

**Mapping Critical Humility:  
A Study of the Complexities of Cultivating Critical Consciousness for White Educators**

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## **Abstract**

This article analyzes four White educators' engagement in professional development focused on critical theory and critical pedagogy. Analysis of participants' engagement in the ongoing process of cultivating a critical consciousness, through the lens of Whiteness studies, revealed moments of consciousness collapse in which participants interrogated and simultaneously perpetuated White racial ideologies. These contradictory moments illustrate the distorting effects of participants' White racial subjectivities due to their (mis)education within Whiteness. Analysis revealed dimensions of critical humility, dispositions that support the ongoing process of cultivating a critical consciousness and the identification and interrogation of moments of consciousness collapse. Dimensions of critical humility include: 1) awareness of the inherent partiality of critical consciousness due to the distorting influence of White racial subjectivities; 2) dedication to the ongoing process of cultivating a critical consciousness rather than linear success; and 3) contextualizing productive discomfort that is essential to the process of developing a critical consciousness.

Key Words: Critical pedagogy, critical consciousness, White educators, Whiteness studies,

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## Optimism & Hope

*...By nature I'm kind of like a flaky dreamer (laughs). I don't have this intuitive understanding of how systems work. That is why I think I am so interested... Naturally I'm an optimist. So, I think it's my way of trying to keep my nature, without losing myself completely as an individual. While [also] feeling like I have enough knowledge and power, at least within my own four walls, that I can know what is going on with this world that I don't have a really good understanding of. And help [students] navigate through it because they are facing it. I'm facing it but almost to a lesser degree because I've already made it in the sense that I have a job...*

*...Like sometimes I marvel at Michael Moore and wonder how he can live in this world. If I had to think about all of these things all the time, I just would cry all the time. Even you, I don't know how you think about this stuff all the time it would just upset me... I mean, it does upset me. –Abigail, 9/26, interview*

Abigail's self-reflection occurred toward the end of an hour-long interview in response to my question about why she was compelled to participate in professional development focused on critical theory and critical pedagogy. During the interview she interrogated powerful complexities of the education system including teacher accountability and assessment measures as well as specific structures that her ELL students are conscripted to navigate. She identified her nature as an "optimist" and a "flaky dreamer" as the impetus for her engagement as she does not have an "intuitive understanding of how systems work." Though she articulated that critical awareness of inequitable power systems is crucial to support her students, she also asserted that her nature, as an "optimist," would be threatened by "thinking about it all the time." After the interview while I was packing up my bag, she returned to the sentiment that she could not engage "with this stuff all the time" and commended me for participating in a graduate program that focuses on interrogating the inequitable systems that shape students' experience within schooling. She asked me if I found my studies depressing and reiterated that she could never think about these things on a daily basis because, as she is an "optimist," she needs to look on the brighter side. In part, her questions established that ignorance of systems of power protects her optimism while

awareness of inequity in schooling produces discomfort and despair. Within this binary of ignorant-optimism and upsetting-awareness, Abigail established that cultivating her awareness would threaten her nature as an “optimist.” In the moment, I responded that yes, studying structural inequity in schooling is “heartbreaking” because I am coming into an awareness of the inequitable and oppressive systems that students are required to navigate. I expressed that, despite feeling nihilistic at times, once I began to see that the way I was taught to make sense of the world was partial and perverse, how could I not commit myself to continuing to cultivate my awareness?

Reflecting now on Abigail’s self-identified optimism and the “upsetting” dimension of cultivating critical consciousness, I complicate her implicit assertion that she does not “think about these things all the time.” She had, not ten minutes before, articulated a detailed analysis of the institutional factors her students navigate in school and in society. Contrary to embodying a strict binary between ignorant-optimism and upsetting-awareness, throughout her interview Abigail articulated how she wrestles with the manifestations of inequitable power within schooling on a daily basis. She witnesses the structures that her students face and chooses to interrogate and to strive to subvert those structures as an integral dimensions of her pedagogy. Abigail’s self-identification as an “optimist” reminds me of a Cornell West quote that was on the syllabus for the graduate education course she took as professional development and for which I was the teaching assistant.<sup>1</sup>

I’m a blues man. A blues man is a prisoner of hope, and hope is a qualitatively different category than optimism. Optimism is a secular construct, a calculation of probability...Hope wrestles with despair, but it doesn’t generate optimism. It just generates this energy to be courageous, to bear witness, to see what the end is going to be. No guarantee, unfinished, open-ended.

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<sup>1</sup> Due to IRB restrictions, the specific course title and professor of the course are not cited here

Here, Cornell West articulates the experiences of Black men bearing witness to and struggling within Whiteness as process of hope and continuous engagement within inequitable structures rather than a calculation of optimism; though his experience as a “blues man” should not be conflated with Abigail or my own experiences navigating Whiteness, his distinction between optimism and hope provides insight into the ongoing process through which White educators, such as myself and Abigail, strive to be hopeful within public education. Despite her assertion that she could not handle the despair that she believes comes with awareness, Abigail continued to engage in the process of cultivating her awareness of the structures of schooling with the intention of supporting her students. Shaping Abigail’s engagement, as well as my own, is each of our positionalities as a White educators as they influence how we see and what we see when cultivating an awareness of inequitable power systems. It is through and from our positionalities that both Abigail and I recognize that inequity and oppression in schooling is “upsetting” or “heartbreaking” — it is from this positionality that we interpret our discomfort and choose whether to engage or disengage for our own comfort. Consequently, Abigail’s assertion that she does not “think about these things all of the time” is, in part, inevitable due to the partial perspective of our positionalities and the choice to disengage.

This article provides insight into the complexities inherent in White educators’ ongoing process of constructing a critical consciousness through which educators cultivate awareness of inequitable systems of power that they, and their students, navigate in schooling and society (Bartolomé, 2004; McLaren, 2003; Freire, 1970; hooks, 1994). Specifically, I consider the influence of White educators’ positionality within the context of Whiteness — the historical and contemporary maintenance of White racial dominance in schooling and society — on this ongoing process (Castagno, 2014; Harris, 1993; Kailin, 2011; Leonardo, 2009; Maher &

Thompson, 1998). Analysis of participants' engagement revealed two dimensions of the continuous process of cultivating a critical consciousness for White educators: consciousness collapse and critical humility. Consciousness collapse occurred as participants engaged with critical theory to interrogate White racial ideologies while, simultaneously or concurrently, perpetuating ideologies of Whiteness. I analyze moments of consciousness collapse as illustrative of the partial understandings produced through the distorted lens of educators' White racial subjectivities. I assert that, moments of consciousness collapse, rather than a moment of failure or indicative of an educators' depth of engagement, are inevitable within the ongoing process of cultivating a critical consciousness; as will be explored in this article, these moments of consciousness collapse can be dynamic and potentially productive moments if White educators strive to identify and challenge partial understandings. In addition to analyzing moments of consciousness collapse, I expand on an understanding of critical humility as the "dialectic ability to live an insecure security" (Darder, 2002). The three dimensions of critical humility that emerged illustrate perspectives and dispositions that participants employed to identify and interrogate moments of consciousness collapse and support their engagement in the ongoing process of cultivating a their critical consciousness.

### **White Educators at Academy High School**

I conducted a critical qualitative study of four White educators engagement in professional development focused on critical theory to explore the question: how does the positionality of White educators, within the context of Whiteness, influence the ongoing process through which educators strive to cultivate their critical consciousness? Participants in the study included: Harry, a science teacher; Perry, a social studies teacher; Abigail, an ELL teacher; and

Paul, an administrator from Academy High School (AHS), a public, comprehensive school located in a major city in the Northeast region of the United States. The racial makeup of the participants in this study, as well as the staff demographics at AHS<sup>2</sup>, reflects national trends of 83% of teachers identifying as White in public schooling (Percentage distribution of school teachers, 2009). Harry, Abigail, Perry, and Paul participated in a graduate education course in the summer of 2014 focused on cultivating an awareness of inequitable power dynamics within schooling, and participated in a professional development discussion group focused on critical pedagogy that met five times during fall 2014.<sup>3</sup> An Education professor from a local, private university facilitated both the graduate course as well as the professional development discussion group. In addition to observing both professional development spaces as a researcher, I was the teaching assistant for the graduate course and served as co-facilitator during the discussion group meetings. I conducted four semi-structured interviews, each an hour long, with each participant – two interviews after the graduate course during the summer and two interviews in the fall while the four teachers participated in the discussion group. I also recorded professional development discussions, two group interviews, and performed additional observations in each educator’s classroom or administrative space.

Neither the professional development nor the semi-structured interviews were intended to be interventions through which participants would “achieve” a critical consciousness. Rather, data collection focused on recording each educator’s reflection on their experiences engaging with the critical theories presented through the professional development. All four participants

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<sup>2</sup> AHS staff is predominantly White and female with 172 identified as White and 137 identified as female of 180 educators. The student population is increasingly diverse - of 1,000 students, approximately 60% of students identifying as White, 20% identifying as Black, 10% identified as Asian and 10% identified as Hispanic.

<sup>3</sup> Reading from the graduation education course included but were not limited to: Brayboy & Maughan, 2009; Ferguson, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 2006; McCready, 2011; Oakes, 2005; Yosso, 2005. Readings for the professional development discussion group included: Bartolomé, 2004; Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2007; Ellsworth, 1989; hooks, 1994.

demonstrated their commitment to the pedagogical project of developing their critical consciousness through their ongoing commitment to professional development that began before this research project and continues beyond it.<sup>4</sup>

Participants' engagement with the professional development occurs within the context of the AHS community as well as the broader context of Whiteness in schooling and society (Castagno, 2014; Kailin, 2002). State mandated and operated public schooling is understood within critical theory as an inherently political site of knowledge and power (re)production that is dialectically mechanized by, and in turn reconstructs, inequitable power structures within society including Whiteness (Bartolomé, 2004; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Fine, 2004; Giroux, 1997; Kumashiro, 2000; Maher & Tetreault, 1998). Within this context, teachers can strive to implement critical pedagogy to empower students to question how and why knowledge is constructed in order to identify and disrupt inequitable power dynamics (Freire, 1970; Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1998; Kumashiro, 2000; McClaren, 2003; Scorza, Mirra & Morrell, 2013). However, the overwhelming White teaching population in the United States, has not been prepared to implement critical pedagogy and, in many ways, perpetuate rather than subvert the status quo (Delpit, 1995; Gay & Kirkland, 2003; Kailin, 2011; Leonardo, 2009; Milner, 2007; Nieto, 2009; Rosenberg, 2004). Given the subversive potential of critical pedagogy within public schools, this article seeks to identify complexities and challenges in the ongoing process of cultivating critical consciousness for White educators.

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<sup>4</sup> It is beyond the purvey of this paper to document the emotional and intellectual investment of each educator as they identified and interrogated powered rituals of schooling, questioned their understandings of and connections between knowledge, power, race, class, gender, language, ability, citizenship and sexuality in schooling.



## **At the Intersection of Critical Pedagogy & Whiteness Studies**

To contextualize and analyze participants' engagement in and reflections on the professional development, I use both critical pedagogy and Whiteness studies frameworks. While it has been argued that an educator's critical consciousness is essential to the implementation of critical pedagogy, the ongoing process through which a teacher develops her critical consciousness, as well as what constitutes a critical consciousness, continues to be theorized (Ayers, 1988; Bartolomé, 2004; Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2007; Ellsworth, 1989; Freire, 1970; Giroux, 2003; hooks, 1994; Kumashiro, 2007; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; McLaren, 2003; Titone, 1998). Fundamentally, a critical consciousness is the process of cultivating one's awareness of and an engagement with the multiple, intersecting and dynamic inequitable systems of power that teachers and students are navigating (Bartolomé, 2004; McLaren, 2003; Freire, 1970; hooks, 1994). Cultivating this awareness requires ongoing critical examination of one's own assumptions, "normalized" constructions of dominant ideologies and subjectivities as well as deficit constructions of non-dominant ideologies and subjectivities (Bartolomé, 2004; McLaren, 2003). Due to the contextual and temporal nature of the power dynamics of which educators are continuously navigating and constructing awareness, critical theorists emphasize that it is not possible to achieve the status of a "critical pedagogue." Rather, critical consciousness is inherently an ongoing process through which an educator develops a greater depth of awareness and capacity to navigate and subvert manifestations of oppressive power dynamics (Darder, 2002; Ellsworth, 1989; hooks, 1994; McLaren, 2003).

An analysis of White educators' engagement through the lens of Whiteness studies expands on this theoretical understanding of the inherent partiality of, and consequently ongoing process of, developing a critical consciousness for White educators from their positionality

within Whiteness. Whiteness studies centers Whiteness in order to make visible and subvert the “normed” nature of Whiteness and its mechanisms of dominance (Castagno, 2014; Di Angelo, 2011; Dyer, 1993; Frankenberg, 1993; hooks, 2013; Leonardo, 2009; Rains, 2000). Given its fluid and plural manifestations, Whiteness is difficult to define; however, it can broadly be understood as the historical and contemporary maintenance of White racial dominance through exclusivity and the relational (re)construction of Whiteness as non-Blackness (Castagno, 2014; Leonardo, 2009; Maher & Thompson, 1998; Harris, 1993). As a system of hegemonic oppression (Bates, 1975), Whiteness is constantly in crisis and is, therefore, rearticulated continuously through dialectic (re)production between and among oppressive institutions, ideologies of Whiteness and the performance of White racial subjectivities (Castagno, 2014; Frankenberg, 1993; Kailin, 2002; Leonardo, 2009; McLaren, 2003).

It is within the context of Whiteness that individual’s White racial subjectivities are informed by, and in turn reconstruct, ideologies and structures of Whiteness (Frankenberg, 1993; Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1998; Leonardo, 2009; Weedon, 2004).<sup>5</sup> Racial subjectivity includes the ways in which one conceptualizes race and one’s own racial identity; as well as how one performs racial subjectivity by ascribing to racial ideologies and engaging with institutions of Whiteness (Gillborn, 2005; Giroux, 1997; Leonardo, 2009). Though one’s racial subjectivity is not entirely determined by one’s positionality, one’s location within structures of power does significantly influence the development of one’s racial subjectivity and, consequently, the racial ideologies that one ascribes to and perpetuates (Castagno, 2014; Frankenberg, 1993; Gillborn,

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<sup>5</sup> While there are many intersecting dimensions of participants’ positionalities that inform each of their process of cultivating a critical consciousness, I have focused on the influence of White educators’ racial subjectivities on the development of their critical consciousness to ensure specificity and depth of analysis.

2005; Kailin, 2002; King, 1991; Leonardo, 2009).<sup>6</sup> Therefore, without essentializing the diverse constructions of White racial subjectivities, or conflating Whiteness wholly with White individuals, it can be reasonably established that White educators, to some extent, employ White racial ideologies that perpetuate Whiteness. It is through these White racial subjectivities that, whether intentionally or not, White educators perpetuate inequitable racial power dynamics (Frankenberg, 1993; Fine, 1997; Kailin, 2002; Leonardo, 2009). Within Whiteness studies, reconstructionist theorists ascribe to a critical hope that oppressive White racial subjectivities can be “remade, revised and resignified” through an ongoing pedagogical projects (Leonardo, 2009, p. 93). Reconstructionist projects, center Whiteness with the intention to identify and disrupt manifestations of Whiteness. Despite these subversive intentions, centering Whiteness can inherently reproduce structures and ideologies of dominance; therefore, reconstructionist projects, should be treated with suspicion and contextualized through continuous critical analysis (Apple, 2004; Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1998; Leonardo, 2009). Through the lens of Whiteness studies, my analysis identifies and interrogates the complexities of engaging in the ongoing process of cultivating a critical consciousness from participants’ White racial subjectivities.

### **Feminist Methodology of a Reconstructionist Project**

I used feminist methodologies’ emphasis on standpoint, self-reflexivity, and reciprocity to support ongoing, critical analysis necessary to contextualize reconstructionist projects, such as this research project, that center Whiteness. Feminist conceptualizations of standpoint informed my understanding of the specific partiality of my own standpoint, as well as White racial subjectivities standpoint, based on lived experiences within the context of Whiteness (Blee,

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<sup>6</sup> It should be noted that White educators are not the only educators who ascribe to and perpetuate ideologies of Whiteness (hooks, 2013). However, this paper focuses on White educators engagement in the ongoing process of cultivating a critical consciousness.

2000; Collins, 1986; Frankenberg, 1993; Hartsock, 1983; Harding, 1991; Kailin, 2002; Milner, 2007; Narayan, 2004; Wolf, 1996). Through self-reflexivity, the ongoing, introspective critical analysis of one's power and positionality, I cultivated an awareness of how dimensions of my own positionality, including my White racial subjectivity and ongoing efforts to cultivate a critical consciousness, informed the collection, analysis and narration of participants' experiences (Blee, 2000; Naryan, 1993; Nelson, 1996; Weis & Fine, 2000; Wolf, 1996). A dimension of reciprocity between researcher and participant (Borland, 1991; Narayan, 1993; Nelson, 1996; Stacey, 1988; Wolf, 1996) in the context of this project includes respecting and supporting participants as they worked to develop their critical consciousness. However, given the positionality of White educators, to consider the dangers of re-centering Whiteness to ensure a critique, rather than endorsement, of oppressive power dynamics (Apple, 2004; Clandenin and Connelly, 2000; Hurtado & Stewart, 2004; Leonardo, 2009). When working with participants that may, in some way, reproduce the oppressive structures a researcher seeks to critique, Vaught (2008) articulates that reciprocity extends beyond the individual to "reflect a more complex sense of participants as representative members of larger sociocultural patterns, systems, and institutions" (p.570). Therefore, though reciprocity in the context of this study meant supporting participants' individual learning processes, reciprocity also meant interrogating participants' engagement to identify manifestations of Whiteness.

### **Mapping Consciousness Collapse & Critical Humility**

Analysis of participants' engagement revealed that, as the educators excavated and interrogated White racial ideologies, such as the deficit model or post-racialism (Cho, 2008; Nieto, 2005), they would simultaneously perpetuate ideologies of Whiteness. In these contradictory moments, of what I call consciousness collapse, as participants engaged with

critical theory they would simultaneously, or concurrently, ascribe to ideologies of Whiteness causing a collapse of awareness they were in the process of cultivating. Analysis of moments of consciousness collapse illustrate the partial ways in which participants analyzed and (re)conceptualized ideologies of self, students, schooling, and society in a given moment due to the distorting influence of their White racial subjectivities. Moments of consciousness collapse do not indicate the depth and breadth of an educator's engagement and do not devalue their commitment; rather, analysis of moments of consciousness collapse provide insights into the complexities and challenges of the ongoing process of cultivating a critical consciousness.

Further analysis of consciousness collapse revealed dimensions of critical humility that participants employed to interrogate moment of consciousness collapse and support their ongoing engagement in the process of cultivating critical consciousness. Antonia Darder (2002) briefly defines critical humility as an educator's "dialectical ability to live an insecure security, which means a human existence that did not require absolute answers or solutions to a problem but rather that even in the certainty of the moment, could remain open to new ideas" (p. 48). I expand on this understanding of critical humility by identifying three additional perspectives and dispositions that participants employed to support the process of cultivating a critical consciousness: 1) a meta-consciousness of the inherent partiality of critical consciousness due to the distorting influence of White racial subjectivities; 2) valuing the ongoing and dynamic process of cultivating a critical consciousness, including dialogic exchange, rather than linear or developmental stages of success; and 3) contextualizing productive discomfort that is essential to the process of developing a critical consciousness. Participants employed these three dimensions of critical humility to challenge and complicate moments of consciousness collapse and to support their continuous engagement in cultivating critical consciousness.

## Consciousness Collapse

Through the professional development, participants engaged with a significant body of critical theory that encouraged self-reflection and analysis of their own ideological and pedagogical understandings. What emerged throughout their engagement, were moments of consciousness collapse in which they interrogated White racial ideologies and, simultaneously, perpetuated White racial ideologies. One such instance of consciousness collapse occurred during my third interview with Perry, a social studies teacher at AHS. We were sitting in two desks, pulled to the front of the room, during his prep period before his next history course began, discussing his commitment to “empowering” students. His engagement illustrated an awareness, but partial understanding, of his own role as an “agent of the state” as well as of the purpose and function of public schooling as it relates to the state and democracy.

**Perry:** Yeah, and I joke in class that I am an agent of the state cause I *am* an agent of the state. And [students] see that that is the relationship: teacher — student, public school teacher — public school student.

**Amanda:** What does being an agent of the state mean to you?

**Perry:** (*laughs*) I don’t know but it sounds funny. I think that is what it is — negotiating the larger structures. There is a structure that puts me in front of them, and there is a structure that causes them to be in front of me rather than a different classroom. And so I interpret it as — my job is to get them to be empowered critical thinkers because that is what we need. It also matches up with what I like to do, which is the whole sort of democratic side of it.

In this moment, Perry identified that his role as an “agent of the state” affects the power dynamic between himself and his students within the “larger structures of education” that he is negotiating. During this interview, as well as throughout his engagement, Perry demonstrated a commitment to “empowering” students; he expressed his understanding of empowerment in another interview as supporting students to “develop their own sense of things rather than a top down sort of authority.” His commitment aligns with critical pedagogy’s intent to encourage

students to critically engage with and construct knowledge and to be citizens within a democracy (Darder, 2002; Ellsworth, 1989; Freire, 1970; hooks, 1994; McLaren, 2003).

A consciousness collapse occurred, however, when Perry asserted that he is fulfilling his role as an agent of the state by getting students “to be empowered critical thinkers.” As public schooling is mandate and operated by the state, teachers can be conceptualized as agents of the state whose function to enact the bureaucratic and disciplinary mandates of the state (Vaught, 2014). Rather than “empowering students,” a pedagogical belief that aligns with tenets of critical pedagogy, one might argue that Perry’s “job,” as an agent of the state, is to perpetuate the status quo of public schooling as a site of inequitable knowledge and power reproduction (Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Darder, 2002; Fine, 2004; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). Though Perry should not be expected to fully articulate this specific definition of an agent of the state, the critical theory he engaged with through the professional development did identify teachers’ role in legitimizing and perpetuating mechanisms of oppression in schooling (Brayboy & Maughan, 2009; Ferguson, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 2000; Oakes, 2005). Therefore, though Perry could name himself as an “agent of the state” and used that conceptual framework to analyze powered relationships with students in the classroom, his understanding of that role is partial. He did not critically interrogate the oppressive dimensions of his role as an agent within the institution of public schooling nor does he seem to be aware of the subversive dimensions of his own pedagogical beliefs.

In order to clarify what he thought his “job” was within the context of public schooling as an agent of the state, I asked him to expand on the “democratic side” with which he asserted his job aligned.

**Amanda:** Democratic as in?

**Perry:** As in, we need educated critical citizens. So that is one way that I can pitch it to [the students], but it also lines up with my own understanding of what good education is.

**Amanda:** And what is that relationship between a public school teacher and a public school student?

**Perry:** Um, I think the whole civic side of it — it's the public side of it. Public schools are there to provide everyone an education that makes them active citizens so the state can function, you know? The state wants to exist so it needs people to take part in democracy, so that is sort of my role.

Here, Perry reaffirmed his commitment to empowering students as future citizens through schooling. However, while articulating his understanding of the purpose of schooling within the state, a consciousness collapse occurred when Perry conflated his own commitment to democratic ideals with the intended purpose of public schooling. His conceptualization of the purpose of public schooling in this moment reifies the “democratizing myth” that, as Perry asserted, “public schools are there to provide everyone an education that makes them active citizens so the state can function.” The myth of democratizing education promotes an ideological perspective that public education invests in all students to prepare them as citizens within a democratic state (Apple, 2004; Giroux, 2009). Contrary to this ideal, however, critical theorists argue that public schooling is, in part, a political site of knowledge and power production through which racial and other forms of domination and inequity are reproduced and maintained and students are inequitably invested in as citizens (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Darder, 2002; Fine, 2004). Thus, Perry’s consciousness collapse extends beyond a partial understanding of his role as an agent of the state to a partial understanding of the function and purpose of schooling itself.

Though the democratizing myth is not explicitly about race, it does serve to perpetuate and legitimize ideologies, such as the deficit model, color-blind multiculturalism, and the myth



of meritocracy which perpetuate racial inequity and are manifestations of Whiteness within schooling (Apple, 2004; Bonilla-Silva, 2003; Castagno, 2014). It should be noted that Perry, and White educators generally, are not the only educators who ascribe to an ideal that education fosters citizens and democracy. Rather, the democratizing myth is a dominant ideological conceptualization of schooling, teaching and learning myth fostered through (mis)education within Whiteness. However, it is beyond the purvey of this study to identify and analyze the ways in which all educators, including educators of color, ascribe to or perpetuate ideologies of Whiteness. Here I focus on Perry's consciousness collapse as illustrative of the distorting influence of his White racial subjectivity. Later in the article, I discuss how White educators' racial subjectivities, due to their positionality within Whiteness, are validated and reaffirmed through the perpetuation of ideologies of Whiteness (Di Angelo, 2011; Fine 1997; Giroux, 1997; Leonardo, 2009).

In order to tease apart whether Perry was asserting that public schooling *should* be structured to empower all students as citizens — a belief that aligns with his democratic ideals as well as the tenants of critical pedagogy — or whether he was asserting that schooling is intended to and does, in fact, produce critical citizens I asked:

**Amanda:** But, do you really think that is how the system functions?

**Perry:** I don't know, um, actually, yes! I do think that is how the system functions in reality. Are there problems with it? Absolutely. And are there problems with it in many ways? Absolutely. But I think, ultimately, that is the only way that it is going to work. And if it does not work then it won't work, it will collapse.

**Amanda:** It being public schooling?

**Perry:** It being the whole government, the whole nation, the whole... whatever type of democracy won't last if the public isn't educated critical thinkers.

In this moment, Perry asserted that public schooling is fulfilling its democratizing purpose of preparing students as citizens and, consequently, the democratic state is “functioning” as opposed to “collapsing.” Rather than fulfilling this “democratizing myth,” however, public schooling is constructed and maintained, and subsequently “functions,” to perpetuate the status quo of inequitable access to educational opportunity and citizenship (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Darder, 2002; Fine, 2004; Giroux, 2009). This consciousness collapse further indicates that, in this moment, Perry conflated his own ideals regarding democratic, empowering education with the purpose of schooling; consequently, Perry obscured the inequitable and oppressive function and impact of schooling within contemporary U.S. society.

Though Perry asserted that there are “absolutely” problems with the system, in this instance, his analysis of these problems was reductive did not address the systemic inequity that both the graduate course and discussion group emphasized (Brayboy & Maughan, 2009; Ferguson, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 2006; McCready, 2011; Oakes, 2005; Yosso, 2005). Later in the interview, Perry identified the “short term business model” approach to education and money in electoral politics as two key problems with the institution of schooling that limits its ability to support citizens and the state. Identifying these problems, while influential and problematic, maintains a democratizing myth that schooling is intended to equitably invest in students by locating any failure within the schooling system in isolated problems. Consequently, Perry’s analysis of the problems in schooling falls short of interrogating structural and systemic dimensions of schooling that perpetuate inequitable and oppressive racial power dynamics (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Darder, 2002; Fine, 2004; McLaren, 2003).

Though Perry could name his role as an “agent of the state,” in this moment, there was a consciousness collapse as he conflated his own commitment to empowering students with both

his job as an agent of the state as well as with the purpose of public schooling itself. Therefore, despite his commitment to democratic ideals, or perhaps because of his strong commitment to these ideals, he conceptualizes public schooling as a site of empowerment rather than a site of oppression; rather than identifying that his ideals are, in fact, subversive, he understands himself to be simply fulfilling his job as an “agent of the state.” In this moment, it seems that Perry was unable to simultaneously maintain his ideological commitment to empowering students while critically interrogating his role as an “agent of the state” within the oppressive dimensions of schooling and, as a result, unintentionally colludes with a false democratizing myth (Apple, 2004). Through this partial awareness, Perry’s process of identifying, navigating and disrupting manifestations of Whiteness within schooling in order to empower his students may be limited.

Moments of consciousness collapse occurred throughout all of the participants’ engagement, as well as my own engagement, throughout the professional development and interviews. While consciousness collapse may reproduce ideologies of Whiteness, moments of consciousness collapse are not manifestations of an individual racial specific to Perry or the White educators in this research project or context (Bell, 1993; Lawrence, 1990). Nor are moments of consciousness collapse indicative of an educator’s ongoing engagement cultivating a critical consciousness. Rather, as will be explored below, consciousness collapse illustrates momentary, contradictory interpretations of critical theory through the distorting influence of my own and participants’ White racial subjectivities. Additionally, moments of consciousness collapse are not moments of “failure” and are instead inevitable in the ongoing process of cultivating a critical consciousness due to the distorting influence of White racial subjectivities. As will be explored through analysis of dimensions of critical humility, moments of consciousness collapse can be a dynamic part of White educators ongoing engagement —

through the identification and interrogation of moments of consciousness collapse, educators can continue to identify and cultivate areas of their critical consciousness.

### **Distorting Influence of White Racial Subjectivities**

This moment of consciousness collapse, as well as others throughout the educators' engagement and my own engagement, reveal the partial ways in which participants analyze and (re)conceptualize ideologies of self, students, schooling, and society due to the distorting influence of their White racial subjectivities. Though reconstructionist theorists suggest that White educators can engage in a pedagogical project to recreate White racial subjectivity (Leonardo, 2009; Giroux, 1997), this process is "made very difficult because [educators] are educated in, and thus educate for, Whiteness. As a result, educators reify the very structures [they] are being charged with dismantling" (Castagno, 2014, p.12). It is within the Whiteness of society and schooling that all educators are taught and prepared to teach. Therefore, perpetuation of Whiteness through White racial ideologies cannot be wholly conflated with White educators (Leonardo, 2009). However, this article focuses the distorting influence of White educators' racial subjectivities on the ongoing process of constructing a critical consciousness. Due to an education within Whiteness, a White educator does not begin or engage in the ongoing process of cultivating her critical consciousness devoid of a racial subjectivity or racial ideologies. For example, Perry, rather than beginning the process of cultivating a critical consciousness without any preconceptions regarding the purpose of schooling within society, understands his own commitment to empowering students, at least in part, through the distorting ideological lens of the myth of democratizing education. In the moment of consciousness collapse above, this ideology emerged as he tried to make sense of his role as an "agent of the state" within an institution while maintaining his democratic ideals.

In working with primarily White, pre-service educators, King (1991) developed the concept of dysconsciousness, “an uncritical habit of mind (including perceptions, attitudes, assumptions, and beliefs) that justifies inequity and exploitation by accepting the existing order of things as given,” to explicate her students’ resistance to cultivating awareness of inequitable racial power dynamics (King, 1991, p. 135). Similar to King’s students, Perry and the White educators in this study are not engaging with an “*absence* of consciousness (that is, not unconsciousness) but [rather with] an *impaired* consciousness or distorted way of thinking about race” (King, 1991, p.135). Unlike King’s pre-service teachers, however, Perry and the other participants were not consciously or intentionally resistant to developing an awareness of inequitable power dynamics. Instead, they opted to participate in professional development within which they worked to cultivate their critical consciousness and alter their pedagogy. Rather than trying to justify exploitation and inequity in schooling and society, Perry’s engagement throughout the professional development was that of a philosopher — he seemed to enjoy engaging in structural analysis of schooling and society as well as interrogating his own positionality within those structures. Though his consciousness collapses when he conflates his own ideals with the purpose of schooling, he is not resistant to subverting oppressive structures. Complex moments of consciousness collapse throughout participants’ engagement illustrate that dysconsciousness, as King (1991) theorized it, is only one of many manifestations of a White educators’ racial subjectivities that can distort the process of cultivating a critical consciousness. In short, White educators do not need to be actively resisting challenges to the status quo to perpetuate ideologies and institutions of Whiteness; rather, unconsciously or unintentionally, White educators may perpetuate ideologies of Whiteness at times through moments of consciousness collapse. Additionally, as King discovered with her pre-service teachers, simply

exposing participants to critical theory or a participants' capacity to name the existence of inequitable power systems, though an important step, does not ensure that a White educator is continuously cultivating her critical consciousness (Castagno, 2014; hooks, 1994; Kailin, 2002; Leonardo, 2009).

Therefore, despite participants' dedication to understanding, navigating and dismantling oppressive structures, like Castagno (2014) suggests, their engagement is inherently influenced by their (mis)education within Whiteness; resulting distorted interpretations produce partial understandings that can reify and rationalize ideologies of Whiteness (Bonilla-Silva, 2003; Cho, 2008; Delgado, 1996). Therefore, regardless of intentions or exposure, White educators have been (mis)educated within Whiteness and consequently, unconsciously or inadvertently, interpret critical theory through a distorted lens producing moments of consciousness collapse. Thus, moments of consciousness collapse are not moments of "failure" nor are they an end to an educator's engagement. Rather they inevitable in the process of cultivating a critical consciousness and a dynamic opportunity to further identify and interrogate distorting influence of White racial subjectivities. Throughout their engagement, at times in response to a moment of consciousness collapse, participants employed dimensions of critical humility to support their own engagement as well as their peer's engagement in the ongoing process of cultivating critical consciousness.

### **Critical Humility: Inherent Partiality of Critical Consciousness**

Due to the distorting influence of educators' White racial subjectivities, an ongoing process of cultivating a critical consciousness can be conceptualized as a reconstructionist project. As a reconstructionist project, White educators' process of cultivating a critical consciousness should be subjected to critique in order to identify and subvert manifestations of

Whiteness that can be reified by centering Whiteness (Apple, 2004; Hurtado & Stewart, 2004; Kinchelo & Steinberg, 1998; Leonardo, 2009). This ongoing critical analysis expands on Darder's (2002) brief definition of critical humility as the "dialectical ability to live an insecure security, which means a human existence that did not require absolute answers or solutions to a problem" (p. 48). For White educators, part of this "dialectic ability to live an insecure security" includes an awareness of the inherent partiality of their critical consciousness. Throughout the professional development and interviews, each participant, with varying degrees of depth and complexity, identified and grappled with the partiality of their own awareness. In one interview with Abigail, I asked her to describe what critical pedagogy meant to her at that point in the professional development.

**Abigail:** This is a messy answer, but it involves reflection — it involves questioning, not only reflection of self, but also reflection of the surrounding power dynamic - of how it all works. I sort of sense it as I'm going to teach what I need to teach in spite of the system working against me. I'm going to do what needs to be done. Um, keeping in mind those factors of the constraints that are being put on the classroom, on a school on a system....

...And not knowing exactly how it all balances and fits together but keeping it in mind and having it never really settle. I think that is the point of praxis — it is that the dust is really never settling on that jar because it is always be shaken up, questioned, changed and evolving. There is constant reflecting and it's never-ending. So critical pedagogy involves all those factors for me.

Through her definition of critical pedagogy, Abigail articulated the partiality of her critical consciousness due to the dynamic nature of systems of power and, consequently, the necessity of continuous engagement. Her articulation of the ongoing process of cultivating a critical consciousness as a jar that "is always being shaken up" expanded on Darder's definition of critical humility in which an educator is encouraged to engage with "an insecure security" through which they "remain open to new ideas" (2002, p.48). In this case, Abigail identified and

engaged with the partiality of her own awareness through ongoing self-reflexive critique of herself and of the systems she strives to navigate. Rather than expecting that she will achieve a stable, and sufficient awareness through which she could implement critical pedagogy, Abigail is committed to a “never-ending” process of questioning and reflecting on herself and the context within which she works. This meta-consciousness of the inherent partiality of her critical consciousness supports ongoing interrogation of how she is reconstructing ideologies of self, society and schooling while studying critical theory.

Although her understanding did not explicitly identify and interrogate the distorting influence of her White racial subjectivity on her engagement with and interpretation of critical theory, in this moment Abigail grappled with the inherent partiality of her awareness. In the reconstructionist project of cultivating a critical consciousness, a dimension of the “reflection of self” and reflection of “surrounding power dynamics” that Abigail cited as part of her ongoing process includes an interrogation of her own positionality as a White educator within Whiteness. As will be further explored below, it is through “constant reflecting” on and questioning of one’s own engagement that White educators can first identify and then interrogate moments of consciousness collapse as manifestations of their White racial subjectivities. It is important to note, however, that the White racial subjectivity with which and through which White educators engage in the process of cultivating a critical consciousness is neither stagnant nor fixed. Though abolitionists within Whiteness studies suggest that White people can “destroy” their White racial subjectivity by becoming a “race traitor,” reconstructionist theorists assert that it is not possible to ever fully divest from the dialectic relationship between systems of Whiteness and White racial subjectivity (Leonardo, 2009; Ignatiev, 1997). Leonardo asserts “racial subjectivity is fundamentally unconscious because it always leave a bit of itself unbeknownst to its subject”



(2009, p. 41). Therefore, as White educators attempt to excavate and subvert distorting manifestations of their White racial subjectivity, they are within a society that continuously legitimizes White racial subjectivities, and their oppressive dimensions, as “normal” (Castagno, 2014; Di Angelo, 2011; Frankenberg, 1993; Gillborn, 2005; Kailin, 2002; Leonardo, 2009). Thus, the distorting lens of White racial subjectivities, though not fixed, are ever-present and inform educators engagement with critical theory and their process of cultivating critical consciousness. Consequently, similar to the endemic nature of Whiteness in institutions (Gillborn, 2005), White educators can not fully understand, map and subvert the distorting influence of White racial subjectivities. The pernicious nature of White racial subjectivities, supports the conclusion that White educators’ critical consciousness is inherently partial (Bartolomé 2004; Ellsworth, 1989; hooks, 1994). Abigail’s understanding of critical pedagogy as an ongoing process of a “jar [that] it is always be shaken up, questioned, changed and evolving” reflects a meta-consciousness of the inherent partiality of her critical consciousness. It is through this awareness that she can support continuous “reflection of the surrounding power dynamic” as well as reflection on her own awareness. Due to the distorting influence of White racial subjectivities, critical humility includes ongoing reflection on one’s own engagement in order to identify and subvert manifestations of Whiteness in moment of consciousness collapse. As will be illustrated later in this article, openness to questioning one’s own awareness as well as the awareness of one’s peers, through an awareness of the inherent partiality of one’s critical consciousness, supports the identification and interrogation of moment of consciousness collapse.

**“The more I read the further I feel away from successful... so why move at all?”**

In addition to articulating insights into the ongoing nature of cultivating a critical consciousness, at times, participants expressed nihilistic interpretations of their emerging awareness of the complexity of inequitable power systems. One such moment occurred during a professional development discussion group when participants read Ellsworth's (1989) "Why Doesn't This Feel Empowering?" The piece complicates and challenges many of the axioms that educators may assume to be liberatory, such as "democratic" and/or "rational" discussions as well as "empowerment." At this point, participants had engaged in the graduate course as well as three discussion group meetings to cultivate their understandings of intersecting systems of oppression within schooling. The facilitator of the professional development and I included this piece at this point in the process to intentionally disrupt and complicate participants' understandings of critical pedagogy and expected that the piece would produce some discomfort. Many of the participants expressed frustration, dismay, and even a nihilistic perspective on their capacity to implement critical pedagogy "successfully" after reading the text. Harry, a science teacher at Academy, in particular, was frustrated. Throughout the project he had continuously questioned, "what is a 'good teacher'?" - though a furtive and incredibly important question, he would, at times, seek finite answers from readings as to how to implement critical pedagogy successfully in his science classroom. At the start of the discussion, he articulated in an exacerbated tone what he felt was an insurmountable path toward being a critical educator:

**Harry:** ...I guess I want to say publically now, my initial feelings — I feel that this took more wind out of my sails than a lot of the things I've read. I think one of the hard things about teaching is that you can always see how much more of the mountain there is to climb and there is always more climbing to do! You can always take one more step. But this added so much more to the mountain than some of the things that I have read before (*everyone laughs*). Um, but going back to specifically my impression of [Ellsworth] is that there is no way to be objective and that every space that you create there is automatically an uneven power dynamic...

Through the metaphor of a mountain, incorporated complexities of critical theory into his understanding of the iterative and ongoing nature of teaching. He also identified Ellsworth's conclusion that "there is no way to be objective and that every space that you create, automatically there is an uneven power dynamic," indicating his understanding of the systemic and dynamic nature of inequitable power systems. These crucial insights illustrate his developing awareness of the complexity of systems of inequity and, consequently, the inherent partiality of his capacity to implement critical pedagogy. Similar to Abigail, he identifies the ongoing process of engagement crucial to his capacity to implement critical pedagogy — critical theory adds more to the mountain that he seeks to navigate therefore complicating his ongoing engagement as an educator. However, while Abigail articulated that "the dust never settles on the jar" to illustrate the ongoing process of critical consciousness with a calm acceptance, Harry is exasperated and deflated when describing these valuable insights. While discomfort is understandable, was expected and, as will be discussed further below, is an essential dimension of the process of cultivating a critical consciousness, the discomfort Harry experienced seemed to devalue the development of his crucial insights. In response to his frustration, I tried to validate his emerging awareness of the complex terrain of inequity he seeks to navigate:

**Amanda:** ... to use your metaphor, it is interesting that you say that, as a teacher there is a mountain in front of you, which is true, but is the point to get to the top of the mountain? Or, is it to actually see the mountain for what it is? Perhaps success is just being able to actually see what is in front of you? Not to some how conquer it.

**Harry:** That's part of it, but I think... We read a ton of stuff last year [in the graduate course] that was like we cannot offer solutions but this is what we see. And maybe part of it is being a pragmatist but I think it is tough to work at a job where success is, (*laughs*) where the way that you measure success is, is, changing and dynamic and maybe not fair (*laughs*). This article in particular, but it is part of a school of one, I'm not saying it is bad for me to be exposed to this - alright now I'll think a little bit more critically.

In response to my suggestion that perhaps success is about seeing the mountain rather than ascending it, Harry identified contradicting understandings of “success” as it relates to developing a critical consciousness. He first referenced the emphasis that was placed on understanding the complexity of problems, rather than proposing solutions, in the graduate education course. This emphasis, on depth of understanding before constructing solutions, supports and values his emerging awareness of dynamic systems of power and the ongoing process of cultivating a critical consciousness. Next, he identified the “unfair” pressures and expectations of “success” within traditional schooling. Though he did not cite neoliberal conceptualizations of success directly, Harry’s linear and finite expectation of success, as conquering the mountain, reflects the quantifiable definition of neoliberal ‘success’ (Apple, 2004; Castagno, 2014; Darder, 2002; Lipman, 2009; McNeil, 2009). It is through this distorting lens of linear success that a consciousness collapse occurs as Harry interpreted his emerging awareness through an expectation of conquering the metaphorical mountain:

**Harry:** ...And I get that and it’s good to think about those things, but it reminds me of something like Zeno’s paradox where you just — I thought I was half way there but now I’m only half way to that other half way thing. And the paralysis that I got at the end of this was just like, I don’t know, maybe I’ll just go back to lecturing for 50 min a day and they will learn because that seems equally effective. On the scale of infinite amount of discrimination and oppression, if it’s an infinite amount and we never get any closer to the end then what is the point of moving in this direction? And I don’t actually believe those things but it makes me feel that way.

Harry’s consciousness collapse occurred when he interpreted his emerging awareness of the complexity of intersecting inequitable power systems and, consequently, the unending process of engagement of a critical educator, as burdensome rather than essential and valuable. Harry illustrated the seeming futility of his ongoing engagement through Zeno’s paradox. Greek philosopher and mathematician Zeno developed several paradoxes to question and problematize

the existence of motion. In Zeno's dichotomy paradox, in order to move half way from point A toward B, one has to move half way to the half point of the total distance. Therefore, before one can move half of the distance, one has to move a quarter of the distance, an eighth of the distance before that, and so on. This paradox suggests that one must complete an infinite number of tasks, resulting in motionlessness and the impossibility of reaching point B (Alper & Bridger, 1997). In Harry's metaphor, "success" means reaching point B at the top of a complex and dynamic mountain.

Unlike Abigail's metaphor of the "dust [that] is really never settling on that jar because it is always be shaken up, questioned, changed and evolving," Harry's interpretation of "success" demands a finite conclusion that he cannot actually reach due to the dynamic nature of the mountain he is navigating. Through the lens of Zeno's paradox, Harry concluded that, due to the infinity and complexity of the mountain, he understands himself to be paralyzed and motionless. To express this frustration, Harry continued on to further explicate his understanding of "success" on this mountain:

**Harry:** ...You don't get closer to the top of the mountain if the mountain is an infinite distance away and they keep adding more to the infinity, right? The more I read the further I feel away from successful. Then, the reaction seems to be, well, why move at all? And I don't actually believe those things, but that is how I would hyperbolize it.

By defining success as reaching the top of the mountain, Harry was despondent in the face of ascending an infinitely complex mountain and, subsequently, devalued his growing awareness of the mountain itself and his process of engagement. Harry is not alone in an attempt to value the process of cultivating a critical consciousness through an expectation that success is linear, finite and quantifiable. In fact, several developmental models, such as Helm's six stages of racial identity development (Helm, 1995; Lawrence & Tatum 1999; Lawrence & Tatum 2004)

or Rosenberg's three stages of cultural awareness (Rosenberg, 2004), propose a linear understanding of the cultivation of a critical consciousness. Within these models, one can "achieve" a level of consciousness that is described as "Autonomous" or "Culturally Aware," respectively. These linear conceptualizations of critical consciousness not only suggest that a White educator can achieve a complete understanding of dynamic systems of inequity but also that she can move *through* a stage of distorted interpretations due to her White racial subjectivity into stages of greater critical awareness. Though these linear models have been rearticulated to be more dynamic — revisions suggest that one can exist in multiple stages at once or go back and forth between stages (Lawrence & Tatum 2004; Miller & Fellows, 2007) — developmental models fundamentally fail to consider the endemic nature and contextual manifestations of Whiteness, or the distorting influence of White racial subjectivities, that requires continuous cultivation of one's critical consciousness. Consequently, when "success" is established as a fixed identity to be accomplished, educators may cease to critically engage and pernicious manifestations of Whiteness, such as the distorting influence of educators' White racial subjectivities, are disguised and escape critical interrogation. Thus, these development models, as well as Harry's linear interpretation of "success", are distorted interpretations of the process of developing a critical consciousness that perpetuate Whiteness.

Through his linear understanding of success, Harry suggests that he returns to a pedagogical approach that does not even attempt to navigate or disrupt systems of power and questions, "why move at all?" Contrary to this nihilistic conclusion, however, Harry is not paralyzed nor should his engagement be devalued. Though his frustration and nihilism is understandable, and may be an unavoidable aspect of his process of engagement, my analysis of his distorting expectation of linear success reveals the importance of a second dimension of

critical humility – valuing the ongoing process of cultivating critical consciousness. Through his valuable engagement in the professional development, he is cultivating insight into the dynamic terrain of a mountain that he cannot navigate “successfully” if he cannot see or understand it. He described taking “one step at a time” up the mountain indicating that he is, in fact, employing his insights to navigate the mountain in the moment. Finally, through self-reflexive analysis, Harry critiqued his own nihilistic interpretation through the lens of linear success. He repeatedly asserted that he was being hyperbolic and that he “does not actually believe those things.” This self-reflective critique, through which he identified the reductive manifestations of his linear interpretation, reflect the necessary analysis of a reconstructionist project and the second dimension of critical humility: valuing the ongoing process of engagement rather than a linear understanding of success that establishes an expectation of absolute answers and certainty.

### **Critical Humility: Valuing the Ongoing Process**

As was illustrated above, the process through which White educators cultivate their critical consciousness is inherently ongoing given the dynamic nature of inequitable power systems as well as the distorting effects of White educators’ racial subjectivities. Abigail’s conceptualization of a jar in which the “dust is really never settling” juxtaposed to Harry’s predominantly linear conceptualization of success illustrate the importance of valuing the ongoing process of cultivating a critical consciousness. This emphasis on valuing process expands on Darder’s (2002) conceptualization of critical humility as the “dialectical ability to live an insecure security.... [and] could remain open to new ideas” (p. 48). This “insecure security” includes a commitment to the ongoing process of cultivating a critical consciousness rather than the promise of a secure or stable identity of “critical pedagogue.” An aspect this “insecure security” and capacity to “remain open to new ideas” is the awareness of the

inevitability of consciousness collapse and, as a result, the openness to analyze, critique and reflect upon one's engagement. Throughout their engagement with critical theory, participants engaged in self-reflexive analysis as well as dialogue as spheres of critical engagement through which consciousness collapse could be identified and interrogated. Therefore, critical dialectic exchange and professional communities can support educators' ongoing engagement and growth (Darder, 2002; Di Angelo, 2011; hooks, 1994; Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1998; Nieto, 2009).

Harry's critique of his own linear interpretation of his emerging awareness, as well as Abigail's commitment to "never-ending" questioning, illustrate that self-reflexive analysis can be a form of dialectic exchange through which an educator complicates her own understanding and challenge partial understandings that are a product of consciousness collapse. Central to both the professional development, as well as the semi-structured interviews, was dialogue between and among participants, the facilitator of the professional development and myself. The dialectic exchange fostered in these professional development spaces was fundamentally different from debate in that, rather than a zero-sum engagement through which one party emerges victorious, all parties are working together to produce greater depth of understanding. My interaction with Harry, in the professional development discussion above, is an example of dialogue in which I question his interpretation and propose a different understanding with the intention of complicating his metaphor of the mountain. The examples of self-reflexive and interpersonal dialogue analyzed below further illustrate how dialectic exchange provided space in which participants' interpretations of the critical theory, including moments of consciousness collapse, were articulated, challenged, complicated and rearticulated.

It is also important to note that, at times, participant's consciousness collapse would not be identified or interrogated. As was briefly articulated in my methodologies, my shifting role as



researcher and facilitator informed how I engaged with participants. While a researcher's engagement and questions cannot be neutral (Stacey, 1988; Wolf, 1996), from moment to moment I navigated the tension between disrupting participants' partial or problematic perspectives and documenting and understanding participants' engagement with critical theory. In the interview with Perry above, I decided to question his interpretation of the connection between public schooling, citizenship and the state with my question "But, do you really think that is how the system functions?" This question prompted him to (re)consider his understanding in that moment. Though I could have further interrogated his response, in the interview context I was focused on trying to understand, rather than challenges, how he was conceptualizing his role within schooling. Consequently, Perry's understanding of the democratizing myth went largely unchallenged – as a result, that moment of consciousness collapse, while it could have been an opportunity to interrogate and problematize the democratizing myth, instead served to reify Perry's partial understanding of his role as an agent of the state. In addition to navigating these tensions of how to engage with each participant in a given moment, my engagement with participants was shaped by the partiality of my own critical consciousness and distorting influence of my White racial subjectivity. When reviewing interviews and professional developments data, there are moments of my own consciousness collapse through which I perpetuate ideologies of Whiteness. Consequently, my ability to identify and constructively address moments of consciousness collapse was informed by the partiality of my critical consciousness and the distorting lens of my White racial subjectivity.

Another moment of dialogue occurred when Paul, an administrator at AHS, and I were discussing administrative discretion in regards to disciplinary action against students that results in suspension or expulsion. At the beginning of this interview, which occurred shortly after the

graduate course ended in the summer, Paul asserted that, as an administrator, “before [he] took the course he would be actively involved in getting kids out of the building.” He cited a mentality and culture within “education that it is easier to make something go away, it is easier to suspend a kid, than to work with a kid” as the impetus for his previous approach. Throughout the interview, he interrogated his own disciplinary practices, identified stakeholders and pressures within the system that informed disciplinary action, and worked to tease apart the complexities of students’ experiences. In discussing a hypothetical scenario in which a “kid punches another kid,” Paul asserted that there are stakeholders in the community, parents and administrators, who “will not look at the assailant as someone who deserves anything, they will look at him as a piece of garbage that needs to be put in a dump... and it’s terrible.”

In order to engage with some of the complexities of violence among students within a school’s culture, I asked him to reflect on a *Democracy Now* film that we watched in the graduate course about the Jena 6 (Goodman, A & Gonzalez, J (Hosts), 2007). The film documented the excessive disciplinary and criminal action taken by school administrators and law enforcement against six Black students involved in school fight with a White student at Jena High School in which the White student suffered a concussion and attended a school event later that evening. Discussion in the graduate course focused on discussing the context within which the school fight occurred and how this context was not considered when egregiously disproportionate disciplinary action was taken against the six Black students. This context included: racial tensions within the community and school culture; a lack of administrative response to nooses hung in a tree at the high school by White students, which was dismissed simply as a prank; several incidences of violence within the community in which Black students were the victims and White students were not held accountable; and the punitive disciplinary

responses against Black students who peacefully protested these racist acts as well — police and the district attorney were called in response to the peaceful protest and, according to one of the few Black teachers at Jena high school, the DA reportedly threatened students in an assembly that afternoon saying “I can end your lives with the stroke of a pen.”

According to the film, the school administration, as well as many of the White residents of Jena, did not see a connection between the charges against the Jena 6 and race or the racial culture and acts of hate occurring at the high school. Hanging the nooses was a clear act of racism that, as was described by members of the Jena six as well as their families, called upon historically rooted and contemporarily maintained messages of hate, racial discrimination, and threat of death associated with lynching (Goodman, A & Gonzalez, J (Hosts), 2007; Lawrence, 1990). With the case of Jena six, the violence between students was decontextualized from racialized context of the community and within the school; while White students racist hate acts were understood and treated as pranksters, Black students who protested and The Jena six were conceptualized as criminal and dangerous. As a result, the Jena six were arrested and charged with attempted second-degree murder and conspiracy. These egregiously disproportionate criminal charges reflect the manifestation and perpetuation of Whiteness through the maintenance of pre-existing racist ideologies and structures by administrators and law enforcement.

When discussing Jena 6, Paul questioned the administration’s punitive response to the Black students as well as the administration’s lenient or non-existent response to the racist act of hanging a noose:

**Paul:** I can see some of the families saying, why didn’t the White kids who put the noose... was it because it wasn’t repeated? It didn’t count as harassment because it wasn’t repeated or it was too anonymous? What did the school do? Did the school do any sort of programming to tell the whole community how unhappy they

were with it? They should have had assembly after assembly saying we are not about this. There are isolated kids who are the problem here. I the principal, I the teacher, get some White students to say we are not part of this. It is other kids who are isolated....

Here, Paul identified the lack of a public response from the administration to the noose as problematic and asserts that they should have addressed it repeatedly. However, a consciousness collapse occurs when he articulated that the students who hung the noose should be understood as “isolated” problems within the school community. The racist act of hanging nooses, instead of being the manifestation of individual’s pathological racism (Bell, 1993; Lawrence, 1990), was a visible manifestation of the racist school culture fostered by administration, teachers and Jena community within which White students enacted a racist symbol with impunity. Rather than disrupting a racially neutral or equitable community — or as a White resident of Jena stated in the film, “we don’t have a race problem in Jena” — the racist and violent act of hanging nooses in a tree called upon historical and contemporary racial oppression and, subsequently, reinforced racism within the community. In this moment, I decided to engage with Paul in a dialectic exchange through which I tried to challenge the notion of racist acts as isolated to individuals and complicate the roll of administrative responses:

**Amanda:** But, it can’t be understood as an individual pathology — that the students who put up the noose are acting in a space that is devoid of racist influences. What you are talking about, an institutional, collective response... I think any response informs how the culture is either challenged or perpetuated. For example, a lack of response from an institution is a response. The culture will persist and the individuals will not be held accountable for their actions within a larger system that might be privileging or oppressing according to race.

**Paul:** Interesting. So are you talking about actions that interrupt this hegemonic, normative narrative? So without a response you have really nothing more than a perpetuation.

**Amanda:** Right, that a silence is, in fact, a response itself. And then there is this other approach that you are speaking to — that we, as an administration, don’t condone or support what is going on. It can be a distancing move of sorts. We as an

institution do not condone supremacist or racist comments — but without an examination of those structures to say, how might we be perpetuating through various forms of institutionalized racism, that it is not like the school is putting up on the wall something that is oppressive but that the very structures can be oppressive.

**Paul:** So is it one better to, for the school administration to declare that we are also looking what we do? We are looking inward and seeing where we might be the cause — where we might be the cause of an individual whose feels that this is ok to do. So we are going to be looking inward as well. And I like that, I think that is a respectable comment to make — That a person in some place of power is not presuming that he or she knows everything or is absolved of responsibility.

In this dialectic exchange, Paul interpreted and restated my argument that institutions are, in fact, engaging even if they choose to remain silent. He clearly articulated that the lack of institutional response to “interrupt this hegemonic, normative narrative” serves to perpetuate inequitable or oppressive power dynamics. I then challenged Paul’s conceptualization of an appropriate response as a distancing move by the administration and school community from visible occurrences of hate-speech and racist violence. Locating racism as acts of pathological individuals disguises the systemic, institutional and ideological manifestations of Whiteness and racial inequity (Lawrence, 1990; Rains, 2000). Paul responded with a set of questions and assertions through which he complicated his previous conceptualization of an appropriate administrative response to racist acts of hate or racially charged violence in a school community. He reached the conclusion that, administration should “be looking inward as well” to determine in what ways the administration and administrators “might be the cause of an individual whose feels that [a racist act] is ok to do.”

In this dialectic exchange, Paul’s initial understanding of an appropriate administrative response was challenged; he worked to consider my questions and produced a more complicated and nuanced understanding of the role of administration and administrators in perpetuating ideologies and institutions of Whiteness within which individual students act. This exchange

illustrates the dynamic, and potentially productive, role of consciousness collapse in the ongoing process of cultivating critical consciousness. Paul engaged thoughtfully as his initial conclusions were challenged - He willingly considered my questions and, through his openness to these ideas, he developed a more complex understanding of the role of administration and, more broadly, the connections between racial oppression, individuals and institutions. His engagement, in this dialectic, subverted the partial understanding produced through his moment of consciousness collapse. However, this analysis does not indicate that Paul's consciousness will never collapse again regarding a similar context. As was articulated above, due to the distorting influence of White racial subjectivities, consciousness collapse can be understood as inevitable in the process of cultivating critical consciousness. Therefore, moments of subverting consciousness collapse do not guarantee that a similar collapse may not occur during future engagement. However, through valuing the process of continuous engagement, self-reflexive analysis and dialectic with peers, White educators can strive to identify and subvert consciousness collapse as one dimension of constructing their critical consciousness.

In addition to dialogue during interviews, the dialectic between participants in the discussion group also informed how they each navigated ongoing (re)construction of ideologies of self, schooling, and society, as well as moments of consciousness collapse. The exchange below illustrates participants' engagement with one another as well as with the facilitator of the professional development and myself to develop a deeper understanding of their interpretations of critical theory through dialectic exchange. In response to Harry's nihilistic interpretation of the complexity Ellsworth articulated, participants read "Epilogue: Beyond Despair" in Derrick Bell's book *Faces at the Bottom of the Well* (1993) for the last professional development discussion group. It is essential to note that the tension explored in Bell's piece are in reference

to the fight for racial equity by Black people within, what Bell establishes as, the permanent and endemic nature of racism (1993). Therefore, the humanizing struggle for justice that Bell describes should not to be conflated with White educators experiences navigating an ongoing process to construct critical consciousness from their positionality within Whiteness. Rather, Bell's piece contextualizes White educators' ongoing process within an understanding of the historical, contemporary, ideological and material implications of racial oppression. Parallels of the ongoing process rather than the experiences within these structures

At the beginning of the discussion, Harry was asked by the facilitator of the professional development to talk about the Bell piece in relation to his understanding of the mountain of "success."

**Harry:** Just as some background, I went on a rant two meetings ago — it seems like what you are doing does not seem as helpful for kids as you might think. It makes it seem like, why not just teach badly for fifty min with your back to the room? And I was not serious, but I was loud (*laughs*). So what stuck out to me, is on the middle of page 199 it says, "rather, it is a question of *both, and*. *Both* the recognition of the futility of action, where action is more civil rights strategies destined to fail; *and* the unalterable conviction that something must be done and that action must be taken." And, as someone who believes in logic strongly, I have a hard time getting around that...

... But, I have a really hard time seeing that — things are hopeless, yet you must do something [because] you have a moral obligation. That is essentially what it is saying, "the unalterable conviction that something must be done" — that is an imperative. Eehhh, I'm not entirely convinced. The tension, as you say, I recognize it. So that is what I took from it. I still, I don't believe in the futility of action when it comes to teaching, but I'm not convinced. Other than you should try knowing that you will fail, is a tough one. I guess we ask our kids to do that several times a day. So, I'm not sure that this brought me out of despair, if I was in despair.

In his response, Harry identified the passage that articulates the tension of engaging in an ongoing process despite knowledge of the "futility" of one's engagement. Bell's assertion that fighting for justice is "*both* the recognition of the futility of action... *and* the unalterable

conviction that something must be done” establishes the value of engaging in the humanizing process of fighting for justice. This is an essential passage in Bell’s piece and can be a lens to analyze Harry’s expectation of ascending the mountain given the complexity, and therefore impossibility of conquering, the mountain. Through Bell’s emphasis on process as necessary, and humanizing, Harry is called to engage with and navigate the mountain, despite the knowledge that he will never conquer the mountain. However, in his interpretation, Harry equated “logic” with an expectation of positive outcome as the impetus to act; through this lens of a logic of optimism, in which there is an expected positive outcome, the imperative that “you should try knowing that you will fail is a tough one.” This logic of optimism reflects, again, the distorting influence of linear expectations of “success” as measurable and finite. Harry additionally interpreted Bell’s use of “futility” as pessimism — a conclusion that there is no point in engagement if there will be no positive outcome. Bell’s futility, rather than being a pessimistic conclusion that dissuades engagement, is in reference to the futility of overcoming endemic racism rather than the futility of the process of engagement. Instead of asserting that there is no positive outcome, and therefore people should not engage in a fight for racial equity, Bell contextualizes the process of engagement in the fight for justice within the knowledge that racism is permanent. It is in spite of the knowledge that racism is permanent that Bell calls for action due to the “unalterable conviction that something must be done and that action must be taken” (Bell, 1993, p.199). Therefore, rather than a pessimistic conclusion, Bell is demanding hopeful engagement in a never-ending fight for justice because the process itself is not only necessary, in order to prevent further manifestations of racial injustice and oppression, but is also valuable and humanizing. Throughout the piece, Bell emphasizes the humanity of oppressed peoples, specifically enslaved African Americans who, “carved out a humanity” despite the



reality of systemic oppression (p. 197). Bell suggests that contemporaries who fight for justice adopt a “philosophy that both matches the unique dangers we face, and enables us to recognize in those dangers opportunities for committed living and humane service” (p. 195). Thus, Bell’s logic is founded in valuing engagement in the process, rather than an expectation of overcoming racism, which he believes to be impossible, as the impetus to act.

In response to Harry’s interpretation of Bell, Abigail expanded on the idea of “tension” in to complicate his interpretation of Bell through a lens optimism and pessimism:

**Abigail:** As far as tension goes, though, I feel like that is the *point*. That there will always be tension. In order for there to be tension there *has* to sort of, like, this pull from opposite ends. So if you don’t do anything on one side, there won’t *be* any tension. It will just snap back to wherever it was before, you need that tension.

**Harry:** Ya, on the previous page he says that "we can go forth certain knowing that our failure to act will not change conditions and may very well worsen them." And I think that is worth knowing. That if we don’t fight, maybe it gets even worse. Right and that is a reasonable consideration. I can get on board with that, but recognition of the futility of action is, that makes it tough to get out of bed in the morning.

Through this dialectic, Abigail expanded on Harry’s understanding of Bell’s moral imperative by establishing that a failure to act would eliminate the tension. Without this tension, she asserted, the fight for justice “will just snap back to wherever it was before.” Abigail established the process of engagement, in order to maintain the tension, as the impetus to act; rather than ascribing to logic of optimism with a promise of positive outcomes as the imperative to act. In response to Abigail’s challenge, Harry granted that the idea that a tension requires the “pull from opposite ends” and agreed “if we don’t fight, maybe it gets even worse.” Though Harry valued Abigail’s framing of tension as “reasonable” he returned to a pessimistic interpretation of Bell’s futility and “tough to get out of bed in the morning.”

To build on, and further complicate, this exchange, the facilitator of the professional

development pointed to Bell's emphasis on the humanizing process of resistance that "continued struggle can bring about unexpected benefits and gains that in themselves justify continued endeavor" (p. 199). She identified that, though progress may seem futile within Harry's own "experience of cause and effect, there is a longer historical sense of evidence of positive change" to which one contributes through resistance. Additionally, she identified that Bell is refuting the "liberal ideal that society always gets better, that it is like evolution" through his emphasis on continuous engagement, despite endemic racism. After a pause, Harry shared his understanding based on this dialectic exchange:

**Harry:** Or, I guess that it does not happen by accident. It takes this constant fight to move it incrementally forward

**Amanda:** And to notice when perhaps it moves backwards. I think that is what he is arguing as well is that is not a constant march toward justice but rather a constant battle to claim the ground that has been won and also to move forward. And to recognize what it is that you are working against. So, a lot of what we have read is trying to identify the mountain that you are upon. Even if that isn't entirely optimistic, in a very 'here are solutions kind of way,' it is disruptive in the sense that it is identifying and challenging what is the structure that you are in. And then you are better prepared to engage with it. Even if it is not laying out the solutions, it is, um, hopeful in its disruption of structures of power.

Harry's initial interpretation of Bell's moral imperative to act was challenged and complicated through this dialectic exchange. I tried to connect his understanding of progress and process — "that it does not happen by accident [and] it takes this constant fight" — to his initial metaphor of the mountain. In making the connection between Bell's emphasis on process, with "identifying the mountain that you are upon," I tried to validate his engagement and emerging awareness of the mountain as disruptive and essential to his capacity to navigate and resist. Again, the process through which White educators are cultivating this critical consciousness cannot and should not be conflated with the historical and contemporary experiences of contemporary African Americans within Whiteness. Rather, I use Bell's moral imperative to act,

despite the knowledge of the futility of action, to analyze the tensions that participants are navigating when engaging in the ongoing process of cultivating critical consciousness.

This dialectic exchange between Abigail, Harry, myself as well as the facilitator of the professional development illustrates the importance of interpersonal dialogue within the process of cultivating a critical consciousness. It is through these dialectics, rooted in the critical humility of educators to value and engage with the continuous process of cultivating critical consciousness, that moments of consciousness collapse can be identified and interrogated. In this case, Harry's initial conceptualization of success as conquering the mountain was challenged across two discussions. It was through these moments of dialogue that a more complex understanding of valuing the ongoing process of identifying and navigating the unconquerable mountain emerged. It is important to acknowledge Harry's willingness to articulate his confusions, frustrations through dialogue. As was explored above, identifying consciousness collapse is crucial to then interrogating and subverting distorted interpretations of critical theory. The dialectic exchange above illustrates that a moment of consciousness collapse is also an opportunity other participants or peers to consider and then challenge, complicate or question. Consequently, participants' willingness to articulate their questions and assertion, encouraged all of the other participants, as well as myself, to identify and question underlying assumptions that shaped, and potentially distorted, each of their interpretations of critical theory. Given the reconstructionist nature of the process of cultivating a critical consciousness for White educators, it is additionally essential that White educators' engagement be subjected to ongoing analysis in order to ensure that ideologies of Whiteness are subverted rather than reproduced. Throughout the professional development, all of the participants expressed the importance of having a space to get out of the day-to-day procedural dimensions of teaching and ask critical questions about

their profession and the system that they, and their students, are trying to navigate. It is within these dialectic spaces that White educators can engage in and value the ongoing process of cultivating critical consciousness.

### **Critical Humility: Contextualizing Productive Discomfort**

Throughout the professional development and interviews, the educators expressed frustration and a sense of discomfort as we discussed the complexities of critical pedagogy and critical consciousness within the context of Whiteness. In the professional development discussion group just before participants Ellsworth's piece "Why Doesn't This Feel Empowering?" (1989), Harry succinctly identified two dimensions of discomfort — discomfort that is inherent in critical pedagogy as well as discomfort that stems from his positionality as a White educator engaging with critical pedagogy. A fellow AHS teacher was expressing his questions, concerns and discomfort regarding facilitating a conversation with his students about the fatal shooting of Michael Brown, an unarmed, young, Black man, by a White police officer in Ferguson, MO. Ultimately, he questioned if it was his place, or appropriate, for him to be facilitating a conversation about Ferguson as a White man. In response to his colleague's doubts and discomfort, Harry established that teaching is "by nature political" and, consequently, teachers "must question power imbalances despite our discomfort." He acknowledged that this is "unbelievably challenging to do, coming from a dominant position in society" but that "discomfort comes along with critical pedagogy." In this moment, Harry clearly articulates his awareness of two dimensions of discomfort for White educators who strive to implement critical pedagogy: the discomfort inherent in critical pedagogy and, the discomfort as a result of his "dominant" position in society.

Critical theorists assert that discomfort, rather than something to avoid, is inevitable and,

in fact, essential to critical pedagogy (Darder, 2002; Ellsworth, 1989; hooks, 1989; hooks, 1994). Rather than seeking a “safe” classroom or harmonious “multicultural diversity,” hooks establishes that critical pedagogy engages with and values difference and discomfort as productive (1994). Castagno (2014) theorizes how “niceness,” the avoidance of “disturbance, conflict, controversy or discomfort” (p. 9), and its connection to equity, compassion and fairness legitimize Whiteness and the perpetuation of the status quo in schooling. Through critical pedagogy, teachers and students identify and interrogate oppressive structures — this practice includes identifying their own positionality, as well as confronting their own ideological beliefs that perpetuate structures of inequity (Ellsworth, 1989; Pruitt, 2004; Rodriguez, 2004). As Harry identifies, through this engagement, “discomfort comes along with critical pedagogy.”

For White educators, this includes cultivating an awareness of the distorting influence of their White racial subjectivities. As was asserted above, White individuals develop racial subjectivities within ideologies and institutions that perpetuate Whiteness. It is through these White racial subjectivities that White educators engage with and potentially perpetuate and legitimize ideologies and institutions of Whiteness. White racial subjectivities are, in turn, legitimized and normalized within the context of dominant ideologies and institutions of Whiteness. Robin Di Angelo (2011), in her exploration of “white fragility,” asserts that an “insulated environment of racial privilege builds White expectations for racial comfort while at the same time lowering the ability to tolerate racial stress” (p. 54). Thus, White educators exist within the context of Whiteness, which validates and reinforces their racial subjectivities producing an expectation of comfort and certainty (Fine 1997; Giroux, 1997; Leonardo, 2009).

Engagement in the ongoing process of cultivating critical consciousness destabilizes expectations of comfort and certainty within Whiteness producing discomfort. Through this

process, educators engage with critical theory and work to cultivate dimensions of critical humility regarding the inherent partiality and insecurity of developing a critical consciousness. Disrupting and destabilizing the comfort and expectation of certainty of White racial subjectivities, within Whiteness, is crucial to the reconstructionist project of cultivating a critical consciousness. As Whiteness studies suggest, reconstructionist projects must be subjected to ongoing analysis and be contextualized within an understanding of the material, ideological oppression of Whiteness. The third dimension of critical humility is reflected in Harry's articulation of two aspects of discomfort. He contextualizes the two dimensions of discomfort within an awareness that teaching is "by nature political" and that "discomfort comes along with critical pedagogy." He additionally identifies how his dominant positionality within society affects his comfort when engaging with critical pedagogy but asserts that White educators "must question power imbalances despite our discomfort."

Though Harry could articulate these dimensions of discomfort, a moment of consciousness collapse occurred in the next professional development when discussing Ellsworth's piece. Harry expressed his frustrations with how people are group and privileged or oppressed based how they are raced within the context of institutional racism:

**Harry:** And part of it, one of the reasons that I do bristle as these types of suggestions, is that I HATE being labeled man of white privilege — not understanding of things, holding down other people. Like it infuriates me...

... But ya know, I'm not so blind to think that it's that I'm not good at the dominant culture. Like I'm good at this game playing. But, I also cannot stand being labeled like that and grouped like that.

In processing the implications of systemic racism on individuals, in this moment, Harry centered his own experience and discomfort at being labeled and treated as a White man. Harry's hatred of being perceived as "not understanding of things, holding people down" implies a discomfort

with being understood as bad or oppressive within structures of racial dominance and inequity. This also implies that an expectation of being perceived as understanding and supportive of all people is challenged by an emerging awareness of the racial power dynamics explored in Ellsworth's piece (1989). Harry's consciousness collapse illustrates two manifestations of the distorting influence of his White racial subjectivity. First, his frustration reflects the "white fragility" that is an aspect of White racial subjectivities due to expectations of racial comfort and certainty within Whiteness (Di Angelo, 2011). As was explored above, White racial subjectivities are validated and legitimized within Whiteness as the "norm" (Di Angelo, 2011; Fine 1997; Giroux, 1997; Leonardo, 2009). Harry's growing awareness of his own positionality within Whiteness threatens an understanding of self within society that is comfortable, positive and validating, producing discomfort and frustration. By centering his own experience, Harry comes close to identifying the ways in which, as an individual, he is implicated in perpetuating structures and ideologies of Whiteness. However, another aspect of his consciousness collapse occurs when he conceptualizes racial oppression as individual actions of "holding down other people." While interpersonal acts of racial oppression do perpetuate Whiteness, conceptualizing racism as exclusively individual and pathological not only shields the systemic nature of from analysis but also leads White individuals to unproductive feelings of guilt, paralysis and a loss of agency (Di Angelo, 2011; Keating, 1995; Leonardo, 2009; Rodriguez, 2004; Rains, 2000).

Harry's ability to articulate the inherent discomfort of critical pedagogy and subsequent moment of consciousness collapse illustrates the temporal and dynamic nature of critical consciousness. Rather than achieving a finite "stage" of awareness regarding discomfort, Harry's process of engagement is anything but linear or consistent — though he can name dimensions of discomfort, he still experiences frustration in part produced through a distorted interpretation of

how people are raced within society. Additionally, Harry again engaged in self-reflective critique to contextualize his interpretation and his discomfort. He acknowledged that, though he “cannot stand being labeled like that and grouped” as a White man, he is “good at the dominant culture.” Here Harry articulated an awareness of the privileges afforded to him given his positionality within Whiteness in order to contextualize his frustration. Through a dialectic exchange, both Perry and Abigail strived to further contextualize Harry’s discomfort.

**Perry:** Ya, it’s tough cause I can’t stand it. But at the same time, I totally benefit from like being a tall, White man. Like, I kind of I won the lottery in terms of like, I can’t help but recognize that totally gives me a little bit of leeway in situations. And how much? I have no idea. But I certainly, once you start to get radar for it, start to notice it.

**Abigail:** Well and even, there is that article about, a guy changed one letter in his name on his resume. It was from Jose to Joe and he got so many more responses. I mean, you don’t even have to see the person to see how that changes things.

Here, Perry grounded the discomfort of realizing one’s positionality as a White man within Whiteness in and an understanding of White privilege. He also acknowledges that his awareness of the ways in which he is privileged is limited but growing — “And how much? I have no idea. But I certainly, once you start to get radar for it, start to notice it.” By locating his own discomfort with an understanding of access to privileges based on his White racial subjectivity, as well as his limited capacity to identify those privileges, Perry contextualized their experiences of discomfort as White men. Abigail further contextualizes this discomfort by bringing the conversation back to experiences of individuals who are raced and experience discrimination and oppression, rather than privilege, within Whiteness.

This moment of consciousness collapse and discomfort occurred in the same professional development as Harry’s emerging awareness of the metaphorical mountain of inequity that he, through a distorted lens of linear success, strives to conquer.



**Harry:** On the scale of infinite amount of discrimination and oppression, if it's an infinite amount and we never get any closer to the end, then what is the point of moving in this direction? And I don't actually believe those things but it makes me feel that way.

... You don't get closer to the top of the mountain if the mountain is an infinite distance away and they keep adding more to the infinity right. The more I read, the further I feel away from successful. Then, then the reaction seems to be well why move at all. And, and I don't actually believe those things but that is how I would hyperbolize it.

It is through this linear understanding of success that Harry is set up for failure and, consequently, expressed discomfort and nihilism. Though Harry strived to contextualize his linear understanding and discomfort by establishing that he does “not actually believe those things but it makes [him] feel that way,” Harry's discomfort can be further contextualized by interrogating his positionality on the mountain. In his metaphor, critical theories are “adding more” to an infinitely tall mountain that he is trying to ascend. Though he is coming to a greater awareness of the complex dimensions of the mountain, Harry cannot be understood as ignorant of the mountain or innocent in the mountain's reproduction. Instead, he is beginning to realize the terrain of oppression within which he is already located and with which he has always been engaging. Rather than lacking racial ideologies, White educators are (mis)educated (King, 1991) and, through their White racial subjectivity, (re)produce and legitimize oppressive White racial ideologies. The narrative that White individuals are devoid or ignorant of racial ideologies protects the “innocence” of Whiteness (Leonardo, 2009). If depicted as ignorant, White educators are understood as unknowingly inheriting privileges from established systems of dominance rather than understood as investing in and perpetuating structures and ideologies of Whiteness. This critical lens contextualizes Harry's discomfort — rather than being “ignorant” and “innocent,” Harry is didactically engaged in the (re)construction of inequitable systems of power.

As was illustrated in the interaction above, a moment of consciousness collapse identified and interrogated through self-reflexive as well as dialectic analysis in order to contextualize discomfort. These moments of critical humility demonstrate the importance of contextualizing discomfort through an understanding of one's own positionality as well as the experiences of peoples oppressed within Whiteness. To return to Darder's (2002) definition, critical humility includes a "dialectical ability to live an insecure security, which means a human existence that [does] not require absolute answers or solutions to a problem but rather, that even in the certainty of the moment, could remain open to new ideas" (p. 48). A dimension of this "insecure security" for White educators includes striving to contextualize their own discomfort as they engage in critical pedagogy and the reconstructionist project of disrupting the comfort and certainty of White racial subjectivities within Whiteness.

### **Critical Humility to Cultivate Critical Consciousness**

To end the final professional development, in which we discussed Bell's piece, I read the Cornell West quote that was on the syllabus for the graduate course participants took over the summer:

I'm a blues man. A blues man is a prisoner of hope, and hope is a qualitatively different category than optimism. Optimism is a secular construct, a calculation of probability...Hope wrestles with despair, but it doesn't generate optimism. It just generates this energy to be courageous, to bear witness, to see what the end is going to be. No guarantee, unfinished, open-ended.

Bell's moral imperative resonates with West's understanding of the difference between optimism and hope — optimism promises a positive outcome while hope commits to engagement despite futility due to the endemic nature of racism. Again, both of these scholars are documenting and legitimizing the struggle for justice for African Americans within Whiteness. These experiences cannot be conflated with the experiences of White educators striving to cultivate critical

consciousness. Rather, the complexities that both West and Bell explore of ongoing processes of liberation provide a lens through which White educators' engagement can be analyzed. Abigail, in her self-reflection at the beginning of the article, asserted that thinking about oppression within schooling would be "upsetting" and threaten her nature as an "optimist." Rather than being an optimist, however, Abigail, Paul, Harry, and Perry are striving to *hopeful*, rather than *optimistic*, as they engage in the ongoing process of cultivating their critical consciousness. Given the contextual and dynamic nature of structures of Whiteness, as well as the distorting effects of White racial subjectivities, White educators cannot move *through* stages of consciousness. Rather, they engage in an ongoing process of cultivating a critical consciousness within which there are moments of consciousness collapse. These moments of consciousness collapse are, as was illustrated above, also dynamic moments of reconstruction. Through the identification and interrogation of consciousness collapse, educators and their peers can work to subverting distorting influences of their White racial subjectivities.

The dimensions of critical humility mapped in this paper expand on Darder's (2002) conceptualization of critical humility and provides insight into the perspectives and dispositions that can support White educators as they strive to cultivate their critical consciousness. An awareness of the inherent partiality of one's critical consciousness, given the distorting influence of Whiteness, is crucial to understand the process cultivating a critical consciousness as continuous rather than finite or linear. Through an understanding of the inherent partiality of one's critical consciousness, moments of partial awareness and consciousness collapse can be understood as inevitable rather than a "failure" of engagement. Through this awareness, educators can work to identify and interrogate moments of consciousness collapse. The second dimension emphasizes valuing the ongoing process of cultivating a critical consciousness.

Through continuous self-reflexive critique and dialectic exchange, White educators can identify, analyze and learn from inevitable moments of consciousness collapse. Finally, through the third dimension of critical humility, White educators contextualize the product discomfort inherent in critical pedagogy and produced by destabilizing the comforts of White racial subjectivities within Whiteness. The three dimensions of critical humility mapped above are interdependent – an awareness of the inherent partiality of the ongoing process is essential in order to understand and value one’s engagement in the process; simultaneously, engagement in the process produces discomfort that, in order to prevent nihilism, must be contextualized. It is through these dimensions of critical humility, and perhaps others that did not emerge through the analysis in this article, that White educators can navigate the complexities of cultivating a critical consciousness within the context of Whiteness.

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**Navigating Contradicting Expectations of “Success”: A Teacher’s Experiences Cultivating  
her Critical Consciousness within the Context of Neoliberal Teacher Accountability**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This qualitative study analyzes the reflections of Abigail, a White high school educator, on the tensions that emerged between her engagement in the continuous process cultivating a critical consciousness and neoliberal teacher accountability structures. Her critiques illustrate the shallow conceptualization of “Cultural Proficiency” within teacher accountability. Additionally, her experiences illustrate the toxic environment, established by neoliberal reforms, that hinders teachers’ attempts to engage in the ongoing process of cultivating a critical consciousness. Through an analytical lens of Whiteness studies, her experiences reveal the manifestation and perpetuation of Whiteness through neoliberal teacher accountability measures. Ultimately, despite a rhetorical commitment to equity, neoliberal reforms do not support teachers’ endeavors to cultivate a critical consciousness necessary to implement critical pedagogy. Based on Abigail’s experiences of interpersonal support, this paper suggests a research focus on administrative critical pedagogy through which administrators, as teacher evaluators, can support teachers within the context of neoliberal reforms.

Keywords: Critical Pedagogy, Critical Consciousness, Neoliberalism, Teacher Accountability, Whiteness studies

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## 1. INTRO

*... In name, it is supposed to benefit the kids. I mean “No Child Left Behind.” I mean, yeah, let’s leave some children behind. Of course we don’t want to leave any children behind. So it is even phrased in a way that is, ya know? So I think it’s supposed to be helping the kids, but I think it is helping kids that learn a very specific way...*

*... We are calling it No Child Left Behind, but ironically we are almost going more to that system of -- get on the bus and be that specific type of learner, or else. And having it fall on the teachers as well. It’s just so messed up.*

In many of my interviews with Abigail, an English Language Learner teacher at Academy High School, she would identify the contradictory rhetorical strategies of the contemporary neoliberal education reform movement in the United States. She asserts that the phrasing of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) reflects the sentiments of educators because “of course we don’t want to leave any children behind.” The implementation of the neoliberal accountability policies, however, does not reflect the rhetorical promise of “equity and excellence” touted by neoliberal policies such as NCLB (Sleeter, 2007; Weiner, 2007). As Abigail suggests above, and throughout her reflections highlighted in this paper, NCLB ironically fails to support all learners equitably, effectively leaving students behind, and holds teachers accountable for student “failure” in the process.

Abigail’s critique of NCLB emerged during semi-structured interviews as she reflected on her experiences within professional development that focused on critical theory and critical pedagogy. Critical theory understands public schooling as an inherently political site of knowledge and power (re)production within society (Bartolomé, 2004; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Fine, 2004; Giroux, 1997; Kumashiro, 2000; Maher & Tetreault, 1998). It is, in part, through schooling that Whiteness, racial inequity and oppression, within society is perpetuated (Castagno, 2014; Fine, 2004; Gilborn, 2005; Leonardo, 2009). Within this powered context of

state schooling, critical pedagogy strives to empower students to question how and why knowledge is constructed and legitimized within inequitable power systems and to develop an awareness of their own positionality within power systems (Freire, 1970; Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1998; Kumashiro, 2000; McLaren, 2003; Scorza, Mirra & Morrell, 2013). According to the traditions of critical pedagogy, a teacher's critical consciousness, self-reflexive capacities and an awareness of one's own positionality in relation to power, oppression and privilege, are crucial to teachers' capacity to empower students (Bartolomé, 2004; Ellsworth, 1989; Darder, 2002; Freire, 1970; hooks, 1994; McLaren, 2003). Given the dynamic and contextual nature of intersecting systems of inequity, developing a critical consciousness is inherently an ongoing process (Ellsworth, 1989). Rather than a fixed identity of 'critical pedagogue' or set of finite insights, it is through continuous critical engagement that teachers can cultivate greater depth and complexity of awareness about intersecting system of inequity within schooling and society. Currently, the predominantly White teaching population has not been prepared to implement critical pedagogy; rather, teachers, as agents of the state, are primarily prepared to and are mechanized to perpetuate the status quo of inequity within schooling (Delpit, 1995; Gay & Kirkland, 2003; Kailin, 2011; Leonardo, 2009; Milner, 2007; Nieto, 2009; Rosenberg, 2004; Sleeter; 2008).

Given this context, my initial research questions focused on identifying challenges and complexities of engaging in the ongoing process of cultivating a critical consciousness for White educators; specifically, how does the positionality of White educators, influence the ongoing process through which educators strive to cultivate their critical consciousness? In order to investigate this question I conducted a qualitative critical study of four White high school educators' engagement in professional development focused on critical theory and critical

pedagogy. Throughout the professional development, as well as semi-structured interviews I conducted with participants, I gained insight into the complexities of cultivating a critical consciousness for these educators. One challenge that emerged throughout the data was contradictory understandings and expectations of “success” – as these educators tried to cultivate “successful” ongoing engagement in the process of cultivating a critical consciousness contradictions emerged with the quantifiable expectations of teacher “success” within a punitive climate of neoliberal accountability.

This article is not an exhaustive analysis of teacher accountability measures or their implementation at Academy High School (AHS). Rather, I highlight Abigail’s understandings and critiques of the system to provide insight into how teachers experience neoliberal reforms as they strive to engage in the continuous process of cultivating a critical consciousness necessary to implement critical pedagogy. Analyzed through Whiteness studies, Abigail’s critiques illustrate how neoliberal structures perpetuate Whiteness within schooling. Abigail’s experiences identify the shallow definition and implementation of “Cultural Proficiency” standards within teacher accountability. This reductive understanding of “Cultural Proficiency” not only fails to cultivate an understanding of critical consciousness as an ongoing process but also creates a toxic, punitive environment in which teachers are discouraged from engaging in the ongoing process of cultivating a critical consciousness. Within these tensions, Abigail found informal supports that supported her continuous commitment to cultivating her critical consciousness.

### **1.1 Whiteness Studies**

In this paper I use Whiteness studies to contextualize and analyze Abigail’s reflections on her experiences within neoliberal accountability structures. Whiteness studies seeks to subvert Whiteness by making visible the ‘normed’ nature of ideologies, institutions and identities that



legitimize and perpetuate White racial dominance in society (Castagno, 2014; Di Angelo, 2011; Dyer, 1993; Frankenberg, 1993; hooks, 2013; Leonardo, 2009; Rains, 2000). Through color-blind rhetoric, through which all students are treated the “same” regardless of race, No Child Left Behind is a manifestation of Whiteness within educational policy (Leonardo, 2009). rather than cultivated and implemented through intentional conspiracies, Whiteness within educational policy is systemic to the construction of systems of schooling and, consequently, education reform (Castagno, 2014; Gilborn, 2005).

In addition to contextualizing NCLB and neoliberal reforms as a manifestation of Whiteness within education, the lens of Whiteness studies provides an analytical framework to understand experiences of White teachers within teacher accountability systems. While teachers are navigating punitive neoliberal reforms that, as will be discussed below, deskills, devalues and decontextualizes their profession, teachers simultaneously act as agents of the state within public schooling (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). Consequently, though teachers can strive to subvert the status quo through critical pedagogy, they function to perpetuate systems of inequity within society through schooling. White individuals are interpellated within Whiteness and, subsequently perform White racial subjectivities, can perpetuate and legitimize institutional and ideological manifestations of Whiteness (Castagno, 2014; Frankenberg, 1993; Kailin, 2011). White educators’ racial subjectivities are didactically constructed by, and construct or perpetuate, Whiteness within schooling and society (Castagno, 2012). Therefore, White educators’ racial subjectivities inform the process through which they cultivate a critical consciousness as well as how they navigate neoliberal accountability structures.

## **1.2 Neoliberal Reform & Accountability in Education**

*“A school designed like a factory has a built-in contradiction: running a factory is tightly organized, highly routinized, and geared for the production of uniform products; educating children is complex, inefficient, idiosyncratic, uncertain and open-ended”*  
(McNeil, 2009, p.389)

Educational reform in the United States reflects international trends of neoliberal emphasis on efficiency through “free-markets,” individual choice, privatization and accountability (Harvey, 2005; Gilborn, 2007; Weiner, 2007). The report, *A Nation at Risk*, catalyzed the application of neoliberal accountability in the education sphere in the United States by establishing a connection between the education system and the United State’s ability to compete economically on an international, globalized stage (Lipman, 2009; Sleeter, 2007). In 2001 No Child Left Behind (NCLB) established contemporary manifestations of neoliberal reform in the United States through high-stakes standardized testing, privatization of educational opportunity and increased, punitive forms of teacher accountability (Sleeter, 2007).

The rhetoric of NCLB identifies equity, democracy and accountability as priorities and establishes that “achievement data will be disaggregated by ‘poverty, race, ethnicity, disability and limited English proficiency to ensure that no group is left behind’” (Sleeter, 2007, p. 3). These stated ideals, however, are variably interpreted and have not ensured equitable material outcomes or educational opportunities for students and communities (Weiner, 2007; Leonardo, 2009). Equity in education would mean the distribution of resources based on need and would require nothing short of a massive overhaul of funding structures and material reparations for historic disinvestment and disenfranchisement of students and communities of color (Ladson-Billings, 2006; Lipman, 2009; Sleeter, 2007). Instead, NLCB’s rhetorical commitment to equity and educational opportunity masks the creation of “a privatized, fragmented system of public education that has a narrow, vocationalized curriculum enforced through use of standardized

tests” (Weiner, 2007). Instead of ensuring equitable educational opportunity for students, in which every student would get what the need, standardization is based on principles of “sameness,” “objectivity” and competition through which every student is treated the “same” in a meritocratic system (MacLeod, 1995; McNeil, 2009).

Within neoliberal accountability, “success” is measured by finite, quantifiable outcomes and does not take into consideration the complexity of inputs that are crucial to supporting student learning. Through this decontextualized, color-blind lens, neoliberal reforms the inequitable material resources that are invested in students’ educational opportunity (Ladson-Billings, 2006). Through this warped conceptualization of color-blind “sameness,” neoliberal accountability and standardization of teaching and learning exacerbates inequity in schooling and society (Darling-Hammond, 2004; Lipman, 2009; McNeil, 2009). Specifically, Leonardo (2009) argues that NCLB reifies Whiteness within education by validating “largely white, middle class schools” as ‘successful’ while “schools and districts that boast high numbers of students of color” as ‘failing.’ Under the guise of color-blind, meritocratic, “objective” standards, the blame for “failure” is ascribed to students, teachers and communities rather than to inequitable structures. This hyper-individualization and de-contextualization of learning legitimizes deficit models of students and communities and has significant material effects that further disadvantage students’ learning (Leonardo, 2009). Ultimately, NCLB’s color-blind rhetoric of “equity” shields the ideological and institutional manifestations of neoliberalism and Whiteness from interrogation by shifting responsibility rather than identifying and interrogating inequitable investments in student learning.

This hyper individualization of ‘success’ and ‘failure’ legitimizes punitive measures and disinvestment from schools and teachers. Though ‘success’ has largely been decontextualized,

the one factor influencing students' education that falls under significant scrutiny are teachers. While access to highly qualified teachers has the greatest impact on student achievement (Sleeter & Stillman, 2007; Darling-Hammond, 2000), "NCLB's definition of a highly qualified teachers actually deskills teaching because it assumes that all one needs to teach well is content knowledge in selected disciplines in the liberal arts" (Wiener, 2007, p.166). Consequently, legitimized by rhetoric of 'equitable education for all', the teaching profession has been deskilled, decontextualized, devalued. Within the context of neoliberal high stakes reform, teachers and students are expected to operate within a banking model in which teachers deposit quantifiable and testable "knowledge" into students. Teachers are increasingly held accountable to implement scripted lesson plans, stripping the teaching profession of "intellectual activity." Not only is this model reductive and harmful for students and their education, it also devalues the profession and process of teaching (Lipman, 2009, McNeil, 2009). Dissatisfaction with increasingly strict, punitive and dehumanizing work conditions influence is causing teachers to leave or be pushed out (Sleeter & Stillman, 2007; Achinstein & Ogawa, 2006).

In addition to reducing teaching and learning to a banking model of education, neoliberal reforms conceptually remove the learning process from social and political contexts that inform education and are informed by education (Weiner, 2007). Consequently, teachers are not prepared to or supported to engage with the powered dimensions of public schooling and, consequently, operate to perpetuate the status quo of inequitable power dynamics in society (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Delpit, 1995; Gay & Kirkland, 2003; Kailin, 2011; Leonardo, 2009; Milner, 2007; Nieto, 2009; Rosenberg, 2004). It is within this neoliberal climate that teachers who strive to implement critical pedagogy must endeavor to engage in the ongoing process of cultivating a critical consciousness.

### 1.3 Critical Pedagogy & Critical Consciousness

Contrary to the neoliberal tendency to decontextualize teaching and learning from social-political conditions, public schooling is understood within critical theory as an inherently political space that operates dialectically to (re)produce power dynamics in society (Bartolomé, 2004; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Fine, 2004; Giroux, 1997; Kumashiro, 2000; Maher & Tetreault, 1997). In response to inequity in schooling and in society, critical pedagogy strives to empower students to question how and why knowledge is constructed and legitimized within inequitable power systems and to develop an awareness of their own positionality within power systems (Freire, 1970; Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1998; Kumashiro, 2000; McLaren, 2003; Scorza, Mirra & Morrell, 2013). The teaching and learning within critical pedagogy is not decontextualized, quantifiable and finite as the conceptualization of learning within neoliberal reforms. Rather than a rhetorical commitment to color-blind equality and a banking model approach, critical pedagogy strives to disrupt the power dynamics between teachers and students so knowledge is co-constructed rather than deposited (Darder, 2002; Friere, 1970). Within critical pedagogy, teaching and learning is inherently dialectic and “success” is not predicated or valued on certainty but rather on tensions and complexity (Darder, Torres & Baltodano, 2009).

According to the traditions of critical pedagogy, a teacher’s critical consciousness - self-reflexive capacities and an awareness of one’s own positionality in relation to power, oppression and privilege - is crucial to the her capacity to empower students (Bartolomé, 2004; Ellsworth, 1989; Darder, 2002; Freire, 2000; hooks, 1994; McLaren, 2003). Cultivating a critical consciousness is inherently a continuous process through which educators develop critical awareness of intersecting, dynamic systems of inequity. For White educators, engaging in the ongoing process of cultivating a critical consciousness is both crucial, as critical pedagogy

cannot be implemented through White racial ideologies (hooks, 2013);<sup>7</sup> consequently, engaging in an ongoing process of cultivating a critical consciousness includes identifying and subverting manifestations of White racial ideologies for White educators. Critical pedagogy, as well as the ongoing process through which educators cultivate their critical consciousness, produces productive discomfort (Darder, 2002; Ellsworth, 1989; hooks, 1989; hooks, 1994). In order to engage in the ongoing process of cultivating a critical consciousness, which includes questioning, taking risks and rethinking pedagogy, educators need to be within a supportive school culture and community (Darder, 2002; Castagno, 2014; Kailin, 2011).

## **2. METHODOLOGY**

### ***2.1 Participants at Academy High School***

In order to explore the ongoing development of White educators critical consciousness within the context of Whiteness I conducted a qualitative study about the experiences of four White educators throughout their engagement in professional development focused on critical theory and critical pedagogy. The participants in the study include: Harry, a science teacher; Perry, a social studies teacher; Abigail, an ELL teacher; and Paul, an administrator from a public, comprehensive high school located in a major city in the Northeast.<sup>8</sup> The educators were selected by the principal at Academy High School (AHS) to receive a voucher to participate in a graduate education course during summer 2014 at a nearby private university. In addition to taking the graduate course, which was focused on cultivating an awareness of inequitable power dynamics

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<sup>7</sup> It should be noted that White educators are not the only educators who ascribe to and perpetuate ideologies of Whiteness (hooks, 2013). However, this paper focuses on White educators engagement in the ongoing process of cultivating a critical consciousness.

<sup>8</sup> The names of participants as well as the school have been changed for confidentiality. The staff at AHS reflects the overwhelmingly White, female teaching force of public schools throughout the United States (Delpit, 1995; Milner, 2007; Leonardo, 2009).

within schooling, the educators participated in a professional development discussion group focused on critical pedagogy that met five times during fall 2014.<sup>9</sup> Throughout the professional development, I conducted four hour-long, semi-structured interviews with each participant. I also observed participants' engagement in all professional development spaces and visited each educator's room or administrative space for observations at least once. In addition to interacting with participants as a researcher through semi-structured interviews and observations, I was the teaching assistant in the graduate course and a co-facilitator of the professional development discussion group.

My research questions and data collection focused on the influence of participants' positionality on their engagement in the ongoing process of developing a critical consciousness that is necessary for effective critical pedagogy. In this paper, I focus on highlighting one participant's reflections on cultivating a critical consciousness within the context of neoliberal expectations of "success" and punitive accountability structures. Academy is a public high school and, as such, adheres to state mandated standards and testing. At the time of the study, there had recently been changes in the teacher accountability system as well as an administration shift. The new teacher accountability system aligned with the Department of Education's Model System for Teacher Evaluation. Teachers at AHS are assessed on either a one-year cycle or a two-year cycle – during their cycle they are expected to document evidence for a certain number of rubrics within the four teaching standards.<sup>10</sup> Administrative staff serves as evaluators at AHS and implement the teacher accountability system. Abigail's experiences within and reflections on the teacher accountability structures will be analyzed throughout this paper. According to

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<sup>9</sup> Readings for the graduate course included but were not limited to: Brayboy & Maughan, 2009; Ferguson, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 2006; McCready, 2011; Oakes, 2005; Yosso, 2005. Readings in the discussion group included: Bartolomé, 2004; Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2007; Ellsworth, 1989; hooks, 1994.

<sup>10</sup> The four teaching standards include: Standard I – Curricular Planning and Assessment; Standard II – Teaching All Students; Standard III – Family Community and Engagement; Standard IV – Professional Culture.

participants, recent changes in administration at AHS have altered the school culture in which they navigate teacher accountability structures. The previous headmaster of the school served for almost fifteen years and, according to participants, maintained a “zero tolerance” attitude for students and staff. The approval of this research project and similar in school initiatives focused on inequity in the school illustrate the current administration’s openness and intention to address inequity within the school and support of teacher’s engagement in critical pedagogy.

Participants’ experiences in the professional development and process of cultivating their critical consciousness were influenced by and occurred within neoliberal structures of teacher accountability as well as the school culture at AHS.

## ***2.2 Feminist Methodology***

Feminist research methodologies seek to map, analyze and disrupt inequitable power systems, most commonly manifestations of patriarchy, through the documentation and legitimization of the plurality of women’s lived experiences (Fine, Weis, Weseen & Wong, 2000; Narayan, 2004; Stacey, 1988; Wolf, 1996). In this research project I use feminist methodologies to center an analysis of participants’ experiences in order to interrogate larger structures of inequity within schooling and society including manifestations of Whiteness.

Feminist methodologies theorize the inherently powered relationship between researcher and participants through an emphasis on standpoint, self-reflexivity and reciprocity.

Methodologically, standpoint is conceptualized as the specificity and partiality of one’s perspective on society based on one’s location and lived experiences within inequitable societal power dynamics (Hartsock, 1983; Harding, 1991; Collins, 1986; Narayan, 2004; Wolf, 1996).

My standpoint as a White, middle-class female educator who, like the participants in this study, is striving to cultivate a critical consciousness, informed the collection, analysis and narration of



participants' experiences (Blee, 2000; Naryan, 1993; Weis & Fine, 2000; Wolf, 1996). Self-reflexivity within feminist research emphasizes the ongoing interrogation of a researcher's positionality within society and in relation to her participants. Cultivating an awareness of my own partial and perverse standpoint through self-reflexivity supported the navigation of my relationships with participants. A dimension of my relationship with participants was reciprocity – feminist methodologies map the complexities and challenges regarding reciprocity within the inherently inequitable relationship between researcher and participants (Borland, 1991; Narayan, 1993; Nelson, 1996; Stacey, 1988; Wolf, 1996). In my role as a teaching assistant and co-facilitator of the professional development, a dimension of reciprocity included working with participants to cultivate their critical consciousness which included, at times, identifying and subverting manifestations of White racial ideologies. Simultaneously, however, as a researcher I was focused on collecting data on the challenges and complexities of participants' engagement in the professional development. However, when participants may perpetuate in some way the oppressive structures that a researcher seeks to subvert, understanding of reciprocity can extend beyond the individual to “reflect a more complex sense of participants as representative members of larger sociocultural patterns, systems, and institutions” (Vaught, 2008, p.570). As this project centers Whiteness, through the experiences of White educators, it is crucial to ensure a critique, rather than endorsement, of oppressive power dynamics (Apple, 2004; Clandenin and Connelly, 2000; Fine, Weis, Wessen & Wong, 2000; Hurtado & Stewart, 2004; Leonardo, 2009). Therefore, I understood reciprocity in this project to include both supporting participants' engagement in the moment and collecting data about participants' engagement to analyze for manifestations of Whiteness.

### 3. RESULTS & DISCUSSION

Throughout the semi-structured interviews with participants, a tension emerged between the conceptualization of “success” within neoliberal accountability structures and within the critical pedagogy and the ongoing process of cultivating a critical consciousness - this tension shaped participants’ engagement in the process of cultivating a critical consciousness. In this paper I focus on the reflections and experiences of one participant, Abigail, and her complex critiques of the teacher evaluation system that shaped her learning process. Throughout the interviews, Abigail consistently contextualized her experience striving to cultivate a critical consciousness within the teacher assessment structures of AHS and the accountability movement. This article is not an exhaustive analysis of teacher accountability measures or their implementation at AHS. Rather, I highlight this participant’s understandings and critiques of the system to provide insight into how teachers experience neoliberal reforms as they strive to cultivate a critical consciousness.

#### *3.1 Contradictory Expectations: Critical Consciousness and ‘Cultural Proficiency’*

A fundamental tension that emerged throughout Abigail’s engagement was contradictory conceptualizations of cultural awareness – how teachers should be expected to understand, respond to and engage with students’ positionalities – in teacher accountability standards and in critical pedagogy. Abigail identifies her process cultivating a critical consciousness throughout the professional development as an ongoing and inherently partial process. In the context of the teacher evaluation structure, however, “Cultural Proficiency” is fit into a rubric within which an educator can be deemed “Exemplary.” These contradictory expectations of “success” informed Abigail’s experience navigating the accountability structures while simultaneously trying to cultivate her critical consciousness.

In one interview with Abigail, I asked her to describe what critical pedagogy meant to her at that point in the professional development.

**Abigail:** This is a messy answer, but it involves reflection - it involves questioning, not only reflection of self, but also reflection of the surrounding of that power dynamic - of how it all works. I sort of sense it as I'm going to teach what I need to teach in spite of the system working against me. I'm going to do what needs to be done. Um, keeping in mind those factors of the constraints that are begin put on the classroom, on a school on a system....

...And not knowing exactly how it all balances and fits together but keeping it in mind and having it never really settle. I think that is the point of praxis - is that the dust is really never settling on that jar because it is always be shaken up, questioned, changed and evolving. There is constant reflecting and it's never-ending. So critical pedagogy involves all those factors for me.

Abigail identifies the complexities developing a deeper and “evolving,” but never wholly complete, understanding of power dynamics in schooling. In her description, she understands “success” as an ongoing commitment to reflection in order to deepen and expand awareness of intersecting, inequitable power systems. Fundamental to this conceptualization of success is the inherent partiality of her understanding, that she will never fully know “exactly how it all balances or fits together,” while maintaining a commitment to do “what needs to be done.” Her insight captures current theoretical understandings of “success” within critical pedagogy as an inherently ongoing process in which one cannot achieve the status of a “critical pedagogue” (Darder, 2002; Ellsworth, 1989; hooks, 1994; McLaren, 2003). Additionally, Abigail identifies that a critical pedagogy “involves questioning, not only reflection of self, but also reflection of the surrounding of that power dynamic - of how it all works.” Developing a critical consciousness is fundamentally an ongoing process through which an educator develops a greater depth of awareness of oppressive power dynamics and their own positionality within those power dynamics (Darder, 2002; Ellsworth, 1989; Bartolomé 2004). This inward and outward process of “constant reflection” is “never-ending,” but through it, an educator can begin

to identify, navigate and, in some ways, subvert oppressive power structures in schooling. This understanding of critical consciousness as it pertains to the development and implementation of critical pedagogy differs from expectations of cultural awareness within accountability structures.

While discussing the changes in teacher accountability structure, Abigail focused on one of the accountability standards, Indicator C, “Cultural Proficiency,” because of its relevance when discussing critical pedagogy as well as its relevance to Abigail’s teaching regarding her student population of English Language Learners. This Indicator is one of four Indicators within the Teaching Standard III – Teaching All Students. Within the “Cultural Proficiency” Indicator there are two Elements that teachers can be held accountable for: “Respects Differences” and “Maintains a Respectful Environment.”<sup>11</sup> For each of these Elements, teachers can be rated as “Unsatisfactory”, “Needs Improvement”, “Proficient” or “Exemplary.” While Abigail thought that it was “positive” that teachers were being encouraged to be “culturally proficient,” there are fundamental differences between her complex understanding of critical consciousness and the rubrics definition of “Cultural Proficiency.”

The rubric of “Cultural Proficiency” indicates that teachers, within a neoliberal accountability structure, can achieve a status of “Proficient” or “Exemplary” – these statuses communicate that teachers have acquired some level of cultural awareness and, consequently, do not need to continue to engage in cultivating their awareness. This linear model of “success” contradicts Abigail’s understanding of the partiality of her own critical consciousness and how the ongoing process of cultivating that consciousness can be assessed and supported.

In response to a question about how she would define “cultural proficiency” Abigail responded,

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<sup>11</sup> Standards and rubrics are from the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education “Model System for Educator Evaluation”

Abigail: I would never say that I embody it, because I feel like it is a work in progress and I think I try to embody it but I think that is the main key.

Amanda: Do you think that this accountability strategy takes into account that in progress aspect of your cultural competency?

Abigail: No, I don't think it can because again how can you measure that? This is a very black and white - you do it or not - and to what degree. And sometimes you don't handle things well and you need help and that does not mean maybe you're not exemplary, but it does not mean that you are not culturally proficient in the sense that you are trying to be aware of it, you know what I mean? So, it's one of the those things where it can't be on a rubric like this, and I think that is why it is important to have humans, like I said humans, who are doing the evaluating because there needs to be that space for making errors and learning. Because we are all learning, we say that we are life-long learners in our mission statement and I think that it is important that we be treated like life long learners as teachers and make mistakes.

Though the question was about “Cultural Proficiency,” Abigail identifies her own ongoing process of developing cultural awareness. Rather than achieving the status of a “Culturally Proficient” educator, Abigail asserts that the “key” is to “try to embody it” indicating the inherent partiality of her capacities. She questions if it is possible to measure “Cultural Proficiency” because of the complexities and contextual nature dynamic systems of power. Consequently, Abigail identifies the importance of mistakes as a dimension of growth throughout the process of developing her critical consciousness – that “there needs to be that space for making errors and learning.” The rubrics for all levels, from “Unsatisfactory” to “Exemplary,” do not create space for an understanding of teachers as learners. Rather the descriptions reflect stagnant, measurable outcomes of a teacher’s “Cultural Proficiency” and does not reflect the fundamental “in process” nature of cultivating a critical consciousness.

Additionally, by establishing that educators can *be* “Cultural Proficiency,” teachers are marked as neutral, if not “Exemplary”, in ensuring equitable access and outcomes for all students. This shallow assessment of teachers’ capacity to support all students equitably

disguises their roll in perpetuating the status quo of inequity in schooling. This mirrors shallow, color-blind implementations of “multicultural” curriculum that, instead of subverting racial inequity, reify and further disguise manifestations of Whiteness in schooling (Castagno, 2014). Consequently, White educators are not held accountable to, or supported in navigating, the complex and pernicious terrain of Whiteness within schooling. In addition to contradictory expectations of “success,” between shallow teacher accountability rubrics and the complexity of cultivating a critical consciousness, Abigail articulates many instances when her ability to cultivate her critical consciousness was hindered by punitive accountability structures.

### ***3.2 Influence of Neoliberal Climate - “how am I going to fit that into a standard?”***

*“Accountability works a panoptic system of surveillance that teaches people to comply and to press others into compliance. This works, in part, because ‘deficiency’ is made visible, individual, easily measured and highly stigmatized within hierarchical system of authority and supervision” (Lipman, 2009, p. 369)*

Abigail’s understanding of developing a critical consciousness is rooted in an ongoing process of reflection, mistakes and growth. This understanding of “success” conflicts with neoliberal structures that conceptualize “success” as finite, quantifiable and decontextualized (Weiner, 2007; Lipman, 2009; Sleeter, 2007). Due to the punitive threat of material repercussions within neoliberal accountability structures, Abigail would, at times, question her pedagogical priorities and made risk-adverse professional goals. Abigail’s experiences within teacher assessment illustrate the distorting impact of standards on teacher’s growth as well as their relationship with their students.

During our interviews, Abigail identified many moments of tension between her pedagogical beliefs and teacher accountability structures. She would describe meaningful moments that were important to her relationships with students and their learning. However, these same moments caused Abigail anxiety when she would consider how she would fit the

activity into the standards. On a fall day, she took the students for a walk to a beautiful wooded area near the school; during the walk the students participated in mindfulness activities as well as written and verbal reflections on their time so far in school. Abigail identified this class as important time to develop her relationships with students and for her students to have space to reflect on their schooling experiences. Though the use of the outdoor space had been encouraged by AHS's principal, Abigail still questioned and worried about "where that fits in the standards?"

Another meaningful but anxiety producing moment occurred when Abigail took her class to play soccer in the gym as a reward for working hard and not chatting during class. In her reflections, Abigail identified the importance of getting to know students outside of the classroom and beyond academic dynamics. She found that her students, who at times struggle to communicate through English with one another and with her, were able to communicate in a different way through the activity. Additionally, she identified that the time in the gym subverted the power dynamic between herself and her students – rather than being the authority, the one who, as she said in many interviews knows the "language of power," she was instead in a position to learn from her students. Through her reflections, Abigail insisted upon the value of these activities as foundational to her relationship with students but simultaneously questioned their viability because they were not quantifiable and did not fit into quantifiable accountability standards.

Abigail's frustration and anxiety around quantifiable goals was produced by an emphasis on SMART goals in the teacher accountability structure. This goal setting strategy, which stands for Specific, Measurable, Assignable, Realistic, Time-based, are a manifestation of the neoliberal emphasis on quantifiable, finite and time-measurable teaching and learning. Teachers are expected to make SMART goals at the beginning of their assessment cycle for all of the

standards for which they are going to be assessed. These goals then become the expectation against which their performance as a teacher is compared.

In an interview, Abigail described her thought process behind a specific SMART goal for “analysis of student learning growth and achievement.” She prefaced her reflection by asserting that “learning is messy and its not always linear and measurable in that S.M.A.R.T. fashion which we are trying to do goals in that very linear time measurable fashion.” Eventually she settled on a goal that 80% of students “will be able to produce a piece of writing typed and using the proper formatting”:

Abigail: I mean, it’s a SMART goal, but its ridiculous. It’s like a lawyer wrote it. But I was so afraid ya know. I thought really hard about those percentages. If I do 50%, will they think that I’m being lazy? Ya know, it’s a mind fuck. I had a one-year cycle but if you were on a two-year cycle - I made those goals with the percentages with the students in mind where I say ok I know this kid is going to have a really hard time writing paragraphs...

... So I was like ok, count her out. And that is what I mean about having the goals be non-risky because, this is awful to say, but I’m already not including her to be safe... Its not like I’m not working for her, but in my SMART goal I’m already taking her out of the successful population. Quote, unquote - successful population. I don’t even have as much of a problem with the standards as much as I have a problem with the SMART goals as something that you have to achieve. I think that you should be able to not make the goal and have that be okay - have it be that process.

In order to determine the percent of her students who will “succeed,” Abigail had to identify the students who would most likely not, despite her investment and their energies, reach the standards definition of “success.” She completed the evaluation in a one-year cycle, which meant that she knew all of the students that she was betting would “succeed” or “fail.” She is implying that, if she were on a two-year cycle, she may not know the students that she will be teaching and placing bets on. Consequently, she would not know where her students are starting off and would not be able to make informed bets about which students would “achieve” and which students



would not. In describing her thought process, Abigail told a story about a student who made significant progress over the course of the year but did not achieve the standards' expectation of "success." Abigail agonized over including that student in the "unsuccessful" portion of her class at the beginning of the year - She said that, by prioritizing the SMART goal "I'm already taking her out of the successful population." Though Abigail articulated that she was still "working" for that student, she went on to articulate the effect of goal setting on teacher-student relationships within the context of neoliberal reforms:

Abigail: I was just reading an article that my department head gave me. They are putting off the teacher evaluation, like they are basically going to have student performance, like the [standardized test or standardized test for ELL students] be part of my evaluation. So if my students don't perform well that could, that could reflect badly on me. And I think it is one of those things were again, it sounds like a good idea. But, I remember a couple years ago, when No Child Left Behind started, [a critique] was talking about dentists - about how dentists salaries should be based on the quality of the teeth of their patients and how people who don't have fluoride available to them in the water or don't have education in relation to brushing or flossing or they eat a lot of sugar. The idea that there are a lot of factors outside of your control that has an impact on who is sitting in your classroom. And to have those kids be seen as a liability for you job, or for your pay, is basically pitting the people who are supposed to be working together against each other. And that is coming down the road; people might get incentive pay for having students who are high achievers and so what motivation does that give for teachers to work with special Ed. or ELL or non-AP students? It's ridiculous.

Abigail is referencing the highly contested use of value-added assessment strategies that include student scores on standardized tests in teacher evaluation. As she articulates, this change would further distort the teacher-student relationship by "pitting the people who are supposed to be working together against each other." In her SMART goal calculation above, Abigail had to bet which of her students would not meet the benchmark of "success" in order to ensure that the student's "failure" would not be held against her in the evaluation. Though she insists that she was still working for those students, in this part of the interview she identifies the potential

“liability” of working with students who, in this accountability structure, present a threat to teachers’ evaluations. Consequently, Abigail questions “what motivation [is there] for teachers to work with special Education or ELL or non AP students?” Here Abigail identifies how the panoptic system of accountability influences teacher’s engagement with students and disincentivizes their investment in students who need their support (Lipman, 2009).

As she did often throughout our interviews, Abigail identified the attractive narrative of accountability - that teacher should be held accountable for student learning. Though a seemingly positive rhetoric of accountability, Abigail identifies how neoliberal understandings of success disregards the influence of educational inputs and external factors on students’ educational outcomes. Through the metaphor of a dentist’s relationship to her patients, Abigail identifies that “there are a lot of factors outside of your control that has an impact on who is sitting in your classroom.” She is identifying how neoliberal reforms are decontextualized, and therefore color-blind; consequently, student achievement, as well as teacher’s influence on student achievement is individualized and the social, economic and political contexts that inform education are shielded from scrutiny (Weiner, 2007, Ladson-Billings, 2006).

The coercive power of neoliberal reforms resides in the punitive and material consequences for teachers who fail, or teach students who fail, to “succeed.” In her reflection above, Abigail expressed anxiety and that she was “afraid” when writing her SMART goal – afraid that she would be perceived as “lazy” if she only put down 50% “success” rate for her students but also afraid that she would not meet her goal. Later in that same interview, Abigail identified the material consequences of failing to “achieve” within the teacher accountability system:

**Abigail:** Its funny, like a lot of the changes that are happening there is an aspect of it that is in the right ballpark of what should happening. These are good things, you should

be culturally aware. I think what bothers me is how they are being used. So I was talking to my [supervisor] and I was saying about my goals that I'd like to take some risks and his comment was don't! Don't take risks because if you don't meet your goal, last year some teachers were let go because they did not meet their goal. I just think that is just bad practice... You have more safe goals and you have more reach goals and I think that both are important and commendable um cause if you have safe goals that is just another way of saying lower standards...

... Or stagnant, I think safe goals are important because they are kinda like what I would call the low base of what you cant go below but that is not really growth. I asked him if I can have my own private goals and just not write them down. I think that fear of losing your job if these goals are not met is really... again there is this whole accountability - yes teachers should be accountable. And yes, 50 years ago there was none of it and teachers could do whatever they wanted and didn't lose their jobs and I get the impulse (*sigh*). Its the execution of it and the rigor of it in the sense that it is not rigorous in the right way, its rigorous without understanding the complexity of the picture or rigorous without support sometimes...

Abigail is identifying the tensions within the rhetoric of accountability – again, she agrees that teachers should be held accountable and that the system is in the right “ballpark of what should be happening” - She believes that teachers should be “culturally aware” but does not agree with the way that accountability measures are applied and executed. She clearly identifies the material consequences for teachers if they do not “succeed” according to the standards. Because of this punitive approach to accountability she was warned not to “take risks because... last year some teachers were let go because they did not meet their goal.” As a result she was encouraged to make risk-adverse goals, which Abigail identified as “bad practice.” These punitive consequences for individual teachers reflects the individualization of color-blind neoliberal accountability structures through which individuals, rather than intuitional and ideological structures of inequity such as Whiteness, are scrutinized and penalized (Gilborn, 2005).

Risk-adverse teaching and professional growth is also contradictory to Abigail's conceptualization of the ongoing process of cultivating a critical consciousness – in which success is inherently incomplete demanding ongoing reflection and growth and mistakes.

Through this understanding of success, Abigail identifies the importance of both “safe goals” and “reach goals”, as safer goals establish a baseline but do not encourage growth. Ultimately, Abigail identifies the irony of accountability measures that rhetorically promise to hold teachers and schools to higher standards while cultivating a toxic culture in which risk-averse, safe goals ensure a teacher’s position. And, as Abigail established, these safe goals by themselves are “just another way of saying lower standards.” Risk-averse teaching due to the threat of material consequences, such as being fired, results in “defensive teaching” through which teachers simplify and mystify knowledge in order to maintain control over the content and the classroom (McNeal, 2009). This banking education model devalues teaching as a profession and “teachers are reduced to technicians and supervisors in the education assembly line – ‘objects’ rather than ‘subjects’” of education (Lipman, 2009, p. 371). Additionally, as Abigail articulated above, punitive consequences can, pit teachers against students in order to survive the system.

Abigail’s sophisticated critique of the teacher accountability structures reveal the ways in which these structures not only do not support teachers in cultivating their cultural competence but, in many ways, discourage teachers from taking risks to develop a sense of the socio-cultural contexts that influence their students’ learning and, therefore, their teaching. Ultimately, punitive control over and surveillance of the teaching profession can push out teachers who are committed and skilled (Lipman, 2009, 368; Sleeter & Stillman, 2007; Achinstein & Ogawa, 2006). Consequently, teacher accountability structures perpetuate Whiteness in schooling and create a toxic environment that teachers, like Abigail, must navigate as they strive to cultivate a critical consciousness.

### ***3.3 Shallow implementation of “Cultural Proficiency”***

As was established above, neoliberal reform's rhetorical commitment to equity and shallow conceptualization of "Cultural Proficiency" are contradictory to the complexity of teachers' engagement in the ongoing process of cultivating a critical consciousness. Instead of supporting that ongoing process, neoliberal standards establish narrow and decontextualized definitions of "success" and use material consequences to coerce teachers to make risk-adverse goals that stunt their growth as critical educators. As was articulated above, Abigail's definition of critical pedagogy and her own critical consciousness identified the complexity of a learning process that cannot be reduced to finite, time-bound outcomes:

Abigail: Not knowing exactly how it all balances and fits together but keeping it in mind and having it never really settle. I think that is the point of praxis - is that the dust is really never settling on that jar because it is always be shaken up, questioned, changed and evolving. There is constant reflecting and it's never-ending. So critical pedagogy involves all those factors for me.

This complex, ongoing process through which Abigail strives to cultivate her critical consciousness is not supported by the "Cultural Proficiency" rubric nor the punitive climate established through neoliberal teacher assessment measures. As Abigail established above, fear of material consequences leads to risk-adverse teaching and can pit teachers against "unsuccessful" students who may be a liability. This fear of repercussions does not support the development of teachers' critical consciousness. Simultaneously, however, teachers are held accountable for reaching "Proficient" or "Exemplary" status within the "Culturally Proficiency" rubric.

In an interview, Abigail identified a specific context in which teachers' "Cultural Proficiency" could be assessed—an extended homeroom initiative began in the 2014-2013 school year to try to make homeroom more substantial so teachers could cultivate a community with a group of students over the course of four years. Previously, homeroom consisted of a 5 minute

holding space during which students were expected to transition into their school day and teachers were expected to document tardiness and violations of dress code. Abigail described homeroom under the previous administration as “five minutes where it is all administration and all discipline.” The new homeroom structure maintained the 5 min check-in most days with a 30-minute block once every two weeks. As part of this initiative, teachers were expected to address topics relating to inequity in their homeroom classes with students. Abigail expressed that she was excited to have more time to get to know students but identified resistance from the teaching staff in regards to the topics they were being asked to discuss with their students:

**Abigail:** There is a lot of resistance to it. I think for teachers, there was this idea that the fact that there were heavy topics being discussed. I think the climate being what it is, when topics like that are discussed, it makes teachers nervous because they do want to handle them right and if they don’t handle them right they can, you can lose your job. There is so much scrutiny on how things are handled that it’s scary, ya know, to make sure that you are doing it correctly.

**Amanda:** What kinds of topics are [the teachers] expected to discuss in 30 min?

**Abigail:** Racism, the dress code, some of it is the handbook rules extended... What else... There were a couple that we did not do, but were on the original list, like sexual assault and stuff like that. And teachers were like ‘I’m not going to talk about that, I’m not going to talk about that with students that I don’t know.’ Ya know that was kinda of mixed.

**Amanda:** Was there PD about how to have these conversations?

**Abigail:** No. And I get that it is scary, and there was not professional development and there is a lot of scrutiny with how you handle it and what you say.

Though Abigail was personally excited about the potential of extended homeroom and asserted that the principal and the guidance department had done a lot of work to develop a list of important topics, teachers were terrified within a climate of punitive accountability to address “heavy” topics within their students. According to Abigail, teachers were not provided professional development to develop their own understanding of complex topics such as racism

in education and sexual assault, let alone how to structure and facilitate a conversation with students in 30 minutes. Rather, teachers were given a “piece of paper with a couple of links to videos and some guiding questions.” Consequently, teachers were expected to facilitate conversations about important but challenging topics and, despite not being prepared, would be held accountable for their ‘Cultural Proficiency’ in their conversations with students.

Though it is essential that racial inequity be addressed in education, the extended advisory structure reflects a shallow and individualistic attempt to address what is a systemic and complex issue in 30 minutes. According to Castagno (2014), disruption of inequity and infestations of Whiteness within schooling require intentional “clearly articulated plans for learning about and practicing power-related and race-related discourse alongside equitable resource distribution” (p.172). The advisory period falls short of preparing teachers to facilitate a conversation about racial inequity with students and, as far as I am aware based on conversations with participants, does not extend to addressing the materiality of racial inequity within schooling. Rather, individual teachers were asked to confront racial issues through a conversation with students implicitly locating racism on an interpersonal, rather than institutional or ideological, level. Through this individualistic format, any misstep by teachers when and, consequently, the institution appears to have not only instigated important conversations about racial inequity and dealt with teachers who did not live up to a standard of “Cultural Proficiency.”

If teachers are to be asked, and held accountable for, crucial conversations about systemic racism and inequity with students they should be adequately prepared and supported. Given the racial demographics at AHS, and throughout the United States, White teachers’ racial subjectivities inform their interpretations and engagement with topics of race and racism.

Consequently, White educators may facilitate conversations about racism through ideologies of Whiteness fundamentally undermining the subversive potential of such conversations (hooks, 2013). As Abigail identified, the time allotted for the conversations was simultaneously too long and too short:

**Abigail:** So it's kind of too long and too short. It's too long because it becomes another class that you have to prep for it, to do it properly. But then, do you even know how to do it properly? And if you are talking about sexual assault, you are just stirring up the pot and then the bell is going to ring and then you send them on their way.

The time is too long because it requires that teachers put in additional work to prepare, unlike the other homeroom periods; but it is also too short because teachers are being asked to engage complex topics, with a group of students that they otherwise see for 5 minutes of administrative and disciplinary interaction, within only 30 minutes. Abigail identifies that with those constraints, and with students that she “does not know” well, she feels she might just be “stirring up the pot and then the bell is going to ring and then [students go] on their way.” Abigail’s critique illuminates another contradiction within the advisory format – the intention was to extend contact time between teachers and students in order to cultivate a community; this community, however, if not well established, cannot support challenging conversations about racial inequity.

While critical pedagogy strives to empower teachers and students identifying connections between power and knowledge and identify inequitable power systems, these critical conversations must occur within an established community in order to navigate the tensions and inevitable discomfort (Freire, 1970; Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1998; Kumashiro, 2000; McLaren, 2003; Scorza, Mirra & Morrell, 2013). These conversations, especially given the distorting influence of White educators’ racial subjectivities, if poorly facilitated and not within an



established community, could be violent experiences for students that ultimately reify ideologies of Whiteness. This is not to say that conversations about race should be avoided within the classroom, as prioritizing a “safe” or harmonious classroom through the avoidance of conflict or discomfort in fact disguise inequity and, ultimately, perpetuates the violence of normative discourses of Whiteness (Castagno, 2014; hooks, 1994). Rather, teachers should be expected and supported to engage in the ongoing process of cultivating a critical consciousness that would, in fact, prepare them to facilitate such conversations with students.

### ***3.4 School Culture & Community of Practice***

In addition to articulating the tensions and challenges above, Abigail identified sources of support from both administration and colleagues. Though all public school teachers are held accountable within neoliberal reforms, “the nature of that pressure depends to the degree to which school site administrators, particularly the school principal, supported teachers in making decisions about curriculum and instruction” (Stillman and Sleeter, 2007, p.24). Consequently, administrators can be a vital source of support and advocacy or set a punitive accountability culture in which teachers fear repercussions.

Abigail’s description of the former administration illustrated the punitive school culture that affected teachers’ daily practice. Ultimately, the former principal’s actions played a role in Abigail leaving the school before returning to teaching.

**Abigail:** Under [the former principal] I think a lot of teachers didn’t like how they were being treated; I mean that is why I left. It was a really bad climate. Some of the administrators are still here; there were some pretty bad dynamics. But I think that there was just a sense of not being respected as people, as individuals, as professionals.

Abigail identifies the toxic culture in which teachers were devalued as “individuals” and as “professionals.” The punitive culture established by the former administration reflects the

influence administration has on teachers' pedagogy, the climate for teachers as well as how long they were at the school. In reflecting on the demographics of the AHS staff, which consists of almost exclusively White individuals, Abigail reflected on the very short tenures of two Black staff members under the previous administration. Though she did not want to speculate about whether they had been singled out by their race, she identified the a culture in which being a "safe" teacher protected your job:

**Abigail:** I think if you were not a "safe" teacher in that administration you didn't last. Like my coworker who was gay was told in his second year cause he was pretty flamboyantly gay and he was out. The department head told him that he might need to tone it down because 'people like you don't last very long here.'

**Amanda:** So when you say safe teachers you mean?

**Abigail:** Not controversial in any way ya know what I mean. And I would put my self in that category because I am female and White and I'm not a rumble rouser by nature. That does not mean that I don't have ideas that are more controversial, but I think I'm not a super outspoken person.

Abigail's assessment of the former administration reveals discriminatory practices, based on race and sexual orientation, against teachers who were deemed "controversial in anyway." A binary is established in which "safe" teachers – White, female and heterosexual – are supported while "controversial" teachers, relationally constructed as outside the protections of Whiteness, of these are pushed out. Abigail's access to these protections reflects' the ongoing construction of Whiteness as property which establish and protected through exclusivity (Harris, 1993)

Though Abigail asserts that she is was understood as a "safe teacher," she identifies that she has ideas that are "more controversial" but that she is not "a super outspoken person."

Implicitly Abigail identifies that her pedagogical and ideological understandings of schooling are "controversial" and would potentially undermine the privileges afforded to her as a "safe" White, female teacher. Consequently, ascribing to and striving to cultivate a critical consciousness, that

is essential for critical pedagogy, may mark Abigail as subversive, controversial and, consequently, outside the protections of a “safe” White teacher.

Clearly the professional climate under the previous administration was not conducive to dialogue nor the examination of power dynamics and inequity within schooling – both of which are crucial to the cultivation of a teacher’s critical consciousness. As compared to the former administration, Abigail identified the culture shifts that have occurred within the current administration:

**Amanda:** Do you think that there has been a shift with this administration?

**Abigail:** Well [current principal] has gone out of his way to stress that just because you disagree with him doesn’t mean that.. like he has encouraged people to disagree with him where as that was not encouraged before you did NOT disagree with [the former principal]. Like you would not even email him back if there was a typo, or not a typo cause that would be silly, but if he had the wrong date or something, you would not even email back. If you were a non-tenured teacher, you would not even do that. So, I mean, [current principal] has gone out of his way. I think teachers are still reluctant and he has gone out of his way to change the dynamic. But I think that there is a lot of mistrust of him too.

Teachers who strive to cultivate their critical consciousness need to be supported as they work to develop their understanding of inequitable power dynamics, ask critical questions and take risks without the fear of punitive measures (Darder, 2002) As Castagno (2014) asserts, “teachers especially need to be supported” in the long overdue ongoing process of critically identifying and subverting manifestations of Whiteness in schooling, including distorting influence of White teachers’ racial subjectivities, as it “will include mistakes, parental discontent and community discomfort (p. 172). As was explored above, Abigail identified the shortcomings of the accountability strategy when reflecting on the ongoing nature and complexity of developing her own cultural competence:

**Amanda:** Do you think that this accountability strategy takes into account that in process aspect of your cultural competency?

**Abigail:** No, I don't think it can because again how can you measure that? This is a very black and white you do it or not and to what degree. And sometimes you don't handle things well and you need help and that does not mean, maybe you're not exemplary but it does not mean that you are not culturally proficient in the sense that you are trying to be aware of it, you know what I mean. So, its one of the those things where it can't be on a rubric like this, and I think that is why it is important to have humans, like I said humans, who are doing the evaluating. Because there needs to be that space for making errors and learning. Because we are all learning, we say that we are life-long learners in our mission statement and I think that it is important that we be treated like life long learners as teachers and make mistakes.

Abigail identifies that the rubric for “Cultural Proficiency” does not provide space for teachers to make mistakes or not “handle things well” and, consequently, does not provide space for teachers to learn from those mistakes or ask for help. She wants the space to set goals, take risks, make mistakes and receive feedback on her efforts and failures in order to grow as an educator. Fundamentally, the ongoing process of developing a critical consciousness does not fit within a step-wise or developmental model in which an educator can achieve an “Exemplary” level of “Cultural Proficiency.” Rather, Abigail acknowledges the complexity and inherently ongoing process of developing her critical consciousness and articulates the need for space and support to cultivate her critical consciousness.

Within the limitations of an evaluation rubric that measures “success” in a “black and white” way, Abigail articulates the importance of human evaluators who are interested in supporting teachers as learners. She reflects on how her evaluator supported her through the first year of the new accountability system and, as Abigail said, “acted like a human” when she was late turning something in or had a question. This supportive relationship helped Abigail navigate the accountability structures that define and measure her “success” as an educator. Additionally, it was within this supportive administrative relationship that Abigail discussed, risker informal goals that she felt were important to her growth as an educator.

In addition to receiving support from her administrative evaluator, Abigail sought support from colleagues in her department, other colleagues as well as through the professional development discussion group. It was through these informal connections that Abigail and her colleagues cultivate spaces in which they engaged in the dialectic exchange that is crucial to the ongoing process of cultivating a critical consciousness. Given the ongoing nature of the process of cultivating a critical consciousness, as well as the productive discomfort that is inherent in this process, critical theorists often reference the necessity of a scholarly community to support teacher engagement and growth (Darder, 2002; hooks, 1994). It is through professional networks that teachers can “sustain and deepen their practice... help navigate accountability demands without abandoning the theories and practices they believe in” (Sleeter & Stillman, 2007, p. 28).

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

Abigail’s experiences illustrate the toxic environment of neoliberal teacher accountability structure that teachers must navigate. Despite a rhetorical commitment to “equity,” neoliberal reforms, including teacher accountability structures, disguise and reify structures and ideologies of Whiteness. The conceptualization and implementation of “Cultural Proficiency” contradicts and hinders Abigail’s ongoing process of cultivating a critical consciousness. Her experiences and critiques illustrate how neoliberal accountability structures hinder and dis-incentivize teachers who strive to cultivate their critical consciousness in an effort to subvert oppressive power dynamics in schooling through the implementation critical pedagogy. The support that Abigail received from her administrative evaluator, as well as from informal and formal professional communities, helped her navigate the pressures of teacher accountability structures as she engaged in the ongoing process of cultivating her critical consciousness. This leads me to

questions regarding educational research focused on critical pedagogy and administration. Specifically, how can administrative support of teacher cultivating critical consciousness implement principles of critical pedagogy? Additionally, how can administrations utilize critical pedagogy and critical theory to analyze, identify and subvert manifestations of Whiteness within the structures of schooling that teachers and students navigate?

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