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Fall 2010

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Problematic Conceptualizations: Allies in Teacher Education for Social Justice

VONZELL AGOSTO

ABSTRACT: This review of the literature on the concept ally and ally identity development was inspired by a qualitative study exploring the identities and social justice values of prospective teachers of color. Although the participants in the original study never used the term *ally*, their narratives inspired me to characterize them as allies in the struggle for social justice education. However, a review of the literature on allies, as analyzed through critical race theory and critical discourse analysis, revealed emerging conceptualizations of ally as being incongruent with minority identities that position people of color at the periphery of this social justice discourse in education. As the emerging literature on allies from student affairs begins to penetrate teacher education, I urge teacher educators to consider the implications of these conceptualizations for the preparation of teachers.



Despite the tensions across theories of social justice (Cochran-Smith, 2008; Gewirtz, 1998; North, 2006), the concept is increasingly present in the teacher education literature as a recognized strand in teacher education reform (Zeichner, 2003). Teacher educators are increasingly grappling with concepts related to social justice (i.e., privilege, domination, antioppressive education, equity) in the attempt to prepare prospective teachers to understand justice, their role in its pursuit, and how to provide an equitably excellent education for all students. The role of an ally is important in the discussion of teacher education because teachers are increasingly expected to understand their role in educational injustice and how to perpetuate justice. Although there is no definitive statement on what social justice entails, an orientation toward justice is reflected in the dominant ideology in the United States “that espouses values of fairness, equality, and equal opportunity” (Goodman, 2000, p. 1067). Identifying the incongruence between the values espoused and practiced can expose areas of injustice.

Teacher educators are not alone in shaping the experiences and perceptions of college students who aspire to teach; student affairs personnel also have a critical role in their development. For instance, student affairs offices

and personnel help to facilitate success, provide a campus climate conducive to success, and contribute to the overall quality of the student experience in collegiate institutions. Students who are prospective teachers typically spend their first 2 years encountering programs, policies, and procedures generated by student affairs personnel. Therefore, frameworks in the literature that inform the service and programs provided to students should be understood by teacher educators who will encounter these students as they matriculate into teacher education programs. Depending on the manner in which institutions and their representatives articulate social justice, the college experience can be productive or counterproductive to the development of ally identities for social justice.

Although embedded in the framework of social justice education, conceptualizations of ally have thus far escaped the critical examination that social justice pedagogy typically entails, although they are finding expression in the literature either through studies of undergraduate students who identify as White (Munin & Speight, 2010) or through studies of religion among students of color (Mahaffey & Smith, 2009). Of primary concern here is the literature on teacher education that relies on these conceptualizations of ally and models of ally identity development (Aveling, 2004, 2006; Calderwood et al., 2008; Mize, 2006; Titone, 1999; Titone, Schalk, & Gibson, 2006).

Using methods of critical discourse analysis (CDA) in the tradition of scholars such as Fairclough and Wodak (1997), Thompson (1987), and van Dijk (2001), I analyze elements in the academic literature emerging from student affairs and entering teacher education that focus on conceptualizations of ally identity and variations (e.g., social justice ally, racial justice ally) to expose the underlying linguistic and narrative structures that operate in the service of domination (i.e., White supremacist ideology). This review of the literature aims to illustrate, through critical race theory (CRT) perspectives, how ideologies of race and racism (as social constructions) are generated through the elite discourses (van Dijk, 1995) and dispersed through published research. I conclude with implications and recommendations for the preparation of teachers with attention to the implications for prospective teachers of color.

Conceptual Framework

CRT is an antioppressive theory that “draws from the strengths of multiple disciplines, epistemologies, and research approaches” (Yosso & Solórzano, 2005, p. 135). Critical legal scholars (D. Bell, 1992; Crenshaw, 1991) advanced CRT through law, whereas Gloria Ladson-Billings (1998) and William Tate (1997) introduced CRT into education (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Five defining elements form the basic assumptions, perspectives, and pedagogies of CRT: a focus on (1) race and racism, (2) social justice and social justice practice,

(3) historical context, (4) the contestation of dominant ideology (i.e., White supremacy), and (5) the recognition of experiential knowledge (Villalpando, 2004). This review of the literature on ally uses critical race perspectives to analyze the scholarship informing the field of teacher preparation, specifically concerning college students who aspire to become teachers. CRT perspectives and CDA methods are applied to expose the nature of oppression as it operates through academic literature, to frame a strand of the social justice education discourse that privileges dominant identities.

Methods of Analyses

Methods of CDA help to identify underlying structures (linguistic and narrative) and modalities that support ideology in the service of domination (Thompson, 1987). CDA approaches discourse as being socially constructed, constructive, and embedded in society, and it aims to expose the links among language, ideology, and social action. This critical approach takes ideology as a product and creative force in structuring lived realities through language. According to Fairclough and Wodak (1997),

1. CDA addresses social problems, 2. Power relations are discursive, 3. Discourse constitutes society and culture, 4. Discourse does ideological work, 5. Discourse is historical, 6. The link between text and society is mediated, 7. Discourse analysis is interpretative and explanatory, and 8. Discourse is a form of social action. (p. 280)

Thompson (1987) described phases of an interpretive process of discourse analysis (hermeneutical approach) for exposing ideology through the "analysis of language and power" (p. 534). The phases include social-historical analysis, formal or discursive analysis (i.e., nominalization, passivization, narrative structure), and interpretation, and they are useful for analyzing conceptions of ally, a role where discourses of race and justice meet. CRT and CDA reveal how some discourses circulate or are manipulated to have more influence than others.

As Rogers, Malancharuvil-Berkes, Mosley, Hui, and Joseph (2005) found in their review of the educational literature using CDA, many of the findings in the studies identified "unintended consequences of educational decisions, policies, and social practices" (p. 383). The authors asserted that the broader category of "critical discourse analyses should more consciously draw on the history of scholarship in Critical Race Theory . . . especially when engaging issues of race, racism, and anti-racism" (p. 385). The call for CRT is echoed by Patton, McEwen, Rendón, and Howard-Hamilton (2007), who contended that there has been little attention to race and racism or the intersection of multiple identities in theories of student development used by student affairs professionals. They recommend that professionals working in higher education use critical race perspectives in their daily practice.

Following is a review of the literature on ally and ally development using CDA methods and CRT perspectives to describe the underlying linguistic and narrative structures and patterns of thinking that undergird what is problematic about the emergent conceptualizations of ally and models of ally identity development. The discussion bridges textual analysis to the social implications of the discourse on allies for the preparation of teachers of color. For as Fairclough argued (1995), the analysis of texts should not be isolated from analysis of institutions and discursive practices within with such texts are embedded.

Review of the Literature on Social and Racial Justice Ally Development

Historically, the concept of ally has been most prevalent among LGBTQI activists and researchers concerned with the development of allies (LGBTQI is an acronym for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender/transsexual, queer/questioning, intersex; Chojnacki & Gelberg; 1995; Washington & Evans, 1991/2005). It has generally been deployed to distinguish heterosexual advocates working from a position of heterosexual privilege for LGBTQI rights (Broido, 2000) from those whose work is not from the same position of privilege. In the context of LGBTQI struggles for justice, an ally is “a person who is a member of the dominant or majority group who works to end oppression in his or her personal and professional life through support of, and as an advocate with and for, the oppressed population” (Washington & Evans, 1991/2005, p. 195). The concept of ally has also been used in reference to men who challenge violence directed at women (Fabiano, Perkins, Berkowitz, Linkenback, & Stark, 2003). In the following conceptualizations of ally and models of ally identity development, racial identity is invoked or emphasized.

The emergent literature on social justice from student affairs on college student development also uses the term *ally* (i.e., social justice ally) in association with a position of privilege (Broido & Reason, 2005; Edwards, 2006; Reason & Broido, 2005; Reason, Broido, Davis, & Evans, 2005; Reason, Roosa Millar, & Scales, 2005). Researchers investigating social justice among high school students (Lewis-Charp, 2003) and college students (Broido & Reason, 2005; Edwards, 2006; Reason & Broido, 2005) have relied on Anne Bishop’s (1994/2002) definition of ally. She defines a social justice ally as “a member of an oppressor group who works to end a form of oppression which gives him or her privilege. For example, a White person who works to end racism” (p. 152). The attachment of ally to privilege is especially the case in research examining social justice-related dispositions among White college students (Broido, 2000; Reason et al., 2005).

In exploring how college experiences affect the development of social justice allies, Broido (2000) developed a model of social justice identity develop-

ment to describe the status of White college students identified by peers as allies. An extension of Broido's model was forwarded by Edwards (2006), who conceptualized ally as an identity to be developed and who argued that ally identity is always aspirational. This process of development through stages involves continuous readjustment and effort that are accompanied by fluctuations in perspectives and behaviors that provoke changes in the individual and the environment, which can then force a revision in ally status. Rather than an identity of attainment or position, ally is an identity forged through action and disposition in connection to principle.

In this model, the ally relationship is based on principle (ally to an issue) rather than on relationships with allies "working with" or for another or others. Edwards (2006) argued that there are three statuses under the heading of *aspiring social justice ally*: aspiring ally for self-interest, aspiring ally for altruism, and social justice ally. Of the three, those engaging social justice from the first two (self-interest, altruism) conceive of themselves as "allies to" a person or target/oppressed group and so pose the greatest risk of doing harm by behaving inconsistently or ineffectively in their social justice efforts or by perpetuating systems of oppression. In contrast, those working within the *aspiring social justice ally* status conceive of themselves as an "ally to an issue" and pose the least risk of doing harm (social justice ally) as they work from principle: for a cause rather than for a person or group.

These conceptualizations of ally and models of ally identity development rest on the oppressor–oppressed duality, with *ally* referring only to those in dominant/oppressor groups (i.e., heterosexual, male, White). For instance, Reason and colleagues (2005) proposed a model of racial justice ally development and definition of racial justice ally: "Racial justice allies are Whites who are actively working to end racism and racial oppression" (pp. 530–531). This model builds on Hardiman and Jackson's (1997) model of social (justice) identity development, which relies on binary constructions (i.e., agents and targets). These conceptualizations of ally imply much that is not readily transparent, leaving teacher educators and practitioners to unpack or forward them as conceived in the literature. In the following section, I analyze the underlying linguistic, social, and thought structures that shape the discourse on who can or cannot be an ally.

CDA of the Literature

Scholars studying race have identified various ways in which language indicates racial ideology and how racial discourses are articulated. Their findings include the denial of racism in racist discourse (van Dijk, 1992), the use of strategic talk among students to avoid appearing racist (Bonilla-Silva & Forman, 2000), and antiracist race talk (hooks, 1995). Patterns of racial ideology operate discursively through stories (van Dijk, 1993) and master scripts

(Swartz, 1992): the “classroom practices, pedagogy, instructional materials,” and “theoretical paradigms” that are constructed and “grounded in Eurocentric and White supremacist ideologies” (p. 341).

Linguistic Analysis

The formal phase of discourse analysis presented by Thompson (1987) involves the interpretation of ideology as linguistic constructions. In the literature on ally and social justice education more broadly, the passive construction generally references minority groups (i.e., targeted). Passivization is evident when verbs are rendered in the passive form, as in the statement “the suspect is being investigated” rather than “police officers are investigating” (pp. 526–527). It deletes action and agency, omits processes, or refers to people as things in the passive structure (i.e., the oppressed) while obscuring the agency and actions of the majority group, allowing the power behind privilege to remain invisible. This linguistic structure has different effects, depending on the subject, and the actions that sustain oppression are hidden in the structures of language. These conceptualizations of ally rely on the following interrelated thought structures: dualisms, single axis of oppression or identity, blood quantum, and a person-centered orientation toward justice.

Major Thought Structures

Reliance on dualisms. Assigning the title of *racial justice ally* based on Whiteness separates and thus leaves nonmajority antiracist agents nameless. The namelessness suggests that those classified as members of an oppressed group, by virtue of their oppressed status in the dualistic framework of oppressor–oppressed, are either (1) antioppressive in their philosophies, ideologies, and behaviors (as having a antioppressive orientation) or (2) Others, invisible yet markedly present by an implied relationship with “White allies.” The namelessness of teachers of color undermines the solidarity implied by the term: “The range of experiences of people holding multiple identities and diverse social group memberships poses continuing challenges to theories of oppression to account for their experiences” (L. A. Bell, 2007, p. 8).

Focus on a single axis of oppression and identity. Society does not evenly distribute privilege or power across and within groups. The intersectionality of privilege and subordination (Wildman & Davis, 1996) that comes with the intersectionality of multiple identities (Crenshaw, 1991), changing contexts, and power differentials is met by the impreciseness of language in describing relationships with facets of privilege and subordination. Oppression theorized as interlocking systems (hooks, 1984) raises attention to the interdependency of these systems (Bishop, 2002) and the seepage between binaries (i.e., dominant–majority, majority–minority, oppressor–oppressed). The divides do not hold up given the ways in which a form of oppression (i.e., racism)

“mitigates other areas of privilege” (Goodman, 2000, p. 1077). In this multiplicity or matrix of domination (Collins, 1990), someone can be oppressed in some ways and privileged in others.

Blood quantum theory: Racial purity/impurity. A blood quantum theory of race is present in conceptualizations of racial justice ally because the definitions depend on unitary categories of race (i.e., monoracial, biracial). Conceptualizing ally as being dependent on a singular (pure) racial category makes it unattainable to those whose identity spans the spectrum of racial categories. This discussion also brings the term in use here—that is, *teachers of color*—into scrutiny as it conceals the ancestry of European descent among people of color and adheres to the blood quantum theory upholding biological racism (the “one drop rule,” or hypodescent). Conceptualizations of ally that hinge on race as a biological rather sociopolitical construct suggest that allies for racial justice wage a struggle located in the materiality of human biology rather than social power.

Individual- or person-oriented justice. An individual or person-oriented conceptualization centers on the individual’s status related to social identity rather than principle. Individual- or person-oriented concepts, such as ally to/with/for someone, and those oriented toward principle or stance (political, ideological), such as ally in/to/for or against, suggests two conceivably different groups: those who work together and those who work against justice. When based on status, achieving the role of ally depends on personal relationships with those less privileged and according to one social marker, whereas those working according to principle can work across social identity groups, on intersecting oppressions, in the absence of those similarly inclined, and when relationships built on justice principles have not yet been developed.

Social-Historical Counternarratives of Race

According to the model of CDA proposed by Thompson (1987), “in analyzing ideology we are concerned to examine how the meaning mobilized by discursive forms is *effective* in specific social-historical circumstances, that is, how it *takes hold* in these circumstances and serves therein to sustain relations of domination” (p. 528). This analysis of how racial justice ally is conceptualized is situated in a larger social-historical context through the literature from CRT in law, which preceded CRT in education. These counternarratives of race demonstrate the broader implications of this inquiry into ally and the discursive exclusion of teachers of color from prominent roles in antiracist efforts. The significance of White supremacist ideology to racial justice ally identity is illustrated in how White privilege constructs racial identities.

White supremacist ideology. The term *white supremacist ideology* reflects Whiteness, power, and ideology. White supremacy is defined as

a political, economic, and cultural system in which Whites overwhelmingly control power and material resources, conscious and unconscious ideas of White

superiority and entitlement are widespread, and relations of White dominance and non-White subordination are daily re-enacted across a broad array of institutions and social settings. (Ansley cited in Mills, 2003, p. 179)

According to Harris (1993), “the deep historical roots of systematic white supremacy that has given rise to definitions of group identity predicated on the racial subordination of the ‘other’” (p. 1785). Kendall (2006) defined White privilege as “an institutional (rather than personal) set of benefits granted to those of us who, by race, resemble the people who dominate the powerful positions in our institutions” (p. 63). Whiteness as metaprivilege defines who is and who is not White, and it delineates the boundaries of non-White racial identities (Flagg, 2005).

Whiteness and White privilege. Since bell hooks (1990) called for the “production of a discourse on race that interrogates [Whiteness]” (p. 54), Whiteness has received increased attention. CRT scholars in law and the strand known as critical Whiteness studies, as well as antiracist activists, examine Whiteness as power, prestige, metaprivilege (Flagg, 2005), and privilege (Kendall, 2006; Wildman, 2005). The sociocultural forces presently operating in the United States in support of White privilege include the cultural push to color blindness, failure to engage the individual-group dynamic in relation to the notion of equality, White participation in the construction of race from a White-privileged viewpoint, and the tendency of those benefiting from White privilege to “take back the center” in discourse, turning attention away from conversations about race toward an emphasis on White concerns and issues (Wildman, 2005). These forces are pertinent to understanding how power operates so that even spheres of antioppressive action are not impervious. The following discussion considers the significance and implications of the concept of racial justice ally, as described here, for teachers who identify as teachers of color.

Discussion of Findings and Implications

The conceptualizations of ally in the reviewed literature exemplify the functions of White power and privilege that operate through elite (i.e., academic) discourse. “It may well be that of all the elite preformulations of racism, those of academic discourse are ultimately, though often indirectly (through textbooks, media, or politics), most influential” (van Dijk, 1995, p. 15). The resulting cultural narratives take hold in the university through curricula, research, literature, and programming. Conceptualizations of racial justice ally in education, predicated on a position of privilege (White identity), mirror and construct the social-historical conditions and hinge on underlying linguistic and narrative structures that place teachers of color at the margins in the struggle for social justice education. Their marginalization from the role of racial justice ally is coupled with their underrepresentation in the teaching

force. More than one third, or 38%, of schools across America do not have teachers of color in their classrooms (National Education Association, 2004). These conceptualizations of ally, racial justice ally in particular, are incongruent with the strand of teacher education reform that aims to increase the representation of teachers of color through the recruitment of those with a social justice ethic (Zeichner, 2003).

The conceptualizations of ally from student affairs research travel into teacher education research, thereby demonstrating “how the meaning mobilized by discursive forms is *effective* in specific social-historical circumstances, that is, how it *takes hold* in these circumstances and serves therein to sustain relations of domination” (Thompson, 1987, p. 528). These conceptualizations are permeating teacher education without critique, drawing on the literature from student affairs or centering the discourse on ally identity among White teachers. Even when CRT is recommended, it is in the context of educating White teachers as allies (e.g., Titone et al., 2006). Or, authors cite the literature from student affairs or college student development without questioning how ally is defined (e.g., Calderwood et al., 2008). These findings beg the question, when teachers of color work to forward antiracist education, who are they if not allies for racial justice?

Recommendations

Teacher educators and practitioners should revisit earlier conceptualizations of ally and models of ally identity development to examine their trajectories as a reflection of power relations, consider their strengths and weaknesses, and make needed adjustments. At times, discourses are appropriated by those with power and domesticated into a master script (Swartz, 1992) from what might have started as a counternarrative (Delgado, 1995). Previous conceptions of ally were forwarded by Anzaldúa (2000), Tatum (1992, 1994), and Kendall (2006).

Anzaldúa described the dynamics involved in forging alliances as relationships of action: doing alliance work and engaging in alliances while working toward certain goals. She stressed the many positions that one might bring to an alliance and the importance of communicating a stance. Tatum (1994) stressed the need for antiracist education to shift from understandings of victims and victimizers and offered a conceptualization of ally as a social (racial) identity that includes (1) understanding allies as people of color who enact a stance and (2) identifying the position in the racial stratification through which one works as an ally (i.e., white allies; Tatum, 1992). Her use of the term *white racial ally identity* names Whiteness rather than leaving it assumed, as if it is the norm—absent from the term (i.e., social justice ally, antiracist ally) but not the definition. Tatum (1992) also described people of color as allies based on stance rather than identity. Her approach continues to find

expression among teacher educators using or advocating CRT—namely, critical Whiteness studies—in the preparation of educators to serve as allies in antiracist education (Aveling, 2004, 2006; Titone et al., 2006).

A conceptualization of ally that is principle directed and person centered comes from Kendall (2006), who defined ally as “a person [who] is associated with another or others for some common cause or purpose” (p. 142). She described her ally role as a principle-driven effort embodied in the context of relationships (alliances) with and across groups/collectives. She wrote, “I realized I am basically an ally to issues” (p. 144) and “when I ally to a person I act in support of the person’s ideology” (p. 146). The conceptualizations of ally offered by Anzaldúa, Tatum, and Kendall offer personal insights into the complexity of conceptualizing ally, theoretically and experientially, and they are worth revisiting as student affairs professionals and teacher educators continue to define the role of ally in relationship to identity, justice, and power. Social justice discourse relies on the distinctions among social groups for the purpose of identification, representation, and distributions of resources. While I do not propose that the distinctions be abandoned (yet), I do advocate that teacher educators and practitioners become less dependent on linguistic and social structures that aid domination over liberation. An inclusive conception of ally is important in this endeavor. Collaboration among professionals in student affairs, teacher education, and social justice activists from various antioppressive stances is recommended to encourage acts of communication that motivate inclusive models of ally identity. Also needed are role models and conceptual models in teacher education that can (1) respond to the complexity in the identities of those oriented toward social justice ideals and (2) inspire social justice advocates, allies, and activists to carve the identities, behaviors and capacities that reflect antioppressive collective action.

A social justice pedagogy of cultural critique coupled with social action (Hines, 2007) can assist in the interrogation of conceptions of ally because it involves the interrogation of taken-for-granted concepts to unveil the ways in which their mobilization affect the possibilities for social change. The absence of critique concerning social justice discourses by those advocating for social justice in teacher education is especially problematic for students because the “victims” or “targets” of the power of institutional (elite) discourse in education are usually the public or citizens at large (i.e., students) who are “dependent on institutional and organizational power” (van Dijk, 2001, p. 363). Concerns raised in this discussion signal the need for continued scrutiny of concepts and theories for their applicability, accessibility, and capacity to serve students, social justice education, and research.

Conclusion

This coupling of CRT and CDA centers the concern for students of color in the social justice discourse on allies. According to a review of educational

research using CDA, this has not generally been the case, and even when race and racism are discussed, the perspectives of White students are centered (Rogers et al., 2005). The tendency for holders of White privilege or Whiteness as ideology to "retake the center" is noted by Wildman (2005) in her description of how White privilege is maintained today. This critique extends to teacher education because it focuses on preparing White students (Zeichner & Hoeft, 1996). Even in multicultural teacher education, preparing teachers to work with ethnically diverse groups considers the needs and concerns of teachers who are White (Sleeter, 2001) and ignores students of color as subjects while positioning them as objects (Montecinos, 2004).

Although the construction and forwarding of these conceptualizations may not be intended to exclude, marginalize, objectify, or leave nameless students of color in the discourse of social justice ally identity among teachers, those who rely on them can intentionally deconstruct them and that which make them problematic for all students. Preparing students to enact equitable educational policies and practices requires that teacher educators and student affairs professionals promote and model critical attention to the paradigms, ideologies, and value systems of the seemingly innocuous, because the benefits and harms of oppression are not always obvious, immediate, or direct. This is a testament to the insidious nature and mythos of oppression. The role that students and teachers are hailed to play within the discourse of social justice education communicates what is (and what is not) expected of them. In congruence with the aim to prepare teachers who advance education that is socially just, the term *ally* should be theoretically and discursively accessible to all students. **TEP**

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