



Christina Berchini

Assistant Professor
English

Structuring Contexts: Pathways toward Un-Obstructing Race-Consciousness

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This research is situated in second-wave White Teacher Identity studies and investigates the ways context structures a high school English teacher's white identity, practices, and race-consciousness. Working with detailed data and vignettes from a single case study, the author highlights the teaching of a unit on the Holocaust. Using the required Holocaust curriculum as a unit of analysis, the author illustrates how the teacher is structured to minimize and dismiss broader discussions of institutionalized and systemic oppression and violence. The author argues that understanding the role contexts play in obstructing race-consciousness can help fill interpretive gaps between race-consciousness and what, on the surface, might appear to be a teacher's race-evasiveness.

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Structuring contexts: pathways toward un-obstructing race-consciousness

Christina Berchini

English Department, University of Wisconsin Eau Claire, Eau Claire, WI, USA

ABSTRACT

This research is situated in second-wave White Teacher Identity studies and investigates the ways context structures a high school English teacher's white identity, practices, and race-consciousness. Working with detailed data and vignettes from a single case study, the author highlights the teaching of a unit on the Holocaust. Using the required Holocaust curriculum as a unit of analysis, the author illustrates how the teacher is structured to minimize and dismiss broader discussions of institutionalized and systemic oppression and violence, and particularly those contributions offered by a student of color in her classroom. The author argues that understanding the role contexts play in obstructing race-consciousness can help fill interpretive gaps between race-consciousness and what, on the surface, might appear to be a teacher's race-evasiveness.

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Introduction

I would think especially in a district that acknowledges how diverse it is, it would try to teach to diversity ... I would think that, with how proud [Freedom High School] is of its student diversity? It would want to acknowledge that. English is such a great place to do that, and I don't think that the curriculum necessarily gives teachers as much opportunity to [teach to diversity] as it could, or gives students as much opportunity as it could. ... [The English curriculum] doesn't seem like something that's fitted to the student population in any way. (Ms. Tessa, interview)

The above quote is extracted from a larger project in which I investigated the racialized identity development of three white English teachers. In this quote, Ms. Tessa (Ms. T), a novice high school English teacher, interprets the way her context attends (or perhaps more aptly, does *not* attend) to the curricular needs of its students. She suggests that the English curriculum with which she is required to teach does not do enough to meet students' needs; that she is required to work with a curriculum not 'fitted to the student population in any way.' I interpret her keen analysis as reflecting a small degree of 'race consciousness' (Jupp & Slattery, 2010) – a developmental process through which teachers seem cognizant of how race and whiteness play out in schools in ways large and small, overt and insidious.

With the above quote, I also intend to frame the problem of context, and how school discourses (e.g. curriculum) have the potential to structure white teachers' identities (Cannella & Reiff, 1994; Finney & Orr, 1995; Jupp, 2013; Locke, 2005; Raible & Irizarry, 2007; Yoon, 2012). The problem of context, and how contexts structure and obstruct race-consciousness, is a key problem I address in this article.

Working with detailed data from a single case study, I highlight Ms. T's teaching of a unit on the Holocaust. Using the required Holocaust curriculum as a unit of analysis, I show how she is structured

CONTACT Christina Berchini berchin@uwec.edu

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