

Democracy's College

Episode 28: Transnational Whitelash in Educational Policy and Practice.

Announcer: Welcome to The Democracy's College Podcasts series. This podcast focuses on educational equity, justice, and excellence for all students and P-20 educational pathways. This podcast is a product of the Office of Community College Research and Leadership, or OCCRL, at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Learn more about OCCRL at occrll.illinois.edu.

In this episode, Marci Rockey at OCCRL talks with Dr. Claire Crawford, BRIDGE Research Fellow at the Center for Research in Race and Education at the School of Education at the University of Birmingham, about transnational whitelash in educational policy and practice.

Marci Rockey: The term whitelash has been used to describe the political and social climate following the United States 2016 presidential election and the Brexit decision in the UK. How has your own research been impacted by these events?

Claire Crawford: First of all, thanks very much for having me. The critical race theorist, I have a keen interest in education policy and the outcomes and trajectory of minoritized student groups, especially if they leave compulsory-age schooling and transition into further education or employment. I'd love to be sitting with you today explaining how had to change my research interests is because they've been rendered the frontline of inquiry. However, it seems that as socially and racially just education system is getting further away. This research in sections of oppression be that either of race, or ethnicity or gender, sexuality, just to name a few. Research in these fields is more salient and timely than ever.

In relation to my own work, I guess the campaign slogans of Brexit, that's for those who are not familiar is vote, leave, and take control. The more familiar campaign of the election of Donald Trump to make America great again, undoubtedly, about race and the need to re-center power for ordinary white people. Both campaigns have claimed a mantle of patriotism and predictably promise to political hard line on immigration, but its detractors on both sides of the campaign have rightly questioned control for who, and indeed, for whom are we making a nation great again?

I think it's important to recognize that the rhetoric of making nations great again is disturbingly distant from the critical understanding of each nation's history. Colonialism, slavery of conquest, abuses which have arguably served to destabilize and exploit regions and communities from which we now think patterns of poverty and, of course, migration. It is the absence of understanding, or indeed the unwillingness to link the races and violence brutality upon which both countries have founded, in my opinion, that results in cause to make nations great again.

I think the words of Toni Morrison speak perfectly to the current social-political context when she suggested that "So scary the consequences of the collapse of white privilege that many have flocked to political platforms that support and translate violence against the defenseless and strength." I guess from my own research, the political and social racism we are witnessing today, it plays out spectacularly through education policy on both sides of the Atlantic. I think while most people are adept spotting very overt displays of racism, like the racist remarks of Trump or the antimigrant campaign process of Brexit. There is one in particular that was titled, "Breaking point, the EU has failed us all," which bears an alarming similarity to Nazi propaganda. If you have not seen it, it's definitely worth a Google. It is, however, the *enduring* and insidious forms of racism that, in my opinion, are the greatest challenge in the academy today. It's a challenge that my own research attempts to address in the context of quantitatively disrupting education policies that produce racially inequitable outcomes.

Marci Rockey:

Could you perhaps give us specific illustration from your work of how the whitelash you refer to plays out in British education policy, as an example?

Claire Crawford:

Yeah. Absolutely. In the UK, discourses of white victim hurt, overt and rife and were perhaps unsurprisingly so, especially prevalent in the runup to Brexit. Paper headlines repeatedly proclaimed that white Brit is under attack by minority ethnic groups. For instance, white British peoples are said to lag behind their minority ethnic peers or that white British children are outperformed by ethnic minority peoples or indeed that peoples with English as a second languages outperform white British students. The newspapers aren't alone in their claims. It is important to note that narratives are actually bolstered to the very highest of level with government ministers calling to explicitly target white working-class children for special support and education, even suggesting that it's a *scandal* that minority ethnic children are more likely to go to university than poor white ones.

Our current prime minister has also made explicit her commitment to exposing disadvantages faced by white working-class people when she launched an order of public services last year. I think from a critical-race perspective, any government's positioning of the white working class alongside disadvantaged minority ethnic groups is no misnomer. It's *highly* significant and an expression of whitelash as the presentation of white working-class people as distinctly disadvantaged is very politically powerful. And in the UK, it speaks very robustly to the 60 percent of Britains that would consider themselves to be working class.

I think that despite the prolific use of the term "working class" by politician and media leaks on both sides of the Atlantic, there really is rarely any explanation or consensus of what that term means or indeed how the politically powerful label is being deployed in context. It's the impreciseness of labels in meanings that fuel racism and xenophobia. I think much of my current work seeks to quantitatively challenge the damaging notion that white working-class children in Britain are under siege, or indeed that the presence of minority ethnic groups in schools cause damage to the education of white children that would warrant such an overtly defensive whitelash.

I think by applying a critical-race quantitative methodology to trouble statistical claims, my own research finds that in the case of nine in 10 white British children—that's the approximately 90 percent of white British children that do not claim free school meals—that they are in fact *not* the lowest performing principal ethnic group in the UK. They *are* certainly in terms of the qualifications with the highest [inaudible 00:06:51] value, the third highest performing group behind Chinese and Indian students, who collectively make up less than 3 percent of the population. That's *quite* a different pattern of achievement than the politicians and media would have you believe.

My work, if you like, effectively tries to warn policy and practice that this selective use of attainment statistics, that's using the data pertaining to one in 10 children who claim free school meals for example, emboldened by erroneous labels such as white working class, which speaks to the 60 percent but really does refer to the one in 10 in British policy, creates a very unfounded perception of much white casualties in our schools, and it speaks very powerfully to anti-immigration nationalist and racist sentiments that are ever present in contemporary western democracies. And it's perhaps worth also noticing that beyond school, the employment rate for white British young people far exceeds that of their peers, even those who were at the top of the racial entertainment spurt. But again, political media elites remain silent on these statistics. Therefore, I'd say

that the British government deployment of these knowingly inaccurate labels speaks very powerful to anti-immigration and certainly fuels the sort of climate of hate that we witnessed in Brexit and indeed on the other side of the Atlantic.

I think there is a very dangerous veneer of a white ethnic disadvantage that's been created and perpetuated by politicians on both sides of the Atlantic. Education policies such as this really are just one dangerous manifestation of the whitelash we're experiencing today.

Marci Rocky:

Some of your recent research and writing on the U.S. No Child Left Behind policy argues that the policy more accurately reflects educational reform efforts that ensure no *white* child is left behind. Can you speak to this policy and how it fell short of advancing educational equity?

Claire Crawford:

Yes, certainly. I guess that my work in the U.S. closely resembles that of the work in the UK, in the sense that I conduct critical readings of federal policies and statistical accountability data to really challenge the rhetoric of policies and associated government claims. The work that I think you're referring to is part of an ongoing study in which I examine the role of No Child Left Behind and the subsequent Every Student Succeeds Act to illustrate that, despite the explicit aims and commitments of the legislation, the acts of permitted an active structure in equality and segregation in schools which *really* fall short of advancing equity in education.

Utilizing my research in Florida, I guess as an example, the manifestation of those acts served primarily to entrench the dominance of wealthy white students in state public schools. Ironically, Florida's approach to education has been heralded as a model by the U.S. administration, with Betsy DeVos suggesting that Florida was a *bright* spot, even that Sunshine State students buck the national trend and show significant improvements and narrow the achievement gap. And yet for my own research, Florida's attainment data provides quite a disturbing insight into the continuing realities of inequitable education in the U.S.

Utilizing standardized attainment data for the states since the exception of No Child Left Behind in 2003, my own research quantitatively illustrates the changes in standardized test scores for students in grade 10 by race, ethnicity, gender, eligibility for free or reduced school meals, and whether a student had gifted certification. If we look at the reading of the English language test results, the data show that since 2003, all groups have made progress in the No Child Left Behind with increases in their mean scale test scores of over 20 percent during its control.

However, because the testing instruments in Florida have changed multiple times since the inception of No Child Left Behind, it's very difficult to look longitudinally and comparatively. If we use odds ratios, they can be really usefully employed in cases like this to examine changes in odds of success between groups. For example, if we look at the data from 2010, and that was the first, the end, if you like, of the first standardized testing instrument in Florida, white students were about four times more likely to meet state benchmark for reading than their black peers, who were about twice as likely to meet that benchmark than their Hispanic peers.

If we look forward to 2017, under the Every Student Succeeds Act, the relative odds of success between white and black students had narrowed slightly to about three and a half times more likely, and the white and Hispanic gap has remained largely static. However, this narrowing, if you like, of relative odds between white students and their black peers may attract the attention of state and federal administration. However, there's a quieter and far more insidious pattern of achievement that is simultaneously occurring that nullifies those gains, and yet that trend remains very unremarked upon.

To give an example, if we look at the odds ratios between students with and without gifted certification, we find that in 2003—that's the year that No Child Left Behind legislation was rolled out in the state of Florida—grade 10 students with gifted certification were approximately 10 times more likely to meet the state benchmark for reading. By 2014, the end of No Child Left Behind, the gap had jumped to more than 16 times more likely. And if we look further ahead to 2017 there is another alarming jump to more than 17 times more likely to meet benchmark under Every Student Succeeds.

One would reasonably question, you know, who are the gifted students in Florida? Perhaps unsurprisingly, the data shows that gifted students are most likely to be white and not economically disadvantaged. I guess to answer your question, federal legislation that is explicitly designed to close the gap has legally committed the further privileging of white wealthy students in Florida, and although inactive opportunity and increased racial segregation may not have been a premeditated goal of the acts, neither was it fortuitous, I think it's important to point out that I do acknowledge that the subject is standardized testing and accountability is in itself conscientious. But I think that No Child Left Behind made important progress in terms of collecting data that has permitted researchers such as myself to expose these structural inequalities in education.

The whitelash in this instance will undoubtedly come in the form of the U.S. administration's commitment to devolved accountability through which policymakers in school administration will once again be able to hide vital data that exposes the existence of whiteness as a political project under the guise of so-called colorblind policies and meritocratic processes and practices in legislation.

Marci Rockey:

True discussions about racial attitudes, racial microaggressions, and racism are often met with deflection, defensiveness, denial, and white fragility when white people are called to see their whiteness for what it is relative to privilege and the racial disequilibrium. How does white fragility protect racial inequality and what action would you say is needed to address the growing transnational racial antipathy toward people of color?

Claire Crawford:

I'm going to have to quote my colleague Professor David Gilborne here. He suggested that there really isn't that much *fragile* about white fragility. We feel it's resilient and it's powerful and it really resists anything that might challenge its claims to neutrality and superiority. I think DiAngelo, when referring to the defensive moves that white people make when challenged racially, suggested that white fragility is really characterized by emotions such as anger and fear and guilt. But she also said by *behaviors* including argumentation, violence, and I think the two national examples I've just provided really reinforce that point.

In terms of argumentation, I think one of the clearest illustrations of white fragility is the question, "What about poor whites?" In the case of the UK, that's the education performance of poorer white. That's the one in 10 that I mentioned that claim free school meals as they serve really as a much-needed facade to white supremacy or the performance of the nine in 10 white students. If all white students are equally privileged in a nation's education system, then there really wouldn't be a vehicle available that could so effectively distract society's attention away from the enduring structural racisms that plague education on both sides of the Atlantic.

In the case of the U.S., I think white fragility plays out through the silence enacted by legislation that has legally and effectively permitted the further privilege of white wealthy students in Florida. Legislation has created the proliferation of giftedness that has really disproportionately served the children of whites who have the most power and privilege. I believe that critical research, qualitative and quantitative, that challenges white power and privilege in education, especially by the white scholars, is a powerful way to interrupt the status quo. It should be *tenaciously*

pursued regardless of the range of defensive moves that might be triggered. It's important to me, certainly, that white people are made uncomfortable by the statistics such as those discussed earlier, in order to bring about action that would finally address some of the ways that racism persist in both nations. I think white fragility is nothing more than an obstacle to progress and, ultimately, the pursuit of material changes in education.

Marci Rocky: In terms of advancing racial equity in educational access and attainment, what would you identify as the most important considerations for future research?

Claire Crawford: That's a good question. I think if you were ever to shut down a conversation, it's done so with statistics. I think numbers are especially appealing to those in power, especially when they lend scientific or authoritative backing to your favorite stereotype or position. Statistics are widely viewed as factual, as objective sources of information. Even when we have doubts, the numbers are perhaps not correct, I think most people lack the skill or the access to really explore and critique the quantitative data presented to them.

For those interested, I think there's a great special issue of the *General Race Ethnicity and Education*. I think it's volume 21, possible issue two, which explores how the well-established and accepted tenants of critical-race scholarship can be methodologically applied to quantitative methods to powerfully support and further social justice. For me personally, I think that the continuation of scholarship that actively supports use of critical quantitative methods to document the structural oppression within which marginalized individuals live is critical.

There is, as I've tried to at least demonstrate in this interview, a vital need for better understanding of how statistics are mobilized and really in critical ways that produce knowledge that really operates to the advantage of dominant whites. Scholars like Bob Lingard would argue there really is need for researchers and practitioners to understand the socially constructed nature of the categories in statistics that are underpinning the contemporary, if you like, policy-as-number approach.

Marci Rocky: What call to action would you offer our listeners, particularly white scholars and practitioners towards disrupting white supremacy in educational context and towards advancing equitable student outcomes?

Claire Crawford: That's a difficult one. I think when we witness extremes in the political and social climates, just as we are today, we really do have a

responsibility to go further. For me, that responsibility, if you like, is especially pertinent for the white academy and educationists and activists. White scholars dominate the academy. I believe approximately 76 percent of full-time faculty, I think in degree-granting institutes in the U.S. are white, and I think to my knowledge, [of] full-time professors, approximately 4 percent of faculty are black.

Then when you compare it to the UK, I think it's even more marked, and I think, according to recent data by the Equalities unit, about 85 percent of our full-time faculty are white. And among the professoriate, for example, only .6 of faculty are black, and that's across all disciplines. I don't think it's sufficient or acceptable to leave the fight for racial equality to those considered cultural insiders and who are, more often than not, those most marginalized in the system of education in the first place.

There really is a need for an urgent conversation through which we can consider how white academics' research on education specifically can contribute to the disruption of white supremacy both within and beyond the academy. In my opinion, we cannot just continue to be outraged by the political campaigns, by the vitriol space, by those with, arguably, the most power and privilege in society in both nations. We, and by we, I mean white people, cannot remain just witness to racism both explicit and implicit in form, whether it's individual or systemic, it really is time for action.

I think, collectively, we need to dismantle the enduring system of white supremacy upon which institutions are built. And that begins with a willingness to acknowledge the existence of whiteness as a political project to defend and reinforce the social order. I guess for me, as a white scholar, the critical race theory has been a way of me to engage with this call to action. It's a radical perspective that seeks to expose the racialized character of society and interrupts some of those taken-for-granted assumptions that reinforce the race of status quo. In my opinion, I'd urge white scholars, in particular, to engage with this literature to be familiar with its propositions, its tenants, and its tools to trouble what they know and to ask different question about their own research and practice.

Reading a paper for my colleague, [inaudible 00:21:06], which suggested that instead of asking, "How is race related to the expulsion of black children?", for example, that's a deficit position, which would promote responses to speak to black child's behavior or upbringing or even, more concerningly, a child's genetic makeup. How about instead asking, "How

is racism related to the disproportionate expulsion of black children?” That’s a greater question that promises to really explore the systematically different experience and expectations and disciplinary actions of black students. I think if we are truly serious about taking control, making any nation great, we must ensure that *every* child can go to school, free from fear, and with opportunities that are available equally to all. I think white outrage without action will never absolve us from responsibility but will serve only to reinforce and further entrench the status quo that we have become so outraged by.

Announcer:

Tune in next month when HyeJin Yeo at OOCRL talks with Dr. OiYan Poon, assistant professor of higher education leadership and the director of RISE, the Center for Race and Intersectional Studies for Educational Equity at Colorado State University, about racial politics of policies around college access. Background music for this podcast is provided by Dublab. Thank you for listening and for your contributions to educational equity, justice, and excellence for all students.