Guest editorial: Introduction: Reconstructive discourse analysis as an approach to redressing racism in critical studies of literacy

As discourse analysts, we find ourselves continually coming back to the power of language and interaction and the ways that people use them. It is in and through language and interaction that we represent and construct our world and our sense of place and identity within it. We see discourse analysis as a potent methodological tool for excavating this process of construction, allowing us to hold still moments of discursive interaction to understand what is being built and, perhaps more importantly, *how*.

Furthermore, as researchers who are committed to teaching and learning as a practice of humanization and emancipation, we see discourse analysis as crucial for analyzing the circulation of power. As foundational works of critical discourse analysis have made visible (Fairclough, 2001; Van Dijk, 1993; Wodak and Chilton, 2005), combining discourse analysis with critical social theories can allow researchers to better understand how structures of power are built, represented and reinforced. By looking closely at the language of a policymaker, a textbook or a teacher, researchers can deconstruct how people use language to (re)produced white supremacy in and through literacy educational contexts.

Yet, many of the same scholars who have demonstrated the power of deconstructive analysis have pushed the field to also engage in reconstructive analysis (Chouliaraki and Fairclough, 1999; Luke, 1995, 2004), also referred to as positive discourse analysis (Bartlett, 2012; Martin, 2004). A reconstructive orientation to discourse analysis is an intentional shift in attention toward, in the words of Luke (2004), "redress, reconciliation and the rebuilding of social structure, institutional lives, and identities" (p. 151). In this sense, a reconstructive approach is not merely a focus on the "good" but instead a careful examination of opportunities and mechanisms for social change. Bartlett (2012, p. 10) describes this work as "bring[ing] to light the contradictions and tensions within the hegemonic order and so provid[ing] the wiggle room for naturalising alternative representations that challenge this order." It is in this wiggle room where, as researchers, we find hope and opportunity.

Mirroring the positive turn in psychology over the past two decades (Brown, 2017), there has been an increase in educational scholarship that takes on these kinds of reconstructive orientations (Darling-Hammond *et al.*, 2020; Rogers *et al.*, 2016; Rogers and Schaenen, 2014). We understand the shift in literacy research as part of this broader turn toward more humanizing research (Johnson *et al.*, 2017; Paris and Winn, 2013) that centers solidarity, imagination, love and joy. We also note that, while there seems to be a more recent and mainstream attention to reconstruction, this reconstructive orientation is not new. From our perspective, it builds on the work of many black feminist educators, scholars and philosophers (Combahee River Collective, 1983; Dillard *et al.*, 2000; hooks, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 1995a; Nash, 2013; Willis, 1995) who have been at the forefront of humanizing scholarship for decades.

Why a focus on white teachers?

Recognizing the black feminist roots of reconstructive scholarship, one might wonder why we chose to focus predominantly on white teachers in this special issue. Our focus stems in part from the well-recognized gap between the proportion of students of color in US public schools and that of teachers of color. While the proportion of teachers of color has increased over the past several decades, the US teacher population remains overwhelmingly white, with recent reports suggesting that 79% of elementary and secondary teachers identify as white, while at the same time the public school student population continues to become more diverse, with the percentage of non-white students increasing from 39% in 2000 to 54% in 2021 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021).

To be clear, we firmly agree with Haddix's (2017) call for the field to make substantial, material changes to increase the number of teachers of color, and we seek to enact this work in our institutions. Yet, diversification of the teacher workforce pipeline will necessarily take time, and we feel a sense of urgency for students of color who inhabit classrooms today. In addition, we believe that white teachers can and must learn to enact positions of co-conspiratorship (Love, 2019), working toward justice in solidarity with communities of color.

However, the existing literature centering interactions between white teachers and students of color does not offer many illustrations of what this might look like. Instead, it tends to focus on the failures of white teachers to enact culturally relevant or anti-racist teaching with their students. In her review of how teachers are positioned in the literature of critical pedagogy, Pittard (2015) found the majority of articles positioned teachers as "needing transformation" (p. 332) to enact critical pedagogy, with white teachers especially predominate in this category. Significantly fewer articles in the review framed teachers as effective critical educators or as engaged in learning about critical pedagogy.

Studies that analyze how teachers, and white teachers in particular, (re)produce white supremacy are necessary to understand and make visible how these structures and discourses persist in classrooms. As Jupp *et al.* (2016) argue from their review of the literature on white teacher identity, such analysis has unquestionably furthered the field's understandings of how whiteness and race-evasiveness operate in educational spaces, and it has led to the inclusion of such topics in teacher education textbooks and courses. Yet, Jupp and colleagues found, there has been less focus on the heterogeneity and complexity of white teachers' identities and practices. This has tended to produce essentialized, monolithic representations of white teachers in the literature, overlooking how teachers' racial identities intersect with other sociocultural identities (e.g. class, sexuality, language) and life experiences to produce complex and multifaceted teaching identities and practices. This aligns with Lowenstein's (2009) review of literature on white teacher candidates from almost a decade earlier. Based on that review, she called for a reconceptualization of white preservice teachers as *learners* about race, culture and critical pedagogies, rather than portraying them as static, fully formed and irrevocably racist. We view this call for scholarship to approach white teachers in more dynamic and nuanced ways – as imperfect and unfinished – as reflecting a Freirean (1970) centering of becoming.

To be clear, we do not understand reconstructive perspectives as naive. The aim of a reconstructive orientation is not to paint overly optimistic portraits of the current state of classrooms or to render invisible or erase the oppressive structures, policies and practices that often make educational spaces stifling and at times unbearable for students of color and other marginalized groups. Instead, we view it as part of the act of imagining otherwise, an orientation captured in Love's (2019) notion of abolitionist teaching and in Kelley's (2002) exploration of *freedom dreaming*, or the possibilities for alternative worlds lifted up by black radical movements. We believe that reconstructive perspectives, at their best, provide

an opportunity to lift up moments, no matter how brief or fleeting, that give glimpses of what could be.

That said, any engagement with reconstruction must be done cautiously, given the risks of downplaying structural and systemic oppression (Bartlett, 2012; Rogers and Mosley Wetzel, 2013; Waugh *et al.*, 2016). This is particularly true when exploring the actions of those in positions and with identities imbued with power, as in our focus in this special issue on white teachers working with students of color. In the words of contributor Karla Lomeli (this issue), the intention of our focus on white teachers in this special issue "is not to romanticize whiteness." Instead, our aim is to engage directly with a tension inherent in this work: the need to fully represent and critique how oppression is (re)produced within classroom interactions and to simultaneously illuminate and analyze moments of and trajectories toward humanizing and emancipatory pedagogical praxis, and to do so within the time constraints and word limits customary of our discipline. A tall order, to be sure, and a challenge we (Laura and Michiko) have faced, often not as successfully as we would hope, in much of our scholarship.

Teacher solidarity
The impetus for this special issue began with a tension we experienced as discourse analysts when analyzing and sharing representations of interactions between white teachers and students of color. The white teachers in whose classrooms we researched strove, however imperfectly, to construct supportive and asset-oriented spaces in which their students could develop strategies and identities as readers and writers. We, in turn, attempted to sufficiently represent the complexity of those classrooms. Specifically, we sought to represent the dehumanizing constraints on teachers' practices, especially in the form of neoliberal accountability (Hikida, 2018; Hikida and Lee, 2019; Taylor, 2019, 2023; Taylor and Hikida, 2020), and the role of teachers in inflicting dehumanization upon students of color in their classroom, while also intentionally highlighting moments of humanizing pedagogical possibility (Martínez, 2018).

As we write and rewrite, we frequently return to Philip *et al.* (2016) conceptualization of a *teacher solidarity lens*, which theorizes how researchers might simultaneously work in solidarity with teachers without negating the central role that teaching plays in racialization and social reproduction. This lens, in part, directs researchers to approach teaching as a "complex practice that requires growth over time" (p. 190). It compels the field to recognize that, while "public discourse and research often demand an unattainable perfection" (p. 191), researchers should approach the work with humility, recognizing the inevitability of imperfection in ourselves and the teachers with whom we work. Reading our data featuring white teachers through a teacher solidarity lens has seemed to introduce additional and necessary complexity, given those teachers heightened complicity in the reproduction of white supremacy. Yet, this racial positionality does not eliminate the constraints they experienced as teachers operating under neoliberal accountability, nor does it diminish the possibility of moments of humanization and emancipation between those teachers and their students of color.

Approaching this tension as stemming from contradictions inherent to this work rather than as a methodological problem that might be "solved," we sought with this special issue to explore how researchers, and discourse analysts in particular, might live analytically within this tension, seeking to represent it in and through analysis rather than to erase it. We wondered: How can scholars of discourse and interaction represent the complex and imperfect work of white teachers attempting to engage in anti-racist and humanizing literacy teaching?

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Grappling with tensions: contributions in this special issue

In the articles that comprise this special issue, contributors grappled with this question through their own data and analysis. In doing so, they provide us with invaluable illustrations of what reconstructive approaches to discourse analysis might look like while simultaneously grappling with the complexities of applying a reconstructive lens to the work of white teachers. In this section, we highlight some of the contributions from these individual articles that have enriched our thinking on these issues.

While data is generated through engagement with real people and classrooms, the resulting data and analyses are always *representations* of those realities. A shared focus across these articles is a deliberate engagement with the challenges of representation. In particular, the authors of these articles attend to the representation in three areas: of their research participants; of the contexts in which data was generated; and of their positionality as researchers.

In various ways, each of the article grapples with the representation of their participants, especially the representation of white teachers. This challenge of sufficiently representing white teachers in their multiple and contradictory relationships to power was a central catalyst for this special issue, and we found in these articles productive models for approaching this representational challenge. For instance, Lauren Leigh Kelly's article, "*What They Allow Us To Learn*," introduces readers to Mr George, a high school English teacher who identifies as a white, gay man. Both his identities as white and gay are made salient in his work with his class of predominately black and Latinx students, especially through his intentional selection of texts to "[ensure] that students saw their identities represented in the classroom." By foregrounding how Mr George's identity as a gay man (as well as his focus on queer and disability studies in college) shaped his pedagogical decisions, Kelly's article allows readers to construct a fuller understanding of Mr George as a complex and multifaceted human being, rather than reducing him to a static stereotype of a white teacher.

As alluded to above, a critique of this approach is its potential to overlook or underplay the centrality of whiteness in a teacher's identity and practice, but Kelly's article demonstrates how a researcher can write into the contradictions of intersecting identities and relations to power. One pedagogical tension from Kelly's article that stuck with us was the attention to how the teachers' focus on topics of oppression led students to feel "overwhelming pressure to think about and act upon structural inequity constantly, rather than being allowed space to focus on their joy and freedom in the present." We see a parallel here to the scholarly tension between deconstruction and reconstruction and the ways we have felt pressured by reviewers and others to critique and deconstruct more. Kelly's naming of this pressure serves an invitation to include reconstructive orientations in teaching as well as research.

Related to this challenge of representation of research participants is the representation of context and relationship. While white teachers are the focal participants in many of these articles, these teachers operate in relationship with others, including students, administrators and teaching colleagues. Through long-term engagement as participant observers in these focal classrooms, the researchers captured data that could represent these multiple and overlapping contexts, yet they were constrained by conventions of length and scope with what could be included within a single article. This is perhaps especially a challenge for discourse analysts, who typically can only present analysis of a handful of discursive excerpts due to the extended presentation, analysis and interpretation required of the method.

Within these genre constraints, representations of relationship and the "feel" of the classroom are often especially challenging. In her article "*She's All About Her Words*," Ashley Patterson provides an illustration of how researchers might invite readers to envision these elusive dimensions of a classroom. Her article provides a window into the classroom of Ms Reeve's, a white middle school English teacher working with both white students and students of color. It weaves close analysis of discursive interaction with ethnographically informed descriptions of Ms Reeve's classroom. In doing so, it constructs a vision of how culturally sustaining pedagogy might be languaged (Bloome and Beauchemin, 2016) both in a single interaction and across a school year. Yet, Patterson resists the tendency to turn the representation of Ms Reeve's classroom into a static set of "best practices" (Bartolomé, 1994; Philip *et al.*, 2019). Of her analysis she writes, "this is not a boxed cake-mix, rather it is a mentioning of ingredients that one may want to consider when crafting their own homemade delicacy." By documenting how culturally sustaining pedagogy can be constructed in and through language, the article makes visible how culturally sustaining pedagogy might be enacted without reducing this complex work to a series of steps.

Karla Lomeli's article, *The Work of Growing Young People Con Cariño*, also makes visible how a single teacher constructed one way of being in relationship with students. She illustrates this way of being, which Lomeli theorizes as an *ethic of cariño*, through her portrait of a white teacher named Mr Hope building relationships with his Latinx students. Lomeli's framing of Mr Hope's approach as an ethic resists the tendency to reduce his way of being to a set of teaching strategies, instead asserting that an ethic of cariño arises from the intersection of multiple, dynamic and responsive practices. Lomeli's article also provides a model for how a researcher might expand upon their positionality and relationship to their research context. Lomeli moves beyond the listing of identities that typically comprise a positionality statement, instead providing a fuller sense of the lenses she brought to these data. She describes how her own background, particularly her experiences teaching in a high school in the same community, shaped her orientation toward this project. She openly shares her initial skepticism toward the capacity non-Latinx teachers like Mr Hope to authentically teach Latinx students, as well as how her understandings shifted across this project.

Similarly attending to researcher positionality in their article *Illustrating Linguistic Dexterity in "English Mostly" Spaces*, Thea Williamson and Aris Clemons remind readers of a central tenet of reconstructive discourse analysis: "taking a stand ... [and] putting our values on the line" (Martin, 2004, p. 184). In addition to sharing with readers the identity positions that each author occupies, they explicitly state the values they bring to their analysis regarding language and power. While scholarship is always shaped by the researchers' values, it is rare for such values to be so clearly named. Furthermore, while scholarship focused on white teachers often excavates (and critiques) the values of its focal participants, it is less common for researchers to expose themselves in the same way. We saw this naming of values as extending the conventional aspects of the positionality statement; moreover, it demonstrates a sense of accountability and trustworthiness that we believe is crucial to a reconstructive orientation.

Williamson and Clemons' article focuses on the translanguaging practices of a group of multilingual young women in a monolingual high school English classroom led by a white teacher. Attending to how these students linguistically engage within that context of whiteness, the article documents moments of translanguaging within the proscribed English-only space. Reminiscent of the critique Ladson-Billings' (1995b) work faced that culturally relevant pedagogy was "just good teaching," one might be tempted to dismiss

these instances of translanguaging as unremarkable or not worthy of this kind of detailed analysis. However, these linguistic practices *become* remarkable when placed within political, historical and racial contexts of English classrooms serving as gatekeepers and enforcers of white supremacy (Bomer, 2017; Souto-Manning *et al.*, 2022). Furthermore, Williamson and Clemons are careful to not overstate the practice of translanguaging in this classroom, noting that English remained the dominant language. Yet, they assert the value of documenting these instances of translanguaging, both to more accurately represent the students' linguistic practices and to avoid "falsely pertetuat[ing] the myth of monolingualism in academic discourse." Furthermore, we see in this analysis of translanguaging moments of possibility, or "spaces of wiggle room" in the words of Bartlett (2012, p. 10), providing brief visions of how we might move from English-only classrooms toward more linguistically varied and inclusive ones.

Annie Daly's article, *Race Talk Tensions*, shares similar moments of possibility in her discursive analysis of conversations about race and racism within a multiracial fourth-grade classroom led by white teacher committed to antiracist practices. Drawing on both critical and reconstructive orientations to discourse analysis, Daly focuses closely on brief moments of interaction between the teacher and her students. This discursive analysis illuminates moments of both tension and possibility in how racial literacy might be constructed in such a space. In reading Daly's article, we are reminded of concept of catalytic validity, which attends to how research "re-orients, focusses, and energizes participants" (Lather, 1986, p. 67) toward social transformation. While deconstruction and critique are necessary to understand how white supremacy is reproduced in classrooms, focusing solely on deconstruction can inadvertently construct a narrative that critical and anti-racist pedagogies are impossible, or at least impossible in the classrooms of white teachers (Lowenstein, 2009; Pittard, 2015). Reconstructive analyses of complex classroom interactions, like those in Daly's article, can provide teachers and others with concrete illustrations of how they might strive toward anti-racism in their everyday interactions, however briefly or imperfectly.

We also see catalytic validity in the article by Melissa Schieble, Amy Vetter and Kahdeidra Monét Martin, *Shifting Language Ideologies and Pedagogies to be Anti-Racist*. Their article uses reconstructive discourse analysis as both a tool for research and for learning. The data for this article was generated from a teacher inquiry group in which teachers, alongside researchers, collaboratively analyzed transcripts created from recordings of their own classroom discussions. Here, the authors focus on Paula, a white, female secondary teacher who used tools of discourse analysis to critically examine and shift oppressive language ideologies she enacted in her classroom. The transcripts of Paula's critical conversations with her students served to hold still moments of tension in these conversations, allowing the inquiry group to collaboratively reflect upon how abstract theories like linguistic pluralism and translanguaging might be put into practice in their classrooms. This article provides a model for how reconstructive orientations might play a role in anti-racist teacher learning as well as in research.

Quentin Charles Sedlacek's article, "*Stealing From The Language*," similarly focuses on teachers who were striving to disrupt hegemonic language ideologies in their school contexts. Along with critical and reconstructive discourse analysis, Sedlacek uses interest convergence theory (Bell, 1980; Milner, 2008) as a tool to analyze narratives told by teachers related to language ideology and practice at their schools. Interest convergence, which has its origins in critical race theory (Gillborn, 2013), serves as a complementary tool to discourse analysis to identify and learn from the tensions that arise from these teachers' narratives. It serves as a reminder that work toward justice "is necessarily a partial and

imperfect endeavor," in the words of Sedlacek. Tensions and contradictions are inherent to the work of white teachers striving toward justice in an unjust world, and their existence does not signal a failure of those teachers' work.

The final article in this issue is unlike the others. The editors of *English Teaching: Practice and Critique* have a vision for including the voices of teachers, families and caregivers, and community members into the "scholarly" discourse on education. Thus, we invited a friend and former elementary school teacher to compose an essay reflecting on the concept of reconstruction. In her essay, Frannie Sanchez's works to reconcile her experiences teaching in the current educational context with her vision of what teaching could and should be. It is this speculative possibility that draws us to reconstructive orientations, and Sanchez's essay reminds us of the urgency of this work.

Working within and from tension

Again and again in conversations with contributors and with one another, we return to notions of contradiction and tension, of the need to avoid overly simplistic and dichotomous framings of good/bad, of racist/anti-racist. We need to take a similar approach to deconstruction and reconstruction. Neither deconstructive nor reconstructive analysis alone can do all the necessary work. Instead, we argue, scholars need to operate in the tension that is produced between these two orientations. This call for the need to operate within tension and contradictions is of course not a new idea (c.f. Erickson, 2004), and scholars working with post-structuralism have warned of the fallacies of binary constructions (Kumashiro and Ngo, 2007), while activity theorists (Engeström, 2015; Gutiérrez *et al.*, 2007) have argued for how learning and change are produced within contradiction.

Yet, at times, we have found ourselves frustrated with this framing of tensions, in that conversations at times seemed to end with the identification of tensions. In our own thinking, it has been helpful to more deeply consider the role that tension might play within work toward justice. It can be tempting to envision work toward justice as occurring as smooth and continuous progress, but the reality is of course much less straightforward. There are concrete ways teachers, students and others in school communities have made progress toward justice, but movements toward justice continually confront setbacks and pushbacks. These movements are also composed of real, imperfect humans (ourselves very much included) who do and will make mistakes as they work toward justice. So, we might envision this work not as a smooth arc but instead as a jagged line. And it is with that imagery of a jagged line that we can envision the role of tension.

The work is not simply to acknowledge spaces of tension but to exist and move within those tensions, to explore the landscape and topography, to find the borders. When considering the work of white teachers striving toward anti-racist pedagogies, there is a need for both deconstruction and reconstruction. As researchers, we can and must explore both the choices teachers made to (re)produce white supremacy *and* how they constructed anti-racist practices that challenge white supremacy. And we must do the same in critically examining our own scholarship. To work within this tension between reconstruction and deconstruction means, fundamentally, that we will make mistakes. We hope that most often our work (both as researchers and as teachers) will hit the mark, but sometimes it will not. Yet, our field and our world do not benefit from demands for "unattainable perfection" that Philip *et al.* (2016, p. 10) critique. Instead, we do the work, we inevitably misstep, we reflect critically on those missteps (and send appreciation to those who helped to identify them) and we begin again.

In a quote often mis-attributed to Viktor Frankl (*Viktor Frankl Institute*, 2023) and shared by Stephen Covey in a forward to a book (Pattakos, 2010, p. v) rooted in Frankl's teachings,

the unnamed author states that "Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response." The author goes on to argue that it is in that space that our growth, happiness and freedom reside. Thus, we return to the profound affordance of discourse analysis to allow us to hold still moments of unfolding interaction; to recreate that space, to examine the choices that were made, how, and with what social consequence. It allows us to lift up moments in which interlocutors choose mutuality and humanization, regardless of how briefly, and to argue that it mattered.

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