The Life You Save Be Your Own: White, Female Pre-service Teachers Imagine the Marginalized Student

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Abstract
Marginalized students at the secondary level are frequently “locked out” of the structures of opportunity by the often well-meaning white, female teachers whose own schooling experiences represent formative models of “success” in school, despite being largely uninterrogated. In this study of pre-service teachers’ stories about future professional life and self, participants at the secondary level dedicated significant parts of their narratives to imaginative rehearsal of interactions with members of marginalized student populations. In these discourses, the pre-service teacher sees himself or herself in a romantic, messianic role: “saving” the “problem student”. This narrative fails to name the structures of racism at work, instead locating the mechanisms of marginalization in the students and seeking to subsequently “save” them from themselves. Teacher educators must encourage pre-service teachers to interrupt such messianic discourses and work to deconstruct their own belief in a benign schooling structure, beginning with critical examination of their own schooling experiences and trajectory.

Introduction
While the K-12 student population in U.S. public schools is more linguistically and ethnically diverse than ever, the vast majority of the new cadre of public school teachers are white, female monolingual English-speakers (Zumwalt & Craig, 2005). In addition to this difference between teachers and students across the board, pre-service teachers at the secondary level may also have little personal experience of marginalization in schools; they typically self-select to become teachers in part because of their “match” with the valued behaviors and discourses of schools. In other words, most of them liked school, were “good at” school and were, in all respects, successful in the school environment and choose their work site accordingly (Lortie, 1975/2002; deMarrais & LeCompte, 1996). It is no surprise that pre-service teachers’ imaginings of what it will be like to work with marginalized students in secondary schools are informed more by popular culture than anything else and that their strategies for best serving these students may be truncated by the limits of their own experience. In this study of pre-service teachers’ stories about future professional life and self, participants at the secondary level dedicated significant parts of their narratives to imaginative rehearsal of interactions with members of marginalized student populations. In these discourses, the pre-service teacher sees himself or herself in a messianic role: “saving” the “problem student” by providing love, attention, connection or self-esteem in the belief that this will facilitate academic success. However, despite the very best of intentions, this “story” fails to name the structures of racism at work, instead locating the mechanisms of marginalization in the students and seeking to subsequently “save” them from themselves. Teacher educators must work to interrupt such messianic discourses while affirming the value of generously constructing marginalized students. In this way pre-service teachers can begin to question their perceptions of a benign schooling structure, the needs of
marginalized students and their own identities as both “good” students and teacher/saviors. The end product should be the story of the students’, and their own, fuller humanity—not just a facile popular cultural cliche of saviors and the saved.

Students and Teachers

Pre-service teachers in this study’s target age group—late teens and early twenties—incorporate mainstream, or as Grande (2002) would suggest, “Whitestream”\(^2\), popular-cultural texts, including films, into their identity formation processes (Robertson, 1997; Grant, 2002). One recurring pop culture theme cited by study participants as particularly important was that teaching in underserved and under-resourced schools with marginalized youth of color was a valued and meaningful social contribution, on par with service in the Peace Corps or similar organization. The implicit text here that simultaneously exoticizes and others the marginalized student notwithstanding\(^3\), most of these young people embark on a life of such service with the very good intention to do what they can to right social “wrongs.” The message in such texts, as well as in some of the marketing materials for Teach for America and AmeriCorps, among other teacher-recruiting service organizations, is that marginalized students are in desperate need of help, if not outright rescue. While this may be only one interpretation of materials that justly reflect the profound economic and educational opportunity disparities operating in the US, many pre-service teachers see not the structures of disparity but rather only the students themselves and individualized affective rescue. A similar “text,” the film *Dangerous Minds* (Simpson, Bruckheimer & Smith, 1995), with which all study participants were familiar, is one example of such a “rescue;” as Gloria Ladson-Billings (1999) writes,

In the popular book, *Dangerous Minds*, former Marine-turned-teacher LouAnne Johnson is credited with turning around the “class from hell”—a group of urban African American and Latino students on the road to failure in school and in life. This book (and the subsequent motion picture) was just one more of what Strop (1996) identifies as among the “teacher as savior” genre of films—movies that construct an image of teachers, particularly white teachers, as “rescuing” urban students of color from themselves, their families and their communities. (p. 255).

Similar discourses of “rescue” are present in terminology like “at risk”—the central message being that the “risk” originates within the student unaware. It is internal, implicit in who the student is (Valencia, 1997). This level of deficit thinking does for marginalized students what mythologies of “damsels in distress” did for women: it implies an eternal stance of helplessness, on the precipice of failure and unable to fend for oneself.

Marginalized Students

At the center of pre-service teachers’ imagined messianic scenarios are marginalized students. Reyes (2006) refers to students as “situationally marginalized,” meaning that these are young people who have economic and personal potential as well as a strong sense of agency, but may be nonetheless marginalized because of a combination of personal life situations (socioeconomic status, teen pregnancy, gang affiliation) and larger structures of oppression. The resulting social and educational challenges, and the structures of schooling that reinforce students’ subsequent feelings of self-blame and hopelessness, do little to recognize the potential of these students. Instead, as “punishment” or remediation, the students are removed further from the contexts in which they might have opportunities to decipher the discourses of mainstream/whitestream school success, or the ways in which successful students “do” school. Similarly, even well-meant efforts
to help some marginalized groups have often resulted in their further marginalization, as they are sequestered away the contexts in which they might gain the tools for successful negotiation of dominant schooling structures (Noguera, 1996).

White Teachers

The new and pre-service cadre of secondary public school teachers is made up of young, white, female monolingual English-speakers (Zumwalt & Craig, 2005). Unlike elementary-level teachers, they typically do not enter teaching primarily because they love children, but rather because they love their academic content area in addition to working with older youth (Lortie, 1975/2002). However, pre-service teachers preparing to teach in secondary schools are like their primary level compatriots in that the majority had been very successful in school (Lortie, 1075/2002). Subsequently, they act to preserve the valued identity of the “good” student, and, for females, this means the “good girl.” As Holland & Eisenhart (1990) describe them, “good girls” preserve their valued identity by pursuing “A’s and praise” rather than taking academic risks to pursue more difficult studies or deeper or more critical understanding, possibly because doing so could impose risks to the “good girl” identity—including being seen as a troublemaker, or getting lower grades in more challenging coursework (Holland & Eisenhart, 1990). In other contexts, these individuals may shy away from activist politics or anything else that might “rock the boat” of conformity and compliance—two things to which many western women are socialized over time (Mahalik, Morray, Coonerty-Femiano, Ludlow, Slattery & Smiler 2005; Galman, 2006). These same “good girls” appear in teacher education programs; again they are “good at” school with “good grades” in their majors and may be attracted to the high school classroom, which rewards compliance and conformity (deMarrais & LeCompte, 1996; LeCompte & Dworkin, 1991; Dworkin, 1987).

Participants in this study also indicated that the high school classroom was attractive because it was a familiar environment in which they had already established success as high school students, and also that it fulfilled their desire to teach in a “college-like” status atmosphere (i.e., with older students) without having to risk the valued identity of the “good girl” by pursuing doctoral-level work or tenure requirements. While many may specifically seek—and find—compelling, challenging careers in high school teaching, high levels of new teacher attrition at the secondary level and data from those who leave the profession suggest that many arrive at an unintended destination and find themselves wanting work that looked and felt different, that was better paid and more professional.

The system of socialization and rewards in schooling make many of these young people—the majority of them women—into silent co-conspirators in their own marginalization and that of their future students by rewarding them for compliance and conformity through the seductive system of “A’s and praise.” Understanding that the school system is not inherently a vehicle for salvation but rather can be a barrier to mobility—and humanity—means questioning the system of reward and the context of self-worth that is valued and embraced by many new and pre-service teachers. Questioning the veracity of a yardstick by which many have measured significant parts of their lives, while difficult, could be the beginning of a process wherein the life that they sought to “save” may turn out to be their own.
Methodology

This data comes from a larger ethnographic study of pre-service teachers’ experiences of choosing to become teachers. Pre-service teachers’ stories were the unit of analysis, and as such, interview methods were of particular importance for data collection. Central to this inquiry was the idea that pre-service teachers’ processes of identity development and storytelling—in this case, stories about their imagined future practice and present rationale for becoming a teacher—may illuminate the roles of the apprenticeship of observation, popular cultural narratives and individual habitus in the process of vocational discernment as well as the relative impact of the progressive teacher education “story.” Study participants came from two undergraduate teacher education programs at both secondary and elementary levels. Data discussed in this paper come from the 92% of study participants who self-identified as white. Of the total participants, only roughly one quarter of these were male. While the original data set includes both elementary and secondary pre-service teachers, the data discussed here pertain only to the secondary group (N=18), all of whom were white and all but two of whom were female.

Data collection took place over two consecutive academic semesters in 2003. Sampling was purposive/theoretical rather than random or representative (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Data were triangulated between-method (Delamont, 2002) (using more than one method to get at the same questions, such as collecting information on one issue using observation and interviews) as well as within-method (getting data of multiple types within one method, such as asking a variety of questions in the interview). Data discussed here are from open-ended interviews; the open-endedness of the interviews themselves facilitated valuable tangential discussions, and even multiple interviews for many of the participants. In particular, a large part of the interview was an attempt to elicit stories from participants. Analysis incorporated domain analysis (Spradley, 1980) and inductive coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Findings: Imagining Self and Student

Before one can actually assume a new role, a period of rehearsal is necessary. In the case of the pre-service teacher, rehearsal of the “teacher” role involves the act of imaginatively taking on the role of another in order to “try it on” mentally and see how it would feel to be in that role (Mead, 1934). Related to Goffman’s (1959) dramaturgical analysis, imaginative rehearsal is just that—a “rehearsal”—perhaps even a “dress rehearsal”—in which we try on and attempt to begin to think about ourselves performing a new role in preparation for the possibility of assuming it. Just as one cannot walk onto the stage and pull off a convincing Hamlet without practicing and rehearsing the role before the proverbial “show” begins, so also one must rehearse and practice these roles before they are performed for an audience. For roles that are relatively taken-for-granted in our fields of practice, the “scripts” or guidelines derived from available reference groups for performing a given role are abundantly available. For many pre-service teachers, these scripts are available from their own apprenticeships of observation and from popular culture (Lortie, 1975/2002). Even at this initial stage when individuals are not yet in the classroom, the scripts that are practiced during rehearsals are not only informative windows into individual thinking about teaching, but may be predictive of eventual practice.

For the pre-service teachers in this sample, their imaginative rehearsals of interacting with marginalized students incorporate scripts that highlight messianic selves: their job as teacher is to intervene or “save” the student. The following are excerpted from participant interviews to illustrate typical “scripts”:
“I see my target student being the juvenile delinquent that society casts off because they learn differently and have purple hair and don’t have the opportunity to go to [an alternative school]. I’ll be there for them to let them know that I’m there, and I believe in them, and that they can do it if they try.”

“People [in my dormitory] ask me why I want to teach kids that are a lost cause, that are so horrible and that I can’t help anyway—well, they have such a negative outlook toward that group, and I think that if you have a positive outlook, then that will make all the difference in the world.”

“I think teaching would be an opportunity to use my gifts…with teaching there is a way to make a difference in other people’s lives. We can take these kids that have these horrible lives and since we have this voice, this opportunity, to come into their lives and be part of their lives, it’s personal…I can tell them that they are unique and have the power to do more and more. Maybe ten years from now a kid who was from this bad family that never had anyone go to college will come back and tell me how my class changed him.”

Much like McIntyre’s “white knights” whose “good” parents, values and education enabled them to benefit from a meritocratic school structure that rewarded their hard work (McIntyre, 1997, p. 121), these pre-service teachers assume that the marginalized student—the pregnant teenager, the gang member and the student with low socioeconomic status—are all deficient because they do not feel cared for or lack self esteem and subsequently do not “try” or believe that they can or should “try.” Nowhere in this equation is the teacher required to examine his or her own position of power, the larger structural forces at work or the need to make implicit the valued school practices legitimated by those forces. Furthermore, pre-service teachers who focus on this theme assume that these students do not have caring families and communities, or that they do not have the agency or wherewithal to see the value of trying to “fit in” and achieve in the schooling structure.

Table two (see below) reflects the frequency of descriptors used in pre-service teachers’ imaginative rehearsal of the marginalized student. In their “scripts,” urban-ness, language status and delinquency were the most frequent descriptors. While race was frequently not named by participants, it went without saying that “urban” or “inner city” youth were invariably also youth of color, as were students who spoke a language other than English. It is possible that this relationship goes without saying; as bell hooks (2000) reminds us, the face of poverty, in the mind of white Americans, is always Black, so also perhaps marginalized students are always students of color and that goes without saying in these narratives as well. References to pop culture examples of marginalized students—like the film Dangerous Minds—always cast Latino/a or African-American actors in the roles of the urban student populations.
Table 2. Descriptions of marginalized students in pre-service narratives

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Descriptor</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Inner city” or “Urban”</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non English-speaking</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Juvenile delinquent”</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frustrated with school</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Misunderstood; “not really a bad kid”</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coming from detrimental or dangerous family and community settings</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Other high-incidence descriptors had to do with individual student affect—that marginalized students were frustrated, misunderstood and not really the “bad kids” that others might see. While pre-service teachers’ imaginings of themselves as the one person to intervene in these situations by asserting a belief in the individual human worth of the misunderstood student is more of the same messianic discourse related to their teacher-as-savior role, this imaginative rehearsal also reflects a “script” that constructs marginalized students generously. This may be a positive element of an otherwise problematic story: pre-service teachers’ generous construction of the marginalized student highlights not limitation but agency and possibility. As Martha Nussbaum (1995) suggests, this kind of imagination can be subversive, as it emphasizes the individual’s humanity over their group or numerical status, something that is especially significant in an era that privileges the “tabular form” of high-stakes tests. This is the “ability to imagine what it is like to live the life of another person, who might, given changes in circumstance, be oneself or one of one’s loved ones,” and to thereby not see simply the person in his or her present circumstances but rather in the circumstances of infinite possibility (p. 5).

That said, teacher educators must embark on a dual task: to encourage the development of this imagination and its practice in imaginative rehearsal, while also continuing to interrogate the implications of these scripts. How much of this generous construction is seeing the possibility-beyond-situation of marginalized students, and how much of it is projecting the possibility of “whiteness” onto them? Like so many pre-service teachers who claim that they are not complicit in the racist structure because they are “colorblind” with regard to their students (and therefore do not, then, see them at all), so also the story of messianic teacher-as-savior includes saving the student of color from color itself by helping them to “act white” (Ogbu & Fordham, 1986).

**Moving Pre-Service Teachers Beyond the Messianic**

One of the tasks of teacher education is encouraging pre-service teachers to critically examine the impact of their own experience on their future classroom practice, or what they think they know about schools, teaching and students. This critical work takes time, and often can only be begun in the smallest of ways during the course of the average short teacher education program (Darling-Hammond, MacDonald, Snyder, Whitford, Ruscoe & Fickel, 2000). However, there were some students whose imagined encounters with marginalized students experimented with scripts that began to challenge the complicity of the structure in students’ marginalization. Two in particular challenged 1) the meritocratic celebration of “hard work” and 2) the role of the teacher in the schooling structure, respectively.
“Working Hard” at Working Hard

Most participants agreed that “working hard” in school, or helping marginalized students build their sense of being cared for (or possibly of being “saved”) so that they, too, can “work hard,” what exactly everyone was going to be working hard doing was also left unsaid. Working hard, or the ability to work hard, seems to be an end in itself. One participant, Alexa (age 22) however, cited an experience in which she saw that just hammering away—working hard—can be alienating unless the context and skills are made explicit and meaningful. She described watching an English teacher in a classroom full of remedial students with behavioral concerns trying to teach Jane Austen’s Sense and Sensibility, to no avail. The teacher pushed for the students to read the book, and the students refused.

I remember the teacher sitting at the front of the room and just getting frustrated with these kids and yelling at them, “you have to do this!” I don’t care if you don’t want to, it’s not about that. It’s about getting through, it’s about doing the work so you guys can graduate on time!” Just seeing her screaming at them, just to push them through with no skills, with nothing, I hated it and I couldn’t wait to get my own classroom and change things.

Another student in this sample, Linda (age 20), made the connection that her experience would not necessarily be the experiences of her students.

Yeah, I became a teacher because I loved school, but there’s also the opposite—there’s 13 years of hating school and that drives people into teaching. And so they’re these ones that are like, ‘I’m sneaking in as a math teacher and then I’ll do what I am told for a couple of years and then I’m going to work the whole thing to teach the kids all the stuff that I was never taught, or never learned.’ So there are two elements and I’m starting to realize that not everyone was like me in school—it’s mostly about kids that don’t love school and don’t love to read and hate to be there and have behavior problems and are easily labeled learning disabled. Those are the majority of the students I am going to have.

Linda was unique in this group, the only one who saw the subversive—and liberatory—potential of teaching students the skills related to demystifying school success, despite her own positive schooling experiences. Youth who thrive in schools will be “better prepared to penetrate the well-remunerated opportunity structure” while those who do not are “locked out” of these opportunities (Suarez-Orozco, 2001, p. 345). The urgency of the situation is compounded when one considers that Globalization means that more and more children have had immigrant experiences, and that these children, in adolescence, have to grapple as well with fundamental issues of identity, belonging and alienation in a universe of national, social and personal fragmentation (Suarez-Orozco, 2001). Teacher education courses about “celebrating diversity” may not be adequate in these contexts. Instead, teacher educators must develop a critical stance in which the structures of power and schooling are demystified and the behaviors associated with success in school contexts are interrogated and named.

Learning to Break the Rules

Both Linda’s and Alexa’s scripts were similar to others in that they included marginalized students, the teacher-as-savior and their imaginative rehearsal of their own, better practice.
However, what distinguishes them and their experiences from others is that they both had a chance to observe field placements and engage in guided reflection—in teacher education contexts—upon both what they saw and their own experiences. Linda could see the teacher’s goal displacement in emphasizing “doing the work” over making sense of school. Alexa was able to see that her experiences in schooling were not necessarily the experiences of others and that there were people engaging in subversive work in schools that would make a difference for empowering students.

Individuals who are prepared to “break the rules” by questioning authorities and structures, or engaging in activism are more likely to be individuals who do not subscribe to certain tenets of western feminine normative behavior: their sense of self worth is not extrinsically determined, they do not conform to normative standards for appearance, intelligence and so on (Mahalik, et al 2005). Pre-service teachers, then, who are more likely to imaginatively rehearse subversive teaching—who can imagine a script that does not include “doing what they’re told”—may have to be both a) exposed to such a script, as Linda describes, and b) be sufficiently liberated from the patterns of conformity and compliance reinforced in the structure that creates the “good girl.”

Problematising messianic discourses means requiring pre-service teachers to name their own complicity in the structures of racism and classism and to challenge their own assumptions about the raced discourses of “success” and “goodness” in schools and the ways in which this knowledge is mystified by the structures of power. In other words, their task is to a) work to understand their own participation in and involvement with the structures of oppression, the costs of that involvement and their own white privilege and b) work with students to make explicit the contours of the discourses of “success” in schools and schooling, all the while emphasizing these are “skills” or tools to use to for ultimate resistance and transformation. In doing so it is possible that the pre-service teacher might imagine a fuller and richer self: not a “savior” but rather a collaborator toward seeking truth and a fuller humanity. As the story goes, instead of heading out to save lives, these pre-service teachers might find that they are the ones who, in the end, need saving. In exploring the possibility that submission, conformity and compliance are not necessary for academic attainment, perhaps the high cost of the “A’s and praise” will be revealed.

**Conclusion: Reframing the quick-fix of salvation**

Gloria Ladson-Billings (2006) reframes the “achievement gap” as an “education debt”: the effect of multi-generational inequality of educational opportunity has a complex cumulative effect that cannot be addressed through any quick fix, as would be implied in “closing” any “gap” (Noguera, 1996). Teacher educators must stress that pre-service teachers acknowledge the culpability of the system as part of a larger structure that, as Lisa Delpit (1992) writes, engages in “Discourse-stacking,”

[Teachers can] discuss openly the injustices of allowing certain people to succeed based not upon merit but upon which family they were born into, which Discourse they had access to as children. The students, of course, already know this, but the open acknowledgement of it in the very institution that facilitates the sorting process is liberating in itself. After acknowledging the inequality of the system, the teacher’s stance can then be, “Let me show you how to cheat!” And, of course, to cheat is to learn the Discourse that would otherwise exclude them from participating in and transforming the mainstream . . . we can again let our students know they can resist a system that seeks to limit them to the bottom rung of the social and economic ladder (p. 301).
One of the first steps in developing this stance is to begin to construct marginalized students generously and agentively: to see their potential, possibility and humanity. Some of the participants in this study were on their way to achieving this initial stance, despite having not yet interrogated the scripts implicit in their imaginative rehearsals. While I do not want to portray unfairly these pre-service teachers’ efforts at reaching out and caring for students, or their honorable intentions to enter into the teaching profession and create human connections, I do want to expand upon the implications of their solutions. The messianic script locates the “problem” in students, their families and their communities, when in reality blame should be laid at another door entirely. Furthermore, for many pre-service teachers, their own school selves and the way they envision the landscape of teachers’ possible work may be truncated by the same structures that marginalize others. With deeper critical examination, they too may find richer work and richer possible selves.
References


(Endnotes)

1 The title of this piece is borrowed from the short story of the same name by Flannery O’Connor. It appears in the 1971 reissue of *The Complete Stories*.

2 This terminology is intended here to race the term “mainstream”—which is to say that it is not representative of any “majority” culture but rather reflective of a larger structure of racism that conflates whiteness with “normalcy”; anything that is not, therefore, white, is outside of the mainstream and marginalized as abnormal or sub-culture. As Urrieta (2006) writes, this is not restricted to just white people but rather anyone who would use whiteness and white cultural capital as a “standard.”

3 As one of my critically-minded doctoral students said, “it’s as if someone announced that if things aren’t going well somewhere in the world they shout “send in the white people!””

4 There were a small number of men among the pre-service teachers’ whose data are included in this paper. They are certainly not “good girls” as defined above despite also being good and school and benefiting from the structure. However, as white men they have automatic “side bets” (Dworkin 1987) that make their process of school rewards and career discernment different altogether. Additionally, they may not have the same stake of valued identity in the perpetuation of belief in a benign, meritocratic schooling system.