

Art. # 1111, 11 pages, doi: 10.15700/saje.v36n1a1111

## The teaching context preference of four white South African pre-service teachers: Considerations for teacher education

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In an attempt to bring about a society in which individuals can realise their full potential, South African (SA) education has undergone fundamental reforms. However, despite these changes, the education system seems to remain hampered by ongoing systematic and institutional racism, and subsequent socio-economic structures of poverty and privilege. Given the national requirement for all teachers to be socially just educators, pre-service teachers need to be guided to first recognise and understand their own worldviews, before they will be able to understand the worldviews of learners in diverse teaching and learning contexts. Framed within Critical Race Theory, this article draws on the interplay between race and whiteness as property to explore four white pre-service teachers' preference for working with black learners. Data generated through an iterative process of qualitative interviewing revealed how the participants' preference is strongly embedded in power and privilege. Based on the assumption that unexamined whiteness will contribute to the continuation of white privilege and teaching premised on a deficit model, storytelling is proposed as a conceptual tool by means of which to decentre whiteness.

**Keywords:** critical race theory; storytelling; teacher education; white pre-service teachers

### Introduction

Twenty years into democracy and education in post-apartheid South Africa (SA) still retains a strong racial dimension in terms of the differences between poorer and richer communities. According to Spaul (2013; cf. also Department of Basic Education (DBE), Republic of South Africa (RSA), 2011), 75–80% of SA schools are low-performing, and serve poor and low income families that are overwhelmingly black, while pupils from middle-class and wealthy families, that are predominantly white, account for the remaining 20–25% of schools that perform well. Central to the struggle to ensure that the poor in South Africa enjoy quality education, is the teacher who is required by the developmental imperative of the Constitution (RSA, 1996) to “free the potential of each person”. Because the teacher's role in the realisation of learners' rights to education is “a precondition to creating the conditions for the attainment of substantive equality and social justice” (Kollapen, 2006), it could be argued that, in addition to raising the academic achievement of all learners, teachers must also confront the inequalities that impede the development of learners' potential. However, since SA education is still hampered by the social construction of unequal hierarchies, teachers and the education system fail to effectively challenge the economic, social and political conditions that inevitably affect the learners' world of learning and living. Nonetheless, the failure of an education system to effectively challenge the persistence of inequalities is not unique to South Africa. Grant (2012:919) maintains that although there has been improvement in the equality and equity of education policy and practice in the US, “successful education of students of colour and students who are poor is a distant second to the education of White students”. Gillborn (cited in Phillips, 2011), on the other hand, presents a rather convincing argument of how the cumulative disadvantaging of black pupils by educational practices such as examination tiering, constitute the achievement gap as a permanent feature of the English education system.

The implication of the above for teacher education concurs with Nieto and Bode's (2008:10) perception that any teacher education programme should be concerned with raising academic achievement, challenging inequality, and promoting democratic participation for the general benefit of all. As a consequence, teacher education remains impelled to educate all pre-service teachers to unconditionally provide their future learners with equitable and high-quality education so that they may become critical and productive members of their societies. Framed within the South African context, it is indeed the vision which states that teacher education should instill an unconditional willingness in pre-service teachers “to deal with diversity and transformation” (Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), 2011:Section 2), which foregrounds the aim of this article, namely to explore the preference of four white SA pre-service teachers to work with black learners.

### Theoretical Framework

In this article, I draw on Critical Race Theory (CRT) as a theoretical framework, and use the intersection between race and *whiteness as property* in order to analyse the four pre-service teachers' teaching context preference. Whilst this section is focused on an exposition of CRT as my theoretical lens, it also elucidates the racialised context in which the participants in this study expressed their preference for working with black learners, rather than with white learners.

### *Critical race theory*

With its focus on the analysis of race relations and racial disparity, CRT is premised on the notion that racism is *permanent, pervasive* and should be *challenged* (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Vaught & Castagno, 2008). Although regarded as an innovation of United States (US) legal scholarship, which has generally maintained a US-centred analysis (Leonardo, 2009:189), I argue that these assumptions can be usefully transferred to other educational contexts to elucidate the on-going significance of race. Thus, whilst this article retains a strong South African framing, it is also proposed as more broadly indicative of the way in which tenets of CRT can be utilised to expose issues of racialised inequalities in any educational context.

As CRT challenges ahistoricism (Gillborn, 2006), a critical perspective on contemporary South Africa requires an understanding that present-day “political, economic and social forces in South Africa include a history of colonization [sic] and apartheid as well as a current struggle toward democratic transformation” (Collier, 2005:295). Thus, despite old social identities being troubled by a state power that is committed to breaking down racial privileges (Steyn, 2007), South Africa remains saturated with histories of oppression and privilege. Segregationist laws have been replaced by economic apartheid, which has become the new model of racial segregation (Green, Sonn & Matsebula, 2007:396; Steyn, 2007:4) – ensuring that ‘a better life for all’ still evades the majority of South Africans. Ongoing systemic and institutional racism in contemporary South Africa not only underlines the ability of racism to adapt to socio-cultural changes by altering its expression, but highlights its permanence and pervasiveness. Framed within CRT, the acceptance of racism as a permanent component of South African life, not only affords a realistic and critical perspective of the structure of South African society, but constitutes the standpoint from which this article is written. As such, this article is informed by the belief that underneath discourses of non-racism and non-sexism in present-day South Africa, certain social, political, and economic practices continue to produce differential status between racialised social groups.

### *Critical race theory in education*

Applying CRT to an understanding of educational inequity, Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995:55) argue that “[i]f racism were merely isolated, unrelated, individual acts, we would expect to see at least a few examples of educational excellence and equity”. When one transfers this argument to the South African educational context, any perception of racism as an individual pathology is refuted by the present-day persistence of large performance gaps between former black schools and former white

schools. Whilst the persistence of racial inequalities is the logical consequence of a society riddled by systemic and institutional racism, the logical outcome is that economic apartheid is manifest in an education system that reinforces patterns of poverty and privilege (cf. Spaul, 2013:6). It can subsequently be accepted that, despite a progressive constitution that informs the vision for a non-racist and non-sexist society (RSA, 1996), racism appears to be endemic and its permanence finds expression in SA schools.

Premised on the notion that racism must be challenged, CRT can serve as a useful guide for education scholars to expose contemporary forms of racial inequality that are often disguised as neutral structures (Yosso, 2002:93). Similarly, Leonardo (2009:4) claims that CRT in education is precisely the “intervention that aims to halt racism by highlighting its pedagogical dimensions and affirming an equally pedagogical solution rooted in anti-racism”. As an iterative project that focuses on conceptual and practical strategies to end racism, CRT has the potential in teacher education to capacitate pre-service teachers to become agents of change, who have “a sense of their own agency as well as a sense of responsibility towards and with others” (cf. Bell, 2007:1-2).

### *The intersection between race and whiteness as property*

In this article, I use the intersection between race and *whiteness as property* as a position from which to consider a number of pre-service teachers’ preference to work with black learners. Arguing that the notion of whiteness can be considered a property interest, Harris (1995:277) investigates how the relationship between the concepts of race and property plays a critical role in establishing and maintaining racial and economic subordination. The mindset of whiteness emerged from the historical link between slavery and the privileges of whites in their subordination of blacks as objects of property who were exploited for their labour. In this way, whiteness became a form of property associated with the *rights of disposition*, the *rights to use and enjoy*, and the absolute *right to exclude* (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004:28; also Harris, 1995; Vaught & Castagno, 2008:96). Constituted by the intersection of race and property, white identity and whiteness became sources of privilege and protection, while black identity and blackness were subjugated, and treated as a form of property.

Within the context of CRT, to be identified as white implies possessing the property of ‘being white’, where to have a white identity as a vested interest, means having an identity constituted by the legitimization of expectations of power and control. When one considers the concept of whiteness as a form of property, it is fairly easy to recall how the interaction between the concepts of

'race' and 'property' enjoyed legal status in apartheid South Africa through racial and economic subordination. The racialisation of South African society by means of differential economic, political, social and psychological rewards allocated to groups along racial lines is a well-known thesis in historical discourses dedicated to the past (Clark & Worger, 2011). However, a CRT perspective on contemporary South Africa reveals the permanence of racism, and underscores the assumption that the racial ideology of apartheid, which served as an organisational map to guide "whiteness as treasured property in a society based on racial caste" (cf. Harris, 1995:277), has simply adapted its expression. Although one may agree with Steyn (2007) that white South Africans can no longer assume the same privileges with the same ease as during the days of apartheid, it could be argued that the fusion of race and economic domination still supports the status of being white as a valuable asset. Whilst whites continue to dominate most opportunities pertaining to recruitment and promotion at top management level (Department of Labour, RSA, 2013:vii), socio-economic rights remain a paper promise in the SA Constitution for many of the disproportionately poor and unemployed citizens in black working class communities. Thus, because the very core of economic relations remains bound up with the idea of property, the use of CRT requires the interrogation of whiteness and the exposure of white privilege (cf. Yosso, 2002).

The persistent underperformance in schools serving the poorest communities (Spaull, 2013) and the great divide between the prospects of children from poorer communities and those from affluent communities reinforce the notion of whiteness as a valuable property. The decision to work with the intersection between race and *whiteness as property* here was informed by the fact that in South Africa, all pre-service teachers find themselves in a society that is deeply marked by a racialised past. Pre-service teachers' understanding of race and the construction of their own identities will therefore always be influenced "by race, by racialised subjectivities, and by a past of racial separateness" (Walker, 2005:53). For white pre-service teachers in particular, it can be assumed that their 'whiteness' cannot escape a history that is informed by a set of assumptions, privileges and benefits that accompany the status of being white as a valuable asset. The use of the intersection between race and *whiteness as property* to analyse four white pre-service teachers' preference for working with black learners will, by implication, entail an attempt to understand how they position themselves in relation to a history of unearned white privilege.

## Research Methodology

### Participants

The participants in this qualitative study are four white, Afrikaans-speaking women in their final year of study for a four-year BEd degree. This study was part of a bigger project on *Identity, Agency and Social Justice* from which various publications have already followed (Le Roux, 2014). Initially, eight pre-service teachers were randomly identified from a purposive selection of students who are white, female and in their final year of study. After in-depth interviews with all eight interviewees, during which they were encouraged to communicate their understanding of their roles as teachers of social justice, four students volunteered to continue with their participation in English. The switch from Afrikaans to English was to accommodate a co-researcher at the time, who did not understand Afrikaans. All four participants were 21 years old. As the daughter of a missionary father, Joan grew up on a mission station. Annie's parents are both teachers, while Susan grew up in a single-parent household. Joan, Annie and Susan completed their school careers at predominantly white Afrikaans-medium schools. Leanie grew up on a farm and attended an English-medium girls' school with a diverse racial composition.

Initially, working with only four participants was a concern. Mertens (2010:332) argues that the number of participants in qualitative research is decided on "the basis of having identified the salient issues and finding that the themes and examples are repeating instead of extending". The number of participants in qualitative research is consequently related to the length of time in the field. In this regard, Morse (2000:4) advises researchers to consider the principle by means of which the amount of usable data is determined by the quality of the data and the number of interviews per participant. Thus, the greater the amount of useable data obtained, the fewer the participants. Because salient issues and repeating themes (such as teaching context preferences) emerged from the initial eight interviews, I resolved to explore such themes further. In order to obtain rich data, it was decided to spend more time with the participants and the initial interviews were followed up by a focus group interview and an additional in-depth interview with each participant.

The decision to work with white pre-service teachers was not intended to essentialise whiteness; rather, this decision was based on Picower's (2009; cf. also Solomon, Portelli, Daniel & Campbell, 2005) argument that unexamined whiteness could contribute to white teachers' maintaining and enacting dominant racialised ideologies. The use of

racialised categories such as white and black in this article is not intended to reify a binary or to lend credibility to popular cultural stereotypes that often accompany such conceptual categories. In my rejection of race as a fixed biological category and considering the notions of white and black as social constructs, I use these categories as a means to engage with four pre-service teachers to explore their teaching preference. However, working with racialised categories emphasises certain challenges, and as a white female who works in an institution that trains teachers, it was incumbent upon me to constantly reflect on how my own thinking about and the use of these categorisations may influence the analysis of the data.

#### Data Generation, Data Analysis and Ethical Considerations

Data generation involved an iterative process of qualitative interviewing: drawing three data sets from individual in-depth interviews; conducting a single focus group interview; and following this up in-depth interviews. The use of more than one data set was useful for a more nuanced analysis of the data.

During the initial stage of the study, in-depth interviews of 40 minutes were conducted with the participants, so as to establish the context of their experiences regarding teacher identity in general, and to develop an understanding of their subjective experiences as pre-service teachers (Kelly, 2006:304; Mertens, 2010:352). The participants' preference to work with certain learners and not with others emerged as a common theme during the first interviews, and created the possibility for further exploration. By means of a focus group interview of 90 minutes, the participants were given the opportunity to develop a more in-depth understanding of their inter-subjective experiences as pre-service teachers in general. By means of open-ended questions and due to their reliance on interaction with one another, the participants were encouraged and enabled to create meaning amongst themselves regarding their preference for working with black learners. Mertens (2010:370) asserts that one of the benefits of a focus group interview is the "additional insight gained from the interaction of ideas among the group participants". The focus group interview subsequently brought about an understanding of the ways in which the participants share and do not share common experiences (Kelly, 2006:304). By retaining an awareness of commonality and difference, recurrent terms and phrases regarding the participants' preferred teaching context were identified. Whilst coding was used to identify recurrent terms and phrases, the latter were used to build a logical and manageable descriptive framework for theorising about their inter-subjective experiences of not only their own racialised identity, but also how this identity feeds into their

preference to work with black learners, rather than with white learners.

The focus group interview was followed by a 60-minute in-depth interview with each participant. The use of open-ended questions was meaningful where the participants were encouraged to 'dig deep' and communicate their preference for working with black learners in post-apartheid South Africa. These interviews assisted to deepen a possible understanding of the reasons they offered for their preference. The responses of the individual participants were further analysed in terms of recurrent terms and phrases in order to learn as much as possible about how each set of data contributed to an understanding of the participant's subjective experience. In addition, the analysis of the data sets helped to triangulate the participants' subjective experiences with their inter-subjective experiences, and promoted the development of a theoretical understanding of how the participants rationalise their preference.

Informed consent was sought and obtained from the participants, and all interviews were digitally recorded with their permission. In addition, all names used in this article are pseudonyms.

#### Findings and Discussion

In her research on the unexamined whiteness of teaching undertaken in the US, Picower (2009) finds that her white participants avoided teaching in communities of colour. She (Picower, 2009:203) attributes this avoidance to a situation in which most of them grew up in ways organised "to keep themselves surrounded by other Whites [sic] and, for most part, they had successfully avoided spending time in communities different from their own". In this study, however, the four participants expressed their preferences for working with black learners in different ways:

Joan: I don't like teaching white children – it is very irritating.

Annie: I *loove* [sic] teaching black children.

Susan: I prefer to work with black learners [...] I personally feel it is my calling to rather work with disadvantaged learners than with a lot of rich people's kids.

Although Leanie indicated a preference for working within a class environment consisting of different races, she draws a clear distinction between how much easier it is to teach black learners:

... black children are very grateful for education; they are grateful for an older person that teaches them [...] but a white child will easily tell you that you are wrong [...] so it is more difficult to teach white learners.

In this section, the intersection between race and whiteness as property is used to analyse and make sense of the participants' preferences; to contemplate the potential consequences for the confrontation of inequalities in the classroom; and to consider possible implications for teacher education.

### White Racial Identity Construction: Whiteness as a Valuable Property

A rhetoric that emerged from the data is the participants' claim that they were not part of apartheid.

Joan: The problem is, I was not part of apartheid ...

Susan: What favours me, is that I was not oppressed by apartheid ... I feel I was not part of it, so I am not going to exercise it.

The participants were between four and five years old in 1994, and their claim is valid in the sense that they did not grow up in an era in which white people held an overtly dominant political position. However, history has a major influence on people's behaviour, and despite their argument that they were not part of apartheid, the participants cannot escape the influence of 'intergenerational knowledge'. Within the South African context, this refers to the transmission of knowledge of a traumatised past by parents, who "upheld, supported and benefited from white domination", to their post-apartheid children (Jansen, 2008:4). The participants, along with all other pre-service teachers, not only find themselves in a society deeply marked by a racialised past, but their often "intergenerationally informed" choice for some racialised subjectivities over others would eventually determine the kind of teacher they would become (Soudien, 2010; Walker, 2005:4).

Within the context of this article, the intersection between race and whiteness as property is used to make sense of how the participants position themselves in relation to a history in which whiteness enjoyed the status of a valuable property. It is assumed that the way in which these teachers make sense of their own racialised subjectivities will ultimately affect their decisions and agency in confronting inequalities in their classrooms. In this regard, the data reveal various ways in which the participants rationalised distancing themselves from a past in which white people enjoyed privileged. These rationalisations range from a victim mentality, based on perceptions that "roles have been reversed [...] with affirmative action and quotas, we are being pushed out" (Susan), to black people having a mental block about society's privileging white people because "their own opinion gives you [as a white person] that power; their thinking you had the power back then – what is to say you are not going to have that power again?" (Leanie). The participants subsequently used the claim that they had not been part of apartheid as a strategy with which to position themselves outside a racialised past; thus, outside a history in which white people enjoyed unearned privileges. The consequence of perceiving themselves as independent from a racialised past feeds the extent to which they are willing to interrogate whiteness and to challenge racism by exposing white privilege (cf. Yosso, 2002).

Disassociating themselves from a racialised past is problematic, especially when one considers

that whiteness cannot escape "the materiality of its history, its effects on the everyday lives of those who fall outside its conceptual net as well as on white people themselves" (Kincheloe, 1999:3). By distancing themselves from apartheid and the associated internalised assumptions of "racial and cultural superiority, of entitlement to political control and land ownership, and of the right to benefit from their access to the world capitalist system at the expense of the exploited, subjugated non-white majority" (Steyn, 2001:xxiii), the participants are not prepared to interrogate the power base of whiteness that continues to hold currency in contemporary South Africa. By absolving themselves of supporting such a power base in a new democratic era, and by attributing it to the history of others (their parents and those who lived under apartheid), the participants have difficulty in effectively considering how past injustices have an impact on present circumstances (Le Roux, 2014). Rather, it seems that for them, whiteness and white privilege only held currency during the apartheid dispensation:

Leanie: I haven't seen myself as a privileged person, because I grew up in this integrated school where other people from different races got the same opportunities, [faced] the same challenges as I did. So I don't see it as I had more than anybody else did [sic].

The assumption that opportunities are equal and that 'it is all about hard work', not only reinforces the participants' resistance to engaging in how the larger historical context permeates ongoing relations of social domination and economic inequalities, but it also serves as a form of strategic rhetoric that renders white privilege invisible. By implication, being white is perceived essentially as being black, and as a consequence, the possibility that their own identities have been shaped and are still being shaped through asymmetrical power relations remains unchallenged; they do not see themselves as continuing products of white privilege. It is this intersection between race and whiteness as property that possibly feeds the participants' conceptualisation of their preference for a particular teaching context in ways that favour their own position of power and privilege.

### The Right to enjoy Whiteness and White Privilege

All four participants are aware of existing inequalities in SA schools and they perceive themselves as agents of change who have to "push away my own pre-conceived ideas about race, or gender, or jocks versus gigs" (Susan); who "think there are many things that have to change" (Joan); and "take it [change] with open arms and hope the best comes from it" (Annie). Although they are able to link these inequalities with the legacy of apartheid, their disassociation from this legacy leaves their understanding of such inequalities devoid of a critical awareness of white complicity in white privilege,

and subsequently endorses the maintenance of white innocence in racism. Whilst Endres and Gould (2009:424) assert that “an awareness of Whiteness [sic] and White [sic] privilege does not automatically result in the ability to renounce it or change practices”, it is rather the lack of such an awareness that may certainly impede change in the school classroom. The participants’ explanation of their preference to work with black learners should therefore be framed by this lack of the recognition of their whiteness and white privilege, and should also be considered in terms of the way in which they invest in their whiteness as a valuable asset. During the focus group discussion, the participants agreed on how a preference for working with black learners.

Annie: I *loove* [sic] teaching black children, they have this uninhibited ...

Leanie: ... openness.

Annie: ... ja, they want to learn, while white children are often like, ‘do you know who my father is?’ [sic].

Joan: ... and there is this sense of respect.

Others agree: ... ja [sic], it is really like that.

Joan: They immediately respect you. It is definitely nicer [to teach black learners]. They show appreciation ...

Annie: Ja [sic], they actually notice you ... they are more grateful than white kids.

Joan: Ja [sic], my experience at a white school was like they are stuck up and, ‘do you know who I am’

...

Leanie: ... ‘my father built the school wall’ ...

Although they perceive themselves as agents of change, the participants’ explanation for their preference is not focused on the possibility of bringing about change; rather, by highlighting the benefits they can draw from working with black learners, the participants reinforce the focus on themselves. Even Leanie who wants to “instill the principle of equality in [a racially and culturally mixed] class”, will enter her classroom with particular notions of what it means to work with black learners; i.e. to enjoy black learners’ “openness”. Whilst this perceived respectfulness of black learners and subservience to whiteness were illuminated through a CRT perspective on the intersection between race and whiteness as property, it is interesting to note that this is at odds with the common perception in the US that black learners are dangerous, criminal, or aggressive (Staats, 2014). The implicit racial bias in both cases seems to be differently informed: in the US, the perceptions of the predominantly white teacher workforce is shaped by “pervasive societal implicit associations surrounding Blackness” (Staats, 2014:2); in the South African context, the participants’ perceptions is informed by the right to be respected and appreciated, as a privilege of whiteness. However, in both instances, racial bias is primarily informed by the tenacity of whiteness to operate in various ways to sustain differential

power relations, whilst simultaneously refusing to acknowledge the way in which white people are implicit in relations of privilege and domination (Leonardo, 2009).

In her critique of traditional conceptions of moral responsibility, Applebaum (2010:5) argues that notions of responsibility are centred on the question, ‘what can *I* do?’ instead of ‘what *needs* to be done?’ However, the participants’ preference to work with black learners does not seem to be primarily informed by what needs to be done to effectively challenge the economic, social and political conditions in schools and society that inevitably affect the learners’ world of learning and living (cf. Nieto & Bode, 2008:10). The participants do have some conception of what they perceive as the morally right thing to do: while Leanie advocates for “consistent and equal treatment for all”, Annie does not see herself as “somebody that pushes change away”. However, it appears that their perception of what the right thing to do may be subjected to their need “to be respected, to be appreciated, to be noticed” (Joan) and “to enjoy gratitude” (Annie). The participants’ preference for working with black learners is therefore not necessarily about establishing a teaching practice that is responsive to socio-cultural contexts; rather it seems to be about receiving the respect, appreciation and openness to which they presumably feel entitled.

**Informed by a Deficit Model: the Right of Disposition**  
The use of the intersection between race and *whiteness as property* is also helpful to highlight the way in which the participants’ assumption that it is easier to work with black learners, is informed by unexamined whiteness. Whilst unexamined whiteness and the subsequent comfort of white innocence feed into four seemingly well-meaning white pre-service teachers’ positioning themselves as the agents that will bring about change, it also underscores the notion that white people often view their world in ways that favour their positions within it (Solomon et al., 2005). In this regard, Marx (2004) indicates that although white teachers can indeed be successful teachers for learners who are culturally, linguistically and racially different from themselves, they can still be racist. Similarly, Ambrosio (2013:14) maintains from his research undertaken with college students in the US, that white students “will adapt to changing social and economic conditions, while seeking to retain a modicum of racial privilege”. Framed within the context of unexamined whiteness, the participants consider the difference between black and white learners as follows:

Annie: While white people is not like ‘you get only what you need’, we always look for more ... they [referring to those understood to be black] had to be satisfied with that [which] was necessary [during apartheid] and I think it is still like that.

Susan: They [black learners] have the opportunity now to go to school; they can get wonderful education [...] they do not make use of the opportunity to make something better of their lives [...] they spend five years in Grade 8 just because they are too lazy to open a book.

Joan: [...] for them [black learners] to get 60% is awesome, but they only need to get 30%, so they aim for 30% [...] for white learners and white schools the expectations are automatically much higher ...

By using 'whiteness' as the standard against which to judge 'blackness' (Green et al., 2007:395), the participants not only favour their own power and privilege and that of white people in general, but strengthen their own position by presenting black learners in ways that are culturally and academically debilitating. The participants' choice to work with black learners is subsequently informed by a deficit perspective that renders black learners' culture and their lack of expectations as the problem. Although Leanie prefers to work with both white and black learners, the data reveals the way in which her own thinking about black learners is informed by a deficit perspective.

I think it is a matter of him [a white child] figuring out a situation, while the black child's culture is far more about simple acceptance [...] 'I do not question, I just do it'.

A deficit perspective is problematic, as it fails to examine economic and social conditions, including the institutional barriers at schools and in broader society that inexorably affect the lives of learners. This is also true in the case of the participants: by seeing themselves as independent of a racialised past, and since discrimination and racism are unacceptable in post-apartheid South Africa, they do not consider discrimination and racism as structural characteristics of society. Because the participants do not expose white privilege for what it is, racism not only remains unchallenged, but becomes a problem of black people who "have this thing that 'we were disadvantaged by white people' [sic]" (Leanie). The message is still being carried on from parent to child: "'White people are not so good; white people have not treated us so well', although this is no longer the case" (Susan), and they consider it to be black youth who misuse the concept *previously disadvantaged* when "they make a noise about things that had nothing to do with them, and now everything is referred to us [whites], and we didn't have anything to do with it" (Annie). By implication, the participants perceive themselves as authoritarian – they will not only bring about change, but they are the answer to the 'culturally and academically deprived'. Instead of seeing themselves as part of the problem, they perceive themselves as part of the solution (Le Roux, 2014).

Whilst Endres and Gould (2009:428) warn against the "unspoken expectations of assimilation

to the norms of dominant groups or assumptions of White [sic] superiority", the participants' positive presentation of white people seems to uphold the conventions of white privilege and feeds into the expectation that to become like whites is the proper way to be. The tendency to "always look for more" (Annie), to have "expectations [that] are automatically much higher" (Joan) and to have the ability to "figure out a situation" (Leanie) are perceived as some of the positive attributes of whiteness which set the acceptable standards to which black learners are presumably required to conform.

From a CRT perspective, the notion of 'their becoming like us' is reminiscent of the alienability of whiteness when certain student performances conform to perceived white norms (Harris, 1995 :281-282 on the *Rights of disposition*; cf. Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995:59). This *right of disposition* subsequently endorses the assumed right to encourage racial advances and concessions for blacks in ways to not cause "major disruption to a 'normal' way of life for the majority of Whites" (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004:28; Gillborn, 2006:13). By positioning themselves in an authoritative position that is sanctioned by their perceptions of the power and privilege of whiteness, the participants, who do not consciously acknowledge such privilege, run the risk of uncritically requiring black learners to conform to assumed acceptable 'white' standards. Whilst this perceived right of disposition underscores the way in which the investment in whiteness is the strongest form of investment, as whiteness is the most privileged racial identification (Leonardo, 2009: 94), it also alludes to Marx's (2004:40) understanding that the most loving teachers can also be racists, where their own white racism can indeed hurt the children they teach.

### Considerations for Teacher Education

The four participants perceive themselves as future agents of change, who want to make a difference in their future classrooms. However, despite their altruistic understanding of their role as future teachers, the data reveals how their preference for working with black learners is strongly embedded in power and privilege. Applebaum (2007:454) poses the question: "how do white people reproduce and maintain racist practices even when they believe themselves to be morally good?" Within the context of this research, the answer to this question has a direct appeal to teacher education and the extent to which teacher education programmes create the space for white pre-service teachers to question and challenge their own whiteness. Although the aim of this article is not to generalise the participants' preference to work with black learners to all white pre-service teachers, I do believe that the insights gained from this research

could serve as an entry point to consider the role of teacher education in guiding white pre-service students to problematise the construction of whiteness.

Sherry Marx (2004) refers in her research to various contributions by teacher educators in the US who intentionally engaged their white students in the examination of whiteness and white racism. In addition, she also highlights the way in which these scholars are challenged by the denials and defensiveness of white students when conversations centre on issues of white racism and white privilege. In a similar vein, and within the SA context of ongoing racial contestations, Le Roux and Mdunge (2012) reflect on the way in which race-related content in their teacher education programme frequently evokes strong emotional responses from their white pre-service students. However, when considering the way in which unexamined whiteness will ultimately allow the participants in this study to enter the teaching profession with a deficit understanding of what it means to work with learners who are culturally and racially different from themselves, no teacher education programme can afford to not create a dialogical space for the disruption of the normative power of whiteness (Hyttén & Adkins, 2001:441; Kincheloe, 1999:1).

It is within the context of resistance tied to whiteness, that storytelling could be considered as a conceptual tool to open up a space for pre-service teachers to deal with the interface between their own racialised identity construction and the development of agency for change. Contrary to CRT's consideration of storytelling and counter-storytelling as conceptual tools to challenge mainstream assumptions about the racially other, and to contradict the *othering* process (Gillborn, 2006:12-13; Ladson-Billings, 1998:11-14), storytelling could be considered as a tool to move the focus from the 'other' onto whiteness itself (Bell, Roberts, Irani & Murphy, 2008). Although the emphasis on the 'racially other' will allow white pre-service teachers to listen to others and to see themselves through the eyes of others, it is my contention that by placing the focus on whiteness, the decentering of whiteness through a "race criticality that is less possessive and more dialogic" can indeed become a possibility (Leonardo, 2009:7).

In a deeply racialised society like South Africa, all pre-service teachers enter teacher education programmes with stories informed by prior knowledge of their own racialised identity, of the racially other, and of racism and oppression. However, not all stories are equally valued, and in this regard, Bell et al. (2008:9) make a distinction between stock stories and concealed stories. Whilst stock stories are the most affirmed and acknowledged stories told by the dominant group,

concealed stories are mostly hidden and invisible to the dominant group as they are told by people in the margins. In essence, stock stories and concealed stories reflect on social life in society, albeit from different perspectives.

The participants in this study not only carry a strong investment in whiteness, but they bring with them stories that position whiteness as both normative and meaningful. However, their unwillingness to interrogate white privilege signals the absence of a dialogical space in the teacher education programme, where they can "tell their own stories, and through telling [them], identify the challenges they face in a racialised society and articulate their visions for a future that offers inclusion, equity and justice to all of the diverse people" (Bell et al., 2008:7; Solomon et al., 2005:162). As an investment in whiteness remains an investment in the most privileged racial identification in South Africa, the use of stock stories in a teacher education programme will indeed place the focus on whiteness. However, the aim of doing so is not to essentialise whiteness, but to provide white pre-service teachers with a context in which to interrogate and critique the way in which race, racism and racial imbalances of power operate in South African society. In particular, the use of stock stories could afford white students the opportunity to critically consider and share how their own socialisation, including the transmission of intergenerational knowledge, contributed to the construction of their own racialised identity and their deficit understanding of those who associate differently from themselves. In this regard, Bell et al. (2008:12) allude to the way in which the 'shift to whiteness' can provide a firmer ground for white people to not only discover and challenge the privileges they received, but to work towards the elimination of unearned privileges.

In addition to the analysis of stock stories, teacher education must also provide the space for black pre-service students to share concealed stories, i.e. those stories about race and racism that remain either invisible or merely glimpsed at in stock stories (Bell et al., 2008:76). The counterbalancing of stock stories with concealed stories is imperative, as the focus on whiteness through the analysis of stock stories might unwittingly re-center whiteness as a marker of privilege. The use of concealed stories can help white students to not only see racism from the perspective of black students, but has the potential to disrupt an assumed white authoritative position, according to which the lives of black people are perceived to be largely dependent on white progress and enlightenment. By comparing stock stories to concealed stories, white students can be supported to understand the way in which the perpetuation of a racialised system in post-apartheid South Africa not only violates the constitutional ideal of equality



for all South Africans, but continues to harm all South Africans (cf. Bell et al., 2008:76). In addition, black students can, through the expression and naming of their own realities, begin to realise how they came to be oppressed and subjugated (Gere, Buehler, Dallavis & Haviland, 2009; Ladson-Billings, 1998:14). Thus, by counter-balancing stock stories with concealed stories, internalisations of domination and subordination can be foregrounded. As such, both black and white students can come to understand how the claim that they were not part of apartheid can easily deprive them of recognising how the grave legacy of apartheid strips them of self-knowledge. The participants' commitment to distancing themselves from a racialised past (and present), subsequently underscores the importance of employing storytelling as a conceptual tool to foreground the pervasive reach of apartheid into the present. As such, white pre-service teachers could be afforded the opportunity to use their own stories and those of people from different race groups, as interpretive structures, to not only interrogate white privilege and its effect on people, but re-position themselves in relation to a racialised past and a contemporary expression of structural racism.

Data generated in this study provide a window into the extent to which whiteness can serve as an interpretive filter to approach the teaching of marginalised groups from a white, racially privileged position. One way of counteracting a deficit approach to working with marginalised groups is the use of resistance stories. Bell et al. (2008:8-9, 112) recognise resistance stories as those stories that highlight a longstanding and ongoing historical process of anti-racism. Resistance stories can teach pre-service teachers about anti-racist perspectives and practices. However, when coupled with stock stories and concealed stories, resistance stories can assist in refuting deficit perceptions about varied racial and ethnic groups. Whilst the white participants in this study failed to consider how institutional barriers at school and in society affect the lives of the majority of SA learners, they also failed to consider discrimination and racism as structural characteristics of society. It is in this regard that the use of storytelling in a teacher education programme can support all pre-service students, but in particular white students, to unpack racism "in ways that are more accessible than abstract analysis alone, helping us understand its hold on us as we move through the institutions and cultural practices that sustain it" (Bell et al., 2008:10).

The use of stock stories, concealed stories and resistance stories not only requires pre-service teachers to personalise and problematise their own relationship to issues of race and racism, but supports white students in developing an anti-racist perspective. However, in order to get white pre-

service students to move beyond personal preferences of working with certain groups of learners, they need to imagine more inclusive possibilities for their future classroom. In this regard, Bell et al. (2008:10) allude to the way in which counter-stories can be used to challenge stock stories, to build onto resistance stories, and to enable responsiveness to more just and inclusive alternatives to racial injustices. As such, counter-stories are new stories; stories infused with imagined possibilities about ways to work and act as allies in coalition with others against racism. Although counter-story-telling has a rich tradition in African American communities, it can indeed be rendered appropriate for the South African teacher education context, to not only "shatter complacency, challenge the dominant discourse on race and further the struggle for racial reform" (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002:32), but to assist white pre-service students in becoming authentic allies in the eradication of educational inequalities. White and black pre-service students can, however, only become authentic allies when white students start to understand and challenge power dynamics, and when they are prepared to disrupt and rupture whiteness as a normative frame of reference.

Although the participants in this study perceive themselves as agents of change, they centre themselves as the authority that will bring about change. Also, their expectation that such authority goes hand-in-hand with certain benefits to which they are presumably entitled, feeds into the strengthening of whiteness as a valuable asset, and supports the notion that they have the right to enjoy their privilege. By implication, the use of storytelling should, first and foremost, be informed by a serious commitment by teacher educators to guide white pre-service teachers to examine white privilege and the effects thereof, on people in general, but also on learners in their future classrooms. It is the tenacity of the invisibility of whiteness that should compel teacher educators to endlessly create a space for pre-service teachers to deal with the interface between their own racialised identity construction and the development of agency for change.

Race in education is a complex issue. In addition, the weight and scope of whiteness studies is broad, and includes different discourses on and analysis of notions such as white privilege, white supremacy and white racial hegemony (Leonardo, 2009). Within the limited scope of this article, the intersection between race and whiteness as property, as depicted by Critical Race Theory, was used to unpack four white teachers' preference to work with black learners. Guided by aspects such as *whiteness as a valuable property*; *the right to enjoy whiteness*; and *the right of disposition*, this study is limited to the context of a CRT understanding of education, albeit framed within the

South African educational context. Thus, whilst the scope of whiteness studies remains broad, this study concludes with the assumption that if whiteness remains unexamined, the perpetuation of white privilege and teaching, premised on a deficit model, will contribute to an education system that continues to produce outcomes that reinforce patterns of poverty and privilege.

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