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Why is our PE teacher education curriculum white?

A collaborative self-study of teaching about 'race' in PETE programmes

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Introduction

Why is my curriculum white? is a student-led movement that has questioned the centrality of white perspectives in higher education. Originating in the United Kingdom (UK) with an event and film produced by students at University College London (UCLTV, 2014, <https://youtu.be/Dscx4h2l-Pk>), the movement suggests that white theorists and viewpoints have been privileged over Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) or postcolonial scholars. They raise concerns that a white focused curriculum has a universalising effect, making white-specific theories appear to speak about all human experience. According to this movement, if universities are to be as inclusive as they claim, they are challenged to develop curricula that reflect this, as opposed to focusing on diversity, which has tended to be framed in relation to the numbers of BME staff and students and celebrated as a proxy for equality (Archer, 2007; Husain, 2015; Pilkington, 2016). Higher education institutions (HEIs) are not neutral, but reproduce implicit perspectives on reading lists, the sequencing of issues,

and consistent messages (Cochran-Smith, 2000). We could also add, how students' needs are addressed, and how these needs are dealt with, as well as HEIs' expectations of (BME and disadvantaged) students' engagement and success. We propose that explicit and hidden curricular material and delivery may contribute to maintaining the status quo, thus racial inequalities; and despite equal opportunity attempts (such as the Widening Participation agenda in the UK), BME students are less likely to be awarded 2:1/1st degrees compared to their white peers; they have higher rates of underachievement, drop out, exclusion, unemployment, and incarceration (Lander, 2016; Pilkington, 2016).

There are reports that contemporary education policy (in the UK at least) is becoming less committed to monitoring disadvantage for specific minority ethnic groups (Rhamie, 2016). Changes to Teacher Standards to remove particular reference to the promotion of equality and inclusion, and awareness of factors impacting children's learning, are concerning, especially when coupled with indications that 'there is very little content related to preparing teachers to understand their own racialised positions...to understand the constructs of race and ethnicity...[even less] to address racist incidents' or how to educate pupils about multiculturalism beyond stereotypes (Lander, 2016, p. 96). Whiteness – the promotion of white interests as normative, race-neutral, or colour-blind, hiding the operation of dominance and advantage – dominates in initial teacher education (ITE), meaning white educators regularly do not see themselves as racialised beings in a context that marginalises a racialised 'Other' or reiterates discourses about 'problem' disadvantaged students (Lander, 2016; Rhamie, 2016).

Attention to whiteness 'expose[s] the inherent structures that perpetuate systemic racism' (Lander, 2016, p. 101). In the UK, the establishing of the Race Equality Charter in 2016 marked an attempt to indeed pay attention to the representation, progression, and success of BME staff and students. To be awarded the Charter Mark, a HEI must demonstrate reflection on institutional and cultural issues for minority ethnic staff and students and create an action

plan for race equality priorities (Equality Challenge Unit, 2018). The curriculum must specifically be considered as part of an application, including how race equality is considered in subject matter, readings, and case study materials. It is too early to say whether the Race Equality Charter will make any significant shifts in culture and structure in UK HEIs, but institutional measures towards race equality are not the only possible ways that whiteness can be addressed. In contexts where similar institutional commitments are not possible or not prioritised, reflection on curriculum and pedagogy by teacher educators is imperative as a positive first step towards potential change.

Collaborative self-study

Narrative and self-study are powerful ways of presenting ‘embodied, everyday experiences’ (Flintoff, 2014, p. 346) by offering space for reflection and deep thinking. Milner (2007, p. 588) found that sharing a personal story of racialised experience or inequity with White pre-service teachers (PSTs) helped them to understand ‘their own racialised lives and how that may influence their work’. Hence, putting forward your own story of race, even if it demonstrates privilege, can model pedagogies and curricula that PSTs can then take into schools. The role of self-examination and inquiry in uncovering and addressing assumptions about students and teaching about race in ITE was addressed by Cochran-Smith (2000), who found that although her explicit curriculum theorised race in depth the hidden curriculum of social contexts, structures, and interpersonal relationships remained racist and exclusionary. Cochran-Smith highlighted inequalities, but subsequently privileged pedagogies developed by White educators and reified an ‘us versus them’ identity, by reproducing race/culture neutrality. For Milner (2007), sharing stories worked both to help white students see that race and racism remain central elements of society and education today, but also open up dialogue with BME students who could then reply with their own stories of marginalisation.

We engaged in a collaborative self-study that was initiated from our goal to improve upon and potentially transform our pedagogical practices

related to race in our programs (Laboskey, 2004). The three characteristics of community, stance, and desire outlined by Ovens and Fletcher (2014) were used as the framework for this self-study on teacher education practices (S-STEP). Both of us had a *desire to 'be more, to improve, to better understand'* (Ovens & Fletcher, 2014, p. 7) how we challenged the traditional white curriculum by utilising pedagogies that addressed issues related to race. To accomplish this, we took a stance of questioning and critiquing ourselves, our actions and our ideas (Hamilton & Pinnegar, 1998) related to our pedagogical practices, biases, contexts, and prior experiences that influenced the pedagogies we enacted during one academic year. We each selected two courses and reflected upon, through journaling, our curriculum content and teaching methods, as well as our thoughts and perspectives related to how we provided our students with learning experiences about race. After each reflective writing episode, we questioned, critiqued, and challenged one another to further our understanding of ourselves as teacher educators, especially in regard to how we perpetuated or deconstructed social ideologies related to race. Through engaging in this collaborative process, our hope was to contribute to the S-STEP community by sharing challenges and complexities teacher educators face when addressing race topics and issues within a primarily white curriculum. In this chapter we recreate some of the reflective journaling and the questioning we engaged in together. We begin with some context about the PETE and sport programmes we teach on. Here, 'course' refers to a module or unit of study undertaken in one year or semester, and 'programme' refers to the overall degree programme that students are enrolled upon.

Context

Joanne is a white British physical education (PE) and sport sociology senior lecturer in the School of Sport Science and Physical Activity at the University of Bedfordshire in the UK. She has always lived and worked in the UK. Following a personal interest in feminism and gender studies, she has researched issues of gender and 'race' intersectionality in experiences of PE

and physical activity for 10 years. Joanne teaches a Year 1 introduction to sport sociology course. In the first semester, students registered on that course come from three Bachelor's degree programmes (Football Studies, Sport Studies, and Sport Development and Management) wherein over 50% are BAME they are significantly male-dominated (typically 94% male). These three programmes occasionally produce graduates who go on to postgraduate PETE programmes. In the second semester of the introduction to sport sociology course, they are joined by students in the Sport and Physical Education programme (not leading to qualified teacher status). Typically, this cohort is 18% BME and has an even gender split. This programme attracts a number of students intending to go on to postgraduate PETE programmes. Joanne also teaches a Critical Sport Pedagogy course in the final year of the Sport and Physical Education degree. The course is a mix of lectures and practicals in gymnastics and dance with four instructors sharing the teaching. The weekly classes cover critical pedagogy, social justice, and physical cultural issues.

Jennifer identifies as a white, gay, female, middle-class, 'mostly' able-bodied American. She is a physical education teacher educator in the School of Teaching, Learning and Curriculum Studies at Kent State University in the United States (US). Due to her personal lived experiences, Jennifer developed a commitment and passion for social justice issues, which has translated into her research and advocacy initiatives on sociocultural and social justice issues within physical education and physical activity for over 10 years (particularly related to gender, sexuality, and (dis)ability). The PE program includes three Bachelor's degrees: PE licensure, health and PE licensure, and physical activity and sport performance (PASP) – non-licensure. Currently, the majority of students in all three programs are male, with a high percentage of college athletes in the non-licensure program. The racial identity of the students in the licensure programs is almost 100% white, with only two Black and two international students who have graduated and obtained teaching licensure in 9 years. Approximately 25% of the PASP students identify as Black or African American. Jennifer teaches a foundations course that provides an overview of

the disciplines within PE, fitness, and sport (e.g., exercise physiology, physical education pedagogy, sport sociology) as well as the overall health and wellness of the nation. There is a textbook utilised for the course; however, current events and sociocultural issues are integrated throughout the course, particularly those that arise in sport and the media. Jennifer also teaches a combined secondary content and methods course with another colleague, which is a primary pedagogy course for students in the licensure programs. The course focuses on standards and assessment, unit and lesson planning, effective teaching practices, curriculum models, and includes extensive field experiences in the local secondary schools. One class lesson was dedicated to explicitly teaching students about sociocultural issues; however, socially just and unjust issues are integrated throughout the entire course. Both of our Year 1 courses have sociological content and take opportunities to address contemporary sociocultural issues in the fields of sport and PE; whereas in our pedagogy courses that are taken later in the program, race and racism, in particular, are addressed less frequently and with decreased intention.

Challenging whiteness in PETE programmes

In this section, we provide examples of how we educated our students about race and challenged the traditional hegemonic ‘white’ curriculum within introductory and pedagogy-based courses. We identify content that was covered, learning experiences that were provided and discourse that occurred in each of our identified classes. Due to space limitations, we cannot provide the breadth and depth of the pedagogies and learning experiences that occurred, but hope to shed light on the possibilities as well as the complexities of attempting to challenge our white curricula. We offer selected pedagogical and curricular experiences and some reflective questions we posed to ourselves and to one another (these reflections and questions are in italics).

Joanne – introduction course

In terms of acknowledging the notions of ‘race’, ethnicity and racism in PE and sport history, there is one lecture in semester 1 of this course on British colonialism and origins of racial difference in sport. I talk about C.L.R. James’ work on cricket in the West Indies and the use of sport as part of British control over the colonies. We explore the story of Jesse Owens in the 1936 Berlin Games, and Tommie Smith and John Carlos’ black power salute in the 1968 Mexico City Games. All these examples are from British and US sport history. The students often respond well to these types of story; that is, they recall the story later. As part of the assessment, they produce a group presentation on the history of a sport. This year there was one group of black male students that focused closely on the history of black men in the NBA. At the time, they did not have the sociological tools to do more than point out segregation and discrimination, but I hoped to build on their interest. *Visibility of black scholars and athletes was important, but I feel that I should have found further ways to aid their engagement by building on their research.* For the first few years teaching this course, I included one lecture on race and ethnicity in contemporary sport, race as a social construction, and privilege. However, that sat uncomfortably with me because when topics such as race, postcolonial theory, or feminism are allocated 1 week on a syllabus it re-centres Western white male theories and theorists as universal; people of colour as ‘markers of difference and diversity’ (Burton, 2015, 4.7). Contemporary issues affecting sport are raised every week, such as how restrictions on travel for people from some Muslim majority countries affect sport, and how athlete protest against racism and police brutality has been received. Sometimes, discussing the experiences of minority ethnic and disadvantaged groups results in heated discussion. A white British student told me he had voted to Leave the EU in the Referendum of June 2016 because there is too much immigration. I felt I had to tell him I disagreed with his position. I am aware every time I present a progressive viewpoint because not all of the students agree. Contemplating this

point, I am reminded that sociology professor Robyn Ryle has tweeted her reflections on the difficulties of teaching sociology:

Sometimes I forget how different teaching sociology is compared to other disciplines.

(Ryle, 2017a)

Like, yes, it may be hard to get students to master differential equations, but at least you're not telling them everything they've ever known or been taught is a lie.

(Ryle, 2017b)

Drawing from both Gauntlett's (2007) identity research using LEGO Serious Play and Flintoff, Dowling and Fitzgerald (2015) narrative project on race in PETE, in a seminar following the lecture on race and ethnicity I set up story-telling activities with visual and creative methods, such as children's building blocks or a written prompt. I ask students to consider 'how has your race/ethnicity affected your sport participation?' It typically results in white students turning to BME students to hear their stories, as though it is only BME students who are shaped by race and ethnicity or have a salient ethnic identity. In this year's class, this activity did not result in much on-topic dialogue, so I shared my own story of a time while walking in Brooklyn, New York, when a black person spat on the ground in front of me in what could be seen as a gesture of hostility, and I asked the students if they considered this gesture to be an example of racism. The group (five white British, one white Greek, one black British, all male) said it was racism. When I suggested that white people cannot experience racism because it is not institutionalised discrimination or violence, they said they could see the point, but I am not sure if they agreed with me just because I was there. The black student did not share any stories himself – I did not put anyone on the spot, but he was quiet throughout the whole activity. I was aware of not wanting to suggest it was his responsibility to educate white students about racism. The only story that one of the white students shared was that he had grown up in a very white place, so he did not

see how ethnicity had affected his sport participation; he had only occasionally played against people of other ethnicities. This showed me that he could not focus on white identity as a race/ethnicity. *I need to do more to teach about white as a racial identity or how whiteness might have affected his life.*

I have considered designing the course to focus exclusively on race, racism, and tools for understanding BME experiences in sport. When I worked out that over 50% of students are non-white-British, I asked myself, exactly why do I not rewrite my curriculum to focus away from white British and US sport history? I expect the white students would then complain about lack of relevance, which is exactly what the *Why is my curriculum white?* activists would say is the problem.

Jennifer – introduction course

In this introductory course, my ultimate goal is for students to become critical consumers of PE, fitness, and sport. On the first day of the semester, I inform the students that we will engage in discourse about topics that may be considered controversial (e.g., Colin Kaepernick, an NFL quarterback, kneeling during the US National Anthem), may be sensitive topics and/or have the potential to make them feel uncomfortable, since many of these discussions about race, racism, gender, sexuality, (dis)ability, etc. can be contentious due to the complexity of the issues. Early on, students self-explore, through their own biographies, their lived experiences with PE and sport where they are asked to identify ways they were privileged or marginalised in those situations. Most often, students cannot ‘see’ their own privilege and those students that are most privileged (e.g., white males) are usually the students that argue for how they were marginalised. Shortly after, students completed a social identity profile as a basis to engage in discourse about social groupings and how certain social identities are privileged whereas others are not. They explored which identities were most significant to them and why. We then viewed the Jane Elliot racial experiment, ‘Brown Eyes, Blue Eyes’ that was videotaped the day after Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated. Students certainly expressed their discontent

for racial injustice after watching this video; however, the majority of students are white and do not learn their own privilege even as I acknowledged my own white privilege. My hope is that through acknowledging my own privilege other students will own theirs, too (Landers, 2016). *I admit that I tend to feel uncomfortable at times explicitly addressing such social issues in my Intro class, because I always have a group of African-American/Black students, mostly athletes, and wonder how they receive my explicit discourse on privilege and marginalisation related to race and racism, because I am in the dominant, privileged group and they are not.*

During the fall semester, I gave the students an opportunity to create a project on their own social identity, what cultural competency meant to them and how it related to their prospective field of study. One student, a self-identified bi-racial woman with a working-class background, created a collaboration of photos that were both from her personal photo library and those that she downloaded from the web. The last few images of her video included African-American/Black protestors – which was in response to the police brutality that was permeating the US. At the end of the video, a student, who identified as an African-American woman, shouted out, ‘it doesn’t matter, it is not going to change anything’. I expressed that I do believe the protests matter – that taking action and seeking social justice would hopefully evolve, although it would take time for systematic change to occur. ‘Like I said, it doesn’t matter. They protest in one area and then there is another Black person killed by police a day later. What kind of change is happening? It won’t make a difference’. We engaged for another minute or two and then she got up and walked out. *I began to question my approach to teaching about social identity and racial justice. Am I teaching it in an appropriate manner? Should I simmer down how intentional I am about the content? Do I have a clear agenda that is coming through my teaching? Or, is this the result of teaching a White curriculum?*

Joanne – pedagogy course

Critical Sport Pedagogy is a final year unit for sport and PE students. It is a mix of lectures addressing critical pedagogy, social justice and physical culture, and practicals in gymnastics and dance; four of us share the teaching. This lecture format, demonstrating a teacher-centred pedagogy, does not exactly demonstrate the principles that critical pedagogy espouses (such as centring student voice). There is no lecture on race and racism in sport and PE, but this year I talked a little about race and racism intersecting with social class; however, it came across that I was conflating issues for working-class people with racial issues (e.g., BME people all experience class discrimination, too), which I did not intend. There is a reading list mainly offering socially critical perspectives in PE and sport pedagogy and expectation for students to read a particular piece each week. Because we do not address race and racism in PE explicitly, there is a lack of race and ethnicity based research on this reading list. Part of the assessment is based on the gymnastics practicals that they engage in through the Cultural Studies Model (Kinchin & O’Sullivan, 2003) and complete a portfolio containing diary entries, photographs, and short essays that address cultural issues in gymnastics. They are assessed on their reflections, not on their ability to perform gymnastics. It asks them to be open about their embodied feelings in gymnastics (e.g., discomfort about body size or ability). They must reflect on how their gymnastics practicals are gendered and how gender might be undone. They do a form of the magazine tasks from Oliver and Lalik’s (2001) work with high school girls. However, we do not ask them explicitly to talk about other aspects of their embodied identity aside from gender and body size. Occasionally, the gymnastics practical teacher reports back to me about an instance she has seen – such as the students self-segregating by ethnicity, or the black students generally not engaging in the activities. *We wonder, is it appropriate to ask students to comment on issues like racial segregation in the classroom? We clearly feel more comfortable asking students to reflect on gender than on race.*

Jennifer – pedagogy course

Students participate in a 5-week middle school field experience and later in the semester have a 2-week high school experience. At the end of the first week of the course, I have the students complete a social identity paper where they explore their social identity, discuss factors that have influenced their identity and how their identities may have changed over time. In preparation for a 3-hour class that focused explicitly on sociocultural and social justice issues, I had my students read the social justice boxes in their course textbook (Mitchell & Walton-Fisette, 2016). The first task was a poster activity of specific social identities: gender, sexuality, SES, (dis)ability, religion, race, and body issues. Each student was given a marker where they had to write any words that came to mind related to each social identity – something that they believe and feel, that they see and hear, related to PE or not, etc. The students really struggled with this. I was so surprised on how disconnected, lacking, general, ‘safe’ the comments were on each poster that I felt the need to discuss each social identity in great detail. Due to the political climate in our country at the moment, we linked some of these social issues to the political chaos in the US and the fallout/actions that have transpired since the election of Trump as the US President and how many of these underprivileged social groups may be affected to an even greater degree.

After this discussion, they engaged in a Privilege Walk activity.¹ I was surprised at their lack of understanding of their own privilege. The conversation that transpired focused on how and why they were similar, about their different privileges and whether they thought the outcome would be the same if I did this activity in different geographic locations in the state. Of course they said no, but I do not think the message really hit home to them (they all identify as white, heterosexual, able-bodied). Later in the classroom, we watched a video called ‘Angry Eyes’ created by Jane Elliott. *My class, I think, were a bit stunned and did not share too much, but I wondered if they were worried to say anything, because my Korean colleague was observing my class.* There is no doubt that her experience watching that video (which she

shared with me later) was different than my white students. *In Jennifer's methods courses, practical experiences are a salient component of the courses, yet, there is limited space for engagement with theory, whereas Joanne's sociology and critical pedagogy courses are centred on theory in lectures and classroom sessions, but lack opportunities to apply these theoretical concepts in practical settings. Which brings us to question, should students learn sociological tools to recognise and articulate inequities first, or have practical experiences where they can see marginalisation for themselves?*

Discussion and conclusion

How do we begin to challenge or change our white curricula? Are we asking too much of our students to 'get' privilege, social theory, and equity in limited class experiences? Based on the few examples we shared in this chapter, we believe our students might be operating in a pedagogy of discomfort, by asking privileged students to talk about their privilege. Recently, Azzarito and Simon (2017) articulated the problems of a white-centric PETE from the perspective of PSTs and school students from minority backgrounds in increasingly diverse environments. They advocated for culturally relevant pedagogies, including encouraging positive understandings of difference that can destabilise dominant ideologies about racialised 'Others'. Although this might initially involve discomfort for PETEs used to cultural homogeneity, they might become socialised into using culturally relevant pedagogies in their own teaching practice. We recognise that it is a demanding activity that needs to be 'scaffolded' (Winkler, 2017), as we attempt to break down students' belief systems through critical thinking, reflection and awareness. While there are critical pedagogies that can help facilitate this understanding, curriculum changes such as making the content explicitly centred on constructions of race and racism have been fruitful.

There are a number of studies on diversity awareness for White PSTs (e.g., Solomon et al., 2005) including some specific to (H)PE or PETE (Flintoff et al., 2015), but less on curricular and pedagogical changes for diverse

classrooms. However, resources on doing social justice and critical pedagogy (Robinson & Randall, 2016; Bell, 2016) do not differentiate concerning the types of students when teaching for and about sociocultural and social justice issues. While it is not black students' responsibility to educate their peers, Packard (2012) encourages educators to be aware of opportunities to bring in student viewpoints that model the sociological imagination; equally, to demonstrate to black students that their perspectives are valued. Diversity in the classroom aids cultural awareness, but being in a diverse classroom is not enough to see positive effects: diversity must be attended to (Packard, 2012).

In some ways, it is easy to answer the question, 'why is my PETE curriculum white?' We are white staff amongst other white staff in institutions of higher education in white majority countries. Pedagogical and sociological theories that we use are written by white folk for white audiences. Most students intending on a path into teaching are white. It is not difficult work to change our curriculum but our socialisation in this setting encourages inaction. However, in our year one courses we both have a higher number of minority ethnic students and it seems to be here that we have had more success in introducing issues of race and ethnicity. Here, we have both used contemporary issues in the world of sport as a basis for discussions of race and racism. And it is here that we can hopefully continue to challenge the white curriculum and show our minority ethnic that a career in teaching *can* be a possibility to them, that teaching is *not* just for white people. At the onset of this collaborative self-study, we were both aware that we taught within a white curriculum; however, through our reflective process and our desire to '*be more, to improve, to better understand*' (Ovens & Fletcher, 2014, p. 7) we were able to identify a salient difference in how we educated our students about racial issues between the introductory and pedagogy courses. It is clear to both of us that we must continue to take steps forward to establish an inclusive curriculum, especially in our pedagogy courses, if we are to have BME graduates who become physical education teachers. Based on our self-study and collective professional experiences teaching in PETE, we provide the following

suggestions to PETEs in how we can attempt to change our white curriculum:

- 1) Develop strategies to aid students' engagement by building upon their work related to race/racism;
- 2) Teach about white/whiteness as a racial identity;
- 3) PETEs and students should engage in continuous self-reflection;
- 4) Pose challenging questions that may lead to contentious and complex discourse and outcomes and develop strategies on how to navigate these engagements;
- 5) Engage in activities to understand one's own privilege (PETEs and PSTs);
- 6) Provide a combination of theoretical (e.g., readings) and practical experiences (e.g., field-based observations and teaching) to educate and expose students about privilege and marginalisation;
- 7) Select content that explicitly centres on constructions of race/racism, (e.g., readings, assignments, assessments); and
- 8) scaffold students learning of threshold concepts by spending longer time on each concept (for instance, multiple class sessions).

We both believe it is important for us to own our white privilege with students despite the fact that we are both in the majority of those that are teachers. Interrogating her own stories demonstrated for Cochran-Smith (2000, p. 15) that she taught primarily for the benefit of 'White students who were invited to learn more about racism through stories of other people's oppression' rather than about larger issues of institutional racism and the history of oppression and privilege. Working with narrative and/or self-study has proven to be valuable analytical and reflective tools for teacher educators and for their students. Owning your privilege and talking about it in class can mean going some way to avoiding 'the rather insidious notion that [your] own ethnicity is divorced from [your] teacher self' (Lander, 2016, p. 105).

Why is my curriculum white? prompts teacher educators to create learner-centred curricula that follow the interests and backgrounds of the students, not what established sources think they ought to learn. It encourages us to ask whether we have truly taken 'other' perspectives into account. Through engaging in this collaborative self-study, we have learned that although we are attempting to educate our students about sociocultural issues and change the traditional white curriculum, we are barely scratching the

surface. We have challenged each other by questioning how students are learning and experiencing content related to race and have shown each other the value of reading social theory, practical experiences, and reflections on identity. Although our contexts are different, both geographically and within our programs, we are beginning to learn different pedagogies that we can enact to address racial injustice and the work that we both need to do to change our white curricula.

Notes

- 1 The Privilege Walk activity invites all participants to stand arm's length apart across the same line allowing ample room to move forward or backward during the activity. The instructor reads statements, such as: 'If you are a white male take one step forward', 'If you have visible or invisible disabilities take one step backward', etc. At the end of the activity, a discussion transpires with the participants as to how they feel with where they are standing, what they learned about themselves, etc.

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