack Obama meant a decline in the significance of race and racism sat uneasily alongside a renewed focus on state violence wrought on communities of color through mass incarceration, police shootings, and immigration policies. The course also started a few months after the election of Donald Trump, an election that brought to the fore specters of more explicit forms of White Supremacy (Holley, 2016). These complexities and contradictions inherent in the contemporary sociohistorical moment influence the possibilities and limitations of learning spaces that center culturally affirming knowledge for students of color, especially in predominantly White schools.

School context

To understand why an unofficial learning space for students of color became necessary, it is helpful to examine the school's context. Urban Independent School (UIS) is a K-12, non-denominational, college preparatory school located in an affluent neighborhood in a major Midwestern city. The school is appropriately described as a predominantly White institution in both its demographic makeup as well as its cultural underpinnings. According to the school's website, 31% of the students in all grades identify as people of color, though this proportion falls to 25% in the high school. Faculty of color are far less visible. In fact, faculty racial demographics appear nowhere in official school publications. Based on the first author's observations and interactions in the school, as of Fall 2017, there were nine full-time faculty of color out of 70 full-time positions. Of those, two were social studies teachers, three English teachers, two language teachers, one administrator and one administrative assistant. The dearth of people of color in the science and math departments speaks to one of many ways that the school implicitly maintains the qualities of a predominantly White institution.

We would characterize the racial discourse at the school as generally centered on racial liberalism, the idea that “racism is a psychological and interpersonal challenge that is visible through extreme notions of individual prejudices” (King, 2016, p. 1304). UIS approaches diversity with an additive model where voices of students and faculty of color can be easily “added” to the existing White norms. However, as Ellsworth (1989) argues, “...voices of students and professors of difference...are not additions to [the mythical] norm, but oppositional challenges that require a dismantling of the mythical norm and its uses as well as alternatives to it” (p. 310). Spaces that center culturally affirming knowledge for students of color challenge the very foundation of the racial liberalism present in UIS and other predominantly White institutions.

Contradictions are apparent throughout UIS's explicit language around “diversity.” First, while the school's website dedicates an entirely separate page to “living diversity,” this term is not found anywhere in the school's overarching mission statement or on the introductory page. This separation between “diversity” statement and mission statement is not unique to UIS – this division also appears, for example, at the predominantly White college where the second author works and the first author attended, suggesting that diversity is not seen as central to the mission and purpose of these predominantly White institutions, at least in how they characterize themselves publicly. Second, the language used to describe the UIS community tends toward universalizing language that glosses over potential conflicts between various perspectives present at the school. Specifically, on the “living diversity” page, the school states that “UIS is a place where everyone feels comfortable expressing who they are and what they believe, regardless of race, gender, religion, learning style, political views, sexual orientation, or economic status.” However, we wonder if it is possible for everyone to express who they are and what they believe when some of these beliefs might be fundamentally opposed? In the current socio-political climate in the United States, for example, we wonder if there can be a comfortable co-existence between someone who supports Donald Trump's views on immigration and students who are immigrants or come from immigrant families, particularly of Mexican and Middle Eastern backgrounds. What about situations where disagreement means denial of a person's or group's humanity? As Son of Baldwin (2016) writes in a social media post, “We can disagree and still love each other unless your disagreement is rooted in my oppression and denial of my humanity and right to exist.” It is unclear what principles UIS teachers and students should use to negotiate such potential tensions.

These unclear messages are present throughout the school in many ways. While senior speeches¹ frequently address issues pertaining to marginalization and identity, the importance of these messages often stops after the speech. The first author has noticed that while students are encouraged to reflect on the meanings of these speeches, classroom teachers give little, if any, time to do so. UIS's explicit “emotional curriculum” is also diffuse in terms of addressing racial identity. In each grade, students attend retreats where adults work to develop a sense of community and values. These gatherings provide opportunities to talk about race and identity, but the messages about how to approach difficult disagreements are sporadic and unclear. Similarly, the school's Diversity Action plan, developed in the 2011–2012 academic year, states that “kindness, compassion, and respect are key values and lead to sensitive communication in a good school.” While those values are indeed important, honest and difficult conversations about identities, difference, and privilege often include feelings of confusion, hurt, and anger.

For the first author, these tensions are felt with particular strength when listening to school leaders. In the past two years, the head of the school has given opening speeches to faculty and students demanding neutrality in the classroom to diffuse the political tension felt in society at large (personal communication, August 23, 2016; August 25, 2017). The high school principal reinforced this message, telling students to “be good to each other” (personal communication, August 31, 2017). After the election of Donald Trump in November 2016, the high school held an assembly to reaffirm its commitment to inclusivity and justice where the principal stated that “any acts of intolerance will not be permitted. It goes against our values.” However, given the mixed messages present at the institution, it is unclear which set of values he was referring to.

In the first author's experiences at the school, there seems to be little guidance for teachers or students on how to navigate these various messages. The dean of students confirmed this impression, noting that “there doesn't seem to be a consistent arc to the work, it's very disparate” (personal communication, November 17, 2017). While inconsistent in some ways, there simultaneously seems to be a broadly shared understanding at the school that conversations about race belong to certain spaces and certain people. The dean observed that “students of color seem responsible for acknowledging White

¹ All seniors are required to write and give a senior speech to the high school student body to graduate.

privilege...it's like the students of color are bench-pressing 350 pounds hoping the White students will want to get stronger and that seems to stunt their own ability to see other forms of oppression" (personal communication, November 17, 2017). Thus, students of color are responsible for naming and challenging White supremacy in a predominantly White institution. They may do so publicly, but their White peers do not need, nor may they feel obligated, to participate or rethink in fundamental ways their privileged positionality at the school and in society.

Course context

Students of color enrolled in the History of Race course spoke in the interviews about this school context and how classroom spaces were places where they felt the burden of having to speak up about issues of race. One student, Elizabeth, noted:

It's kind of awkward when you're the only person of color to talk about issues relating to race and identity because sometimes [White students] don't understand them or they try to but they still don't and it's hard to have to simultaneously represent a whole group of people also feeling like you don't want to be different. (interview, April 2017)

Another student talked about how her White peers expected her to be an expert on particular topics because of her heritage and discounted the work that she put in to learn about a topic, knowledge that her peers also have access to. Talking about a course that focused on American foreign policy, she said:

I was putting in the work. I was doing the readings twice to make sure I understood...But there were definitely moments where it was like, "Oh shoot, they're all looking at me because a question about India was asked and nobody did the reading." So they expect me to know and I had little moments where I was just like, "I'm not going to help you out in this situation. I'm just here to learn about foreign policy and I'm doing a great job at that." (interview, April 2017)

The five students of color who enrolled in the History of Race course were hoping that it would be an unconventional learning space where they would finally focus more extensively on race while not having the burden of educating their White peers. They expected that the classroom space would be *for* them, a safe space where, as Kumashiro (2002) explains, "students who face different forms of oppression can go for help, support, advocacy, resources, and so forth" (p. 35). These students "expected people of color to be more central in the discussion because it [was] a class about race" and that the class would be "a space for people of color to...share their experiences and have that impact on other people" (interviews, March 2017). In other words, they expected the class to be a place that affirmed their experiences and histories through culturally affirming content, pedagogy, and discursive norms. For these students, then, this class was also a space where White students' perspectives and voices would *not* be centered.

However, these expectations were difficult to meet, given the school's context as a predominantly White institution. What the students of color found instead was succinctly described by a student who noted that she had expected to feel a "vibe" in the class that their White classmates would "authentically and sincerely" believe their peers of color about their experiences. Instead, she notes:

That's not the vibe I'm getting and that's what I expected, which is kind of weird and hypocritical because of the narrative of race at this school and how everyone is always like, 'I want to respect your experiences, I want to be super tolerant and I want to be open to hearing what your experience is.' But when it comes in conflict of me exploring my own identity...makes me uncomfortable, and...makes me feel like I can't relate, then I'm not gonna make that place open for you. (interview, March 2017)

The student points to the limitations of empathy and understanding of "Others" that depends on similarities between "us" and "Others" (Kumashiro, 2002, p. 43).

Meanwhile, White students said that they were in the class because "they were different from those actively advocating for White supremacy" and wanted that distinction recognized (interview, March 2017). Students of color picked up on this desire as well, noting that White students "want the brownie points and they want it on their transcript that they did a good job of learning about race in this cute little liberal school" (interview, April 2017). The dissonance between expectation and reality left one White student feeling caught off-guard as they "thought it was going to be a lot more like cookie cutter class than it actually [was]" (interview, March 2017). She expected the course to be like previous history courses but just adding "the race things basically." This comment speaks to the White students' expectation that the course would affirm their positions as allies in the fight against racial injustice and that it would "add" to their knowledge of race and racism rather than fundamentally challenge it. Thus, when their belief that American democracy can overcome any obstacle and keep expanding (VanSledright, 2008) was persistently challenged by the curriculum and their peers of color, they were thrust into crisis.

Findings

Teacher's perspectives and goals

Following [Thornton's \(2006\)](#) argument that an enacted curriculum arises when teachers focus on their aims, I (first author) knew from the beginning that I wanted this course to be a site of anti-racist action through the curriculum and my teaching. While my school administrators thought it would be best to focus on past events to demonstrate the significance of race, such as starting with the Civil Rights Movement and moving forward, I felt this approach denied the complex development of racialization in this country and would reinforce the notion that racism is part of the past and simple to understand in its most violent forms ([Howard, 2004](#); [Nelson & Pang, 2006](#)). As other researchers have found, understanding the continued and contemporary impact of racialized inequities remains a challenge for students, especially White students ([Epstein, 2000](#); [Howard, 2004](#); [Martell, 2016](#)). Instead, the curriculum I developed focused on (1) racialization and the historical institution of racism and (2) the historical and contemporary realities of racism. I also decided to use analyses by scholars of color to actively avoid “re-inscribing the marginalization of race” when teaching about race ([King, 2016](#), p. 1314). I believed that these curricular goals and tools would create a different kind of social studies learning space, one that both affirmed students of color and allowed all students to have a better understanding of American racial history and their place in that history.

My teaching aims were framed by the school setting as a predominantly White institution. To be clear, teaching this course was one of the most rewarding opportunities I have had in my career, one that allowed me to combine my passion for teaching with thinking through race and justice. I knew this would be a course where I could craft a curriculum that spoke directly to the ways that the past shaped how we see ourselves today. This type of culturally affirming knowledge was something that I felt I missed when I was in high school, growing up in predominantly White communities. In attempting to craft an unconventional curriculum in a White school, I used my own lack of experience as motivation to develop a curriculum that would have benefitted me greatly in my adolescence.

Like [Blum \(2012\)](#), I wanted to help my students “become adults who *could* talk intelligently, responsively, and productively about race” (p. 7) in a society where it is often difficult to do so. Conflicts with administration over the focus and goals of the course reinforced my initial conviction that young people needed exposure to the ease with which White supremacy guides decisions. I was not as concerned with the conventional debate of “who is racist” that frames racism as a moral failure ([Tatum, 1997](#)), but rather with how White culture thrives through the silencing and erasure of stories and discussions that challenge this socio-political order.

As such, a typical week in the course would include common readings from primary sources (e.g., slave narratives, writings from Black intellectuals of the time period such as W.E.B. DuBois) and secondary sources (e.g., [Bell, 1980](#); [Leong, 2013](#)) to offer a common knowledge base for our discussions of historical and structural racism. I asked students to write in journals to reflect at the start of each class and if needed, especially when conversations were tense, they would reflect at the end of class. A mix of partner talks, small group discussions, and whole class conversations were used to engage topics. Keeping in mind that students may want to address the connections between what they were learning and contemporary issues, I often set aside time at the beginning of each class period to discuss current events.

Going into the course, I expected that students would be well-versed in the importance of talking about race and racism because of the various opportunities they seemed to have at the school to do so. I felt confident that the school's shared community values about diversity would be present and all I needed to do was reinforce the importance of these values. The class felt like home at first. It seemed like an unconventional space in the school – many colleagues, on seeing my class roster, pointed out how academically strong every student was and how it was the most racially diverse class they had ever seen in their time at the school. While this comment spoke to the predominantly White space of the institution, I thought little of it at the time, believing that the messaging of the institution and my abilities to scaffold the needed skills in discussing racism would create a space unlike any other in the school. As I examined the school's racial landscape in depth when I began writing this article, I realized how naive I was.

On the first day of class, we crafted classroom discussion norms ([Brookfield & Preskill, 2012](#)). This list included common themes such as remain respectful, stay engaged when uncomfortable, speak from the “I” perspective, and listen before speaking. We delved into recent debates on college campuses about the differences between discomfort and safety during discussions of identity ([Schaper, 2016](#); [Smith, 2016](#)). Students unanimously agreed that discomfort was to be expected given how little race and racism were discussed in classrooms. I took their agreement to mean that when difficult emotions arose, such as anger or frustration, students would work through them collectively and care for one another in that process. We also addressed the contradictory nature of racism as a “closed issue,” in spite of the fact that actions throughout contemporary society continued to perpetuate it ([Hess & McAvoy, 2014](#)). As such, every student openly agreed to engage one another and the topics honestly and with a desire to understand and challenge our place in perpetuating racism. I knew that discussions would not be perfect, but from their responses, I assumed that they were ready to start talking about race and learn how to productively navigate the topic with one another along the way. I also expected that all of my students would be able to engage productively with and benefit from a curriculum that centered culturally affirming knowledge for students of color. However, this goal proved to be a challenging one because of competing student expectations as well as the difficulty in working against the norms of a predominantly White classroom, school, and society.

Student expectations and experiences

In individual interviews throughout the semester and in focus group interviews at the end of the year, students of color spoke of their excitement in being able to enroll in a course that focused on experiences that were previously overlooked or glossed over in their history courses. A student who identified as biracial said that the course readings “sparked a greater interest” for her to continue exploring the impact of race and racism on contemporary American society (interview, April 2017). Another student of color noted that the course was exceptional not only in its content but also in the methods used to study the topics. She appreciated that they learned more about the context of historical events but also that this context was “approached from the point of view of a person of color or a scholar who was a person of color” (focus group, June 2017). It led one student of color to conclude that if dominant narratives are not being complicated in all of their history classes, then “it means that we’re not doing enough work if we’re not finding other primary sources and resources” (focus group, June 2017).

As mentioned earlier, students of color also looked forward to having more opportunities to discuss a history of race and racism with their peers of color. Strikingly, one student even used the term “affinity group” when she talked about her expectations for the learning space of the classroom. She said that she thought the course would be “like an affinity group... when I’m talking with friends who are mostly people of color or talking to them about social issues. I thought that same feeling would be present in the class” (interview, March 2017). Her view echoes a Black student’s comment made on the first day of a high school class Blum (2012) taught about race and racism: “I’m surprised any White students would sign up for a course called Race and Racism. I thought we were going to sit around and talk about how oppressed we are” (p. 1). These initial expectations of both the students of color and the teacher indicated that they anticipated that the History of Race course would center content that affirmed their cultural experiences and histories *inside* a classroom.

Students of color soon became aware that for their White classmates, enrollment in the class was a way to signal their orientation toward social justice. As one student noted, her White peers seemed to think that “being a part of this class in and of itself is to them like a social justice effort” and these students saw their enrollment as making them a “better person because I’m gonna know more about race and I’m gonna be a better ally,” (interview, March 2017). She critiqued their motivations, saying, “it’s almost like they’re viewing the class as an internship, like you go and it’s a learning experience and like your supervisor and you both know that you’re there to learn and that’s for like future job experience.” For the students of color, the course was a place to learn more about themselves, their communities, and each other—in other words, to learn culturally affirming knowledge. They suspected that for White students, however, it was a place to show off their anti-racist, social justice credentials. While the teacher (first author) hoped that the classroom would be a space that could potentially accommodate all students’ learning needs, the students of color indicated that their needs and learning was stunted by the persistent focus of the class discussions on what the White students wanted and needed.

Students of color indicated that the classroom space ended up not advancing their learning and understanding of racial history because White students often derailed conversations about race. They assumed that it was difficult for White students to avoid conversations about race in this course. As a student noted, in other history courses where “we talk about [race] once or twice...it’s easy for people to not expose themselves but in History of Race...over time, you get a sense of people’s underlying prejudices or misconceptions of race” (interview, March 2017). Students of color found that their White peers managed to derail conversations about race by shifting the focus to other social identities and forms of oppression (e.g., sexism) or by using overly intellectual language that made it difficult to understand what a person was saying. Two of the students discussed an example during a discussion about Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings:

Second author: And do you think it’s like focusing on gender as a way to avoid talking about race? Elizabeth: Yeah because they were more comfortable talking about... Zara: Yeah and also just, yeah I think that sometimes it came from a good place of being like, ‘how can I understand?’ but sometimes...I felt like a very good example of white fragility. Second author: Kind of derailing the conversation? Elizabeth: “Why are we talking about race when we could be talking about you know, the fact that this man raped all of these women?” and blah, blah, blah, and it was like, “it’s not really an either or and it’s a History of Race class.” Second author: And he wasn’t just raping any woman, right? Elizabeth: Yeah. (focus group, June 2017)

In interviews with the teacher (first author), four of the five students of color expressed their frustration about these classroom dynamics. If a majority of the time and space was taken up teaching White students, students of color did not get to learn about the nuances and differences within communities of color, which they argued was central to the development of their ideas about race and their identities. One student of color said to the first author:

You’ve created this space for people of color not to be the teachers but [to] share their experiences and have that impact other people and instead of that happening at least right now...we have white males sharing their experiences that don’t apply and then spending like a majority of class talking about why the death penalty should or [should] not exist. (interview, March 2017)

Another student asked the teacher (first author) to take on more of the responsibility of challenging white students’ comments in class:

I was talking about this with a couple other students and...it's like we're not students anymore and we came here to learn about race...[Having you take on more of that responsibility] I think [will] just help us relax a little bit more and help us engage in the class in a way that's not, "I need to be on guard or I need to be waiting for something to go wrong" 'cause we all know something's going to go wrong because there's very much a sense of like foreboding when we come to this class and it's like we need to be watching and we need to be prepared to hurt. (interview, April 2017)

One student noted regarding the occasional moments in the classroom when students of color spoke to each other, "I find I come to the most meaningful conclusions because...we don't feel guilty, we don't feel like we need to get around our egos as much" (interview, March 2017). This student alludes to the notion that being able to have conversations that allows one to contextualize personal experiences within a broader framework necessitates a particular kind of dialogic exchange where knowledge was seen as being co-constructed with peers rather than through debating and discussing facts using obscure examples or language. Here, the student makes the important point that supportive learning spaces for students of color are not just about including culturally affirming content but also about allowing students of color to engage deeply with each other's stories and histories without needing to explain themselves to their White peers.

Defending Thomas Jefferson

The frustrations of students of color and the racialized tensions in the classroom peaked during a discussion of Gates (2003) The Trials of Phillis Wheatley: America's First Black Poet and Her Encounters with the Founding Fathers. Using Gates's critical examination of the opinions of major colonial officials such as Thomas Jefferson, George Washington, and Benjamin Franklin to determine whether an enslaved woman, Phillis Wheatley, could be described as a poet, I (first author) wanted to demonstrate the White colonists' purposeful efforts to stabilize this connection between race and subservience. Gates's argument fits well with what I wanted students to make sense of and understand: while racial formations were nuanced even in early American history, they were also central to the development of the political and social ethos of the United States. As we began, students seemed to understand the central claims Gates presented, but questions were raised, particularly by White students, that suggested that few White students were seeing the implications of Phillis Wheatley's experience for the founding of the United States.

While students aptly analyzed how Wheatley and Washington reflected social and political understandings of race in colonial society, they struggled with Jefferson. Specifically, tension rose when our analysis of his language revealed that he sought to justify Black people as subhuman. The students recognized Jefferson's actions, but became wrapped up in how such actions impacted his historical legacy. As one White student noted, "does this discredit all the good Jefferson did?" At this point, the conversation's emotional dynamics grew tense with White students asserting that Jefferson's other accomplishments outweighed the racism he endorsed because it was common for that era in history. Students of color rebuked this assertion, asking "so does that mean we can't call racists racist because racism was normal at the time? Isn't that the point of this course, to understand that?" Feeling frustrated at the unproductive dynamics of this conversation and how easy it seemed for students to forget our community norms, I authoritatively took back control. It didn't make sense that the same students who, in the previous unit about indigenous experiences, were willing to give back land to indigenous people, suddenly found themselves defending Jefferson. That night was one of those nights where I felt like I failed as a teacher. (teacher journal entry, February 2, 2017).

The teacher's assumption that students would react to the Jefferson lesson in a similar way to how they reacted in a previous class discussion "left little room for what is uncontrollable and unknowable in education" (Kumashiro, 2002, p. 6). Looking back, this moment serves as a perfect example of the "entrenched resistance" (p. 48) described by Kumashiro (2002). While we agree with Kumashiro (2002) that such crises are necessary in moving students toward anti-oppressive education, they are not easy to navigate for teachers or students. The possibility of such resistance also speaks to why unconventional and unofficial learning spaces outside of classrooms and schools might be necessary for students of color in general and became necessary in this instance.

Affinity group for students of color

In light of the Jefferson debate, the teacher (first author) felt that there was a need for emotional and intellectual triage for students of color who would likely face these same challenges repeatedly. The unconventional framing of the content and his pedagogical approach did not appear to effectively challenge the norms of the school context and White students' desires to seek affirmation of their own positions. At the same time, he came across an article detailing Ellsworth's (1989) support for informal affinity groups in a similar course at the University of Wisconsin and wondered whether an unofficial, separate space for students of color to delve more deeply into content and, if need be, debrief on the emotional conflicts that might arise in the class would be helpful. Additionally, the teacher (first author) believed that this group might give him and the students of color a space where they, as people of color, could speak openly together about how to approach conversations about race and engage in relevant racial identity development work without the fear of being perceived in White normative ways. As students of color noted in interviews, their interventions in classroom discourse positioned them in certain racialized and gendered ways by their White peers:

It's intimidating [to talk in class] because a lot of [students] apparently talked about how we're just angry at them and how I'm going to shut everybody down and that might be true. I'm not angry at anyone but I'm willing to shut people down. (interview, March 2017)

I just feel like the people of color in this class got characterized in a certain way by the White students who did not agree or were offended or were upset about things that we had said. And just like the ways that we were talked about...like "very emotional, so angry, like why so aggressive" that I don't feel like [that] would have happened if we had support from male [students of color]. (focus group, June 2017)

After getting positive responses from the five students of color about creating an affinity group for them, the teacher reserved a room where he and the students would be able to eat lunch together and talk once a week. He framed the space as a setting *for them*, so if they needed or wanted him to leave at any point, he would without reservation. He tried to be transparent about his own limited perspectives as a cisgender male of color to explain why it might be okay to ask him to step out or not come on certain days. In earlier sessions, he tried to draw out their knowledge of race and power based on in-class discussions. For example, in the first meeting after the class on Phillis Wheatley, he posed questions about the racialization of Black and White persons by doing close-readings of the court transcripts so he could continue the project of learning knowledge that culturally affirmed students of color.

However, the students opted to focus on the relational dynamics of race and power between themselves and their White peers. This collective venting in the affinity group affirmed their shared sense of frustration and dispelled their sense of isolation in the classroom. One student, Elizabeth, noted:

It was nice to hear that we were all frustrated about something...because the first two classes I feel like we were all making eye contact and just sitting there, being frustrated. Then we talked about it at one of our meetings and then the next class...we all...everybody [students of color] said something. (focus group, June 2017)

Zara agreed, stating:

I thought I was the only one who was feeling like people were being a little bit racist and inappropriate. I felt like that was just me overreacting to the environment and being over-sensitive but it was nice to talk to other people who felt the same way. (focus group, June 2017)

Yasmeen also commented on the sense of belonging in the affinity group, stating:

There's definitely a sort of solidarity there, especially like in our debrief sessions and just like being able to be with someone who's like in as much pain as you are in a certain moment or just as frustrated as you are, I feel like it's definitely brought us all closer together. (interview, April 2017)

The need to talk to one another speaks to the disparate community of students of color in the setting of a predominantly white institution. This need for affirmation appeared in [Ellsworth's \(1989\)](#) research as well, where she found that groups met "for the purpose of articulating and refining positions based on shared oppressions, ideological analyses, or interests. They shared grievances about the dynamics of the larger group and performed reality checks for each other" (p. 317). [Hooks \(1990\)](#) also speaks to the importance of such space specifically for marginalized people, stating that "often when the radical voice speaks about domination we are speaking to those who dominate. Their presence changes the nature and direction of our words" (p. 146). Thus, the need to feel connected to one another, to know that they are not alone, and to speak without needing to explain themselves to White students became the group's central purposes.

Additionally, Elizabeth observed that the group had a productive effect on her participation in the classroom:

[Class] just kind of got frustrating because...sometimes we were like bogged down and people making comments that...weren't clear [or] were very...academic, intellectual and very obscure and...just like not something that I could personally connect to or relate to in a way that would make me want to contribute or it just made me really frustrated and I didn't want to. But...the environment that the people of color group provided me like made me feel a lot better about contributing because I knew that there would be people who would back me up. (focus group, June 2017)

As the course progressed and meetings fell into a routine, the affinity group's purpose shifted toward constructing knowledge together instead of solely confronting emotional tensions with their White peers. Elizabeth described the shift in this way:

Depending on the day and depending on the class that we had just had, it was either a chance for us to vent and be very frustrated about what had happened or a chance for us to be like, I wish I had learned more about this or like I wish we could talk about this more [Zara: readings or something...] Yeah and originally that was more of the purpose...we're not covering very much in class because we're getting stuck on all these things so maybe we can talk more about that. And kind of as the class progressed it became less of that and more of like, what just happened? Let's talk about this. (focus group, June 2017).

Zara reasoned that the affinity space was more productive because "we didn't have to start from a point, then break it down, and then...go through those barriers and then finally get to a place where we're...having the same conversation"

(focus group, June 2017). Elizabeth corroborated this assertion, claiming “there were just a lot of things that we already kind of knew and a lot of opinions that we shared...[and conversations] were actually more productive because of that” (focus group, June 2017). Both students spoke to the notion that students of color were ready and willing to engage productively with the unconventional content included in the syllabus, without having to go through the process of “unlearning” and “crisis” this content provoked for their White peers.

This kind of deeper engagement sometimes meant that the students in the affinity group were able to move beyond easy binaries in their discussions as is illustrated by the teacher's reflection on their study of W.E.B. DuBois and Booker T. Washington:

In class, White students situated Washington and DuBois as two forms of being Black in the U.S., an historical argument presented in their U.S. history survey courses in the previous year. When I probed further, White students acknowledged the tension between the type of civic participation DuBois endorsed relative to Washington's assimilationist policies. However, in class, there seemed no desire to further complicate this story from any of the students. In the affinity group meeting afterward, I asked the students of color to share their thoughts on the class discussion. The conversation delved into deconstructing DuBois and Washington as exemplars of Black activism in the U.S. They discussed Washington as an “assimilationist” in a society that “was really White.” When asked to elaborate on this idea, the students talked about their own experiences with having to fit into White culture, concluding that “White means more than race, it's culture too” (teacher personal journal, February 2, 2017). While they acknowledged that DuBois's ideas affirmed more of their own beliefs, they also wondered if his assertion of a “Negro Problem” would be better framed as the “White Problem.” The students of color wondered if DuBois's Harvard education made him “more White” to Black people since it was so uncommon for a Black person to receive an Ivy League education. This point led to a debate among the five students about the historic role of formal education in racial justice. (teacher personal journal, February 2, 2017)

This example demonstrates how the affinity group offered a space for students of color to complicate their understandings of material by challenging one another and co-constructing meaning.

The affinity group also inspired one of the students to use the critical tools of analysis she learned to analyze the school itself. Drawing on her sharing of her family's history in the affinity group, Elizabeth's project examined the story of the first black student admitted to Urban Independent School. A centennial yearbook released by the school for alumni suggested that the board of trustees supported and implemented policies designed to integrate the school in 1961. Elizabeth requested access to the school's archives to verify this assertion, but was initially told it was not possible. When she persisted, asking the school to provide a reason for this denial, she was granted conditional permission for use of the archives only during the school day with a specific adult present. After venting about her frustrations about the unrealistic conditions to use archives in the affinity group, her peers wondered if something was being hidden from her. After collecting old directories and cross-referencing them to yearbooks during 1961, 1962, and 1963, Elizabeth found a few black families that had attended the school and contacted those that still lived nearby. A few people agreed to do interviews and their testimonies contradicted the school's stories about its past. For example, while the board did integrate in 1961, only one black student was admitted and the families interviewed recalled never seeing other black students in grades above or below them during their time at Urban Independent School. In her conclusion, Elizabeth wrote, “One of my favorite parts of history is that it allows the past to provide context and explanation for the present. But if our school's history misses this very significant piece, how can we expect to understand *our* problems?” (student work, June 2017, emphasis added). Without the affinity group to offer her a space to reflect and feel affirmed in her frustrations and investigative purpose, it seems unlikely that Elizabeth would have completed her project or been able to challenge the school's master narrative around integration.

The affinity group discussion also led the students of color to affirm each other's understanding that their perspectives were often unwelcome in the conventional setting of the social studies classroom. With this affirmation, their ability to develop strategies to navigate the conventional classroom became central to the affinity group's purpose. Before the affinity group began, students of color would have waited for White peers to participate in a topic; after a few sessions of the affinity group, they moved to engage one another's points without hesitation or waiting for a White student to join in the discussion. For example, in discussing their complicit roles in White supremacy, students of color controlled the first 15 min of discussion without a single White peer participating (teacher personal journal, February 16, 2017). Students of color commented that these were the best discussion moments in class and they appeared to continue developing their abilities to control conversation. Zara also addressed the power of co-constructing knowledge with her peers of color:

I find [when] I learn best is when I'm talking to other people of color about their experiences, [asking] “how have you experienced this” and like we're bouncing off of each other. And what ends up happening is that...[I] further[ed] my understanding of race or my understanding of my place in the whole thing...and how race plays out in the United States. (interview, March 2017)

Zara's comment illustrates beautifully the power of such spaces – the ability of students to listen to each other without needing to defend their positions and the open-ended nature of discussions that aim to further everyone's understanding rather than foregrounding a need for definitive answers.

The affinity group also served as a site to complicate commonly held ideas about the relationship between students of color and their White peers in discussions of privilege and identity. The idea that circulated at the school and in the affinity group can be paraphrased as “we aren’t their teachers, we shouldn’t have to be the ones teaching them about race. They can do it themselves.” This idea came from the important sense that students of color were not the objects of White students’ learning. Over the course of the semester, the affinity group complicated this idea. In an informal conversation toward the end of the semester, the teacher (first author) asked whether they expected their White peers to be able to move to a place of unlearning on their own. At first, students seemed reticent to engage this point, as Yasmeen reminded me “it isn’t our job to do that for them” (teacher journal entry, April 24, 2017). However, Zara then complicated Yasmeen’s statement, saying, “I don’t think we are opposed to talking to [the White students] about our experiences and understandings of race but they need to listen” (teacher journal entry, April 24, 2017). The other students of color nodded along with Zara’s point, suggesting that they recognized the conditional nature of their engagement. As they talked through possible solutions, the students’ ability to be critical of the school’s messages as well as common tropes in cross-racial dialogues spoke to the anti-oppressive potential of this unconventional space.

Discussion

For the teacher (first author), the affinity group space ideally would have served to support the students of color while also helping shift the dynamics of the classroom so that the full class could once again focus on the goal of “understanding and fighting racism” (Leonardo & Porter, 2010, p. 310). While these two goals were not completely met because of time constraints, the affinity group was an important learning space for the students of color, and it allowed him to achieve a better balance between acknowledging the “racial hurt” felt by those students and maintaining an openness to inquiry and debate in the classroom (Blum, 2012). The need for such a group raises important questions about what is possible in a classroom space, especially in predominantly White institutions. It reaffirms Kumashiro’s (2002) argument that teachers do and should be flexible in drawing on multiple approaches to anti-oppressive education based on ongoing reflections about their particular students and classroom dynamics. While this special issue focuses on social studies education outside of schools and classrooms, this study led us to ask questions about whether such outside spaces are necessary because teachers cannot provide culturally affirming knowledge to students of color *inside* classrooms and schools. Author 1’s experiences lead us to conclude that there are indeed good reasons for why separate spaces for students of color might be necessary and that the students’ learning in that outside space has important implications for social studies education *within* classrooms and schools.

First, the need for the affinity group in this case study raises concerns about the effectiveness of conventional norm-setting in social studies classrooms, especially in predominantly White institutions. While culturally relevant and sustainable pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2014; Paris, 2012; Paris & Alim, 2014) might offer useful ideas for how to frame controversial conversations in classrooms, White supremacy remains a foundational aspect of the classroom and schooling contexts in such institutions. How can social studies teachers navigate the paradox of desiring safety in classrooms for all students while simultaneously encouraging students to engage in a process of “unlearning...especially when what we previously learned helps to mask the privileging and Othering of different identities” (Kumashiro, 2002, p. 46)? The act of unlearning is not a safe act; it is a moment of crisis that challenges the normative assumptions that we carry with us. Ochoa-Becker’s work on the importance of what she calls “counter-socialization” in social studies classrooms suggests that high school students are ready to engage in classroom dialogues that help them develop a “critical deliberation mindset” (Ochoa-Becker & Engle, 2007, p. 67). While Kumashiro’s notion of “unlearning” also encourages teachers and students to engage in such work, this study bears out his caution that students can be resistant to questioning the values and norms they have internalized from their families, schools, and society or what Ochoa-Becker would call their “socialization.” Moreover, discussion norms in social studies classrooms are designed to create some predictability and control around how students conduct themselves (Brookfield & Preskill, 2012; Hess, 2009; Washington & Humphries, 2011). However, this kind of norm setting assumes that teachers can predict accurately what students might take away from these conversations. In the experiences detailed in this study, students acted in counter-intuitive ways and drew conclusions that the teacher did not expect. As Kumashiro (2002) explains,

[We] cannot fully know who our students are, we cannot control what they learn, we cannot know with certainty what it is they actually learn, and we cannot even be certain that what we want them to learn is what is in their best interest to learn. (p. 68)

In the context of everyday White supremacy, we wonder if these discussion norms productively lead White students to move beyond their discomfort and their “egos” as one of the students of color put it.

Secondly, is it possible for social studies classrooms and curricula in predominantly White institutions to be productive learning spaces for all students? The effectiveness of the affinity group space stemmed from the students’ ability to navigate difficult material by listening deeply to each other. They were ready and willing to engage in the curriculum because it allowed them to learn about themselves and their communities in a positive light and to connect their family and personal histories to larger histories in ways that had not been possible in previous history classes. One student talked, for example,

about how studying *Loving v Virginia* resonated with her personally because she was a biracial person. Another student appreciated practicing how to respond to troubling comments in a racially diverse classroom setting, so that she could be “armed” for such conversations in the future. While such culturally affirming knowledge can be empowering for students of color, it might seem disempowering for White students for whom a more accurate accounting of the history of race in the U. S. means a more accurate depiction of White supremacy and White complicity (Chikkatur, 2013). In this classroom setting, a challenge to what Sara Ahmed (2012) calls the “happy” anti-racist White stance led students to focus on defending White historical figures rather than staying focused on racial formation. If, as Nurse (2008) argues, a more honest account of race and racism does little “to enhance the cultural esteem of White students” (para. 14), creating an atmosphere of openness in a racially diverse classroom remains a difficult proposition. How can teachers work to create the conditions in classrooms that existed in the affinity group where students learned from listening deeply to each other without feeling guilty or defensive? As Zara noted, how can teachers convince students with privileged identities that “It’s okay to not be a part of it and it’s okay to just be uncomfortable all the time” (interview, March 2017)?

Third, this study also raises the question of whether social studies teachers are willing and prepared to engage in such work. As Ochoa-Becker and Engle (2007) note, schools often “favor values of consensus and conformity” which can make it difficult for teachers to cultivate in their classrooms the critical thinking and reflection necessary for a truly democratic society (p. 96). Kumashiro (2002) summarizes this concern well, asserting that:

Education is not something that involves comfortably repeating what we already learned or affirming what we already know. Rather, education involves learning something that disrupts our commonsense view of the world. The crisis that results from unlearning, then, is a necessary and desirable part of antioppressive education. (p. 63)

While we might be able to anticipate the challenges faced by students when encouraged to engage in unlearning, it is short-sighted to pretend that the teacher does not simultaneously enter into crisis. How might a teacher navigate the uncertainty of unlearning while also enacting cultural norms of classroom management, curriculum proficiency, and pedagogy essential to being perceived as a qualified teacher by administrators, teacher educators, and other constituencies of the community? Accepting that outcomes of an anti-oppressive curriculum and pedagogy are always uncertain was challenging enough for this teacher as someone who desired to situate his classroom in an unconventional way. Is it realistic to expect this work of preservice teachers or those new to the profession who simply need to find and maintain their jobs?

Similarly, what might lead veteran educators who are deeply entrenched in convention to engage in their own unlearning, especially if there is no guarantee of “success”? The reality is that there is no clear roadmap to working against everyday White supremacy in our classrooms. It depends on our students, our own positionality, and the shifting relations within and outside of our classrooms. Thus, we are left wondering if it is possible and fair to expect teachers to take risks in their teaching that place their jobs in danger. While we agree with Kumashiro (2002) that educators should create spaces for students to work through “crises” engendered by having their worldviews challenged, there seems to be so much at stake with so little guidance. At what point and how do we reach the place “where we have nothing to lose but our chains” (Shakur, 1987, p. 52)?

It is worth noting the substantive changes that the teacher (first author) made to the course in its second iteration. Using the idea of inquiry as stance (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009) positioned the first author as a teacher/researcher in such a way that led him to think through and with crisis as a pedagogical tool. After reflecting together with the second author, the first author decided to include regularly in the course racially isolated small group discussions, wherein students who identified as White and students who identified as people of color worked in separate groups on the same set of discussion prompts and then shared their findings back to the class. While the students were initially perturbed by their conflation of “separate but equal” doctrine with culturally affirming discussion spaces, they came to appreciate these spaces over the course of the semester. Students of color noted “I feel heard” and “I feel like I can say what I want to say” while White students reflected that “we can like work through being White without dominating the conversation” (teacher journal entry, March 2018).

Finally, even though this study led us to more questions than answers, the affinity group experience demonstrated the importance of unconventional learning spaces outside of the classroom for students of color and of the “Education for the Other” approach (Kumashiro, 2002). The affinity group sheltered students of color from everyday White supremacy so that culturally affirming knowledge about race and power in the curriculum could be explored and challenged. The co-construction of knowledge and community outside of the classroom serves as evidence that such spaces are imperative as safe spaces for students of color in a predominantly White institution. While we cannot predict exactly how and what students will learn in future iterations of this course, being more aware of the limitations of enacting anti-oppressive pedagogy *within* the classroom redirects our focus *outside* of it. It is these unconventional approaches to understanding school contexts that better serve our aims of disrupting oppression in educational spaces.

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