READING: "THE CRISIS IN BLACK EDUCATION" FROM A POST-WHITE ORIENTATION

By **Marcus Croom**

As a literacy scholar, I have spent a great deal of time theorizing race in pursuit of practical ends—advancing the literacy practices of Black children in US schools. This themed volume focused on the "crisis in Black education" caused me to reflect on this question: What makes "Black education" Black? Black as a category of race needs to be explained rather than assumed.

In this article, I will argue that race can be theorized either as common sense or as consequential D/discourse.[1] I will also offer contrasting views of what "crisis" may mean according to each theory and conclude by suggesting that this moment of "crisis" is thrusting upon us an opportunity to read text and the world from a post-White orientation. By post-White orientation, I mean a racial understanding and practice characterized by (a) unequivocal regard for "non-White" humanity, particularly "Black" humanity; (b) demotion of "White" standing (i.e., position, status); (c) rejection of post-racial notions; (d) non-hierarchical racialization; and (e) anticipation of a post-White sociopolitical norm.

Racing on a Different Track

According to O'Connor, Lewis, and Mueller, race is "undertheorized in research on the educational experiences and outcomes of Blacks."[2] They explain that race has been understood through two dominant perspectives: race as variable and race as culture. These understandings of race ignore or minimize heterogeneity, intersectionality, and the institutional production of race and racial discrimination where Black persons are concerned. Alternatively,

O'Connor, Lewis, and Mueller argue that race is *produced* as a social category and urge that future research take an orientation of race aligned with the following:

> (a) theoretical attention to how race-related resources shape educational outcomes, (b) attention to the way race is a product of educational settings as much as it is something that students bring with them, (c) a focus on how everyday interactions and practices in schools affect educational outcomes, and (d) examination of how students make sense of their racialized social locations in light of their schooling experiences.[3]

Such studies will continue to uncover how schools produce race as a social category. Research focused on race production, then, will have implications for talking and writing about race and how race impacts views on education. The following framework conceptualizes race as common sense and race as consequential D/discourse.

Race as Common Sense: The Wrong Train

Sociologist Celine-Marie Pascale finds that race is widely understood as "common sense," which she defines as "a saturation of cultural knowledge that we cannot fail to recognize and which, through its very obviousness, passes without notice."[4] In other words, these are " assumptions that we make about life and the things we accept as natural. Common sense leads people to believe that we simply see what is there to be seen. For example, common sense leads us to believe that we simply 'see' different races."[5] She concluded that common-sense knowledge of race was discussed in four ways: "as a matter of color, nationality, culture, or blood."[6] What all of these ways have in common is that race is understood uncritically: that is, in a manner that does not question serious incoherencies and contradictions. A deeper, more important point about race as common sense is how it assumes racial White superiority.[7] The racially White superordinate assumption included in common-

sense notions of race is morally bankrupt and indefensible.

Race as Consequential D/discourse

Race as consequential D/discourse is defined as the individual, collective, institutional, or global production of race, through meaningful ways of being, languaging, and symbolizing, *and* the effects of such race production (i.e., big "D" Discourse and little "d" discourse; see note 1). I trace the beginning of this understanding of race to W. E. B. Du Bois's book *The Souls of Black Folk*. Du Bois's "study of Black identity marks a turning point away from biology and towards discursive interaction."[8] Thus, Du Bois must be counted among foundational theorists when we historicize the understanding that race is a D/discursive, socially constructed, consequential human practice.

According to anthropologist Kevin Michael Foster, the antecedents/roots of defining race as consequential D/discourse can be found in the vindicationist tradition, a tradition coined by W. E. B. Du Bois. Foster explains further,

> According to [St. Clair] Drake, vindicationism reflects the work of scholars to "set straight the oft-distorted record of the Black experience and to fill in the lacunae resulting from the conscious or unconscious omission of significant facts about Black people" (Drake 1987, vol. 1: xviii). Today, even where vindicationism is not the explicit goal of Black scholars, the influence of this tradition is often apparent. Vindicationism may not be the defining characteristic for the work of African-descended scholars, but it is a recurrent feature (Baker 1994, Franklin 1989).[9]

The vindicationist tradition sustains and advances us as persons raced as Black. More specifically, the vindicationist tradition and Du Bois's work are critically important today as they were at their origins because "race emerged in language, and it survives in language."[10] But not only this: race is also produced in ways that have grave consequences for human beings. For example, rhetoric scholar Kelly E. Happe

uncovered that genes are made into artifacts of race and, in fact, do not corroborate race as the biological, common-sense view of race alleges. Race, then, should be interrogated and denaturalized as a self-evident feature of the human body, even at the subcellular level. This stance contradicts those who, whether unlettered or lettered, promote genes, skin, or other claims about the human body as corroboration of race as common sense.[11] Again, race is consequential D/discourse. Whenever race occurs, it does not occur naturally; rather, race occurs because humans create and consume race for human ends. Each of these ways of understanding race—as common sense or as consequential D/discourse—may influence how race and "Black education" are viewed.

Race and "Black Education"

When we understand race as common sense, "Black education" may mean the realm of education that is a subset of, or is even apart from, "White education." Said another way, "Black education" is education from Black people's perspective, on Black people's terms, and in Black people's experience. From this orientation, "Black education" is a self-explanatory label that marks the largely homogenous "Black" experience of education in the US according to those who are themselves actually "Black."

The "crisis" in "Black education," when race is understood as common sense, is a crisis in at least two ways. First, Black education is assumed to be subordinate to White education. Second, Black education primarily or exclusively involves Black people and places—Black people and places assumed to be subordinate to White people and places. Accordingly, the question becomes, what can be done about those inferior "Black children" and their inferior "Black education"? To be clear, this is not my own view; rather, I am articulating the common sense view of race where education and crisis are concerned. According to this meaning of crisis, within the "Black" boundary there is catastrophe, and beyond the "Black" boundary, all is well or is at least better.

When we understand race as consequential D/discourse, "Black education" may mean the social partitioning of access to some aspect(s) of accumulated human knowledge, according to the racial hierarchy of "White" over "Black." In other words, education itself is not racialized unless persons socially produce education as such through, for example, talk, text, or some other practice. Importantly, I hasten to add, education can be racialized for both ethical and unethical reasons. A "crisis" in "Black education," when race is understood as consequential D/discourse, is a crisis in terms of thought, practice, systems, and institutions, whether local or global. Therefore, the question becomes, what patterns and barriers are hostile to the humanity of persons raced as "Black"? I believe that this question begins to approach the essence of the vindicationist tradition of Carter G. Woodson along with many others like Du Bois.[12] From the consequential D/discursive understanding of race, we who are raced as "Black" are always already fully human, and thus legitimate inheritors of all accumulated human knowledge, but our legitimacy as inheritors of all human knowledge and our intersectional, heterogeneous humanity are not always adequately honored and regarded. Such dishonor and disregard toward our human inheritance and plentitude is evidenced by historic and current thought and practice, including the processes of education (whether in school or out-of-school).

With this second perspective of "Black education crisis" in mind, it becomes obvious why, yet again, we are faced with the need to exclaim, "Black lives matter!" It should come as no surprise that the organization of schools and classrooms, the instructional practices therein, and the resources and materials apportioned to places raced as "Black" would produce pipelines to prison and poverty.[13] Given the innumerable artifacts, institutions, and ideologies derived from Western Europeans' invention and exploitation of race,[14] we who are raced as "Black" fully expect to fight philosophically, epistemologically, theologically, theoretically, hermeneutically, linguistically, economically, politically, interpersonally, intrapersonally, and with our own colored, clenched hands to protect our humanity, the humanity of our children, our loved ones, and our communities. For many persons raced as "Black" in the US, this is the American way.

Our present times have shown us again that we have a choice to make: will we choose to orient ourselves to race as common sense, reading the written word and the unwritten world only according to White superordinate, Western European design? Or, will we choose the post-White orientation, wherein we are critically aware of the consequential D/discourse that metaphorically, and quite literally, writes the codes of the racialized matrix in which (and according to which) we live (and die)?

Conclusion

I have not argued that there is no such thing as race or racism. Neither have I argued that persons raced as Black should renounce the racial descriptor "Black." Further, I reject post-racialism in all its forms.[15] To the contrary, I have argued above that race and racism are produced by human thought and practice for human ends. Most of these human ends for race production are patently White superordinate (obviously including racism), but thankfully some human ends for race production are post-White oriented and human nurturing for persons categorized as "Black" (i.e., vindicationist). The issue is not the label "Black" per se; the issue is whether one is "Black" on racially subordinate terms or on human-peer terms.[16] As this suggests, post-racialism fails to hit the point. The point is race production and whether the race production in question is ethical or unethical. Rather than post-racialism, we should pursue the development of racial literacies—the critical, human cultural toolkit supporting human well-being amid the thought and practice of race. This article and the following lesson are designed to support the development of racial literacies among teachers and students across all racial categories. To give post-racialism full consideration—even if one day, racialization should come to an end, we still must nurture and protect human beings (particularly "Black" human beings) right now and until that post-racial day arrives (again, if it would).

Whatever the current (raced as) Black education crisis may be, we should face it on human terms, rather than on racially White superordinate terms—terms that make Whiteness normative. Perhaps the "crisis in Black education" is the recurring, practical repercussions of not yet realizing, together, what it means for persons, raced as Black, to be human.[17]

Notes:

1. Throughout, I use the big "D" and little "d" distinction offered by Gee, *Social Linguistics and Literacies: Ideology in Discourses*. "Discourse" is meaningful ways of being in the world, and "discourse" is meaningful ways of using language or symbols in the world; for example, talk or texts are "discourse" employed in the "Discourse" of Black, White, Latino, Asian, Native American, etc.

2. Carla O'Connor, Amanda Lewis, and Jennifer Mueller, "Researching 'Black' Educational Experiences and Outcomes: Theoretical and Methodological Considerations," *Educational Researcher* 36, no. 9 (2007): 541, doi:10.3102/0013189X07312661.

3. Ibid., 546.

4. Celine-Marie Pascale, "Talking about Race: Shifting the Analytical Paradigm," *Qualitative Inquiry* 14, no. 5 (2008): 725, doi:10.1177/1077800408314354.

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid., 726.

7. Charles Wade Mills, *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997); Dante A. Puzzo, "Racism and the Western Tradition," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 25, no. 4 (1964): 579–86.

8. Kirt H. Wilson, "Towards a Discursive Theory of Racial Identity: The Souls of Black Folk as a Response to Nineteenth-Century Biological Determinism," *Western Journal of Communication* 63, no. 2 (1999): 194.

9. Kevin Michael Foster, "Vindicationalist Politics: A Foundation and Point of Departure for an African Diaspora Studies Program," *Transforming Anthropology* 6, no. 1–2 (1997): 2.

10. Kelly E. Happe, "The Body of Race: Toward a Rhetorical Understanding of Racial Ideology," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 99, no. 2 (2013): 135, doi:10.1080/00335630601076326.

11. Richard J. Herrnstein and Charles Murray, *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life* (New York: Free Press, 1996).

12. St. Clair Drake, *Black Folk Here and There: An Essay on History and Anthropology* (Los Angeles: University of California Center for Afro-American Studies, 1990); Woodson, *The Mis-Education of the Negro*.

13. Gloria Ladson-Billings, "From the Achievement Gap to the Education Debt: Understanding Achievement in U.S. Schools," *Educational Researcher* 35, no. 7 (2006): 3–12, doi:10.3102/0013189X035007003.

14. Siep Stuurman, "Francois Bernier and the Invention of Racial Classification," *History Workshop Journal* 50 (2000): 1–21; Michael Banton, "The Classification of Races in Europe and North America: 1700-1850," *International Social Science Journal* 39, no. 1 (February 1987): 45–60.

15. Including post-racialism as argued by Leonardo, *Race Frameworks: A Multidimensional Theory of Racism and Education*.

16. Carter G. Woodson, *The Mis-Education of the Negro* (San Diego: Book Tree, 1933/2006), 199–202.

17. Sylvia Wynter, "On How We Mistook the Map for the Territory, and Re-Imprisoned Ourselves in Our Unbearable Wrongness of Being, of Desetre: Black Studies toward the Human Project," in *Not Only the Master's Tools: African American Studies in Theory and Practice,* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2006).

Marcus Croom is a doctoral candidate in Literacy, Language, and Culture at the University of Illinois at Chicago, where he is also a research assistant with the Early Literacy Impact Project. He is a graduate of North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University (Bachelor of Science in Music Education), Shaw University (Master of Divinity), and North Carolina Central University (Master of School Administration). After completing undergraduate studies in 2001, he taught K-12 music. His research examines literacies and race in education using vindicationist philosophy.

Email: **mcroom2@uic.edu**

LESSON PLAN:
READING: "THE CRISIS IN BLACK EDUCATION" FROM A POST-WHITE ORIENTATION
By: **Marcus Croom**

1. Connections to Middle School and/or High School

Children are socialized into the thought and practice of race as common sense by the time they enter kindergarten (see E. P. Apfelbaum, M. I. Norton, and S. R. Sommers, "Racial Color Blindness: Emergence, Practice, and Implications," *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 21, no. 3 (2012): 205–9, doi:10.1177/0963721411434980). By middle school and high school, children have had very sophisticated experiences with race, but typically have not been adequately supported as they navigate both normative human development and race production in their lives. This double task can be especially challenging for children "raced" as Black in American society and in American schooling (see Peter C. Murrell, Jr., "Identity, Agency, and Culture: Black Achievement and Educational Attainment," in *The Sage Handbook of African American Education*, ed. Linda C. Tillman (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2009), 89–105. The instructional aim, with middle and high school teachers and students, is simply to begin by defining race and then offering teachers and students an opportunity to (re)define themselves in light of their own better understanding of race. Teachers will prepare to facilitate this beginning by engaging in this activity and then assessing their own work.

2. Goals of Lesson Plan

Teachers and students will understand race as consequential D/discourse and how it contrasts with a common-sense understanding of race, and use dialogue and writing to (re)define themselves in light of a richer understanding of race.

3. Objectives

- Teachers and students will create a safe setting for demystifying race as a human cultural practice.
- Teachers and students will conceptualize and discuss the definition of race provided (race is consequential D/discourse).
- Teachers and students will create, discuss, and argue a point of view of race.
- Teachers and students will use focused free writing to create a shared or unshared Race Reflection.

4. National Council for Social Studies (NCSS) Standards: US History Teacher Expectations

History

- Enable learners to develop historical understanding through the avenues of social, political, economic, and cultural history and the history of science and technology.

Individuals, Groups, and Institutions

- Help learners analyze group and institutional influences on people, events, and elements of culture in both historical and contemporary settings;

- Assist learners in identifying and analyzing examples of tensions between expressions of individuality and efforts used to promote social conformity by groups and institutions;

- Enable learners to describe and examine belief systems basic to specific traditions and laws in contemporary and historical movements;

- Assist learners as they explain and apply ideas and modes of inquiry drawn from behavioral science and social theory in the examination of persistent social issues and problems.

Culture and Cultural Diversity

- Assist learners to apply an understanding of culture as an integrated whole that explains the functions and interactions of language, literature, the arts, traditions, beliefs and values, and behavior patterns;

- Have learners interpret patterns of behavior reflecting values and attitudes that contribute or pose obstacles to cross-cultural understanding**.**

6. Warm-Up (Anticipatory Set)

Teacher will launch instruction by saying: "*Today, we are going to distinguish between two ways of understanding race. The first way is nothing new. In fact, we'll call it the common-sense view of race. The second way is one you'll quickly catch on to. We do it all the time, but you probably haven't thought about race this way; we'll call the second way the consequential D/discourse view of race*." To support all students, the teacher will syllabicate and define the following words on the (smart) board before having the class choral read each word aloud:

dis/**course**: talk or writing; also things done to be identifiable in our world ("D")

con/**se**/**quen**/**tial**: has an effect following a related cause

con/**sume**: use

i/**den**/**ti**/**fi**/**able**: something that can be known, recognized, or pointed out

This vocabulary preview should take less than two minutes. Also, these terms should remain posted during the lesson. If this lesson is extended, this preview can be repeated or other terms may be previewed using the same approach.

Applying the article above to instruction, the teacher will discuss and complete a T-chart as described below.

5-10 minutes: The teacher will pose this question and discuss: "*Who are your people and what makes each of you members of the same group?*" Although directed to the whole class, this question is really an individual query. The whole class is not assumed to be members of the same group. Individual students should have an opportunity to respond to and dialogue about the question. The teacher should engage in the discussion, revealing their own personal view, but also silently noting instances when students (or when teachers themselves) offer common-sense notions of race to identify

themselves or the group with which they identify.

7. Activity (Instruction Input)

25-30 minutes: Teacher will post a T-chart to facilitate a whole-class comparison of the common-sense perspective of race and the consequentially D/discursive perspective of race. Define the "Race Is Common Sense View" as the perspective wherein race is a human feature that is self-evident and identifiable. Define the "Race Is Consequential D/discourse View" as the perspective wherein humans create and consume race for human ends. Students will provide examples of how race is commonly understood as "self-evident and identifiable" on the left side of the T-chart (e.g., skin, bone, blood, hair, name, language, culture, etc.). On the right side of the T-chart, students will provide examples of how humans "create and consume" race (labeling, ranking, storying, symbolizing, social-classing, boundary-making, etc.).

Once the T-chart is completed, the teacher will provide students with a copy of the article about Rachel Dolezal **(https:// broadly.vice.com/en_us/article/rachel-dolezal-profile-interview).**

Option 1: Students will form groups of three or four, jigsaw-read the article (each member will select a portion to read and report back to the entire group), and discuss the entire article.

Option 2: The teacher will select an excerpt from the article, and student groups will read and discuss the excerpt (e.g., begin reading at "Rachel and her college friends describe Belhaven as predominantly white" and end reading after "Finally, she says, she could live an authentic life"). Student groups will prepare to orally argue whether the "Common Sense View" or the "Consequential D/discourse View" of race best explains the racial identity of Rachel Dolezal. Students will respond to the following: "*Does Rachel Dolezal have racial identity? If so, which one(s) and why* (i.e.. according to "Common Sense" or "Consequential D/discourse")? *If not, why not* (i.e.. according to "Common Sense" or "Consequential D/discourse")?" The teacher will engage with the arguments offered by each group without suggesting which argument is right or wrong. The point is for the teacher to invite a reasoned oral argument from all groups (teachers may provide and model a common oral argument structure to support the development of a reasoned oral argument; a structure may also be provided and modeled in the following written assessment).

8. Assessment

15-20 minutes: Using free writing with a focus, students will write a Race Reflection using the following focus prompt: "*Do you have racial identity? If so, who are your racial people and what makes each of you members of the same group? If not, why not?*" Teacher may share their own Race Reflection with the whole class and even invite willing students to share their Race Reflection with the whole class or within groups. However, sharing Race Reflections requires the teacher to be comfortable managing, with credibility and sensitivity, the possibility of unexpected or unpopular viewpoints. Above all, the classroom must be a safe space for developing racial literacies, a process that includes missteps, misunderstandings, and missed opportunities. Close the lesson by saying the following: "*Race means many things to people in our world. Today*

we have explored a two-category framework that allows us to question our assumptions about race. Today was not about answering our questions, but beginning to ask questions. Whatever we ultimately conclude after wrestling with our race questions, we should not allow race to be harmful to our own humanity or the humanity of others."

The teacher will collect and review each Race Reflection to determine if the student has a reasoned reflection (reasoning appropriate for a focused free write, not a publishable text). Beyond reasoning, teachers are looking for evidence that students understand the difference between the "Common Sense View" and the "Consequential D/discourse View" of race. Because this is a focused free write, teachers will not evaluate student writing for use of writing mechanics or conventions. Overall, I suggest that teachers use this work as an ungraded assignment. If teachers find Race Reflections that derogate self or others, this should be appropriately discussed with the individual student. Importantly, students are not required to adopt one view of race or the other; they may be inconclusive. Again, this entire lesson is only a beginning effort to develop a richer understanding of race as a human cultural practice.

This writing assignment can be extended by providing a model of a publishable text, offering opportunities for student-led research, and offering teacher-led writing support to students (across multiple drafts). This extended writing process should result in a publishable text, including appropriate use of writing mechanics or conventions.

9. Teacher Resources

• *The Mis-Education of the Negro* by Carter G. Woodson (1933), especially chapter four, "Education Under Outside Control"

• *Everyday Antiracism: Getting Real about Race in School,* edited by Mica Pollock (2008), especially section A, "Race Categories: We Are All the Same, but Our Lives Are Different," and section B, "How Opportunities Are Provided and Denied Inside Schools"

• "In Rachel Dolezal's Skin" by Mitchell Sunderland (2015): **https://broadly.vice.com/en_us/article/rachel-dolezal-profile-interview**