COMBATTING THE ALTRUISTIC SHIELD IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING

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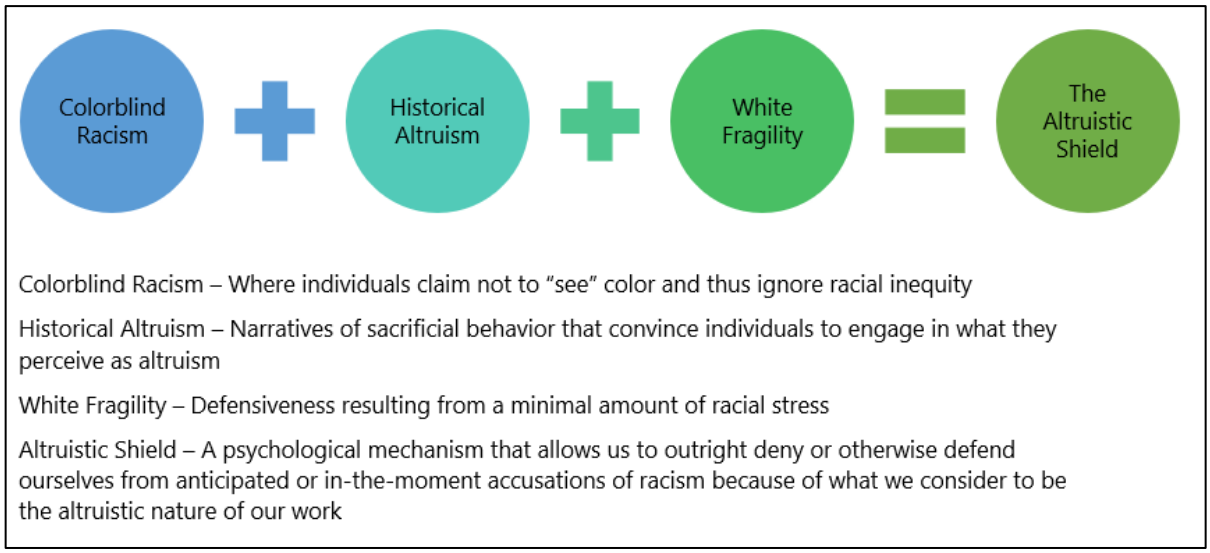
The altruistic shield describes a psychological mechanism seen among English language teaching (ELT) professionals that allows them to exempt themselves from perpetuating inequity and racism because of what they imagine is the altruistic or self-sacrificial nature of their work. Such reasoning functions as a form of reflexive emotional defensiveness that works to impede racial equity. This article describes the forces that have created so problematic a mechanism and provides suggestions ELT professionals can use to increase their awareness of racial inequity and its remedies and thus serve their students more effectively.

Keywords: adult education, critical literacy, critical theory, race, raciolinguistics, white fragility

In my experience as a Black ELT professional, I have noticed that any explicit mention of racism often causes productive conversation to cease. Over time, I have sought to understand the roots of this discomfort and have come to conceptualize these defensive reactions as the "altruistic shield" (see Figure 1). Naming this phenomenon and seeking productive means to counteract it are the focus of this paper.

Figure 1. Key Concepts Comprising the Altruistic Shield



The Altruistic Shield

The altruistic shield describes a psychological mechanism used by educators that allows us to outright deny or otherwise defend ourselves from anticipated or in-the-moment accusations of racism because of what we consider to be the altruistic nature of our work. More specifically, some ELT professionals

believe that choosing this field means that we do not play a role in systemic racism, despite extensive evidence of the persistent and pervasive White supremacy in the ELT field.

White Supremacy and ELT

From the recruitment of White native teachers (Ruecker & Ives, 2015), to the prioritization of inexperienced White teachers over more experienced colleagues of racialized groups (Ramjattan, 2019), the ELT field is designed to prize Whiteness. Flores and Rosa (2015) have conceptualized what they call "raciolinguistic ideologies" (p. 149), which focus on the perceived deficiencies of racialized users of language from the point of view of the often unacknowledged White listener. Kubota (2015) explains how academic knowledge itself is racialized, and that what is deemed "legitimate and universal" (p. 8) contains a racially discriminatory component. The classification of native English speakers has long been problematized (e.g., Canagarajah, 1999), and although it is found in other forms of language teaching, because of the history of ELT, native speakerism helps to reify the discriminatory power structures of our field.

The ELT field's low level of racial literacy descends from "colorblind racism," through which people claim not to be able to visually recognize skin color while continuing to enjoy racial privilege, relegating all racism to what Zamudio and Rios (2006) term "explicit behavioral racist acts" (p. 485). DiAngelo (2010) explains how our adherence to individualism prevents us from understanding our place in a larger, racist system, and convinces us that to opt into teaching students of color can delude us into believing it is proof of our individual lack of racism.

White Fragility and Self-Image

White teachers of racialized students require what Picower (2009) refers to as a "racialized critical consciousness" to effectively educate these learners; however, she notes, "there are multiple accounts of reported resistance to these courses and concepts by White pre-service teachers" (p. 199). This resistance is born of two intertwined concepts: teachers' belief in the altruistic nature of their work, and White fragility, which DiAngelo (2011) defines as "[a] state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves" (p. 54). The defensiveness endemic to White fragility prevents the professional growth necessary for effective teaching of racialized students.

The psychologist Anna Szuster (2016) writes, "Compliance of behavior with the norm stabilizes affective well-being and is also a means of maintaining a positive self-image" (p. 3). Choosing the ELT field helps people feel better about themselves, and the cognitive dissonance that follows from the realization that what one sees as a good can nonetheless be harmful could be particularly difficult for White teachers to comprehend and express.

Prevalence of the Altruistic Shield

The altruistic shield stretches far beyond the classroom, however, as there is ample empirical evidence suggesting that professionals in other professional fields also considered socially good demonstrate a stark discrepancy between their externally expressed feelings toward their marginalized clients and their internal beliefs. Physicians claiming egalitarian-explicit beliefs nonetheless demonstrate significant implicit bias, affecting their treatment of racialized patients (Chapman, Kaatz, & Carnes, 2013). Social work students enter the profession requiring specific education on the marginalized groups they serve (Wahler, 2011). The point from these two examples is not only that members of every profession can hold racist beliefs, but also that taking part in what has been categorized as socially beneficial work does not exempt the practitioner from perpetuating systemic racism and its harmful outcomes.

Matias and Liou (2015) explain that historical narratives of White activists have been passed down through history. The ultimate sacrifices—made by white freedom fighters like John Brown, executed for fighting to abolish slavery in 1859; Viola Liuzzo, assassinated by the Ku Klux Klan in 1965; and, most recently, Heather Heyer, run over by a neo-Nazi in Charlottesville in 2017—have served to glorify and privilege the actions of whites, turning the teaching of racialized students into "rescue missions" (p. 605), as reified by the comforting "public pedagogy" (Cann, 2015, p. 288) of White teachers in popular Hollywood films.

Recommendations

The question becomes: Where do we go from here? Many ELT professionals remain unaware of these issues despite decades of scholarship published on these very topics, and even those who are aware

often remain in a defensive crouch, hiding behind the altruistic shield and not seeming particularly eager to experience the vulnerability required to emerge from this position. As long as we remain mired in this structural dysfunction, hostage to a system that both clings to and denies its racial hierarchies, our students will be categorized as linguistically and racially deficient—and if we do not explicitly work against these intertwined assumptions, we will not provide them with the full support they deserve.

It is our duty to challenge White supremacist hegemony in ELT, especially if one comes to feel implicated in maintaining the extant systems of oppression. But how can we actually confront and change an issue that is far too complex and frankly far too difficult for any single one of us to tackle? I do not profess to have all of the answers, but I do believe I can help initiate a dialogue by advocating two essential actions all of us can do right this second—namely, we can all *change our consumption* and *challenge our context*.

Changing Our Consumption (Critical Literacy)

Ask yourself the following questions: Who is writing the literature you are reading? Do these articles and books support or challenge the racial status quo? Do they offer alternative perspectives or reify and replicate the extant dialogue? Does their bibliography contain a mix of different racial voices (e.g., Schulze & Cáceda, 2019), or does it almost exclusively cite White authors (e.g., Priddis et al., 2013)? Have you and your colleagues engaged with any conceptualization of raciolinguistic ideologies (Flores & Rosa, 2015) or other literature that challenges systemic racism in the ELT field? Though it is beyond any one individual to reverse an entire system, you definitely can raise awareness of a harmful practice and its long-reaching effects by changing your consumption and sharing what you have found with your professional circles. Will this remove systemic racism from ELT practice? No, but if we all deepen our critical literacy, if we read, share, and cite different sources, we can make the smallest of shifts in power that may one day cohere and tip the balance toward recognizing and supporting those who have been marginalized.

Challenging Our Context (Critical Theory)

Wherever you work and study, be it a private language academy, a university, a K–12 public school, or elsewhere, racism will be present. Whether it is, as mentioned above, the prioritization of the White instructors at the expense of their colleagues of color (Ramjattan, 2019), or the exclusion of educators not considered native speakers (Ruecker & Ives, 2015), there will be something you can identify, no matter how outwardly committed to racial equity your educational context claims to be. Once you encounter some practice that you believe is problematic, you can risk acting to lower the shield, engaging with the reality of the policies behind the identified issue and questioning the patterns that have led to the result. There is no guarantee the problem will be lessened or solved if you confront the situation, but there is a guarantee it will not be solved if you do *not* act.

Advocating for Our Students

I make the preceding suggestions with the goal of opening a dialogue by providing actionable options that can be undertaken by any ELT professional who is interested in avoiding the altruistic shield personally and combatting systemic racism within our field. Freire (1970) once warned us how easy it is for education to function as a tool of oppression. Many of us, myself included, read Freire in our teacher training programs, but because we do not fully internalize his message, we continue to impose our proscriptive values upon our learners. For racialized students, W. E. B. DuBois's (1897) concept of "double-consciousness" (p. 2) remains disconcertingly relevant. Our students are forced to confront this reality every day, but by challenging our context and changing our consumption, we can avoid falling behind the altruistic shield behind which we might otherwise hide.

The teaching of English has never been a neutral act. Instead of acting in ways that preserve a false self-image, we professionals must place ourselves at the forefront of the fight against the pervasiveness of White supremacy in English language teaching—but we can only do this if we stop hiding behind the altruistic shield.

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