Chapter 19

Classroom Conversations in the Study of Race and the Disruption of Social and Educational Inequalities: A Review of Research

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This review of research examines classroom conversations about race with a theoretical framing oriented to understanding how such conversations may disrupt social and educational inequalities. The review covers research on how classroom conversations on race contribute to students’ and educators’ understandings of a racialized society, their construction of and reflection on relationships among students, as well as to their learning of academic content knowledge. The review considers research across grades P–12, as well as conversations in teacher education, with a specific focus on the U.S. context. Limiting the review to the U.S. context is done not to obfuscate conceptions of race and inequalities globally, but to elucidate how race becomes manifested in unique ways in the United States—often positioning African Americans and Blackness as the “fundamental other.” The review offers a social, historical, and political discussion that contextualizes how classroom conversations, and their omission, are not conversations only relegated to the classroom, but are part of a larger dialogue within the broader society.

It is not really a “Negro revolution” that is upsetting the country. What is upsetting the country is a sense of its own identity. If, for example, one managed to change the curriculum in all the schools so that

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Race is not a biological category but a social construction that is given meaning and significance in specific historical, political, and social contexts (Appiah, 1989; Omi & Winant, 1994) with long-term and enduring effects on people, communities, and even research. Language plays a crucial role in the social construction of race. As people interact with each other, the language they use in how they respond to one another reflects and refracts (cf. Volosinov, 1929/1973) extant conceptions of race and race relations. Language also signals meaning explicitly through the denotational meanings of words and implicitly through indexicals (implicit references to social, cultural, and historical contexts), language choice (e.g., register, language variation, key), and other subtle but powerful ways that often lay just below consciousness (Gumperz, 1986). Thus, the social construction of race through people’s use of language occurs both when it is an explicit topic of conversation and when it is not. We also recognize the problematic nature of the word “race” because despite the present acceptance that [it] is a social construction, the term was used for political gain and economic advantaging that traverses the Black–White binary (Lewis, 2003).

Given the social, historical, and political contexts of race in the United States, an argument can be made that race is ubiquitous in conversations within and across social institutions, including classrooms. One of the reasons for specific attention to classroom conversations and race is the unfulfilled promise placed in public education in the United States for promoting equality, equity, social mobility, and a democratic society (cf. Kluger, 1985; Spring, 1991). Yet, it also must be recognized that historical analysis questions whether U.S. law and legal processes and educational policies and practices ever intended to devote an equitable opportunity for educating and liberating all of its citizens because of race (cf. Ladson-Billings, 2004). A key question to ask, therefore, is, “How might classroom conversations on race disrupt the inequalities that students suffer both within the classroom and outside it, both in their present and in their future?"

Despite the importance of the question above, there has been relatively little research in P–12 classrooms on classroom conversations, race, and the disruption of inequality (although there has been a plethora of research on race in classroom education, per se). Some researchers have suggested that teachers and students in the United States rarely explicitly discuss or confront issues of race in their classrooms or curricular discussions (Pollock, 2004; Schultz, Buck, & Niesz, 2000) and when they do, as noted by Bolgatz (2006) it is usually “within carefully controlled boundaries of scope and sequence . . . neatly package and limit the treatment of race into confined
arenas” (p. 260). Why are there so few discussions of race in classrooms given the ubiquitous presence of race in all aspects of life in the United States? Is the absence of discussions of race in classrooms a form of silencing, thereby, maintaining the illusions Baldwin (1963/2008) referred to in the quotation at the beginning of this chapter? How might conversations on race in schools disrupt the inequalities manifest in and through education policies, structures, and practices?

We have organized this review to, first, address the question how has (and how might) classroom conversations on race be researched? Thus, we offer a social, historical, and political discussion that contextualizes how classroom conversations, and their omission, are not conversations only relegated to the classroom, but are part of a larger dialogue within the broader society. We then discuss the logic-of-inquiry used in research on classroom conversations on race to understand the nature of the knowledge such studies yield. The two sections following—(a) the nature of classroom conversations on race and teacher education and (b) classroom conversations on race—address a second question: What is known about how classroom conversations on race might disrupt inequalities?

Methodologically, several considerations have guided our approach. First, given the historic nature of *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954, we have chosen to use this court case as a starting point to begin examining evidences of how researchers pursued inquiry into the pedagogical relationships between teachers and discussions of race in classroom settings. Another important consideration has been to examine studies where there were classroom conversations being presented by ways of audio recordings, video recordings, and forms of conversational analysis, as this approach aligns directly with our premise for the review. We have used several research databases such as ERIC, EBSCO, and Google Scholar. Our search terminologies included (a) conversations of race in classrooms, (b) race talk in classrooms, and (c) discussions of race. Using 1954 to 2016 as the time frame, the first publication that engaged in discussions of race in a university classroom settings was found in 1992 (Tatum, 1992). As discussed later, we believe there is tremendous opportunity to examine “race talk” in schools that analyzes both structures and contexts, but also to consider how are students and teachers engaging in conversations about race to develop their knowledge about the world in which we live and the critiques necessary to disrupt the inequalities within it.

**SOCIOHISTORICAL AND POLITICAL CONTEXTS OF CLASSROOM CONVERSATIONS ON RACE**

Heuristically, classroom conversations on race take place within both local and macro contexts. Here, we discuss the broader sociohistorical and political contexts acknowledging that particular local contexts may mediate how these broader contexts frame classroom conversations on race (Lewis, 2003).

During the first century of the United States, the educational climate for enslaved African people and colonized indigenous people of North America was oriented to
(a) deny schooling for Black people (Anderson, 1988) and (b) “civilize” Native American people through forced assimilation including language, Christianization, militarized social practices, and industrial training for servitude. Essentially, the purpose of schooling was to “kill the Indian [to] save the man” (Adams, 1995). During the 19th century, national identity politics dominated by scientific racism appropriated Christianity to justify and defend racial hierarchy (Goldberg, 2009). With the end of chattel slavery by 1865, the concept of race framed as a White/Black dichotomy provided European Americans with a new way to identify and to distinguish themselves from the formerly enslaved (Guèye, 2006). This new identification also privileged and normalized White experiences and knowledge, while marginalizing and “othering” those who were not White. Together, the Three-Fifths Compromise of the U.S. Constitution, the emergence of Jim Crow laws after Reconstruction, and the Plessy v. Ferguson decision of 1896 that established the doctrine of “separate but equal” codified a hierarchical relationship (Bell, 1992) and further concretized the role of race in shaping U.S. society. Part of what this historical context produced was a contested definition of personhood for people of African heritage in the United States. As sociolinguists have shown, whenever people use language they are always communicating who they are in relation to each other (Blommaert, 2015) and part of that is their personhood.

The passage of the historic 1954 Supreme Court decision in the United States, Brown v. Board of Education, legally inscribed equality as the federal law in public education and engendered a sense of renewed hope for millions of Black and Brown people that the “color line” might be removed. However, as Ladson-Billings (2004) reminds us, the Brown decision was in part a forced choice because of the political context of both the growing number of cases against segregation and silence from the federal government on its beliefs about education and civil rights. Then, it was hoped, children and educators from all backgrounds would truly experience democracy and have numerous opportunities to learn and talk across races (Allen, 2004). However, the passage of Brown II and its “all deliberate speed” requirement gave Whites who resisted Brown the opportunity to delay and deflect its implementation (Ogletree, 2004) thereby making White students become the primary beneficiaries of the education system (Bell, 1992; Morris, 2003). This active resistance to public school desegregation reified the racial hierarchy and the culture of racism. If Brown v. Board of Education had been equitably implemented, ideally, it would have created opportunities for interracial dialogue among students and educators. However, the resistance of White people to Brown resulted in the dismantling of public school desegregation (Boger & Orfield, 2005) and the displacement, demotion, and dismissal of Black teachers (Etheridge, 1979; Haney, 1978) from greater participation in such dialogues (Foster, 1998). Part of the challenge with regard to classroom conversations on race is that if the teaching profession is primarily composed of middle-class White women, their experiences and culture are privileged. It raises the question of who can engage and/or facilitate conversations on race and in which classrooms can such conversations occur. An argument can be made that a paucity of such conversation has further disenfranchised non-Whites in our
educational system and schools remain primarily segregated and resegregated (Donnor & Dixson, 2013).

Before Brown and afterward, public schools actively and passively perpetuated constructions of race through curriculum and pedagogy that relegated the culture and experiences of various racial groups to the margins (DuBois, 1903/1994; Hartlep, 2013; Ladson-Billings, 2000; Woodson, 1933). In so doing, school leaders contributed to the promulgation of Whiteness (the taken-for-granted and hegemonic privileging of White people, their cultural capital, their history, their languages, etc.). Part of what makes Whiteness pernicious is that it is mostly unnamed and invisible and thus becomes the context for interpretation and action as if it were the only conceivable framework. Attempts to employ a different knowledge base, set of experiences, way of talking, and using language, all have the potential of marginalizing the person and labeling him or her as irrational.

Recently, there have been multiple key events in the United States that have made discussions of race more visible in mainstream and social media. Here, we only name a few. Perhaps most notably, the presidential candidacy of Barack Obama in 2007 promulgated dialogues about race and racial identity on national and international levels (Walters, 2007; Wise, 2009). Obama’s candidacy for president unleashed articulated and visual representations of racism. Ironically, these representations of race were juxtaposed with a positivistic sociopolitical analysis of postracialism in which the latter seemed to neutralize discussions of race (Morris & Woodruff, 2015).

In 1998, White assailants, used a pickup truck, dragging James Byrd, an African American man, three miles in Jasper, Texas, resulting in his death. What is notable about this case is that in 2008, Oprah Winfrey began a nationally broadcast conversation about the case and whether things had changed in Jasper 10 years after the event. A claim can be made that the conversation initiated by Winfrey was landmark because she broadcasted a discussion of race to a racially diverse public (Jensen, 2003). Tragically, other African Americans have since been killed because they were Black, including deaths by police officers. Whether the murders received media attention or not, the events have sparked an effort led primarily by Black women to name the policing of Black lives as a life and death under siege (Black Lives Matter, 2016). Public media forums like Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat enable cross-racial public discussions of race, unsanctioned and unregulated, sparking national and international protests and awakening national consciousness on race. It was within this context that the Black Lives Matter movement began. (The counterresponse to the Black Lives Matter movement, All Lives Matter, disregards the caste-like status and unprotected lives of Black people).

Part of the recent broader context also includes the passage of laws. In 2011, Alabama passed laws requiring police officers and school officials to arrest and report, respectively, any person who could not provide legal documentation of their citizenship status (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2016). Arizona also passed laws that attacked ethnic studies curricula in high schools and claimed that such curricula were anti-American and unpatriotic and that discussions of race in schools are dangerous and generated unhappiness among minority students (Horne, 2007).
In 2010, Andrew Breitbart, a White conservative journalist, manipulated a video presentation of Shirley Sherrod, the U.S. Department of Agriculture administrator, and accused her of being a racist because of her reflective storytelling at a National Association for the Advancement of Colored People banquet. She told of her own evolutionary understanding of racism as she worked to help a White farming family retain their farm. Sherrod’s narrative became a target for reverse racism in a new post-racial era (Stolberg, Dewan, & Stelter, 2010). For the purposes of this review, part of what remains remarkable about Sherrod’s situation is that although her storytelling was about hope and healing, she was punished for talking about race.

Shirley Sherrod’s case, the laws against ethnic studies, and the pushback against Black Lives Matter reveal the difficulty for people of color to tell their stories, to have ownership of them, and to have their stories heard. Each of these events above and others reflect a national context of vacillation of racial discourse; defining the U.S. society as racialized yet devoid of accountability to question and transform cultural practices that promulgate racial inequalities. It is within these contexts that classroom conversations on race occur; and thus it is important that both the study of such conversations and reviews of research on those conversations need to account for these contexts. It is perhaps ironic that while there is vigorous and pervasive discussion of race in the popular culture, the mainstream media, and on social media, such discussions are rare as are education research studies.

**THE LOGICS-OF-INQUIRY OF RESEARCH ON CLASSROOM CONVERSATIONS ON RACE**

Researchers deploy diverse theoretical frameworks, methodologies, and research designs to define and make sense of classroom conversations on race (hereafter, logic-of-inquiry). Explicitly and implicitly, the logic-of-inquiry of a study defines what counts as knowledge, how knowledge can be constructed, how learning, personhood, and inequities are defined both socially and educationally, and how the study of classroom conversations on race are contextualized. The logic-of-inquiry of a study is not neutral with regard to epistemology, ontology, and ideology.

In the studies we review, many established an a priori theoretical footing with predetermined characteristics of what counted as a “good” classroom conversation on race. Although the theoretical footing varies across studies—including critical race theory, Whiteness studies, critical discourse analysis, critical ethnography, and critical theory more generally—the syntax of the logic-of-inquiry is similar (and is illustrated in Figure 1).

Since the theoretical footing predetermines what characteristics are used as criteria for examining and evaluating a classroom conversation on race, the logic-of-inquiry in such studies can be called “top-down.” For example, in Rogers and Mosley’s (2006) study of a second-grade classroom, the researchers (which included the classroom teacher) construct three primary categories: noticing race, enacting White privilege, and disrupting White privilege. They look for patterns across guided reading lessons in which the three primary categories are evident. Their analysis provides examples of each of the three categories and also showed what they call “hybrid discourses of
Whiteness enacted and Whiteness disrupted, sometimes within the same book and within the same day” (Rogers & Mosley, 2006, p. 473).

The strength of a top-down logic-of-inquiry is defining its epistemology and ideology through the theoretical framing it employs. Its weakness is lacking the mechanisms for describing those aspects of classroom conversations on race that do not neatly fit within the chosen theoretical framing, emic perspectives, situated meaning, and the retheorizing of extant theoretical frames.

One variation of the top-down logic-of-inquiry we describe above focuses on how students and teachers experience and respond to classroom conversations on race (see Figure 2).

Methodologically, studies employing such a logic-of-inquiry often involve interviews and conversations with teachers and students. For example, Quay (2014) interviews professors who were attendees at a conference focused on addressing racial issues in higher education and who regularly orchestrate conversations in their classrooms on race. The interviews focus on what strategies they use to engage their students in what the professors view as productive conversations on race. Quay uses thematic analysis of the collected data to identify findings about the form of the class (e.g., lecture vs. discussion), the content of the course (the readings used), the place
of student and professor reflection, debriefing with students, and other activities (e.g., service learning). While this resembles the top-down logic-of-inquiry discussed earlier, it conceptualizes students’ reflections and responses as mediating how an a priori theoretical frame might drive the conduct of a classroom conversation on race. In brief, who the students are, their experiences, and the agency they take in reflecting on the conversations all need to be considered.

Research that employs an inductive perspective while informed by various theoretical footings, emphasizes a dialectical relationship between extant theories and the theoretical constructs derived from the inductive analysis of the conversations themselves. As such, it emphasizes the generation of grounded theoretical constructs regarding how classroom conversations on race might disrupt inequalities (see Figure 3).

Carter’s (2007) research on silence is an example of this perspective. Using ethnographic perspectives, participant observation, and interviews with students that foregrounded their classroom experiences and their interpretations of what was happening in their classrooms, Carter reconceptualizes “silence.” It is an active, agentive strategy the African American young women used in their predominately White high school literature class to establish solidarity among themselves, and to contest explicit and implicit racialized nature of their educational experience. Essential to this logic-of-inquiry is respect for the situated perspectives, voices, and insights of students and teachers as they experience instructional conversations on race. The logic-of-inquiry here affords the generation of new concepts and the reconceptualization of extant concepts, providing new ways of naming, describing, and interpreting what is happening in particular conversations about race in classrooms. Thomas (2015) illustrates this variation of logic-of-inquiry (see Figure 4).

Thomas (2015) asks three questions: (a) What are the teachers’ linguistic strategies and tactics for handling race talk dilemmas that arise during the teaching of literature? (b) What challenges do teachers confront while attempting to navigate these

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**FIGURE 3**

*Grounded Theoretical Constructs Logic-of-Inquiry*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnographic Framing of Classroom Conversations on Race</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Inductive Analysis</td>
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<tr>
<td>Extant Theoretical Footings Related to Race</td>
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<tr>
<td>Theoretical Insights and Theorizing About Classroom Conversations on Race and About Theories of Race Relations and Dynamics More Generally</td>
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</tbody>
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dilemmas? (c) How do they attempt to resolve the challenges? Using an interactional ethnographic approach that foregrounds attention to the use of language, Thomas provides descriptions of what happens in the conversations of two veteran English language arts teachers, one African American and one White. Thomas’s interpretation of the data is informed by multiple theoretical perspectives including Black feminist theory, interactional sociolinguistics, discourse analysis, critical sociology of education, systemic functional linguistics, and critical race theory. These multiple perspectives foreground the complexity of engaging in conversations about race. Although the ways the teachers use language differs, both show adeptness and insight into how they orchestrate conversations about race matters. Both teachers value student perspectives and encourage responses while guiding students toward a shared ethical position. Nonetheless, in both classrooms, there is silence and evasion. The logic-of-inquiry Thomas employs allowed her to foreground complexity and ambiguity in the orchestration of the classroom conversations.

Chapman (2007) raises questions about the logic-of-inquiry underlying research on African American students in general that is pertinent to research on classroom conversations on race. She argues for foregrounding the inherent “messy, contradictory nature of human experiences and behaviors . . . [and] conflicting actions to present an overall picture of determination and agency” (p. 160). The issues Chapman raises can be interpreted as a concern for how personhood is implicitly defined through the logic-of-inquiry of a study. She cautions about the reification of people’s lives as a consequence of the methodology employed and the need for researchers to be reflective about the consequences of their logic-of-inquiry.

 Earlier, we noted that research on classroom conversations on race needs to be situated within sociohistorical and political contexts. One of the ways that research indexes sociohistorical and political contexts is through reflection on the epistemological and ontological nature of the study. Milner (2006) argues that “research ought to do more than merely tell us something or give us some information; it should be used to empower researchers and research participants to actually do something to improve circumstances and situations.” (pp. 367–368). Building on the theorizing of Dillard (2006), Milner further argues for attending to spirituality in research involving the experiences and lives

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**FIGURE 4**

**Situated Perspective Logic-of-Inquiry**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Extant Theories of Race in Education and Society</th>
<th>Interactional Ethnography / Discourse Analysis</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Generation of Theoretical Constructs About Classroom Conversations on Race and Disruption of Inequalities</td>
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of African Americans. Milner focuses attention on the language of research and proposes an agenda pertinent to research on classroom conversations on race.

Dillard’s ideas to rename, to recategorize and to reconceptualize how we use and construct language is, on some levels, liberating and can be connected to hooks’s (1994) discussion of healing that takes place when dominant views and ideologies are critically examined, particularly among people of color who have been mistreated through educational research. Shahjahan (2005) declared that a goal of researchers should be “to heal . . . and to work towards equity and social justice for human beings and all creation” (p. 690). (Milner, 2006, pp. 369–370)

What is at issue in the calls by Chapman, Milner, Dillard, and others, is the importance for researchers to reflect on and interrogate the logic-of-inquiry in their studies, how it pushes back against Whiteness, acknowledges the ubiquity of race and racism in education and in the institution of research, defines personhood, and engages in the project of what Winn (2013) calls restorative education.

We would be remiss if we did not illuminate that within the logic-of-inquiry, there is also the researcher foregrounding their own racial identity as observer and in several cases, participant-observer. We find across the studies, the researcher provides a context for personhood noting that one’s own racial identity is relevant to the field (Brown, 2013). In some cases, but not conclusively, the racial identities of the participants are emphasized beyond the demographic description in the methodology. This is most prevalent in research that situates racial theory(ies) as a framework for the study. Perhaps, the examination of discussions of race in school settings also includes the ways identity influences the theoretical footing.

**THE LANGUAGING OF CLASSROOM CONVERSATIONS ON RACE**

In this section, we frame the languaging of classroom conversations on race in three heuristic categories: (a) curricular, (b) discursive, and (c) and disruptive. By curricular, we mean the ways in which teachers explicitly plan for conversations through the instructional choices they make (e.g., what texts to use, what concepts to consider, what academic tasks to engage). Discursive, unlike curricular, relates to the uses of language that emerge during the conversations. Disruptive involves the use of critical moves (e.g., questioning, problematizing, use of counternarratives) away from dominant ideologies and coded language that works to maintain the status quo. Disruptive does not necessarily seek to create closure to complex ideas but may leave issues unresolved and open for more discussion. Disruptive also includes silence and the ways students and teachers utilize discourses to build community or to protect themselves.

The review of languaging classroom conversations on race here considers research across Grades P–12 (in the next section, we consider conversations on race in teacher education classes). While conversations on race outside of the classroom—in families, peer groups, and communities—influence racialization and conversations in the classroom (Lewis, 2003), we do not consider them here because of space limitations.
The review is limited to studies conducted in the United States because of its particular historical context including the enslavement of people of African heritage and the dismissal of the humanity and experiences of African, Native, Latina/os, and Asian Americans, while positioning African Americans as the “fundamental other” (Waters, 1999; West, 1993).

**Discussions of Race as Curricular**

Bloome, Power Carter, Morton Christian, Otto, and Shuart-Faris (2005) examine uses of language in a working-class community middle school, where an African American early career teacher invites seventh-grade students into discussions of race through the selection of literature as well as the questioning processes. The students discuss a poem that has features of African American language (AAL). The teacher initiates the classroom lesson in relatively traditional approach, using a teacher initiation, student response, and teacher evaluation participation structure. The discussion of race begins as the students consider the voice and perspective of the speaker in the poem. The teacher asks “Who is the speaker?” and “How do you know?” as a means to encourage the students to reflect on the relationship of language, identity, and race. As the instructional conversation continues, the topic shifts from claims and warrants about the meaning of the poem to what constitutes AAL speech patterns, to student narratives about their encounters with language variation, language attitudes, and race, to exploration of language, race, power, and notions of self in their own lives. The research suggests that it is not the surface-level participation structure itself that matters but rather incorporation of the students in problematizing taken-for-granted notions of race and language, the opportunity for them to share narratives of their own experience with race and language, and the use of knowledge and insight from the sociolinguistics of language variation to reflect on their own lives.

Where the teacher in the Bloome et al. (2005) study explicitly focuses on students’ attention on the use of AAL in a poem, in classrooms studied by Rex (2006), the students’ use of AAL brought race into classroom conversations. Using both ethnographic and discourse-analytic methods, Rex looks at how the teachers and students react to the use of AAL language. Mostly the responses either marginalize the students or discredits the intended social moves. Rex characterizes the students uses of AAL as cultural practices that the students brought into the classroom and raises questions about the degree to which classrooms can be inclusive if students’ use of AAL (see Vetter, 2013, for a similar study of response to the use of AAL).

Dixson and Bloome (2007) provide another study regarding race and the use of AAL. The African American middle school language arts teacher of a predominantly African American classroom conducts a literature lesson and switches the register of the classroom talk to a conversational style that had some resemblances to the call and responses and sermonizing practices of Black churches. In so doing, she pulls the students into a series of narratives they tell about themselves that reinforce their social identities as academically oriented. Taken together, the Rex and Dixson and Bloome studies show how uses of and responses to AAL can either
distance students from academic social identities or promote and include them in academic social identities.

Hollingsworth (2009) presents a case study of a fifth-grade teacher’s exploration of race as an orchestrated attempt to protect herself from being perceived as racist. The teacher creates a multicultural unit to engage social issues with her students. However, in order to avoid possible discomforts with contemporary issues, the teacher structures text choice with historical frames of inequality including stereotypical positioning of victimization and heroism without contextualization or alternative framings. Discussions of race within this curricular frame function as a means to silence students’ alternative frames of reference (cf. Fine, 1987). The students were not asked to and consequently, do not insert their own experiences into their readings about race and racism effectively foreclosing them from making connections and engaging in more transformative ways for thinking about race in everyday life.

As noted earlier, Carter (2007) makes a distinction among silence, silencing, and silenced. Silence and silencing are complex processes that are not necessarily mutually exclusive of each other. While silencing can be thought of as a process that contradicts evidence, ideologies, and experiences (Fine, 1987). Silence also can been thought of as one’s response to silencing (Carter, 2007). Silenced can be thought of as submission to hegemonic processes, a response to silencing and/or a void or absence of voice. The distinctions among silence, silencing, and silenced provide a way to make visible students’ sub rosa uptake on how race is formulated in classroom conversations on race where it may not be safe to publically contest those conceptions of race.

Bolgatz (2006, 2007) examines discussions of race at both the elementary and high school grades. At the elementary level, Bolgatz (2006) reports a study in a fifth-grade classroom in which the teacher chooses to study the Revolutionary War, a subject that might easily be packaged in romanticized notions of freedom and democracy centering Whiteness. However, the teacher presents the Revolutionary War through the experience of enslaved people and the fears of Southern Whites. While the teacher asks targeted comprehension questions to guide the reading process, students make “sophisticated connections,” questioning the meaning of enslaved people carrying weapons to fight. Bolgatz’s analysis focuses on how questioning and discussion build multidirectional lenses for discussion, for example, the students seek to juxtapose Southern Whites controlling Blacks’ access to guns with colonists’ desire for freedom from Britain. The researcher notes the complex interpretations the students construct through reading and, importantly during class time, the exchange of information and collaborative dialogue. Disruption functions to construct new opportunities for students to engage in conversations, in this case, that are initiated by the students, “going beyond factual understanding to make connections between ideas and events” (Bolgatz, 2006, p. 263).

At the secondary level, Bolgatz (2005) explores how structures and materials support student engagement, focusing on strategies and techniques employed by two teachers coteaching an interdisciplinary U.S. history and language arts class. Bolgatz
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(2005) notes that the class structure utilizes a conversational approach that “freed students to interact” (p. 34). Significant in the study was the teachers’ use of questioning to aggravate complacency rather than creating “neat” conclusions.

In the studies by Bolgatz, Bloome et al. and Hollingsworth (2009), race is made a curricular topic by how the teachers orchestrate classroom conversations. In each case, the instructional conversation provides opportunities for students to interrogate and problematize taken-for-granted concepts, to share narratives of their own experiences with race matters, and to connect those conversations with reflection on matters outside the classroom.

Discussions of Race as Discursive

In the previous section, the teachers deliberately selected instructional topics to disrupt hegemonic conceptions of race. In this section, we review studies that examine how uses of intertextuality, counternarratives, and critical discourse analysis destabilize dominant ideologies of race and their accompanying inequalities as well as studies reporting how the use of language stabilize dominant ideologies.

A study by Anagnostopoulos, Everett, and Carey (2013) concerns the reading of Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960), a canonical literary text used in a large number of high schools, often taught with a focus on morality and character development related to heroism and ethics. Anagnostopoulos et al. (2013), however, focus on the uses of language in class discussions that reveal White students’ dysconsciouness of race in a ninth-grade classroom. The authors argue that their findings reflect the discourse of the “new racism,” a strategy of forgetting. We find this study of particular interest because it suggests that without discussions of race, students are invited to forget and then blame those victimized and minoritized by race for undermining racial harmony by remembering. In contrast to the White students, the Black students use language in ways that engage personhood in the literary text as well as in their present identities. As the classroom conversation evolves, it is not the literary text that is key but rather the students’ uses of intertextuality in juxtaposiong race as represented in literature to race in contemporary political, familial, and communicative situations.

Pixley and VanDerPloeg (2000) present a case study of an online writing exchange between White private school students in Connecticut and African American, Puerto Rican, and Dominican public school students in New York, where the researchers were the classroom teachers, both of whom were White women. One of the explicit purposes of the online writing exchange was to build relationships across states and communities, deconstructing race, and stereotypes. In a writing exchange, one of the White students from the Connecticut school used discourses of fear and victimization in his writing to express why White people are afraid of Black people. As a result of receiving this writing, the students in the New York classroom engaged in discussions of racialization, historical framings of racism, and racialized privilege and constructed counternarratives. The discursive turns in the class dialogue elevated the
discussion of race from the immediate context, the Connecticut letter, to a greater discussion about accountability and discomfort. Although the outcomes of such classroom conversations are complex, the White teachers (of minoritized students) report that “Today my students and I bury ourselves in silence. We wrap and wrap the silence around us, thick and White as cotton. Silence is safer than language. Silence allows us to ignore what we do not wish to see” (Pixley & VanDerPloeg, 2000, p. 284). That is, even in cases where students and teachers productively engage in classroom conversations constructing counternarratives and contesting White privilege, the affective nature of those conversations may be such that silence is preferred.

Similarly, Schaffer and Skinner (2009) report a 2-year ethnographic study among fourth-grade students that shows the difficulties of overcoming “colorblind” ideologies in classroom conversations on race and students’ use of language to constrain efforts to have such conversations. The study describes the school as a “model elementary school,” rich with programs and curriculum that explore diversity. The teachers in the study employ lessons that explore inequality, difference, and include students studying and sharing their cultural identities. However, racial boundaries enact forms of resistance to discussing race were equally present. This resistance manifests itself in social events, unregulated by teacher control or school curriculum (e.g., recess, lunch, break time). Discussions of race among students worked to “reclaim racial stereotypes and slurs” and evoked students’ self-proclamations of being “cultural experts” among peers. The study reports that the White students adopted “colorblind” stances and placed judgments on discussions of race as “rude” and “inappropriate” (p. 282). One White student explains the racial tension at the schools as “Not a lot. Just some . . . It’s mostly the black people who start those conversations. Like I don’t really know why, but they do” (p. 283). Uses of coded language as pseudonyms for race function to serve as insults as well as bravado for the students. Unresolved discourses like “acting White” or “acting Black” remain active alongside pop culture terms like bling bling or “Eminem wannabe” to establish racial group memberships.

**Discussions of Race as Disruptive**

Brown (2010) reports a yearlong ethnographic study examining an African American history course of 14 African American students taught by an African American teacher. Revealing one of the ways in which race is implicated in classroom conversations were a series of lessons in which the students are asked rap songs about “Black History.” Brown describes the lesson as culturally misaligned with the students’ membership in hip-hop culture and their understanding of authentic voice, defined in hip-hop with bravado and resistance to the status quo. That is, while the teacher believes the lesson indexes cultural alignment, the students viewed the task as asking them to be inauthentic and superficial. Throughout the week of in-class writing, students used nonverbal cues, silence, and attempts to conference with the
Oppressed groups are frequently placed in the situation of being listened to only if we frame our ideas in the language that is familiar to and comfortable for a dominant group. This requirement often changes the meanings of our ideas and works to elevate the ideas of the dominant group. (p. xiii)

The impasse fueled by resistance, opposition, and silence is broken by one student’s request, “Can I just write a paper?” The analysis of the classroom interactions over several days leading to this one request reveal that despite the course and teacher’s commitment to discussions of race and racism, the context for writing was framed in terms of the teacher’s representation of Black history and culture, eschewing the students’ experiences outside the classroom. Students’ initiation of topics like violence in their community, drugs, and the government’s role in crime are viewed as inappropriate. The student’s request to write a paper, an approved product to display academic knowledge, reflects an unwillingness to employ hip-hop language and culture, an urban Black cultural art form, to produce an academic rendering. In brief, while the students’ willingness to engage in academic work functions respectfully, they are not willing to erase Black culture, language, and their experiences with race to write what the teacher calls “raps,” discursively reconstitute as “poems.” Part of what is suggested here is that the languaging of classroom conversations on race that disrupt inequalities does not ipso facto mean bringing conversational styles from outside the classroom into the classroom. Any language practice exists and is authentically meaningful within a field (cf. Bourdieu, 1977). In this case, pulling the language practice out of its field made it, and those engaged, inauthentic—threatening their racial and cultural identities both in and outside of the classroom.

Copenhaver-Johnson (2000) explores the omnipresence of Whiteness in the imaginations of students in a K–2 classroom. In brief, the students’ responses to children’s literature reflects the predominance of Whiteness, even in their imaginary characters. As students engage in reading many different genres, the students elucidate racial meanings for texts. Students openly discuss the unfairness of “White-only” drinking fountains reported in one of the books they read. But the findings are complex as later students express the idea that the angels in heaven as Black and White but sit on segregated clouds. The African American children are able to discuss and name race in ways that demonstrate a level of understanding, unlike their White peers.

Sassi and Thomas (2008) focus on the role of the teacher in classroom conversation on race with particular focus on privilege and race in a ninth-grade classroom. Although there is student diversity, there is also student self-segregation. While segregation practices among students in school are not unusual (Tatum, 1997), students’ awareness of their privileged positions within these segregation patterns belie their expressed idealism about equality. The ongoing racial tensions in the class appear agitated by reading texts that decentralize Whiteness and profile the voices of historically oppressed communities, which created social interaction patterns that
encouraged the teacher to dig more deeply into those texts. Nonetheless, despite the teacher’s efforts, several White male students assert the benefits of slavery for African Americans. While many teachers might consider strategies for “moving on” or working toward a more harmonious classroom community, this teacher takes another position toward discussions of race, disrupting the need to resolve the tensions with silence. What Sassi and Thomas (2008) demonstrate is that disruption to “colormut- ing” in classroom conversations on race is not easy, are often complex, and do not necessarily entail closure or completeness.

CLASSROOM DISCUSSIONS OF RACE IN PRESERVICE TEACHER EDUCATION CLASSROOMS

If teachers and students are to engage in classroom conversations on race in ways that disrupt inequalities, teacher education would seem to be a promising location for promoting doing so. The assumption is that teacher education can provide opportunities for teachers to learn how to orchestrate classroom conversations on race that disrupt inequalities in their particular classrooms. Given teacher education’s rich history of engaging issues of diversity as well as racial issues, and the large corpus of studies on preparing preservice teachers for multicultural/multiethnic, underserved, minoritized, and racial diversity, one might expect an equally robust set of research studies; this is not the case.

A review of the extant literature from 1950 to 2016 yields few research articles on university/college classroom discussions of race. Overwhelmingly, those studies focus on White preservice teachers, while there is limited research that investigates discussions of race among minoritized preservice teachers (e.g., Haddix, 2010; Irizarry, 2011).

In many ways, preservice teacher education classrooms are similar to P–12 classrooms: a large number of students and one teacher, a curriculum prescribed mostly by government agencies, and an evaluation scheme based on acquisition of predetermined learning. What is different is that preservice teachers are predominately English-dominant, middle-class, and White. In addition, what they learn is mediated by their experiences in their internship experiences in schools (which can offer a different orientation to race than their teacher education classes). Furthermore, preservice teacher educators have chosen both their field and their educational institution and can be viewed as consumers who, if they are unhappy, take their “business” elsewhere. Similarities and differences notwithstanding, there is little reason to believe that preservice teachers have had substantive conversations in classrooms on race prior to entering their teacher education programs, especially given the research on how rare such discussions are in P–12 education.

Much of the research on classroom conversations on race in preservice teacher education classrooms references Tatum’s (1992, 1994, 1997, 2000) scholarship on classroom conversations on race in university classrooms in general. Tatum’s scholarship is a narrative of her experiences teaching a course on the psychology of racism
and is also based on her students’ writings and sidebar conversations. Tatum (1992) offers university instructors four guidelines:

1. The creation of a safe classroom atmosphere by establishing clear guidelines for discussion
2. The creation of opportunities for self-generated knowledge
3. The provision of an appropriate developmental model that students can use as a framework for understanding their own process
4. The exploration of strategies to empower students as change agents

Although Tatum’s research is not specific to teacher education, in the studies we reviewed on classroom conversations on race in teacher education, the findings replicate Tatum’s findings.

Consider McIntyre’s (1997) oft-cited study that draws on theories of antiracism, Freireian pedagogy, and multiculturalism. In her participatory action research study, the participants are 13 English-dominant, female, upper-middle to middle-class White, undergraduate preservice teachers. Her goal was to examine what it means to have a White identity, (2) discover ways of making meaning about Whiteness and thinking critically about race and racism, and (3) recognize how our White racial identity and the system of Whiteness are implicated in the formulation of educational practices, thereby fostering the development of individual transformation, collective transformation, or both. (p. 21)

The participants are coresearchers as they also explored the interview data transcripts and did audit and member checks. McIntyre (1997) collects data on eight group sessions that she held with preservice teachers to deconstruct Whiteness. The purposes of the group sessions were (a) to engage the participants in dialectical consciousness-raising experiences around issues of White racial identity and Whiteness; (b) to provide an opportunity for participants to locate themselves within the larger educational arena as White female student teachers, thinking critically about educational practice in relation to their own identities and White teachers; and (c) to make explicit the need for examining Whiteness and how as White teachers, they can be committed to a process of teaching and learning that is antiracist and transformative in nature. McIntyre (1997) reveals a range of responses from her participants regarding their evolving understanding of Whiteness “Whites as living a fairy tale, White power and privilege, We’re good, they’re bad, and don’t blame us, Good Whites versus Bad Whites, White skin color as a negative connotation” (pp. 80–116). The researcher and the participants are often conflicted about their beliefs and understanding of Whiteness (identity and racism) in U.S. society. McIntyre (1997) collapses these general ideas into three broad categories: White Talk, Constructions of Whiteness, and Teacher Image. Among her key findings is a definition of White Talk as “talking uncritically with/to other Whites, all the while resisting critique and massaging each other’s racist attitudes, beliefs, and actions” (pp. 45–46). Furthermore, McIntyre (1997) characterizes White Talk as “derailing the conversation, evading questions,
dismissing counterarguments, withdrawing from the discussion, remaining silent, interrupting speakers and topics, and colluding with each other in creating a 'culture of niceness' that made it very difficult to 'read the White world'” (p. 46).

Marx and Pennington’s (2003) cross-case study is methodologically more typical of research on classroom conversations on race in preservice teacher education. They use qualitative ethnographic techniques (field notes, interviews, observations) to craft individual case studies of White preservice teachers addressing race, racism, and Whiteness. The purpose of the study was “to bring up the topic of Whiteness with three White preservice teachers completing their field experience semester in the community where I taught for 13 years” (p. 96). Using a narrative format, Pennington reports that White preservice teachers appeared eager to talk about antiracism, race, and racism; however, they were less comfortable confronting their Whiteness and White hegemony.

Similar findings come from studies by Trainor (2005), Haviland (2008), and Seidl (2007). In conversations on race, White preservice teachers tend to avoid and distance themselves from uncomfortable topics about race, White privilege, and Whiteness. Relatedly, Case and Hemmings’ (2005) study examines the importance of creating a safe space for White preservice teachers to engage conversations on race and the disruption of inequalities. Beyond the four studies referenced in this paragraph, we often found that researchers’ discussions of the role of emotions during conversations/discussions about racial issues tended to supersede the actual data presented about classroom discussions of antiracism, race, and racism. The extant research is flush with articulations of English-dominant, female, upper-middle-class, White preservice teachers’ emotional states, but limited articulation of the actual classroom discussions of race.

In many of the studies we have reviewed, the inequalities that were intended to be disrupted through classroom conversations on race in preservice teacher education classrooms were not articulated. However, in the few they are clearly expressed. Tatum (1992), for example, links classroom conversations on race to racial identity development (both for White and African American students), the improvement of interracial dialogue and interaction, the creation of a safe classroom atmosphere, and empowering students as change agents. Examples of studies that include the experiences and feelings of minoritized preservice teachers are rare and have been conducted by scholars of color. Following Tatum’s article about race among undergraduates, Willis and Meacham (1996), African American scholars, describe a shift in classroom climate and discourse among multiracial preservice teachers around discussions of race. They refer to the shift as a breakpoint (i.e., an identifiable point where public discussions and responses about race evolve from being distant and cautiously polite to personal and less cautious). The authors share excerpts from responses by minoritized preservice teachers who publically give voice to their ethnic/racial roots and contrast these statements with the responses by White preservice teachers who express discomfort with identifying as White and acknowledging their Whiteness. Willis and Meacham report White students’ expressing feelings of anger, denial, guilt, and resentment prior to the breakpoint.
Several researchers of classroom conversations on race in preservice teacher education (Haviland, 2008; Marx & Pennington, 2003; McIntyre, 1997; Mosley & Rogers, 2011) articulate the complexity of the research process, as English-dominant, White, middle-class females that conducting studies among Whites, especially people whose life experiences are most like their own, complicates the research process. They experience the difficulty of being an insider, while simultaneously submitting that philosophically, they also are positioned as outsiders given their antiracist, critical pedagogical, and White studies stances. Such reflections are reminiscent of calls by Cochran-Smith et al. (2015) for teacher educators to examine their own experiences, perspectives, histories and practices with regard to diversity.

Looking across the studies on classroom conversations on race in preservice teacher educational classrooms, there are a series of common findings:

1. The researchers’ and participants’ discussions of race rarely include the voices of minoritized students.
2. The majority of students in these preservice teacher education classrooms appear to lack experiences among people of color, they have lived and been educated in predominately White environments all their lives.
3. The discussions that occur, mediated by the English-dominant, female, upper-to middle-class White researchers and/or instructors, recenter and reprivilege Whiteness, although stated goals are to address anti-racism, racism, and race.
4. In most studies, university classroom discussions emerge in response to assigned readings or in response to field placements.
5. There is a focus on the emotional burden of reconciling Whiteness for participants, in some cases the emotional burden overwhelms discussions of antiracism, race, and racism; thus, the deconstruction of antiracism, race, and racism is incomplete, with the foci on the emotional state of the White preservice teachers, White hegemony is recentered, reprivileged, and reempowered.
6. Conclusions generally (a) describe the difficulties experienced by the researchers in addressing issues of race, racism, Whiteness, White supremacy among their students and (b) reference the students’ emotional state and lack of language to discuss race in general, but specifically Whiteness.

Taken together the studies can be viewed as calling for improved theory building, teaching strategies, and restructuring curriculum for holding classroom conversations on race in preservice teacher education.

**FINAL COMMENTS**

Classroom conversations on race are rare in P–12 classrooms, and only a small number of them are empirical studies. We argue that researchers (and educators) need to acknowledge that classroom conversations occur within sociohistorical and political contexts. We describe the diverse logics-of-inquiry found in these studies, noting that some studies are framed top-down by a theory or theories, while others
are framed by a dialectical relationship between extant theories and the inductive construction of grounded theoretical constructs.

Within these empirical studies, we note that although carefully selected, curricular content may facilitate classroom conversations on race that deepen academic curriculum, facilitate the development of positive social identities for students, and disrupt inequalities; however, how teachers and students use language are critical to what is accomplished during and through classroom conversations on race. Research suggests the importance of teachers problematizing taken-for-granted interpretive frameworks derived from dominant racial ideologies and the importance of having students make connections between the discussions of race at a distance (e.g., in a literary text or of a historical event) and with their own lives close-up. Research also showed the importance of narratives of students’ experiences as counternarratives to dominant racial narratives.

However, we also noted research also shows the course of classroom conversations on race do not always lead to the disruption of inequalities or closure or eschewing dominant racial ideologies (including the centrality Whiteness, colorblindness/color-mutedness, and racial hierarchies), while some students may contest the imposition of Whiteness others will contest attempts to disrupt it. Last, although preservice teacher education would seem like a promising site to lay the foundations for promoting well-orchestrated and meaningful classroom conversations on race, research shows that it is a complex site with all of the difficulties for having such conversations as P–12 classrooms.

What is the work to be done? First, the corpus of studies is small; many more studies are needed and in particular studies are needed that provide detailed, discourse analysis of the conversations themselves (perhaps through conversational analysis, interactional sociolinguistic analysis, linguistic ethnography, or microethnographic discourse analysis, etc.) informed by social and critical theories of race (e.g., Brown, 2008; Dixson & Bloome, 2007; Carter, 2007). Second, education researchers should intentionally work to expand research to include classroom discussions of race that address all racial groups in the United States. Third, and as noted earlier, whereas teachers’ own racial identities were implicated in the nature of and the extent to which they engaged in classrooms conversations on race, researchers’ and teacher educators’ identities must be included as an integral component of theorizing about classroom conversations on race. Several studies in this review illustrate this point. Beyond the need for empirical studies is the need for theorizing how classroom conversations on race reciprocally influence conversations on race in other settings. Further theorizing is needed on how classroom conversations on race leading to disruptions of inequality might be conceived at multiple levels including local, situated contexts and broader social, institutional, and societal contexts.

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