Journal of Educational Controversy

Volume 12
Number 1 *Black Lives Matter and the Education Industrial Complex*

Article 2

2017

A Critical Race Theory Analysis of Post-Ferguson Critical Incidents Across Ecological Levels of Academia

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Abstract: In this article, we explore our experiences entering the academic school year eager and ready for the challenge of taking up the death of Michael Brown and the events that followed in Ferguson, Missouri, as a catalyst for important conversations regarding structural injustice. Through exploration of critical incidents (Hamilton, 2004), we review how our attempts to open dialogue were met with defensiveness and a discourse that relegates the responsibility of engaging in conversations about race and power to educators of color. Echoing Pollock, Bocala, Deckman, and Dickstein-Staub (2015), we found that teachers at all levels may resist the 'diversity' aspect of preservice education when they view 'diversity work' as extraneous or belonging to others. Through a Critical Race Theory (CRT) perspective, we examine incidents that exist across different ecological levels (Bronfenbrenner, 2005) in which we work (our classrooms), partner public schools, and university. We use a CRT perspective across these levels to explore how

Michael Brown's killing and the events that followed in Ferguson, rather than igniting a shared sense of responsibility among educators across these communities, triggered a defensive response in White students and teachers centered on the need to protect Whiteness as illustrated across the three critical incidents we describe.

Keywords: Whiteness, Critical Race Theory, Critical Incidents, Teacher Preparation

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The killing of Michael Brown by a White police officer in Ferguson, Missouri marked what will now forever be tied to the hashtag, #blacklivesmatter. As teacher educators in one of the largest, most racially segregated cities in the United States, we are charged with actualizing, developing, and furthering the meaning of this phrase in our daily work. However, this charge can only be fulfilled when and if our future teachers can meaningfully and skillfully engage in and lead conversations that underscore the critical urgency of addressing the daily lives of Black youth, particularly within educational settings. The question remains, as posed by Noddings (2013), "Can we teach democratic values without living them?" (p. 23). Contextually put, can we, as teacher educators, relay that Black lives matter without incorporating the questions in a meaningful way into our pedagogical practices? In this paper, we analyze what happened when we, as teacher educators in an urban education program, attempted to live our democratic values by following what Dewey (1927) prescribes – communicating openly with our students through guided participation in conversation and dialogue as a means of learning to democratically deliberate. In the context of furthering a democratic society, it only makes sense that such a tragic event would lend itself to the kind of dialogue that would both ignite feelings of rage over the pervasive injustices that continue to plague our Black youth. In accordance with our university's mission, which is defined by dedication to the social justice principles of Ignatian pedagogy including attention, reflection, and action, we envisioned that this type of response would facilitate discussions in our classrooms connecting the events in Ferguson with the realities of our young Black students. Additionally, we planned to model strategies and provide

resources that would allow teacher candidates to have conversations with their public-school students in the months following Brown's killing. As a group of three professors of pre-service teachers, composed of one Jewish, White female, one female, Multiracial Latina, and one White male, working with school partners who mostly serve students of color and pre-service teachers who--similar to national numbers (Goldring, Gray, & Bitterman, 2013)--are almost entirely White and female, we knew we would face specific challenges in fostering dialogue, trust, and solidarity among our colleagues, students, and their students in public schools around the city.

In the 2011-2012 school year, 82% of K-12 teachers in U.S. public schools were White, while 68% of public school students identified as students of color (Bitterman, Gray, & Goldring, 2013). The demographics of the teaching force is mirrored in the predominance of White faculty working in teacher education (Chronicle, 2011). The striking contrast between the backgrounds of teachers (i.e., university professors, teachers in training, and practicing teachers in public schools) and the students they serve increases the importance of supporting White educators in confronting racial bias and acting in solidarity with communities of color (Howard, 2006). In this article, we explore the endeavor of compelling educators--at the university level and those in training--to reexamine their identities, with the goal of equally sharing in the struggles, obstacles, and hardships of the communities of color in which they work (Shalaby, 2013). Such a reimagining, we argue in this article, is one that is hard to realize. A wealth of research shows that, in many cases, those in positions of privilege don't see race as an issue that pertains to them (Stovall, 2006). Deckman, Fulmer, and Makepeace (forthcoming), argue that "practices that mark race as important only for the racially 'Other,' while on the surface purporting to counter racism, more deeply entrench it" (p. xx).

In this article, we explore this tension by describing our own experiences with approaching the academic school year eager and ready for the challenge of addressing the death of Michael Brown and the events that followed as a catalyst for important conversations around structural injustice. Through exploration of critical incidents (Hamilton, 2004), we review how our attempts to open dialogue were met with defensiveness and a discourse that relegates the responsibility of engaging in conversations about race and power to educators of color. Echoing Pollock, Bocala, Deckman, and Dickstein-Staub (2015), we found that teachers at all levels may resist the 'diversity' aspect of preservice education when they view 'diversity work' as extraneous or belonging to others. Through a Critical Race Theory (CRT) perspective, we examine incidents that cut across the different ecological levels (Bronfenbrenner, 2005) in which we work: our classrooms, partner public schools, and university.

Critical Incidents

Critical incidents have been widely utilized in teaching and learning literature as a means of identifying moments of heightened awareness that can provide insight and deepen understanding about the learning process (Kosnik, 2001). An event that stimulates increased sensitivity and awareness provides a useful occasion for analysis and reflexive thought. However, while critical incidents are often contextualized within a specific location, they may be decontextualized in terms of the larger institutionalized forms of oppression that frame them. Unique to our analysis here is that we use CRT to examine our critical incidents in a way that places race at the very core of our understandings in order to situate these incidents among those larger institutional forms of oppression. While this article is framed around the killing of Michael Brown and the growing acknowledgement of a pattern of police brutality against Black men, we review critical incidents in educational spaces in reaction to this larger national event, to

elucidate how this event served as a catalyst for a cascade of emotion-laden reactions that exposed beliefs and judgments which, in the absence of such a contentious event, remain unarticulated.

We argue that when confronted with a critical event foregrounding interracial relations, educators involved at various levels of a teacher preparation program that espouses a socially-just mission, protected their own privilege through acts of avoidance, resistance and/or of perceived care for one another. In doing so, these educators negated a powerful opportunity to disrupt traditional notions of how, why, and to whom race matters in educational contexts, and instead reaffirmed that institutional forms of racism are so ingrained in society that they pervade even those communities committed to addressing inequities.

Critical Race Theory

This study is grounded in critical race theory (CRT) and framed by CRT's foundational assertion that racism and other forms of oppression linked to intersecting identities such as gender, class, and language, are an inherently occurring characteristic of institutional structures (Bell, 1980). In other words, racism remains ingrained within American institutions such as schools and universities, influencing how individuals and groups experience education. While our critical incidents shared below may relay seemingly individual instances and experiences in response to the killing of Michael Brown, considered within the CRT framework, these experiences can be attributed to a larger embedded infrastructure of White supremacy and hegemonic ideology around non-dominant peoples working and living within institutional structures. While CRT is rooted in complex understandings of law, racial ideology, and political power, it also provides a practical theoretical vocabulary for education scholars to expose the deep-seated issues of racial ideology and power that continue to matter in American life,

rejecting the notion that scholarship can or should be neutral (Crenshaw, Gostanda, Peller, & Thomas, 1995). Specifically, as it relates to our area of interest in this paper, CRT maintains that race is both socially constructed and a legitimate, daily experience.

However, within educational contexts, CRT scholars assert that race continues to be a "largely untheorized" notion in the U.S despite being a critical theoretical perspective for understanding educational inequities and examining the dynamics, impact, and consequences of power and privilege in educational contexts (Tate, 1997, p. 196). According to Solórzano (1998), taking a CRT approach to education means challenging the "dominant discourse on race and racism as it relates to education by examining how educational theory, policy, and practice are used to subordinate certain racial and ethnic groups" (p. 122). We focus here on educational contexts that influence K-12 children, students who experience firsthand institutional realities tied to race and racism, as well as institutions charged with preparing teachers where CRT holds promise to "analyze, explain, and conceptualize policies and practices in teacher education" (Milner, 2008, p. 332). In this paper, we respond to the call to analyze the role of race/racism in education/schooling by leveraging CRT to understand the ways in which institutional racism influences our experiences across multiple educational contexts when interacting with students and colleagues about the killing of Michael Brown.

Our Critical Incidents

In describing our incidents, we move through different nested communities of our program, the city schools, the university classrooms, and our larger faculty community that organize and structure the partnerships between these communities (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). We describe our incidents in order of their level of connection to public school students of color. We also aim to show that the values, attitudes, and actions we see at the most proximal levels of

connection to students may be a function of more distal connections, or at least, mirror each other. Across all incidents, it becomes clear that racism is central and endemic in our institution and is manifest in how the different stakeholders within our teacher preparation program experience one critical incident in different ways.

Our critical incidents emerged from our work preparing teacher-candidates in a field-based education program within a large metropolitan area. While our critical incidents are situated within this particular teacher-education program, they are not meant to speak solely to our program, our faculty, or our teacher candidates, but instead to highlight the pervasiveness of the issues discussed throughout this manuscript by emphasizing the existence of systems of oppression even in places that strive to challenge unjust and inequitable institutional narratives. In presenting the critical incidents below, we also acknowledge and have continuously reflected upon how our own positionality matters in this paper. We recognize that we are very much part of the incidents that follow, both as they were enacted and then later retold. We understand that our intersecting identities as educators with different backgrounds influenced how we responded, were responded to, and experienced these incidents. Indeed, each of the incidents below reveals how our own positionality likely interacted with the nature of the discussions we had surrounding the death of Michael Brown in our educational contexts. When we were disappointed and outraged by our critical incidents around Ferguson, we came together to digest these experiences, thus generating the idea behind this project. What followed was a weekly meeting for an entire semester, where, in the process of developing this writing, we also found a space to discuss ongoing issues within this context.

Second Author. A month after Michael Brown was shot in Ferguson, and three weeks after I moved to Chicago, I was assigned to the high school site where I would run my class and

work with teacher candidates. It took only a glance at the demographic data from both rosters to see the stark differences in populations: the high school was 97% Black and my teacher candidates were 100% White, as am I. Given the unrest in Ferguson and elsewhere, I imagined that this would serve as a critical time in schools to talk about discrimination, education for the purpose of change, and an opportunity for my teacher candidates to more authentically consider these issues, not from the ivory tower but in and with communities of color in our field-based program.

The "incident" happened the second week of class. Mark was scheduled to be teaching in the 12th grade English class on the 4th floor. He stood out in the classroom, with his almost-white blond hair, thin-rimmed glasses, loafers, and ironed khaki pants. When the bell rang at the end of the period, I could see Mark exiting Ms. Jones' classroom. He was hunched over and mumbling to himself. "You okay?" I asked. Mark then proceeded to recount what had happened. He explained that his class was scheduled to talk about the book *Black Boy.* However, the conversation that began with a discussion of *Black Boy* moved to a conversation about Ferguson, with Derek, one 12th grader, explaining that "White people don't like Black people and White people often take Black babies." The 12th grade English teacher, Ms. Jones, the school's only Black English teacher, stood in the middle of the room. Ms. Jones had mastered the art of getting students to connect with books. In my first observation in her class, a lesson on *Black Boy* about a character's relationship with his absent father began with statistics of fatherless families in the South Side, from which many students commuted early every morning to make it to the school up North by 8:30am.

Ms. Jones listened to Derek's comment, then turned to Mark and said to the class, "Well, we have a White man in the room. Mark, what do you think about what Derek just said about

what White people think?" He told me he explained that he didn't hate Black people, that he certainly didn't steal Black babies, nor did he know anyone who had, and that he really couldn't speak for all White men. Mark recounted that he also probably relayed that same message three times in different ways, hoping by the time he got to the third iteration, something would happen, and the focus would no longer be on him. He didn't say how Ms. Jones had responded to his answer—perhaps he was still reviewing in his head his own comments or searching the room for a validating face.

When he got back to our classroom for our usual debriefing he detailed this incident to the other students. They seemed furious with Ms. Jones. "How could she put you in that situation?" "That is so unfair." "That is so uncomfortable." They all seemed to chime in. I listened. Unfair or fair seemed beside the point. Isn't this what we ask high school students to do all the time? We are constantly asking them to share how they feel about, think about, and respond to issues. As teachers, should we be spared such vulnerability? No one in my 100% White class had ever been asked to be the sole representative of a group, since they were always the majority, unlike my students of color, who were constantly asked to act as ambassador and representative of all people of color. This had clearly never been Mark's role before, and he was uncomfortable with it.

In the six weeks that followed I watched Mark design and implement lessons that integrated his own personal experience. For a grammar lesson, he wrote a mini-autobiographical piece to demonstrate how to use conjunctions. Using beautiful and whimsical language, he mused about drinking "pop" with friends and going to see the opera. The students seemed totally uninterested in Mark's description of his youth. To connect with these students, Mark wanted them to *know* him. Class after class, he provided materials that revealed more and more about

himself. Mark was preoccupied by his students' disinterest. He bemoaned that he would never be able to get them to read the canonical works he wanted them too, because they were disengaged and lacked the sophistication. A week before the end of the semester, Manette, one of the football-playing seniors who had been in Mark's English class, agreed to let me into a classroom where I would be working that day. He introduced himself as we walked up the stairs and I said "You have a very unusual name. How did you get it?" Manette explained that his parents named him after Doctor Manette, the character from Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities*. He elaborated that while he was in his mother's belly, he died, but somehow at the end of the pregnancy he came back and fought to be alive, and that he, like Dr. Manette—who was mysteriously jailed and suffered in prison—once liberated, in this case from his mom's belly, was "nothing but goodness." Close to death, he emerged as a truly good soul and that was how he got his name. He opened the door for me and I said, "That was a great story, you should write about it." "Yeah," he said and walked off. Mark had overheard our conversation. He asked how I had gotten him to tell that story; what did I tell him, and why had he been so comfortable telling me? Taken aback by the question, I responded, "I asked and I listened."

In this incident, we see the ways in which discussions of power and difference are thwarted by the perception that the responsibility of conversations about race and power should be carried by educators of color. In response to Ms. Jones's request that Mark, as the White representative in the room, discuss the experience of White men, we see White students rallying around Mark and decrying the supposed unfairness of the teacher putting Mark's Whiteness on display. Mark's sense of vulnerability stimulated by this moment in Ms. Jones' class did not precipitate empathy or compassion for students of color who are routinely placed in this position. Instead, he felt a need to be acknowledged, to be seen. Mark could have harnessed this

discomfort to recognize the wealth of knowledge that his students have. Instead, he was unable to identify and build upon the assets of students like Manette, who, when welcomed to a conversation with invitations that allowed him to show his understanding of his world, was able to demonstrate the applicability of a canonical text to his own conceptions of character development and change.

But, the shame of this incident made Mark's Whiteness more central, and his students more peripheral, as he integrated more and more material that emphasized his own worldview and shut them out. In the next incident, we see how teacher candidates rallied around a White male faculty member, much like they did around Mark, to further relegate issues of power and difference to the responsibility of communities of color.

Third Author. The first day of class as a teacher is one that is mixed with excitement and anxiety. I often spend the night before tossing and turning in bed while I plan and re-plan the next day's events. In August of 2014, I experienced my "first day" for the twelfth time as I met with a group of excited teacher candidates enrolled in a university course focused on educational policy in practice. They came into the small room we had reserved on campus talking about their summer adventures and hopes for the coming school year. It all appeared to be very normal, like most of the first days I had experienced as both a middle school teacher and university professor.

However, this first day was very different for me and many others around the country. The events transpiring in Ferguson, MO put the troubling state of race relations and a host of other societal issues into the national spotlight. The events left me filled with emotions, thoughts, and questions that had implications for me as a teacher, citizen, and human being. During the week that Michael Brown was to begin his college career, I felt that it was vital for the group of future teachers to spend time reflecting on what this meant to their current lives and

those of the students who would eventually enter their classrooms. Instead of the typical first day activities, I decided we would spend the majority of our time together discussing what was happening in Ferguson.

We began by simply communicating what we knew, what we felt, and what questions or issues this event was bringing up for us. The comments ranged from expressions of anger to confusion to disputing race as a central issue at play. All of the students seemed to be troubled by the events, but few were ready to connect them to larger societal narratives that would force them to implicate themselves in some way. However, I felt it was a starting place for a conversation that would continue for the rest of the semester.

Then, we turned to our lives as teachers by first watching a video that followed a 14-year-old boy through the streets of Ferguson as he narrates what he sees and poses the question, "Am I next?" The video was followed by reflecting upon student experience(s) and what youth bring with them every day to school. Finally, we read about the ways in which teachers in Ferguson responded by holding classes despite school closings and how teachers in a neighboring district were responding to being told not to talk about Brown's death in their classrooms. We reflected on how these teachers were taking on leadership roles not only in their schools, but also their community while standing up for what they believed.

As class was nearing the end, I opened the conversation up to anything else that the students were thinking about or questions for the group. A young man raised his hand and said, "I don't think it is right that they make you talk about this on the first day of class." As I looked around I saw others in the class nodding their head in agreement. When pushed to say more, he believed that the time we spent talking about Michael Brown and Ferguson was mandated by those above me in the School of Education. He even went as far as to apologize that I was put in

this "position." I assured students that it was my decision to spend our time in this way and tried to reiterate why I felt this was vital for all of us to be thinking about and discussing.

The comment is still one that I am trying to understand. Where would this student, and others, get the idea that the learning experiences I planned for the day were not my own? Did I somehow promote this idea through my comments, my body language, or the artifacts I chose to introduce? Was it that I was a White male bringing these issues into the classroom that signaled some sort of coercion? Why were they trying to protect me? What were they trying to protect me from?

As I continued to reflect on this incident, my thoughts extended beyond this group of teacher candidates to questions regarding the larger historical and institutional influences evident throughout our conversation. In what ways was their perceived defense of me simply a reflection of the institutional norms of the ecological system they had always been a part of? Should I have expected these students to be immune to the institutional forms of oppression that were integral to the ways in which they experienced schooling? What opportunities have these students had to build awareness of embedded systems of oppression throughout our society? What opportunities, if any, have they had to talk about race, diversity and injustice, as it connects to their lives as teachers?

In this critical incident, Author 3's students attribute his pedagogical choice to focus on the killing of Michael Brown and the events in Ferguson as one that has been imposed on him. The students seem entirely perplexed by why a White male faculty member would take up this tragedy of his own accord. In both Author 2's and Author 3's incidents, students seem to feel that issues of race should not be front and center in their discussions around teaching in urban schools. Instead, conversations around race that required White students to actively participate

in the dialogue were perceived as "unfair," whether they were perceived as inappropriate in the case of Author 2's students, or as an attempt by the University to impose a race-related topic in the case of Author 3's students. These feelings reflect larger institutional narratives about the role of race and racism in schools/society, and to whom the responsibility lies to challenge structural systems of oppression. In the critical incident that follows, Author 1 also encounters resistance to discussing these issues from colleagues, who, like Author 3's students, seem to assume that there is a shared, underlying understanding that Ferguson is not an issue that necessarily warrants the attention of White educators.

First Author. It was the first large group meeting I attended as a beginning faculty member. As a new hire, even amidst the expected new-to-the-job road bumps, I was encouraged by the positive ambience of camaraderie and the school's emphasis on social justice. As is typical of most, the two-hour faculty meeting mainly addressed logistical issues, such as the academic calendar, committee updates, and announcements. There were ten minutes left. A small group of faculty approached the podium and asked us to look around our table. They proceeded to give us some instructions: "We thought it was important for us to dedicate time to the events that have unfolded with respect to Michael Brown. As educators, it seems only logical to begin a discussion about how we are all processing this and how we will speak to our students about it. If you would just spend a few minutes at your round tables discussing your reactions to the events in Ferguson and then share out, that would be great."

There were four people at my round table, all White female faculty. I had never exchanged more than a few "hellos" with any of them. I instantly sensed that I needed to listen in that space, rather than talk. I didn't know these folks, and had been advised many times by

mentors to keep quiet for at least the first year in a new faculty position, lest I be seen as an instigator. While I had no problem taking on the role of listener, I was eager to seize the opportunity to engage in this critical conversation about the dire situation of young Black males in the United States. As the speaker left the podium and returned to his seat to cue the beginning of our group discussions, Holly let out a big sigh; "Do we have to talk about this at the end of the day? This is so depressing." Lydia concurred. "Nice choice to end the meeting. Could we think of ending this on a lower note?" The table members released affirming, soft, nervous laughter. I looked straight ahead, hoping that I managed a poker face. I said, "Yes, we do have to talk about this because for some of us, it's not a choice whether to talk about it or not." I had shown my hand of cards. I felt my insides brewing, the familiar sensation I recognized as my adrenalin rushing in to control my anger. I had said enough. Anything more and I would have risked my own peace of mind. I sat there, boiling, while hearing comments such as: "Well, you know, we haven't heard the police officer's side of the story;" "I don't think we should rush to judgement;" "We don't really know what the boy did."

Sitting there, I felt frozen and angry, seething over these responses. I felt a pang of disappointment and rage. I had moved my entire life, once again, from a place that I can only describe as backwards to an urban, diverse, and socially just university. Naively, I was relieved that I wouldn't have to deal with the same degree of ignorance and racism that I had previously encountered. At least, I thought, my colleagues would give the appearance of being progressive, especially as teacher educators in one of the most troubled and racially charged cities in the country. My colleagues were presenting what they saw as a fair and balanced view of the Ferguson incident. This view - given the undeniably clear history of structural and specifically, state violence inflicted on Black people - could only be had under a systemically racist paradigm.

I was devastated by the reality that the systemic racism that facilitated such comments are embedded within all of our educational institutions, regardless of location.

While I urgently needed to debrief and make meaning of what had just occurred, I was wise enough to hold back until I found a trusted ear. Olivia, a fellow female faculty member of color, asked if I was going to the bus stop. We walked together. I shared my story; she listened empathetically and assured me that I could talk to her anytime I needed to, especially when it came to matters such as this one. She also expressed regret at what had occurred at my table. By contrast, White colleagues at her table were deeply troubled by the Ferguson incident and weighed in on the importance of the issue, brainstorming ideas as to how they would address this topic on the very first day of class and beyond. It was encouraging to hear that others had responded with agency and urgency. Given my positionality as a female faculty member of color, who has repeatedly felt the brunt of microaggressions, I remained unsettled. I didn't want to lose hope, but I was also wise enough to know that this wouldn't be the last time I left a meeting feeling this way. On my bus ride home, I quietly wept.

Looking back, I asked myself some contextual questions that I hoped might help explain or shed light on the way the conversation about Ferguson unfolded. Of all possible points throughout the meeting, why spend the last moments of a meeting to discuss such an important topic? Why not start with that topic and provide substantial time to discuss? Were we all, in some way, reacting to the ill-suited time slot? Was the discomfort around discussing this racially-charged issue so great that instead of engaging in a discussion, my colleagues found defense mechanisms to circumvent it, protecting their White privilege? Was this discussion doomed from the start, precisely because it took a peripheral seat to other mundane issues? Was this the first time this type of issue had ever been raised to the large group? I also found myself

wondering how posing questions directly to my colleagues regarding their attitudes might have further confirmed or potentially unearthed different, more nuanced and thoughtful commentary about Ferguson.

While triggered by the comments of individuals, I also must acknowledge the larger structural mechanisms at play. What I experienced at my table was a sliver of a few people in a brief moment in time who I am certain went on to conduct their versions of everyday acts of pedagogical resistance for the greater good of the children of Chicago. What is of note here is not the actual individuals, but rather the insidious ways in which structural racism manifests itself in seemingly small behaviors of individuals, as was the case at my table.

In many ways, this last incident exemplified the privilege of Whiteness. The first author's White colleagues could make such historicized comments about violence on a Black male child and represent nothing but their individual opinions, which were never indicative of anything larger about Whiteness or racism, when structural racism is a system of societal structures that works interactively to distribute generational and historic advantages to White people, producing cumulative, race-based inequalities. Therefore, in this instance, the conversation that ensued at the first author's table demonstrates that her white colleagues, perhaps not fully aware of their privilege, did not think twice about making comments that yielded the unintended consequence of callousness, based not on individual intent, but racialized behavior.

Discussion

All three of us were left disappointed by the various reactions in our communities of practice when we attempted to engage in these discussions. Each of us knew our audience of predominantly White teachers—be they teacher candidates or teacher educators—and felt that

through discussions of Ferguson, we might be able to confront racial bias and initiate conversations around its pertinence to our important work in urban schools. Our disappointment was evident, but the reasons for it differed as a function of the various ecological contexts in which each individual incident transpired. Each of us lamented the tragic failure of what we, perhaps naively, perceived to be such a fertile space for discussing issues of power and difference. One of the most striking outcomes of our critical incidents was our realization that these incidents were relatively small tips of a much larger iceberg. Our attempts to challenge dominant ideologies around Black boys was met with a fierce protection of Whiteness by White students, pre-service teacher candidates and teacher educators. Each of us, as beginning faculty members, came to this institution with the knowledge that social justice would be at the core of our research and teaching endeavors. Confronted by the limits of racialized behaviors, our hopes were tested, forcing us to reexamine notions of social justice within varying ecological levels within the context of teacher education.

President Obama said in an address shortly after the protests in Ferguson, "Emotions are raw right now…let's remember that we're all part of one American family" (www.Whitehouse.gov, 2014). Obama's words aligned with our university's Ignatian-pedagogy-based mission and seemed to provide some guidance for the approach we would be taking to support our teacher candidates in having conversations with their students in public schools during the months following Michael Brown's death. More specifically, we wanted all school stakeholders to discuss and examine the issues facing Black male youth in our schools together. However, what these incidents suggest is that in espousing the idea of "one American family," or seeing social justice work as about equal treatment or teaching to **all** students, we may unintentionally be creating a discourse that makes it so teachers—teacher educators and

university professors alike—do not feel a responsibility to promote truly just practices and awareness in schools. To elaborate, language around supporting and serving all students, inadvertently in these contexts, may permit our White teacher candidates to maintain an identity of fairness and equitability, even social awareness, in actively avoiding responsibility for individual communities. Teacher language that suppresses and avoids race words, or diction that is "colormute", according to Pollock (2005), reproduces the racial inequities teachers may seek to avoid. The discussions that unfolded in our incidents reveal how stakeholders evoked ideas of fairness to defend their unwillingness to focus on Ferguson or Black male youth in particular.

We highlight this discourse because it reifies inequities. Furthermore, as we conclude this paper to a close, civil unrest is once again in the national spotlight as the citizens of Baltimore, Maryland, take to the streets to protest the killing of another Black male at the hands of police officers. In the time it has taken us to make sense of and communicate our critical incidents regarding the death of Michael Brown, similar homicides of Black males in New York, Cleveland, and now Baltimore (to name a few), continue to highlight structural injustices across our country. Despite the tensions we experienced, we feel increasingly committed to raising the level of conversation surrounding Ferguson, fairness, and social justice. As we gear up once again to address issues of structural inequity in our schools, we aim to more intentionally address these forms of resistance and to reveal how conceptions of personal "fairness" may undercut, and in many cases thwart, the enactment of justice on behalf of the youth we seek to serve in schools.

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