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## Caste and the Classroom: A Review of Wilkerson's Work

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Wilkerson, I. (2020). *Caste: The origins of our discontents*, Random House. 447 pp. \$32 Hardcover, \$14.99 eBook. ISBN: 9780593230251

To fully prepare pre-service teachers for a diverse classroom, more must be done in teacher prep programs to adequately develop anti-racist educators. In general, teacher prep programs are predominantly white, middle-class, and female, which may not adequately reflect the demographics of their future student population (Galman et al., 2010). Thus, the need to develop culturally responsive teaching philosophies, allyship, and understandings of antiracist pedagogy is crucial for how preservice teachers show up for their future students (Matias & Mackey, 2016).

During teacher education, prospective teachers should be (and are) trained in the theoretical underpinnings of education and trained to reflect on what they are doing and why (Freire, 1998). Most preservice training includes requirements to take classes that inform the theory behind pedagogical application by taking classes similar to the sociology of education (Woods & Pollard, 2017). Materials that discuss the complexity of how the education system in the United States operates should be used to prepare future teachers for the reality of an everchanging educational landscape. Utilizing excerpts from Isabel Wilkerson's (2020) *Caste* would be incredibly useful to integrate into introductory courses in education training programs to discuss the sociological context of where the education system in the United States of America is situated.

Wilkerson offers her personal account in *Caste*. A Pulitzer Prize winning journalist, she has long written about the lived experience of her ancestors, as seen in the publication of her first work *The Warmth of Other Suns* (2010) and her description of the Great Migration. In her second book publication, Wilkerson examines the historical contextualization and change that a caste system has undergone in different societies inclusive but not limited to the United States, India, and Nazi Germany. Wilkerson's examination of the term "caste" is thematically expanded throughout the book using personal account, historical narratives, and metaphorical example that bring a depth of understanding to a complicated term, which builds upon Wilkerson's definition: "the architecture of human hierarchy....an artificial construction, a fixed and embedded ranking of human value" (p. 17). The varied historical accounts are interwoven like a story, making it a worthwhile read for students in introductory education courses to read.

Suggestions of incorporation could include reading and centering the whole book, but, often due to time constraints, it may be better served for instructors to pull excerpts that contextualize caste and the school system. For example, Part Four "The Tentacles of Caste," opens with a commonly taught example in education courses "Brown Eyes versus Blue Eyes"- this sets the foundation of this section and the explanation of how caste has expanded its tentacles into multiple systems of society. Having students examine Jane Elliott's famous example in addition to Chapter Fourteen, "The Intrusion of Caste in Everyday Life," would be beneficial in education foundation classes. However, research has shown that preservice teachers have challenge in examining personal privilege and may not necessarily connect understanding personal bias to the classroom. Thus, Wilkerson's work could be used as a tool laying the groundwork for preservice teachers' racial noticing, or rather the process of attending, interpreting, and responding to varied phenomena (Shah & Coles, 2020).

Within this racial noticing, Wilkerson provides a call to action that feels accessible to implement for future teachers entering into the field during a time of political division. Part seven, “Awakening,” encourages a more holistic vision for de-colonizing the caste system ingrained in society- referring to the necessity of “the heart (as) the last frontier” (p. 370), the need to “take off the fake crown” (p. 364), and the re-imagination of what life would look like without caste.

Worth noting is that *Caste* does not tell the entire dynamic situated within the historical narrative of the caste systems described, and instead the author chooses to frame the perspective from a U.S. point of view. Wilkerson chose broad concepts that may be applied to sociologically understanding the dynamics present with the U.S.. When applied to the settings of a classroom, this is beneficial to point out to students, especially when prioritizing the need for a multicultural perspective in their future primary or secondary classroom teaching. Utilizing excerpts from Wilkerson’s book and purposely choosing examples that allow for a foundational understanding of the collective experience, naming what students are noticing, and listing ways in which Wilkerson experiments with new ways of thinking that are outside the homogenous thought patterns embedded in a system dominated by caste are lessons that can be experienced and used in the college classroom for preservice teachers.

As described by Wilkerson, the shedding of the sacred thread is necessary, as in reality it is a poisonous snake around the neck of humanity. Using this book to inform future educators of the possibility of this shedding is paramount, as the sooner we can remove the sacred thread- the sooner we will see “all of humanity” (p. 364).

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