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CRITICAL PRAXIS:

USING MY OWN WHITENESS AND EXPERIENCES TO CHALLENGE ISSUES OF
RACISM AND WHITE PRIVILEGE

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Curriculum and Social Inquiry Doctoral Program

Submitted in partial fulfillment of

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In the Foster G. McGaw Graduate School

National College of Education

National-Louis University

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USING MY OWN WHITENESS AND EXPERIENCES TO CHALLENGE ISSUES OF

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Critical Praxis:

Using My Own Whiteness and Experiences to Challenge Issues of Racism and White Privilege

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Color

Who am I within this skin?
        This pinkish, tannish skin?
                What does it encompass?

I think of myself as a child with a page full of ladies drawn by my mother set in front of me,
        A full box of crayons of every imaginable color at my right hand, ready for me to use
                To make the ladies beautiful.

I pick the "flesh" color for their skin.
                              It never occurs to me that all flesh is not "peach."

If I think about it at all, I think that the peachish color is not really the color of my skin any more than the beige band aids labeled flesh-colored are really the color of my skin and always stand out against it.

                      I just know that flesh is the color of my skin

 I wonder why I never stopped to think about all the people whose flesh is NOT the same color as mine
                                    Or
How the brown-skinned children might feel about having a crayon labeled "flesh" be so different from their flesh.
                                    Or
About the anomaly that I was called "White" but my skin was NOT white.

I just knew that most people in my world had skin like mine,
                        Regular skin color,
                                  Normal skin color.

I knew people with darker skin, but while they were people I loved,
they were not people who had a lot of power in the world I knew.

I remember thinking, with my box of vibrant colors before me,
        That some of my ladies could have brown skin
                and there were so many more shades I could use for them:
mahogany,
        burnt umber,
                cocoa,
                    bronze,
                        coffee………….a number of exotic, beautiful shades.

It is only years later that I look back on myself the child and see that example of
                            White privilege
        And wonder about how that kind of thing colored my perception of the world
                                        and my place in it.

                I ponder the damage it did me – and the children of color.

So, I come to the question of who I am within this skin.
        How is my worldview affected by the color of my skin?
                How am I different from my Black friends and colleagues and acquaintances?
              How do we connect?
                  How do I balance the privilege?
                      Can we ever really know one another?
                      Where is my voice?

                I struggle each day to find the answers to these and other questions.
                  And each day, the answer is a little different.

Chapter One

Introduction

Purpose

There is so much about our society that needs to be changed! In some ways, it is overwhelming to contemplate the necessary changes. It is easy to become discouraged. But the simple thought that, as I realized when I read *The Power of Their Ideas* by Deborah Meier (1995)**, what is does not have to be** is liberating and exhilarating.   Change is threatening. I know because sometimes I feel threatened by impending change in my profession. I have learned to counteract the threat by trying very hard to remain open to change, to be on the cutting edge of it, proactive instead of reactive and defensive. I find that works because it allows me to feel tremendous hope about possible change and my small part in it. I know that change is imperative in order for us educators to address the issues of social justice as they impact education.

I have learned to dream. As Zeus Leonardo (2004) says, "Dreaming spurs people to act, if by dreaming we mean a sincere search for alternatives and the evasion of reality. It is not always an unconscious act, but a metaphor for social intervention that moves the critical social theorist from analysis to commitment" (p. 15). First, one has to recognize what needs changing. Only then can one begin to act to effect change. It is not, though, in my experience, a linear progression. I find that I am constantly learning to recognize new areas in education in general and in my work in particular that I want to address, even as I am working in my small sphere of influence on the first things I have recognized. I am involved in both analysis and commitment. I see myself as engaged in a process. I try to act responsibly; I dream; I discuss; I act; I am discouraged; I react; I reflect; I am encouraged; I dream; I act…

One key area that cries out for change is how we approach issues of equity, social justice, and race and achievement in education. As I have begun to delve into the subject of the ways in which race affects achievement, I have changed in my thinking and in my practice in innumerable ways. My transformation is affected by the inter-subjective grappling with the issues in discussions. It is by listening to my cohort exploring their ideas aloud. It is by thinking critically about what I read and hear; asking myself what stakes the speaker/author has in the subject at hand. It is by hearing myself say aloud to others what I am thinking and feeling. In many of the things I read, I see a sense of personal understanding that grows with the interaction with others. The idea that each of us sees through our own lenses and that such lenses are ever changing as we interact with the world around us fascinates me. I see that by sharing ideas we gain a distance from them and they come back to us different in some ways because of the encounter of others' perceptions inherent in the sharing, ready for us to reflect on once more and then send out again and again and again.

This process in which I am involved is something I would like to communicate. I find things that others have shared with me and my reactions to them enlightening. I hope it does not sound presumptuous of me to want to add my voice to the discourse. It has been the process of finding my own voice and recognizing at least some of the lenses through which I see things that has sparked the transformation in me. It is my experiences with listening to the voices of others: my students, their parents, my colleagues, my professors, my cohort that are integral to the learning that has occurred in me. I want to use my journey as a way to illuminate some things I see as issues that need addressing. Gloria Ladson-Billings (1998) put into words for me how I feel about writing this dissertation. "As is true of all texts, this one is incomplete (O'Neill, 1992). It is incomplete on the part of both the writer and the reader. However, given its incompleteness,

I implore readers to grapple with how it might advance the debate on race and education" (p. 9).

Perhaps, others with whom I will come into contact in one way or another will also be changed.

Bill Ayers (2004) says it well, "I don't know how to change the world; and I don't know if our

efforts are in vain. But I do know that change in small places can gesture toward larger

transformations, and that changing a single mind can unleash a universe of possibilities" (p.119).

It is thoughts such as this that keep us doing the work we do.

The ultimate purpose of this work is to help improve student achievement and

performance in school by looking at the ways in which we, as educators, can change and enhance

ourselves: our sensitivity to the needs and experiences of our students, our ability to reflect on

our methods and interactions with students and the choices we make as we work with our

students. After all, each of us has control over only ourselves. As we change and grow, others,

our students and colleagues, may change and grow in response to us. It is important to

remember that while we have little control over anyone (even ourselves…), we do have a lot of

influence over others. Understanding that influence and using it with sensitivity and respect, it is

hoped, will help us be better educators. In this dissertation, I look at some ways I have changed

and grown in my ability to exert my influence as an educator.

Background

As part of this autoethnological/autobiographical work, I think it is important to

delve into my personal and professional background, in order to locate myself in a context, a

time and place. I am a middle-aged, White, Jewish woman who is a clinical social worker by

profession. I started out my professional career thinking I would be an English teacher, but

during my student teaching, I discovered that I was most interested in the social/emotional

development of children, so I pursued a master's degree in social work. I always knew that I

wanted to work in a school, however, and I consider myself first and foremost, an educator. That sense of myself became clear to me when after twenty plus years of teaching, I pursued a master's degree in interdisciplinary studies in curriculum. For the last 19 years, I have worked in a high school of approximately 3000 students in suburban Chicago. The community is a melding of urban and suburban living. The population is diverse. The school serves students the slight majority of whom are White, the remaining students are Black, both African American and Caribbean, with about 9% of the students Latino and a small number of others. There is diversity in the economic and social status of the students we serve as well. The multicultural aspect of our school is a driving force in setting the goals of the school. One of our clearly stated missions is to enhance the achievement of **all** students, with an emphasis on minority student achievement. Many in our community strongly agree with the statement made in "Equity Lessons from Detracking Schools" that schools should restructure and make reforms so that all students will reach high academic standards because of the cultural ideal that schools are responsible to all children. (Oakes, Wells, Yonezawa, & Ray, 1997) Ours is a sophisticated community that in many cases recognizes the issues that arise because of the diversity and tries to address them. Having grown up in this community, working and living in a place in which issues of race and equity in education are ever present, at times addressed and at other times making themselves felt in covert or subtle ways, has contributed to shaping me and my interest in this subject.

Rationale

We live in a society where race matters. It is an issue in education as well as in other areas of our lives. Glenn Singleton, in an interview by Dennis Sparks (2002), says in talking about achievement, "Race and racial conditioning are always happening. Therefore, it always

has to do with race. As racial beings, our race is always there; it's always playing a role" (p.62).

Leonardo (2004) says that "pedagogues recognize that racism is not the problem of white

supremacist fringe groups, but a general institutional arrangement created between whites and

people of color…" (p.14). In order to address such issues as equity, social justice, and race and

achievement, we have to acknowledge the fact that race is an issue. Deborah Meier (1995) talks

about grappling with racism when she worked at creating the Central Park East Schools, saying,

"Every family conference or student conflict with a peer or teacher can potentially raise issues of

race. These can be excuses or they can be fundamental roadblocks. It's not easy to know when

to open up the topic and when to leave it closed" (p. 58). Meier's words could be expressing the

experiences of many educators who think about this issue.

Looking within oneself is an essential piece of having a meaningful conversation about

race and achievement. Recognizing one's own biases, lenses and life-shaping experiences helps

to frame one's ideas about the place race plays in education and how to go about making positive

changes in one's own small sphere of influence. Providing a model for the kind of introspection

that is the basis of this work as well as my reflections (in the context of being a White, middle-

aged, female educator in a diverse setting) of my experiences in grappling with the relevant

issues, will, I hope, be instructive and informative to other educators struggling with the issues of

race and achievement.

Statement of the Problem

As an educator of a variety of children, I must, I think, ask myself some hard questions:

What am I doing to acknowledge the racism the Black or Latino student faces in society's

institutions? What am I, a White educator, doing to enhance my understanding of my own racial

identity development and to look into my own heart and soul to see where I fit into the picture?

What am I doing to help students negotiate moving among the various communities they encounter? How am I helping students to see that their various identities need not be contradictory? Can my asking these questions and sharing my reflections encourage others to ask some of the same questions of themselves? In this paper, I will address the issues of racial identity development, White privilege, how the two intersect in education and the impact race has on achievement and some of the ways I think these things can be addressed.

Chapter Two

Review of Relevant Literature

Talking about Race

Rarely do we talk about these kinds of things. It is difficult to talk about race, especially in a group where people of different races are represented. We tend to feel self-conscious; at least, I do. We worry that we will say something that will offend others. We worry that we will not be understood correctly -- or maybe that we **will** be understood and disapproved of by others. We worry that we will be judged or considered racist. We worry that by engaging in this dialogue one way or another others will think less of us. Bill Ayres (1997) describes race as being "unspeakable."   He says, "Growing up in an entirely racialized surround, and one in which, as Cornell West reminds us, almost no one acknowledges its existence, means that we draw race into ourselves with our every breath, that we drink it with our mother's milk… We don't talk at all. And in silence a lens of distorted images, fears, misunderstandings, and cool calculatedness slips neatly into place" (p. 131). Singleton responds to the idea that talking about race inspires fear and discomfort in white people.

> My experience… has been that when people speak from a place of personal truth and risk being uncomfortable, only then do their interracial relationships deepen. It is important that white people move past their fear of offending and being corrected to a place where they can understand the points of view expressed by people of color. People of color need to recognize that their experiences are unique and to have patience and compassion as we try to translate them to a white audience." (Sparks, 2002, p. 60)

It is important to talk about race because we do live in a society where race matters. If we do not talk about it, those distorted images and fears reign. Often, people still want to gloss

over the issue. Mica Pollock (2004) calls this being "colormute." She talks about how teachers feel uncomfortable talking about race even to the point of stuttering or hesitating when defining a student as "Black" or "African-American." But, she says, when we educators think about colormuteness, "we realize that de-raced talk is actually *never* the discourse of people who do not, or cannot, 'see' race. Rather, it is the talk of people wishing for race's irrelevance… Indeed, even when we resist seeing racial patterns with all our might, we sneak back directly or indirectly to notice the racial patterns we ignore" (p.209). Singleton calls this dialogue about race "courageous conversation." He thinks "courageous conversation is an essential prerequisite for addressing the very significant and difficult challenges we face in closing the racial achievement gap" (Sparks, 2002, p. 62). As I have read about racism and reflected on my own experiences as an educator, I have come to this same conclusion.

Colorblindness.

Some teachers are wont to talk about being colorblind. I think this comes out of a desire to have race **not** matter; from the mistaken thought that if we do not see race, we are being fair to students or from a desire to present oneself as not racist. For example, in our staff development group, entitled "A Conversation on Race and Achievement," which I co-facilitate with a young, Black, male colleague, one teacher, in a discussion about the dilemmas faced by African American children, questioned whether such dilemmas truly exist. The small group discussion was centered around the dilemma of students of color trying their best in school, working their hardest even as they know that in our society, no matter how well-educated they are, how well-dressed, they may still be followed around a store as if they were criminals. "Does that really happen?" asked this teacher. "Isn't it more a matter of socio-economic status?" (As if that would make it okay even if it were the case.) Several of the Black women in the group jumped

to respond. "It happens to ME!" said one teacher. "My husband who has a graduate degree from a prestigious university was followed around a department store just a few weeks ago," said an administrator. "I just don't get it," responded the original teacher. "When I look at my students, I don't see White kids or Black kids; I just see kids."

Robert T. Carter (1997) points out, "in the social situation where colorblindness is advocated, one first recognizes a person's color and then claims to ignore it. In reality it is not possible to be color blind where race is concerned. The very claim illustrates that a person can see but then denies race" (p. 201). Nelson M. Rodriguez (2000) has an even stronger indictment of colorblindness. "With this…discourse, we are told that all people are the same under the skin and that we all have the same equal chances of making it. Therefore, the 'logic' continues, if a minority person fails to achieve, the blame lies *solely* with the individual" (p. 9). This colorblindness is an issue that, I have found, often needs to be addressed as an individual or group begins to look at the issue of race and achievement.

Chubbuck (2004) talks about "the erroneous belief that a race neutral 'colorblind' position is a viable stance for eradicating racism. The colorblind position, frequently surfacing in history as part of White Americans' response to difference, demonstrates how any social construction of Whiteness or race in general, can undergo a contextualized change in meaning to protect privilege" (p. 305).

Often the most well-meaning of teachers thinks that it is virtuous not to notice a student's race. Such a well-meaning teacher does not realize that a person's race, ethnicity and gender make up a large part of a person's identity, and to ignore it is to deny something important about the uniqueness and individuality of that student. According to Michele Foster (2001), many teachers are

not adequately prepared to deal with a diverse student body. Both current and prospective teachers' responses to diversity indicate their lack of knowledge about students different from themselves. Teachers tend to rely on racial and cultural stereotypes and explanations of dysfunction, deficiency and deprivation and/or insist on a color-blind approach to dealing with students." (p. 217)

Imperative Discussion.

"The colorblind perspective treats race as an irrelevant, invisible and taboo topic," according to Howard (1999, p. 53). Not only must race not be a forbidden topic, but we must make a definite effort to find ways to talk about it, to take active steps to open up a dialogue. Mica Pollock (2004) makes clear, "when we notice racial patterns and say nothing publicly to dismantle them, we often help ensure these very patterns matter-of-fact reproduction" (p. 209). It was to make sure that race is not a taboo topic and to halt that reproduction that we began the staff development group mentioned above and the Professional Book Club for a Community of Learners at my school. It seems imperative to me that it is up to us educators who are in the schools to promote opportunities for this kind of discourse. As Lavuan Dennett in *The Lifeworld of Leadership* says, "'The new culture includes a commitment to excellence and an acceptance, even appreciation, of change that assures us all that this school will keep becoming what it needs to be. We lead one another in the process of becoming"(Sergiovanni, 2000, pp.132-134). Gloria-Ladson Billings (1999) says that the best teachers are "reflective and self-critical" (p. 107).   The Book Club and the staff development group each provide a cohort with whom to share the reflections and the passage of becoming. To be truly reflective, we must be aware of the perspectives of others in addition to our own perspective (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1991). Especially when talking about race and achievement, it seems important to have opportunities to

discuss our selves and our own perspectives and experiences around these issues as we move towards looking at how they affect our students and what we can do about it. As Willis D. Hawley and Linda Valli (1999) contend, teachers need opportunities to acknowledge and address their personal identities and moral purposes as well as the cultures and contexts in which they work" (p. 133). Our personal identities include our racial identities and understanding the cultures and contexts in which we work includes an awareness of the varying cultural, racial, ethnic, political and socioeconomic backgrounds from which our students come.

Sometimes, we feel alone and isolated in dealing with these issues. The Book Club and the staff development group both give faculty and staff the opportunity to read the work of current researchers, theoreticians, and practitioners, to process the ideas and then to apply them to our own setting and practices. We are able to affirm the work of our colleagues and to make constructive suggestions as we share what we have tried and what has worked for us and why. We have the opportunity to review educational policies and methods in light of the latest pedagogical thinking.

Racial Identity Development

"I first understood what it meant to be a White person when I went back east to my home town and discovered that the swimming pool in which I had cavorted as a young child had been paved over and made into a playground. I hadn't noticed that had happened until I went for a walk around my neighborhood. I asked my mother about it and she said that it had happened when the City Council had decided the pool should be integrated and people were up in arms, so they decided just to close the pool. I felt ashamed of being White at that moment," said one member of our discussion group. Our staff development group was addressing the issue of when we first recognized our own racial identity. I was struck by the man's response because I

remembered a similar response from a Black woman in our Professional Book Club for a Community of Learners when we read and discussed Beverly Daniel Tatum's (1997) book, *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?*. "I remember when the law changed and the city pool had to be integrated," said the African-American teacher. "The city paved over the swimming pool rather than have Black children swimming there." "Didn't you feel enraged?" I asked. "How can you deal with that?" "You learn to deal with it," she replied, "or you couldn't function. That kind of anger and rage can destroy you," she said, accompanied by vigorous nodding from the other people of color.

Now, here we were five years later and a White male was expressing a similar situation to describe his recognition of his racial identity. The feeling it engendered in him was one of shame for his race. I realized that this kind of event taking place all over the country during the time of imposed racial integration, which for some of us were lived experiences and for others of us history, had a profound effect on many of us in different ways, in the sense of beginning to help us define who we are as racial beings. Giroux (1997) explains it well when he talks about multiculturalism being

> About making whiteness visible as a racial category; that is, it points to the necessity of providing white students with the cultural memories that enable them to recognize the historically- and socially- constructed nature of their own identities. Multiculturalism …should attempt to provide white students (and others) with the self-definitions upon which they can recognize their own complicity with or resistance to how power works within and across differences to legitimate some voices and dismantle others. (p. 250)

The ensuing discussion, in which we looked at the event from the vantage point of our own situations and came to a consensus of outrage, was a catalyst to begin to talk about race and achievement.

Beverly Daniel Tatum is an author who has had a profound influence on my thinking. Through her, I was first introduced to the concept of racial identity development. Tatum (1997) explicates the stages of Black racial identity development offered by William Cross, a psychologist whose model is referred to as "the psychology of nigrescence or the psychology of becoming Black." According to Cross, the five stages of racial identity development are pre-encounter, encounter, immersion/emersion, internalization, and internalization-commitment….In the first stage, Cross says,

> the Black child absorbs many of the beliefs and values of the dominant White culture, including the idea that it is better to be White…Transition to the encounter stage is typically precipitated by an event or series of events that force the young person to acknowledge the personal impact of racism. As the result of a new and heightened awareness of the significance of race, the individual begins to grapple with what it means to be a member of a group targeted by racism. (Tatum, 1997, p. 55.)

> Lisa Delpit (1995) tells the story of her early understanding of what it meant to be Black.

> I learned early that Miss Pat, of Romper Room – no matter how much I looked into her Magic mirror and no matter how good a "Do-Bee" I was – would not let me join her tele-vision classroom. "That's only for white kids," my mother explained. Things weren't as they seemed on television. She had to explain the connectedness of things initially beyond the grasp of my four-year-old, home-centered mind: somehow my "nappy" hair and my family's brown skin…was connected to the workings of the larger world in ways

that prevented me from sitting in Miss Pat's circle or from going to the bathroom while

shopping downtown- and prevented my mother from trying on hats in a department store

or from getting a teaching job closer to our house. (p. 92)

This experience recounted by Delpit strikes me as an example of what Cross is talking about.

Clearly, the dawning realization that she, as a Black child, could not appear in the Romper Room

classroom was an early recognition of Delpit's Black identity. As she is writing about this

experience as an adult educator who wants to help teachers recognize the need to be aware of

and understand circumstances beyond their own, it seems to me that Delpit has clearly moved

through the middle stages of identity development to commitment, where "the individual has

found ways to translate a personal sense of racial identity into ongoing action expressing a sense

of commitment to the concerns of Blacks as a group…the individual is now anchored in a

positive sense of racial identity and is prepared to perceive and transcend race (Tatum, 1997, p.

76). Reading Tatum sparked many a conversation with students and fellow staff members about

when we first began to think of ourselves in terms of race.

Recognizing Our Own Identity Development.

When we had this discussion in our staff development group, people of color shared a

wide variety of experiences of this first recognition of racial identity. One person told about how

he had gone to visit relatives in the south and when he went to get a drink of water at a fountain,

his mother pulled him back roughly and he didn't know why she was angry. It was when she

explained to him that the fountain was for Whites only that he first felt like a member of a group

targeted by racism. My co-facilitator shared how when he was a pre-teen, he was on a basketball

team. His coach, who was White, brought his younger son to the practices. One day the little

boy came up to my friend and said to him, challengingly, "How do you spell nigger? Is it 'N'

'I' 'G' 'G' 'E' 'R'?" My friend was mortified, he told me. He felt terrible shame, but he didn't know why. He never told anyone the story, not his loving parents or his older brother with whom he was very close, until this conversation about racial identity development. These events are powerful and hurtful in ways we don't even fully recognize. Hearing this story from someone I care about breaks my heart. More importantly, it spurs me on to raise awareness in myself and others, to make sure I am always sensitive, to bear witness so that things can change.

This recognition of one's racial identity often occurs during adolescence, according to Tatum (1997). This premise makes sense because it is a time when children begin asking themselves, "Who am I?" They ponder who they are in relation to their peers, their families and society. They ask themselves, "What is possible for me? Who will I be?" Answering these questions is a process that occurs during the course of adolescent development. One of the issues with which Black teens grapple is who they are as students. One of the rites of passage that sometimes bring the issue into play is dating. Tatum (1997) addresses this issue when she says,

> Black girls, especially in predominantly White communities, may gradually become
> aware that something has changed. When their White friends start to date, they do
> not…Resisting the stereotypes and affirming other definitions of themselves is part of the
> task facing young Black women in both White and Black communities." (p. 57)

When Tatum talks about Black girls living in predominantly White communities not starting to date when their White friends do because there are only White boys available and they are not seeking out Black girls, I am reminded of my father's experience. He was one of the only Jewish kids in his high school. He had lots of buddies and felt as if he were an integral part of the school in spite of the religious differences - until they reached dating age. Then, his good

friends deserted him, letting him know that they did not want him dating their sisters. Although I did not realize it at the time when I was a teen-ager and my father was telling me that story and expressing his hurt and dismay at the turn of events, I see now that he was trying to prepare me for my own ultimate identity development.

I was discussing this with a Black friend who shared with me that she wonders about some of the decisions she made regarding her daughter and son. Her kids started out at our culturally diverse public high school, but she found that they began not to want to be academically successful because their friends did not put academic success at a premium, so she moved them to a predominantly White private school. As Tatum indicates might be the case, my friend found that having sent her very bright, capable children to schools where they were among few other students of color, her 23-year-old son was confused about whom he wanted to date, White women or Black women. He felt disloyal to his sister if he dated a White woman, but because of his experiences at the White school, he felt more comfortable in many ways with White women than with Black women. My friend and her children were always involved in Jack and Jill (an organization for Black families) and their Black church as Tatum suggests is important. Still, having gone to a predominantly White school, her son had these dating issues. There are no easy answers, no pat solutions or formulaic responses, but the dilemmas abound.

White Identity Development.

Tatum (1997) acknowledges that the "process of examining their racial identity can be uncomfortable and even frightening for Whites…" (p. 113). As Sonia Nieto (1999) says, "…taking on an identity based on privilege and the oppression of others is difficult because it brings with it a great deal of inner turmoil and anguish...What is needed is… neither a narcissistic preoccupation with Whiteness nor a guilt-ridden journey…What is needed is…hope"

(p. xiv). They both think, however, that exploring one's White identity is worth the struggle because as Tatum (1997) says, it creates "possibilities for more authentic connections with people of color, and in the process, [strengthens] the coalitions necessary for genuine social change" (p. 113).

One of the things I found especially interesting was what Tatum (1997) has to say about Jews. "Those Whites who are highly identified with a particular subordinate identity may also struggle with claiming Whiteness as a meaningful group category because they feel far from the White male norm" (p. 103). She mentions that Jews of European ancestry, of which I am one, sometimes do not think of themselves as White because of what happened in Nazi Germany when " Jews were defined as a distinct, non-Aryan racial group. In the context of an anti-Jewish culture, the salient identity may be the targeted Jewish identity. However, in terms of U.S. racial ideology, Jews of European ancestry are also the beneficiaries of White racial privilege" (pp. 103-104). This is essentially true for me.

I have experienced anti-Semitism in both its overt and covert form. Because of that, it has been hard for me to see myself as White. I tend to identify more as Jewish. In fact, my own first experiences with my racial identity come from my being Jewish. For one thing, I learned early on that to be a Jew sometimes meant to be ridiculed or persecuted. It was painful when I was in elementary school and some of my classmates moved to a different part of town "to get away from the Jews" who were moving into my neighborhood. It was weird to encounter these same people in high school and know how they or at least their families had felt about me and mine. We celebrated all the Jewish holidays in my home. I stayed home from school for many days every fall as the high holidays and the special days that followed unrolled. I remember feeling bad that I missed so much at school and that my teachers never seemed very

understanding or accommodating. I cared about being a good student, so missing tests and having to make up important assignments was hard. There were other Jewish kids, but most of them did not miss school for as many holidays as I did. Early on, I gave up on trying for the perfect attendance prize; missing school for religious holidays meant that even if I was in school every other day of the year I could never qualify.

My sense of racial identity really became apparent to me, though, when I was in junior high school. I went to the dentist accompanied by my best friend. We were sitting in the waiting room reading movie magazines. I was reading about Natalie Wood, one of my favorite actresses. I turned excitedly to my friend, "It says here that Natalie Wood is Jewish!" My friend replied, "Really, but she's so pretty." I felt as if I had been kicked in the stomach. I remember it vividly as I am told people do when their "otherness" first hits them. I had no idea how to respond, so I said nothing. Yet, this remains a pivotal point in my sense of myself and I remember it viscerally these decades later. It gives me a point of identification when people talk to me about their own racial identity development.

Later, I explored these concepts further when I read, *We Can't Teach What We Don't Know* by Howard (1999) and "Is White a Race? Expressions of White Racial Identity" by Carter (1997). Howard alludes to the work of Tatum and others on racial identity development. He and Carter explore fully the stages of White identity development as postulated by J. E. Helms, which I found helpful. For example, in the contact stage, one of the first stages of White identity development, some White people talk about the colorblindness that was mentioned earlier. I like to think of myself in the stage of autonomy as described by Helms, a place where "we have acknowledged the reality of personal, cultural, and institutional racism, and we are engaged in activities to resist the many manifestations of oppression" (Howard, 1999, p. 93).

Howard (1993) acknowledges that the "development of a White racial identity…is a continually unfolding journey of discovery and growth" (p. 84). He acknowledges what many researchers and authors note, that

> Whites, for the most part, are not accustomed to seeing ourselves as racial beings…it is possible for Whites to exercise the privilege of choice regarding whether or not they will attend to their own identity as racial beings. The dynamics of dominance and the politics of difference…continue to allow Whites in Western nations to exist in the ironic and contradictory state of being blind to our own racial identity, on the one hand, while asserting the inherent superiority of Whiteness, on the other. (pp. 85-6)

Carter (1997), a psychologist, tells us that the idea of racial identity is usually applied to people of color.

> When Whites' racial identity is discussed it is done in terms of their political views or in terms of how they view people in other racial groups. Whites, while socialized in a racially constructed world, are taught not to be aware of themselves in racial terms. More importantly, in everyday language there is little recognition of the fact that race has personal psychological significance for Whites and, as such, is an aspect of each person's personality and developmental processes. (p. 199)

According to Rodriguez (2000) "Whiteness has historically been appropriated in unmarked ways by strategically maintaining as colorless *its* color (and hence its values, belief systems, privileges, histories, experiences and modes of operation) behind its constant construction of otherness" (p. 1). Clearly, it is difficult for Whites to process their racial identity development without a lot of thought, introspection and reflection. This is partly because as Howard (1999), says,

Whiteness is at best a dissonant identity. To be aware of one's Whiteness is to be in

conflict, at least to some degree, with the social marker of the race we carry. Whiteness

has been associated for centuries with racism and dominance. It is an inescapable truth of

history that Whites are inherently implicated in the legacy of privilege and have benefited

from the oppression of other groups. (p. 114)

It can be very difficult for Whites to process this sense of culpability, of shame, in fact of

repugnance. Sometimes, that means not wanting to talk about the issues. I have experienced

that squeamishness myself.

Another explication of White identity development says that it is formed in opposition to

Blackness. Conventional wisdom acknowledges that race is a social construct, although many

still see it as a scientific fact. Perry (2003) says that Whiteness was created by people who

imagined Blackness as something exotic and longed for, while at the same time despised. "…if

what it means to be white is constructed in opposition to how blackness is imagined (meaning

African Americans), then African Americans are implicated in the consciousness of white

Americans like no other minority" (p. 76).

The process of moving beyond seeing myself as Jewish to looking at myself as White is

ongoing for me, albeit not easy. I am sometimes acutely reminded of my Whiteness and other

times, I am not aware of it at all. Faye J. Crosby (1997) expresses my feelings when she says,

Work-induced consciousness of my Whiteness comes not only from the research I do but

also from my teaching. In my work as a professor I have come to realize that the

contours of my life and of my studies are bounded by my White skin color. Sometimes

the realization has arrived like a thunderbolt. (p. 184)

In my work as an educator, I, too, have begun to understand the boundaries placed on me because of my Whiteness. I have sometimes made gaffs and blunders, which, however unintentional they may be, I realize later may have hurt someone else. Such are the "thunderbolts" that have informed my understanding of myself and my own racial identity development. As Crosby points out, the privilege that we have as Whites sometimes blinds us to the issues with which others are dealing and makes us insensitive, even when we are trying very hard to recognize our own racial identity and the implications inherent in it. Rodriguez (2000) challenges Whites to

> think through how Whites live out (i.e. perform) their whiteness from a privileged position in the web of reality. How do their performances, specifically in relation to minorities, differ based on the *degree of awareness* of their overall structural advantage in terms of race privilege? (p. 8)

White Privilege

It seems to me that it is important to begin with oneself when exploring the issues of racial identity development and White privilege. I have always thought of myself as a caring, open, egalitarian person. It has been through the process of introspection, reflection, observation, discourse and interaction with others that I have changed in my thinking and in my practice and grown in innumerable ways. As I read, studied, reflected and related to others my assumptions and beliefs have been altered and honed by the various courses I have taken during the past few years in my doctoral studies. This is an ongoing process for me.

The first time I was introduced to the term "White privilege" was when I read Peggy McIntosh's (1997) piece entitled "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack," in *Race*, edited by Bart Schneider (1997). What an eye opener that was for me! It is not that I had been

unaware of privilege or even White privilege. It was more that I had never put a name to it. There is a certain power that comes with identifying an issue. So it was with me regarding White privilege. I began to look at various experiences I had in different ways. Something as simple as believing that I and my child had the advantages of good schooling because we deserve it, I see differently when I think, as Oakes and Lipton (2004) point out, "that also implies that if some students don't have the basic foundational opportunities of schooling it is because they don't deserve them. And we know that this is simply not true" (p. 187). Such thinking is an insidious form of privilege, which I had never thought of because I enjoyed the privilege, so had not questioned it. I began to see myself in relation to others differently than I had before. In a nice turn of phrase, Bill Ayers (2004) says that "one obstacle to feeling the weight of the world is the blindness of privilege" (p. 124). In an effort to remove those scales of privilege from my eyes, I asked myself some of the same questions McIntosh (1997) asked herself. I began as she did to "count the ways in which I enjoy unearned skin privilege and have been conditioned into oblivion about its existence" (p. 121). Ayers (2004), too, points out that "privilege is not something the privileged have to embrace or even recognize in order to reap its benefits" (p. 124). In explicating White privilege, McIntosh (1997) points out, "Whites are taught to think of their lives as morally neutral, normative, and average, and also ideal, so that when we work to benefit others, this is seen as work which will allow 'them' to be more like 'us'" (p. 121). She acknowledges that while Whites can understand that racism puts others at a disadvantage, we have not seen the other aspect of this realization, that racism puts us at an advantage. As McIntosh (1997) says, "Describing white privilege makes one newly accountable" (p. 120). That was certainly so for me!

Difficulties in Relinquishing Privilege.

Like Michelle Fine (1997) I, too, find myself "trying to understand how whiteness accrues privilege and status; gets itself surrounded by protective pillows of resources and/or benefits of the doubt; how whiteness repels gossip and voyeurism and instead demands dignity" (p. 57). It is important to me to understand not only how privilege affects Blacks, but how it affects me as a White person. Maureen Reddy (1998) says that to have an antiracist society is

> hard, very hard…The fact is that for white people to fight institutional racism and its
> concomitant white-skin privilege, we will have to give something up: we will have to
> refuse the unearned privileges accorded to us for our white skins. Apart from the initial
> problem of raising consciousness enough to recognize these privileges, we will run into
> the problem of not wanting to lose our privileges, especially our white children's
> privileges. (p. 184)

I have definitely felt how difficult it is to relinquish privilege, especially in terms of opportunities for my daughter. It is one thing to recognize injustice in a global sense; it is a completely different thing to understand that acting on that recognition means having to give up something.

Oakes and Lipton (2004) talk about how hard it is for White Americans to acknowledge and accept inequalities. They hypothesize that this might have to do with a strong commitment to equality that blinds them to the inequalities even when they are pointed out. Or, they say, perhaps it is because that equality might cause them to lose the advantages they have enjoyed. While I believe that racism diminishes me, I can see how seductive it is to ignore White privilege, but I keep coming back to my own accountability and desire to effect social change, so I try very hard, not always successfully, to be honest with myself. In a very real way, I feel my integrity is at stake in this struggle.

I have a colleague who dislikes the term White privilege because she thinks that what we are talking about are not privileges, but rights that everyone should have. McIntosh (1997) addresses that when she says,

> …the feeling that one belongs within the human circle, as Native Americans say, should not be seen as privilege for a few. Ideally, it is an unearned entitlement. At present, since only a few have it, it is an unearned advantage for them. (p. 125)

> Around the same time as I read McIntosh, I also read Jonathan Kozol's (1991) *Savage Inequalities*. This was another work that exerted a powerful influence on my thinking. It is interesting to me that Gloria Ladson-Billings (1998) says about this book that

> it created an emotional and ethical stir within and beyond the education community. White colleagues talked of how moved both they and their students were as they read Kozol's descriptions of inequity in school settings… Interestingly, many African American colleagues indicated that although Kozol had been precise and passionate in his documentation, he had not revealed anything new about the differences that exist between African American and White schools. But Kozol's research did give voice to people of color. His analysis of funding inequities provides insight into the impact of racism and White self-interest on school funding policies. (p.20)

When I read this, I felt diminished and inadequate that it had taken me so long to recognize this issue that Black people had recognized for years. It does seem to me to be very important, though, that Kozol did raise awareness of people who had not seen this as an issue prior to reading his book. We each have to start somewhere…

I have to admit that when first confronted with the idea of equalizing the money given to all school districts in Illinois, I felt threatened. My reaction was that I worked hard to give my

child a home in a community that invests in its educational system and I did not want anyone to

infringe on my daughter's educational opportunities. I was unaware ***because I let myself be***

unaware of the horrendous conditions under which some students live and go to school. Kozol

(1991) says,

> When low-income districts go to court to challenge the existing system of school
>
> funding, writes John Coons, the natural fear of the conservative is "that the levelers are at
>
> work here sapping the foundations of free enterprise." In reality, he says, there is "no
>
> graver threat to the capitalist system than the present cyclical replacement of the 'fittest'
>
> of one generation by their artificially advantaged offspring. Worse, when that advantage is
>
> proffered to the children of the successful *by the state*, we can be sure that free enterprise
>
> has sold its birthright…. To defend the present public school finance system on a platform
>
> of economic or political freedom is no less absurd than to describe it as egalitarian. In the
>
> name of all the values of free enterprise, the existing system [is] a scandal. (p. 206)

Kozol makes the point that it is not just financial inequality but also racism that

causes the extreme differential that exists among school districts. As a taxpaying parent of a

student in my education-conscious suburb, I was pretty firmly entrenched in the idea that my

hard-earned money should go to give **my** child the best possible education. In theory, I wanted all

children to have a good education, but I really was not all that concerned about those "other"

children in the way that I was about my own child. My entire view of school funding changed

when I read *Savage Inequalities*. I was ashamed of myself. I realized that **all** children must have

the same high quality educational opportunities that my child has or I am diminished as a member

of our society, a concept I learned from Martin Luther King, Jr. As Michael W. Apple (2000) so

emphatically says, it is important to "constantly remind ourselves that the large-scale social forces

such as racism and sexism many of us rightly condemn are not abstractions. Their effects are visceral. They are not far removed from daily practices, but constitute and are constituted by them" (p. 2). By writing about the situation and raising people's awareness, Kozol is working on creating the critical mass needed to make substantive lasting changes. By discussing these issues with students, teachers, friends and family, I am, in my own rather limited sphere of influence not only trying to remind myself of the immediacy of these issues, but also trying to create a critical mass….

How White Privilege Affects Me.

Once I began to understand what White privilege is, I began to see how it affects me. I looked at ways in which I had enjoyed privilege because of my Whiteness and had not even been aware of it. I do not want any unearned privilege because of the color of my skin. I want privileges that I have earned. I actually think I am a pretty good person and that I have in some ways earned privilege. That's great. I don't want to benefit from something unearned at someone else's expense, though. I don't want privilege that hurts someone else and has accrued to me simply because of the color of my skin. Even as I say that, however, I am aware that that I do benefit from that privilege and that I take many things for granted. I cannot get away from the fact that I am White and do receive the benefits of that condition. As I write this, I am reminded of what Laurie Fuller (2000) asks as she explores this issue. "As a 'white woman,' am I again centering on myself and my own struggle with identity positionings? …is this another way for me as a 'white' to try and escape the guilt of white privilege by deconstructing and recontextualizing notions of race?" (p. 100). Where **is** my place in the discussion? How does even asking these questions affect my sense of the issues? To me, looking at all this stuff is a painful journey, but a necessary one. There is a tremendous cost to Whites inherent in White

privilege, although most of us have been socialized to ignore it. I feel very strongly that I am diminished every time there is an unjust act committed against someone else, especially in the sense of the unearned advantage of race.

Need for Safe Spaces

When my daughter was in school, in the culturally diverse community in which we live, I was very active in the PTA. When she was in middle school, a group of Black parents wanted to form a Black caucus of the PTA. I was outraged. My walking partner and I discussed the situation vigorously on our nightly walks. The more we talked, the more furious I felt, the faster we walked. I realize now that I felt somehow threatened by the Black parents wanting their own group. At the time, I asked what would happen if I wanted to form an all White group of the PTA or a Jewish caucus. After all, I said to myself, the PTA is for ALL the parents, including Black parents. Why should they be separate? It was not until years later, when I was introduced to the concept of White privilege that I realized how privileged my reaction was. I never felt uncomfortable going in to the school. If I had an issue or a problem to discuss with the teacher or the principal, I thought nothing about going to the school to talk to them. I felt it was my school. I did not realize that many of the parents did not have the same feelings about the school that I had or the same experiences when trying to access the school.

While I wish it were not the case, I can see now how important it is for there to be a Black caucus or, as we have at our school, Black and Latino Quest programs so that successful high school students can mentor and welcome into the school students of their own race and ethnic backgrounds to help them "do" school. The faculty sponsors advise the high school students who provide tutoring and social opportunities for junior high students. There was a time when I would have decried such a program. As Tatum (1997) says, "It might seem

counterintuitive that a school involved in a voluntary desegregation program could improve both academic performance and social relationships among students by separating the Black students…" (pp.73-4).

It used to seem counter- intuitive to me. In fact, at one time, I was quite threatened by such an idea. I thought to myself, as I had before regarding the PTA, "How would the community feel if I started a program just for Jewish kids or just for White kids in a public school? There would be quite an outcry." Then, again, as I read and thought about privilege, I realized that all my life, I had enjoyed such programs. I, as a member of the dominant White culture had always had the role models in school that encouraged me to be successful. Funny, that even with that enjoyment of privilege, the creation of a program for someone other than me makes me feel bad, excluded, left out. How must Blacks and Hispanics have felt their whole lives? Now, when I hear criticisms of these Quest programs on the basis of exclusivity, I am able to explain the need for them. Is it a function of privilege that I have the sense that I should be able to be included in anything that is happening that I am interested in or qualified for regarding schools or just my personality? That is the type of question I have begun to ask myself as I explore my reactions to privilege. I do not always find an answer.

An important reason for formal and informal Black caucuses began simmering in my brain when I heard the responses of the Black women in my Book Club to the question I raised about feeling enraged at the swimming pool being cemented over rather than being integrated. "You deal with it or it would destroy you" resonated in my mind. How does one deal with that I asked myself and others. A Latino friend of mine told me that every morning before he gets out of bed, he reminds himself that he is a brown-skinned man in a White world. He **daily** girds himself against the racism he knows he will encounter however subtle it may be. Singleton

remarks on the importance to him of having places to talk about these happenings and to heal from them.

> Some days I am less able to cope. People of color are like pressure cookers walking around with racial pressure building inside. For me, courageous conversation is a valve that slowly releases that pressure so that I don't explode, which will appear inappropriate, overly aggressive, or emotional. Black Americans, and other people of color for that matter, require healing places to deal with these micro-aggressions…Without these safe spaces, we don't have opportunities to slowly release that pressure. (Sparks, 2002, p. 61)

He acknowledges that it is important also to have opportunities to address these issues in multicultural forums in the settings where they actually take place. That affirms my colleague's and my choice to pursue conversations on race and achievement in a variety of forums, but it also highlights to me why, uncomfortable though they may make me, it is essential to have spaces and places for Blacks to be with Blacks and Latinos with Latinos.

Institutional Racism: The Intersection of Identity and Privilege in Education

Racism and privilege abound! They are endemic in our environments. They are institutionalized. These things surround us. Fine (1997) defines institutional racism thusly,

> If institutions are organized such that being white (or male or elite) buys protection and if this protection necessitates the institutional subversion of opportunities for persons of color in policies/practices that appear race neutral, then liberal strategies for access are limited. By that I mean that those who have been historically excluded may disproportionately 'fail' to perform 'to standard.' (p. 64)

I have thought about institutional racism, but I never really thought about the definition in the way that Pierre Bourdieu does. In the quote Fine (1997) uses he says, "'The act of

institution… signifies to someone what his identity is, but in a way that both expresses it to him and imposes it on him by expressing it in front of everyone and thus informing him in an authoritative manner of what he is and what he must be'" (p. 58). Perry (2003) says that when we say that something is "institutionalized, we mean that it was the central meaning system that informed institutional life in these schools and to which its participants would to a greater or lesser extent be socialized" (p. 93). These explanations clarify for me why institutional racism is so powerful a force.

> Giroux (1997) says that James Baldwin describes multiculturalism as
> primarily about whiteness and its claims to a self-definition that excludes the messy
> relations of race, ethnicity, power and identity. Baldwin highlights how differences in
> power and privilege authorize who speaks, how fully, under what conditions, against
> what issues, for whom, and with what degree of consistent, institutionalized support. (p.
> 236)

Apple (2000) tells us that "official knowledge" is the knowledge that those in power in any given institution, including education, tell us is right, correct, just. Howard (1999) talks about the things that converge into the dynamics of dominance: an assumption that you know what is right, the ability to ignore realities that do not agree with the one that you have constructed and the mantle of privilege. I have observed that people in positions of power can continually state and restate an assumption they take as true and in the process, it becomes true, even in the face of provable discrepancy. I call this the "emperor's new clothes syndrome" after the children's folk tale. It does not seem to matter that what is being espoused is patently false; by the time it is repeated with strong assertion enough times, it is understood by many people to

be true. I think this dynamic of dominance is one aspect of institutional racism. Without even thinking about it, we make many assumptions based on what we have been taught in the past.

The pieces I have read and the conversations with others engendered by that reading, the further reading I have then undertaken to help myself understand the issues raised in the resulting conversations and the ensuing dialogues arising from those readings inform and direct my work as an educator and impel me to pursue this project.

Chapter Three

Methodology

This dissertation is an autoethnographic cultural study in which I am looking at the issue of White privilege and its effect on equity and social justice from the point of view of situating myself in a particular culture in an effort to understand the phenomenon of White privilege as a means towards effecting change. It is my hope that in adding my voice to the discourse, I will be able to share the ways in which I have grown and changed and that my story will resonate with others and positively influence their thinking about this subject.

Autoethnogrophy/Autobiography

According to Denzin and Lincoln (2003), qualitative research "can be used to help imagine and create a free, democratic society" (p. xi). Heady words! They go on to say that "qualitative research involves the studied use and collection of a variety of empirical materials – case study; personal experience; introspection; life story…- that describe routine and problematic moments and meanings in individuals' lives" (p. 5). I took this as encouragement to pursue the course of autobiography in my dissertation. In fact, I do use my personal experience, introspection and life story in order to describe routine and problematic moments and meanings in **my** life. Denzin and Lincoln (2003) say that "many now argue that we can study only our own experiences. The researcher becomes the research subject. This is the topic of autoethnography" (p.51).

Bochner (2003) talks about how his eyes and ears were opened "to the necessity of exposing how the complex contingencies of race, class, sexuality, disability, and ethnicity are woven into the fabric of concrete, personal, lived experiences, championing the cause of reflexive, experimental, autobiographical, and vulnerable texts… we need a form that will allow

readers to feel the moral dilemmas, think with our story instead of about it, join actively in the decision points that define an autoethnographic project, and consider how their own lives can be made a story worth telling"(Ellis & Bochner, 2003, p. 202-3).   Bochner describes exactly what I hope to do in my project.

Ellis and Bochner (2003) define autoethnography as follows:

> Autoethnography is an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural. Back and forth autoethnographers gaze, first through an ethnographic wide-angle lens, focusing outward on social and cultural aspects of their personal experience; then, they look inward, exposing a vulnerable self that is moved by and may move through, refract, and resist cultural interpretations…As they zoom backward and forward, inward and outward, distinctions between the personal and cultural become blurred, sometimes beyond distinct recognition. Usually written in first-person voice, autoethnographic texts appear in a variety of forms…In these texts, concrete action, dialogue, emotion, embodiment, spirituality, and self consciousness are featured, appearing as relational and institutional stories affected by history, social structure, and culture, which themselves are dialectically revealed through action, feeling, thought, and language. (p. 209)

Research Questions

The primary research question for my dissertation is:

1. How has/does my experience as a White, Jewish, female educator shape(d) my understanding of issues of racism and White privilege in education?

Related research questions are:

1. How can we best have the conversations about race and achievement necessary to address these issues?

2. How will the asking and attempting to answer these questions affect the next steps for me?

Blurring Genres

For me, the most compelling pieces I read are personal narratives and people's stories about their experiences. I find myself connecting with them and they help me to understand my own work and practice better. It is important to me to know where an author is coming from, what lens s/he is using as the story unfolds for me to truly make meaning of it in my own life and work. The abstract is never as meaningful to me as the personal. Therefore, this dissertation will be in the form of a narrative, which, as I understand it is a genre in which making meaning of experiences by telling about them is the main focus and that it is "based on a particular understanding of the speaker's self" (Casey, 1995, p.213). Casey says also that narrative "dares to announce 'I am' ('we are') and in so doing deliberately defies the forces of alienation, anomie, annihilation, authoritarianism, fragmentation, commodification, depreciation, and dispossession" (p. 213).

If this seems somewhat confusing, it is perhaps because the distinction between the genres is fuzzy. According to Ellis and Bochner (2003) "autoethnography, narrative ethnography, self-ethnography, memoir, autobiography, even fiction, have become blurred genres" (p.214).

Ellis and Bochner (2003) say that in personal narratives, the author takes on "the dual identities of academic and personal selves to tell autobiographical stories about some aspect of their experience in daily life" (p. 211). They continue, "In **literary autoethnogrophies**, an

author's primary identification is as an autobiographical writer rather than a social scientist, and the text focuses as much on examining a self autobiographically as on interpreting a culture…" (p.211). My work will be situated somewhere in the intersection of these two forms.

In reading Denzin and Lincoln (2003), I have come to situate my work also as a cultural study. They say a researcher taking a cultural studies perspective "will read a text in terms of its location within a historical moment marked by a particular gender, race, or class ideology" (p.10-11). That is what I will be doing as I continue to be engaged in looking at White privilege and racial identity development and personal and institutional racism in education, particularly in my experience.

Credibility: Problematizing Autoethnography/Autobiography

Denzin and Lincoln (2003) acknowledge that

Commitment to this style of writing [autoethnography] does not come easily. It involves learning how to write differently, how to use personal experience and the first-person voice as vehicles for authorizing claims to truth and knowledge. And there are many critics, including those who wonder about narrative truth, emotional recall, and layered texts, who question the point of a storied life and worry as well about such traditional issues as reliability and validity. (p. 52)

Initially, when I thought of doing autobiographical or autoethnographic work for my dissertation, I was excited, but felt somewhat awkward and uncomfortable about it. I worried that it would be too narcissistic or self-absorbed of me. Always, unfortunately, one who cares about others' opinions of me, I worried that "they" would think me self-serving or too caught up in myself. Increasingly, though, as I become immersed in my subject, I feel that my experiences with the phenomenon of White privilege, my own journey into an understanding of racial

identity development and my burgeoning awareness of the extreme importance of acknowledging and addressing this topic in education, make my voice one to be added to the discourse. As Casey (1995) tells us, "'Understanding of self is not narcissism,' Pinar (1998, p.150) argues, 'it is a precondition and a concomitant condition to the understanding of others'" (p.217).

Barbara Katz Rothman (2005) discusses her own struggles with this genre as she pursues her sociological research. She talks about her latest book as being "informed by my life, not simply framed by or sprinkled with personal anecdotes…. In autoethnography, your life is data" (p. B11). As Rothman talks about grappling with her own work, she says,

> I have a number of concepts that I want to get across to the reader. I search for examples in whatever is available to me. That includes my life. …my life is also what gives me some of my ideas: Concepts develop out of living; experience congeals into thought… I'm wrestling with ideas, which have often come to me in the course of living my life. I use my writing to try to explain those ideas and introduce them to other people. (p. B11)

Rothman says that she is using her practice rather than theory in her writing. She goes on to make the very important point that "practice is, for all of us, grounded in theory, in ideology, in ways of thinking about the world" (p. B11). This concept helps me to realize the importance of self in qualitative research.

Making Oneself Vulnerable.

One of the pitfalls of looking at one's own experiences and at oneself is a tendency to present oneself in the best possible light, thereby foregoing inclusion of some of the experiences and feelings about which one is not proud. I am acutely aware of this limitation and have committed to including all my growth experiences around this issue, even ones that I wish had

not occurred. It is very difficult to make oneself as vulnerable as one must if one is to do meaningful autobiography or autoethnography. I try my best to allow myself that vulnerability and hope that the reader will benefit from my foibles and understand from where I am coming.

In a Think Piece written by Maria Piantanida (2001) entitled "Studying One's Practice: Solipsm or Scholarship?" some of these same questions are addressed. She talks first about the lack of objectivity that comes with autoethnography. She tells the story of a doctoral student who wanted to study the experiences of Chinese students as they become acclimated to academic life in the United States, who was told that she could not do that because as a Chinese woman studying in the U.S. herself, she would be too close to the subject and could not be objective. Piantanida (2001) says,

> embedded in these anecdotes are assumptions about the nature of legitimate knowledge and the methods of inquiry by which such knowledge is generated…Given this world view, the prospect of practitioners studying their own practice raises the specter of 'solipsism,' which, in its general use, connotes 'an excessive preoccupation with oneself. (p. 1)

I worried a lot about this as I was trying to figure out how to approach my project. Piantanida goes on to say that it is helpful to remember "that solipsism, in its original metaphysical sense, refers to the view or theory that self is the only object of real knowledge or the only thing really existent (*Oxford English Dictionary*)." She continues that in this philosophical sense, "solipsism points to a world view which assumes the inevitable subjectivity of knowledge" (p. 1). I found this enlightening and comforting.

Piantanida (2001) postulates that the power of this kind of research

> lies in the potential for probing the particulars of one's own professional life in order to gain insight into more universal human dilemmas. Often this probing takes the researcher beneath the surface of his or her public persona, creating the potential for new insights into oneself. These insights may not always be pleasant, and what the practitioner-researcher makes of them is crucial to the scholarly integrity of a study. (p. 3)

Narrative Truth.

In addressing some of the criticisms and concerns raised by others about this research genre, Bochner (2003) tells us

> First, there is the question of narrative truth. What is the point of a storied life? Narrative truth seeks to keep the past alive in the present. Stories show us that the meanings and significance of the past are incomplete, tentative, and revisable according to contingencies of our present life circumstances, the present from which we narrate. Doesn't this mean that the stories we tell always run the risk of distorting the past? Of course, it does. (pp. 219-220)

He goes on to explain, however, that "narrative is both about living and part of it" (p. 220). This kind of work, he says, functions "as an agent of self-discovery or self-creation, for the author as well as for those who read and engage the text" (p. 221). He describes the narrator as investigator, "always asking what is right to do and good to be" (p. 222).

Subjective Lens.

One of the problematics of autobiography/autoethnography is that there is no objective, quantifiable information to share. Madeleine Grumet (1991) alludes to this when she says that the autobiographer or narrator must always be aware of the pitfalls connected to the fact that

"every telling is a partial prevarication" (p. 69). Here, Grumet addresses the issue that what the autobiographer chooses to share necessarily defines and limits the information shared. It seems to me that such limitations of personal lens are found in all research, even quantitative, because what one chooses to include is always a factor. William F. Pinar (2000) quotes Grumet as saying, "'I would be naïve if I refused to admit influence in what we notice, what we choose to tell, and in how and why we tell what we do. Nevertheless, autobiographical method invites us to struggle with those determinations. It is that struggle and its resolve to develop ourselves in ways that transcend the identities that others have constructed for us that bonds the projects of autobiography and education' (1990b, p. 324)" (Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery, & Taubman, 2000, p.540).

It is interesting to me to note that Vivian Gussin Paley (2000) added a story in the new preface to her book, *White Teacher* that she had not included in the first edition of her book, although the incident had occurred before she originally wrote the book. In her new preface, she questions herself as to why she did not include the story the first time. It is such looking into myself and questioning and making meaning of my experiences that I do in my autoethnography. In this dissertation, the fact that it is subjective is clearly stated at the outset. Also, I hope, that very subjectivity is part of the strength of this work.

Design

In this work, I weave throughout my narrative the literature I have read and explicate its impact on me. For, everything I have read on the subject of race and achievement, White privilege, dialoguing about race, and issues of equity in education have had a profound effect on me and have pointed me in new directions on the journey of understanding I have undertaken. In addition, I explore the experiences I have had in my work as an educator in a diverse high school

in the Midwest and how they have shaped me and challenged me. Ellis (2003) in describing the methods employed in autoethnography says,

> I start with my personal life. I pay attention to my physical feelings, thoughts, and
> emotions. I use what I call systematic sociological introspection and emotional recall to
> try to understand an experience I've lived through. Then I write my experience as a
> story. By exploring a particular life [mine, in this case], I hope to understand a way of
> life…. (p.206)

In essence I am the only participant in this study. Others pass through my life and my consciousness and engage in dialogue with me, but they are not actually participants in this study as I am looking at myself and my reactions to them rather than at them. This work is in the first person. The voice is mine; the reflections are mine as I talk about how conversations I have had, authors I have read and things I have experienced affect me.

Memos.

Memos are an important part of qualitative research according to Joseph A. Maxwell (1996). They help you understand and develop your ideas. The value of memos depends on engaging in "serious reflection and self-critique, rather than just recording events and thoughts" (p. 12). I make use of memos from past experiences as well as continue to keep memos as my experiences unfold.

Analysis

I problematize this reading and these experiences in order to connect my own personal sense of them to the broader culture of the educational environment in which I find myself. I am committed to being as honest and introspective and reflective as I am able to be. As Bernestine Singley (2002) says in her introduction to *When Race Becomes Real*, she was asking people to

"honestly reveal their personal feelings and experiences around race. Bearing your soul to public view or, more accurately, for public consumption, is not easy" (p.23). It is my hope that my story and the recounting of my experiences as a White female educator resonates with others and adds insight to the discourse on race and achievement.

Robert V. Bullough, Jr. and Stefinee Pinnegar (2001) have written some guidelines that I found helpful and interesting when formulating my methodology. They talk about Pinar and his concept of "currere." Pinar believes that one always teaches the self and, therefore, he "engaged in a rigorous self-exploration, through a method he labeled 'currere,' seeking the roots of his self-understanding and therefore achieving an understanding of education" (p. 13).

Bullough, Jr. and Pinnegar quote C. Wright Mills, who "suggests that there is an important relationship between personal growth and understanding. He articulates…that for public theory to influence educational practice it must be translated through the personal" (p. 15). Mills makes a strong case for self-study to be considered serious research, which I hope mine is.

When the issue confronted by the self is shown to have relationship to and bearing on the context and ethos of a time, then self-study moves to research. It is the balance between the way in which private experience can provide insight and solution for public issues and troubles and the way in which public theory can provide insight and solution for private trial that forms the nexus of self-study…. (p. 15)

What Mills says describes the analysis I do. I am confronting the issues of White privilege, racial identity development and the relationship they have to our current culture. I hope that the way that I have begun to understand it for myself can provide insight into the public issues of racism, privilege and racial identity development. Surely, the public discourse I have had and the works I have read have provided insight for me into these issues. This kind of

study is recursive in the sense that my personal experiences, reflection and interactions with others inform my intention to try to change public practice and increase social justice while the published work influences the personal growth I have experienced and continue to experience. Pinar (2000) says that Richard Butt "believes that in interpreting and reconstructing our past, present and future, we move beyond what we thought before through action. In exploring these notions through acting them out, we are able to rehearse the possibility of transformation" (pp. 556-557). Bullough and Pinnegar (2001) say that "ultimately, the aim of self-study research is moral, to gain understanding necessary to make that interaction increasingly educative" (p.15). The words of these authors encouraged me to pursue this dissertaion.

Chapter Four

Where Does Change Reside?

Influencing Others

The ultimate purpose of my study is to facilitate change. How does that happen? How does change occur? I believe that I am the only person for whom I can make decisions. I do not believe that I as an educator, a parent, a wife, a friend, a therapist, a supervisor or a colleague have control over anyone else. I do believe that I have ***influence*** on others. We all do. To me, that is one of the reasons that this kind of reflective, introspective, autoethnographic work is productive: it has the potential to influence others to take a look at some of the same issues and see if they come to similar conclusions – or not.

As educators, we exercise our influence over others constantly: we give our students the tools to make choices for themselves and to recognize and exercise options; our goal is to teach them to think critically rather than to tell them what to think. Our influence is powerful because of what we choose to share with them and what we choose not to share. It seems to me often to be quite subjective. Yet, at the same time as the choices we make as individual educators or departments or schools or states has a huge influence on who our children become, if we show them the tools, we can facilitate the students learning far more than just that to which we expose them during their tenure with us. One of the ways teaching is subjective is that we share our own stories and experiences with our students, sometimes intentionally, sometimes inadvertently. In this research, I am intentionally, purposefully sharing my experiences grappling with issues of equity and social justice and White privilege in schools with the hope that by making my self visible I can influence others to look at some of the same issues and engage in their own personal

journeys around race and education and therefore get involved in the discourse and movement toward ameliorating some of the racism.

The Relationship of Subjectivity and Political Action

Some people see a tension between subjectivity and political action. For me, there is no tension: the subjective grappling with the issues seems to me to be the forerunner of political action.

> Autobiographical work is a political, intellectual project devoted to transformation, not only of the field, but of its participants… In noting that constructions of race, class and gender intersect autobiographical remembrance, Naomi Norquay reminds scholars that the point of this work is not merely knowledge accumulation. It is change. (Pinar, 2000, pp. 565-6)

To me, all change begins with self-understanding, whether it is self change or using ourselves as change agents in a broader social and political sense. First, one must reflect, which involves knowing oneself and the things to which one is committed and about which one cares deeply. Reflection involves introspection, learning about oneself and one's motivations and foibles. Such (necessarily subjective because it is so personal) reflection and introspection leads to action. Perhaps that action is writing, or talking, in some way sharing ideas with others. Perhaps that action is forming a Professional Book Club for a Community of Learners or facilitating staff development. Those actions ultimately lead to change, both in oneself because of the desire to change the self-understanding brings and in others because of the way we influence others by our actions.

Inchoate Intentions.

When I first started the Professional Book Club for a Community of Learners at my school, the idea that I wanted to use this as a forum to discuss issues of race and education was inchoate. The first book I chose for us to read was *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria* by Beverly Daniel Tatum. I had found the book provocative and enlightening when I first read it and thought that my cohort might enjoy engaging in discussion about it as well. It took me awhile to realize that what I really wanted to facilitate was a book club that focused on issues of equity and social justice in education. I began to understand that as I looked at the books I brought to the group as possibilities for us to read. Since that was not how I had originally billed the book club, I did bring in books/authors that sparked discussion about best practice in general, but eventually, I realized that my interest was in race and social justice in education and the books/authors I suggested reflected that interest. As time went on, we made that focus explicit in the book club.

Overcoming Reticence.

I have been thinking about how hard it is to put oneself out there and how I have found myself doing so. A few years ago, a sign-up sheet came out for us to decide what we wanted to do for our staff development groups. Everyone has to sign up for something. In the past, I have facilitated groups on a variety of topics from conflict resolution to a Homebase (homeroom/advisory) facilitators' support group. The preceding year, I had participated in the mentoring program as a resource rather than a facilitator. I was planning to do that again. When the sign-up came around, however, one of the choices was a group to plan a staff conversation on race and achievement. My friend and fellow social worker, a 30-something Black male was

listed as a facilitator with "other(s) to be determined." When I saw this offering, I was immediately intrigued by it. My interest was piqued!

My second thought was, "Why didn't they ask me to co-facilitate? They (whoever they are) know I am interested in this topic and that I am a skilled facilitator. Or, do they not think I am a good facilitator?" I began to really question myself in terms of my professional skills and whether or not I really do have a place in this struggle. I felt very bad that I had not been asked to participate in this project because I have such an intense interest in this topic and want to add my voice and expertise to the work on it in my school. I debated what to do. Should I go ahead and do the mentoring program? Should I sign up for Planning a Staff Conversation…? Should I let someone know I would like to facilitate? After all, they had said other facilitators would be determined. I went back and forth on that one because I knew I would be totally devastated if I offered to be a facilitator and was turned down. Maybe they did not want a White facilitator. Maybe they just did not want *me*. It was a real dilemma. I stewed about it for a few days and then, because I was truly very interested in doing this project, I got up my courage and approached my colleague about working with him. I stated it very tentatively because I did not want to push myself on him. He was overjoyed to have me volunteer! He was quite warm and responsive because that is the kind of guy he is. He told me he would love to have me co-facilitate with him and that he had been somewhat coerced into doing this project and was uncertain as to how to proceed. Not only was I not stepping on his toes by volunteering to work with him, he told me, but also he was thrilled to have someone with whom to work and especially someone such as I, who was well read and immersed in the subject. That was the beginning of a wonderful partnership and friendship between us. Although we are very different: he's male, I'm female; he's Black, I'm White; he's Christian, I'm Jewish; he's young,

I'm, well, let's say, middle-aged, we have become soul mates. At the time, though, after I left the meeting with my colleague, I began to question myself again. After all, he was a new member of our department and maybe he just didn't know how to turn me down. As I think about this, I realize that it is a little crazy, but that is how I felt. I realize that this insecurity and uncertainty on my part was colored by the fact that we were talking about race and I am a White woman and perhaps not really considered to be appropriate to participate in the cause this way. I agonized over whether or not a person like me has a place in the struggle for equity and social justice. If it is about race, I reasoned, it is about Blacks and Whites and so, as a White person, I have a point of view and a set of life experiences and positions on the various issues. But would others see it that way? Or would I be looked at as some kind of interloper? I do not think I am alone in having these kinds of anxieties, but maybe I am… Anyway, long story short, we did approach the powers that be and I was brought on board as the co-facilitator. In fact, I ultimately realized when we ran it by the administration that they did not purposefully pass over me, but rather just did not think of me to be the facilitator of this group, quite possibly because I am White. This thought gave me a lot to ponder. I have come to realize that it is very important to have both Black and White people working on this issue, together and separately.

Beginning to Act.

In any case, when we first began our conversation around race and achievement, I did not want anyone in the group who was not already "there" in terms of seeing the importance of having a discussion on race and achievement. I was afraid of the potshots taken at one who stands up to take a leadership role. I care about being respected and liked and thought well of, so I did not want to be in the position of being seen as wrong or bad or politically incorrect. The first time we met, our charge was to develop a forum for the entire staff to address the issue of

race and achievement. What my colleague and I soon discovered was that the first step is to HAVE the conversation. As we structured activities designed to help people create the staff discussion, we realized that the participants in the group continually went back to having the conversation among themselves, wanting to explore their own thoughts and feelings about it. We decided to provide the opportunity to have that discussion and created catalysts for it. My colleague and I ended up creating an action plan to have the conversation with the entire staff, which in the end was never implemented. I am not sure why nothing more was done with our plan. Perhaps, the powers that be felt that the school was not ready for it; perhaps they felt there were other, more pressing issues to be presented to the faculty. My colleague and I and some of the people who had participated in the staff development group were disappointed that this did not become a school wide endeavor, although we did continue to work on the issue in another small staff development group the following year.

This time, we offered a staff development session on having, rather than creating for others, a conversation on race and achievement. I wanted to invite certain people who I knew were interested in having such a discussion and I wanted to keep the group small so that we could weed out people who potentially would be difficult in such a discussion; at the time, I was still worried about facilitating such a discussion with people who were not politically on the same page as I. My colleague agreed, although he did not have the same reservations I did. It did not work out the way we planned, however, because people wanted to be in our group for a variety of reasons. Some, it appeared, wanted a forum to disagree with the stance taken by the administration, while others seemed to find the session to be the least disagreeable place to spend staff development time when they would rather be working with their classes or doing work for their classes (which some did during the discussions rather than participate.) Most people,

though, were there because they ***did*** want to grapple with this important issue, although they

came to it from a variety of positions.

Gaining Confidence.

I learned something very important from this experience: I learned that I could facilitate

a group around this difficult topic even with people who were not that interested; with people

who came from positions different from mine; and even with people who thoroughly disagreed

with me. It was a profound awakening! Through introspection, reading, discussing and

reflecting with my colleague, I have begun to see how important it is to be able to have this

"courageous conversation" about a "hot-lava" (as Florio-Ruane (2001) calls it) topic with people

who have not given it a lot of thought. It is not without trepidation that I undertake this work. It

is with the knowledge that I must make myself vulnerable and that I may be misunderstood.

People may disagree with me, may even get angry or talk about me behind my back.

Nevertheless, I feel myself moving forward wanting to expand my facilitation of such

challenging discussions. I do so because it seems to be imperative. I think that I, as a White

person, have a place in the discourse about racism and education. As a White educator, I have a

place in the intentional disruption of White privilege. And, as a White American, I have the

responsibility to take a hard look at myself to see what it means to be White in our society. As an

educator, I ask myself what I can do to engender positive changes. I do this aware that I will

make mistakes, that I do make mistakes, and that I am not always the person I want to be. There

is a tension within me that leads to reflection, which leads to action. I believe that others who

think deeply about these issues will be moved to act as well.

Dealing with Conflict.

A few years ago, I presented a paper at the 2003 AERA conference in Chicago. The paper, "Leading a Professional Book Club: Staff Development to Build Understanding and Grapple with Difficult Issues," was accepted under the Professional Development strand. The discussant for the session in which I participated, Thomas Guskey, a prominent scholar in the field of professional development, suggested to me during the discussion that the next step for the Book Club was to make it include the entire school (Guskey, 2003). At the time, I did not agree with that recommendation, for reasons which still make sense to me. For example, I felt that a book club by definition should be limited to those people who want to be there, who are committed to reading the books and participating in the discussions; it is not something that should be imposed on people. The desire to read and contemplate the impact the authors' ideas have on one's own practice and worldview and to consider how those ideas can be a catalyst for one's own further thoughts and action are what make the book club an effective and exciting form of staff development. I still think that is true. I have come to realize though, that communal reading and reflection is an excellent vehicle for community building. Florio-Ruane (2001) says it well,

> What we can learn with peers and/or more experienced others (be they teachers who may be present at the table or authors who are present in their texts) is rooted in and related to our conversations. Implicit in the idea of such conversations is the development of a community within which learning from text can occur. (p.122)

That is why I thought a book club would be a productive vehicle for exploring the issues and beginning the conversations about race and achievement.

Now, as a result of my five years experience with the book club, I would take it a step further and have everyone read a text and discuss it. I have come to embrace the suggestion made by Thomas Guskey that the reading and subsequent conversation could be expanded to the whole school. It might not be easy to do; conversations might be contentious, even adversarial, at times, but that is what makes this "courageous conversation" as Greg Singleton calls it (Sparks, 2002). As I do this work, I also have come to recognize that I have to embrace the conflict and discomfort that inevitably comes with it. Donaldson (2001, p. 108) quotes Peter Vaill, "To do something new, people invariably experience periods of profound discomfort." Singleton, too, indicates that discomfort has to be part of an authentic conversation. That is what makes it courageous (Sparks, 2002).

Florio-Ruane (2001) said that in her book group, the emotion generated in the discussion of Kozol's (1991) *Savage Inequalities* threatened the continuation of the conversation. She felt that, as the hostess/facilitator, she had to "move away from conflict." She goes on,

> However, I seem to sacrifice discussion of an important issue in order to restore cooperative participation in the group… The dilemma for a teacher in such a situation might be that of managing argument and examination of difference within the …medium of conversation and without risking its breakdown. (pp.113-114)

I have been in that role. I struggled with that dilemma in my role as facilitator of our Professional Book Club and in our school's Race and Achievement discussion sessions. It is uncomfortable when people are passionate and they disagree. It can get ugly. Therefore, people tend to shy away from it. Yet, how can we ever come to a deeper understanding of these "hot lava" topics if we always veer away from them? Taking a leadership role in courageous conversations means figuring out a way to deal with conflict.

In the end, it comes down to an issue of trust. It is important to establish trust, to have people understand that they are not adversaries even if they see things differently and that it is appropriate to disagree as we each struggle to understand our own place in the discourse. Lawrence and Tatum (1997) talking about a professional development program they studied that was designed to help educators "recognize personal, cultural and institutional manifestations of racism and to become more proactive in response to racism within schools settings" (p. 334) acknowledged lack of trust as creating most of the tension. For some, it was never resolved. It seems to me that one of the roles of the group facilitator is to help lay that foundation before grappling with the difficult issues. As the Japanese talk show host, Deborah Tannen (1999) says, we can make an "effort to modulate conflicts and defuse the spirit of opposition, but not the substance of disagreement." (p. 286)   Likewise, Donaldson (2001) says that engaging in this work as a leader means facing tensions and disagreements, rather than ignoring them or trying to suppress them. In fact, he says leaders should encourage "'counterfluence' –voices that differ and that seek to change dominant patterns of influence" (p. 76). Being able to disagree and discuss differences about complex, involved and perplexing issues in order to grow, as well as to come to consensus about other issues, is what I mean when I talk about a community of learners, which is why I included those words in the title of the book club.

Crossroads of Change

So, where does change reside? Now, I see that the challenge is to expand that community of learners to the whole school, not an easy task, but one I see as essential to effecting change in a systemic way. Introducing the opportunities for people to be exposed to new ideas, to think about them, to discuss them creates the platform for change. The beginning of change exists within an individual, as a tension-ridden state of mind. Working to resolve that tension

inevitably leads to action. Action has the potential to lead to change. Action without reflection is not praxis. Nor is action based on ideology alone enough to sustain change. Critical praxis is the intersection of analytical reflection and practical application of an idea. That juncture is where change resides.

Chapter Five

Resilience in Students of Color

Involving Students in the Conversation about Race and Achievement

In the staff development group, "Having a Conversation about Race and Achievement," we brought a small group of Black students with whom we had been working to talk about a variety of issues from their points of view with the faculty members in the group. This began in our staff development group of the preceding year when some students who had participated from our school in the Minority Student Achievement Network (MSAN) conference approached the superintendent saying they wanted to have an opportunity to address teachers. {The MSAN is described by Theresa Perry as "…a group of districts organized to address the achievement gap in their respective school systems" (2003, p. 65).} The superintendent spoke to my colleague about their request and asked/told us to facilitate this. We had some concerns about it initially, but one does not refuse one's superintendent, so, of course, we complied.

Our concerns were basically twofold: one, we had planned our time and already had more than we could fit in to the schedule and this would mean not doing something else, and two, we did not want to bring the students in to harangue or lambaste the teachers, which we feared might be the case. The second concern we decided to address by meeting with the students ahead of the time they were planning to come to our session.

While a number of students had originally made the request of the superintendent, when we invited them to meet with us only six students came: six wonderful, committed, caring concerned students with whom we bonded quite quickly. We discussed the things they wanted to share with the teachers and, indeed, there were things about which they had very negative reactions and feelings. So, we worked on an agenda and on the best way to present their

concerns so that they really would be heard and the adult group members would not be defensive. All of us, the students and my colleague and I, enjoyed and learned a lot from that first meeting and we decided we would continue to meet. This became a forum for the students' voices to be heard – and acted upon – by us as well as an opportunity to explore the issues raised in an open, honest dialogue in an atmosphere of trust.

Before the meeting with the teachers, I had taken notes and made an outline with the subjects the students wanted to address and some of the substance they did not want to forget when they came to the meeting with the teachers. What a great meeting it was! Because the students did not speak in a way that was at all accusatory (largely, I think, due to our discussions about what would be effective) and even acknowledged their appreciation that the teachers were meeting to grapple with this issue, the adults were able to hear their concerns and were extremely responsive. When the students raised the issue that they felt minority authors were not well enough represented in the required reading, one teacher from the English department offered to arrange a meeting between the students and her department regarding the choices of novels read in classes. The educators in the staff development group were delighted to have the students and invited them to return. Unfortunately, this put these students in the unenviable position of speaking for all students of color in the school, which we constantly tried to address, not always successfully.

Department Discussion.

The meeting with the English department was arranged and we were there, ready to discuss the students' concerns, having worked on them in the ongoing meetings we were having with the students. Nobody showed up to talk to us. The department chair was very apologetic and indicated that she had failed to remind people, but that they **were** interested in talking with

the group, so we rescheduled. This time, some teachers were there and we had three different, enlightening discussions with each group of teachers who came to the English workroom to meet around the table with us over one of three lunch periods. We did not by any means have the entire department or even close to it, but the students felt the department had responded to them.

Expanding the Canon.

The discussions were informative to me. We had worked with the students on what they wanted to say. At first, they were thinking that they did not want to read any of the classics; rather they wanted them replaced with books to which they could relate better, books in which the main characters were functional, middle class, successful people of color. We discussed this at great length, looking at the books they were recommending and the goals of the various English classes and their ultimate goals for their high school education. I introduced the idea that these college bound students might need to be versed in the canon in addition to having the broader experience of reading the kind of literature they wanted introduced more widely into their classes. The idea that they might need to be familiar with some of the classic literature taught in high schools across the country seemingly had not occurred to the students, but they quickly picked up on it. We discussed the idea espoused by so many people who grapple with the issues of race and achievement that it is important for students of color to have the same tools as White students when they go into the competitive world of higher education – or anywhere, for that matter.

Cultural Capital

What Is Cultural Capital?

Many people interested in the best educational opportunities for Black students have alluded to "cultural capital." In his book, *Achievement Matters*, Hugh B. Price (2002) tells us,

Janie Victoria Ward, author of *The Skin We're In: Teaching Our Children to Be Emotionally Strong, Socially Smart, and Spiritually Connected*, says that even though cultural programs are very important for a child's development, some African-American parents may be reluctant to engage in certain activities with their children – such as visiting museums and libraries, attending lectures, and plays – because the parents feel those activities are "too white."

> The trouble is that this type of reluctance can shortchange your children, stifle their interests and stunt their growth as capable and curious young people. As Ms. Ward says, "If you are a black adult for whom crossing over feels dangerous, you may choose to stay put, even at a cost to your children. It's not that blacks don't see the value of these cultural activities, or that they are nonintellectual or anti-intellectual. It's just that for many, it feels too treacherous, too hard to be the first to or the only one." (p. 162)

Here, Price in talking to Black parents is expressing the importance of cultural capital and attributing the lack of it to White privilege.

In her discussion of Pierre Bordieu's notion of "cultural capital," defined as " socially inherited cultural competence that facilitates achievement in school," Theresa Perry (2003) talks about an example of a kindergarten teacher who reads a wonderful book to her students, appropriately and making great efforts to engage them, but

> the children are not engaged. They are quiet, attentive, but not engaged. The content of the book and the knowledge assumed, are so distant from the experiences of the children that the book fails to engage them. Never mind that the book is wonderful and ideal in every other regard. Now, this needn't have been the case. The teacher could have done some prior work with the children before she read the book. She could have explicitly

and systematically handed over to them the concepts and experiences that they needed in order for the reading of the text to be meaningful and engaging, connecting the text to the children's experiences. She also could have chosen one of the many multicultural texts that are great pieces of literature and appropriate to teach the language and concepts she was trying to teach with the book that failed to engage the children. (pp.67-69)

Perry is talking about kindergartners, but her thoughts can be extrapolated to apply to the discussion we were having with high schoolers. Our students wanted to make the very point that Perry makes about including multicultural texts appropriate to teaching the ideas and fostering philosophical discussions in their English classes so that they, students of color, could relate to the literature. At the same time, it seemed to me, in order to give our bright, capable college bound students the cultural capital they need to be successful in the colleges to which they were headed, the canon of literature also needs to be taught, albeit keeping in mind, Perry's exhortation that it must be done in a way that makes it accessible for all students. The students in our discussion group embraced this concept and incorporated it into the discussion they ultimately had with the English teachers.

The idea that there might be multicultural texts in addition to the canon that are great pieces of literature turned out to be a topic of discussion in a couple of the student groups with the English teachers. The students were able to speak up to clarify that they were not promulgating the idea that no Shakespeare or other classical literature should be read. In fact, they indicated that they understood the importance of having been exposed to such literature. They made it clear that their idea was to broaden the canon, to expand it to include literature that reflected their experiences and that of other non-White cultures. They explained that this would be beneficial not only to them, but to the White students and students from other

underrepresented cultures as well. Chubbuck (2004) talks about the "pattern – where racist beliefs in White superiority and dominance create structures that privilege White norms…" (p. 305). These students wanted to change that pattern.

Amanda Lewis (2003) expands on the definition of cultural capital when she says,

I understand cultural capital to include having a general facility for interacting appropriately in various contexts, a knowledge of and an ability to use the rules of engagement in particular settings, general cultural knowledge relevant for and held in esteem in a particular situation and certain kinds of possessions or credentials. (p. 170)

She also references the other kinds of capital Bordieu discussed: "economic (money and property), social (connections, social networks)…and symbolic (symbols of prestige and legitimacy). She acknowledges that "each form of capital can be converted into the others in order to enhance or maintain positions" and that they are not always distinct and "in practice the boundaries are quite blurry" (p. 155).

Significance of Cultural Capital.

Lewis (2003) hits on the significance of capital in regard to discussions of race and achievement and the resiliency of African American students when she says,

The notion of capital is important because it inherently challenges one of the dominant narratives for understanding educational success and failure – the ideology of meritocracy: people are understood to be successful solely because of their individual effort and talent so that those who "deserve" to excel in fact do so (Apple 1982, 1990).

(p. 156)

As I ponder this notion of capital and how it affects my undertaking this autoethnographic study, I am reminded of what Michael Apple (2000) says about capital,

While there is a formal right for everyone to be represented in the debates over whose

cultural capital, whose knowledge 'that,' 'how,' and 'to,' will be declared legitimate for

transmission to future generations of students, it is still the case that…a *selective tradition*

operates in which only specific groups' knowledge becomes official knowledge. (p. 62)

Meritocracy.

In our discussions with the English teachers these issues of capital intersected.   Some of

the English teachers indicated that they felt the literature the students were advocating to have

included in the classes was not "academic" enough. The students and my colleague and I and

some of the other teachers, were shocked and appalled by this thought. Other teachers disagreed

with that and supported the idea of a wider range of multicultural readings; in fact, many already

incorporated such things in their syllabuses. In this debate I saw clearly that many of the

teachers felt that the "official knowledge" had to be the canon, the knowledge that the dominant

classes over time had declared important. Some of them felt there was no room for expansion to

include literature that reflected the cultural experiences of their students.

Dominance is embedded in what we teach. For example, we tend to teach about history

from a Eurocentric perspective. The classics or the canon of literature tend to be books written

by Whites. I say, "tend to be," because many teachers in my school who stop to think about it,

interrupt that cycle. But even in a school like the one in which I work, where minority student

achievement is a highly touted goal, I find teachers who mouth traditional, racist mantras. My

staff development partner and I took a group of very bright, high-achieving students of color to a

discussion with some of the teachers in the English department to discuss broadening the

required literature in the English curriculum to reflect writers of color and topics of interest to

people of color. The students felt that the literature they read reflected predominantly White

experience. During the course of our work with the students, we had talked about a variety of books that address the issues with which we were grappling. One of the students chose to read Beverly Daniel Tatum's (1997) book, *Why are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?* as her choice for a supplemental reading assignment. As we spoke with the English teachers, she, in true Socratic style, turned to the text and quoted from it in order to make her point that reading literature in which Black characters are described simply as a "Black woman" or "a chauffeur" or even "Nigger" creates a culture of racism. "Cultural racism – the cultural images and messages that affirm the assumed superiority of Whites and the assumed inferiority of people of color – is like smog in the air" (Tatum, 1997, p. 6). To this student and others in our group the choices of literature in the English classes felt like cultural racism. It was important to them to explain their feelings to the people who choose the books our students read. Some of the teachers heard them; others did not, but rather reacted defensively.

When one of the students mentioned a book she thought would be good to include, one of the teachers responded disparagingly that the book was not challenging enough. The department chair disagreed, but the damage was done. I saw the look on the student's face as she flinched at the implication that a Black writer could not write a quality book. At this point, the student who had read Tatum (1997) as an outside reading assignment for her English class, shared the following quotation:

> Dominant groups, by definition, set the parameters within which the subordinates operate. The dominant group holds the power and authority in society relative to the subordinates and determines how that power and authority may be acceptably used. Whether it is reflected in determining who gets the best jobs, whose

history will be taught in school, or whose relationships will be validated by society, the

dominant group has the greatest influence in determining the structure of the society….

The dominant group assigns roles to the subordinates that reflect the latter's

devalued status, reserving the most highly valued roles for themselves. Subordinates are

usually said to be innately incapable of being able to perform the preferred roles. To the

extent that the targeted group internalizes the images that the dominant group reflects

back to them, they may find it difficult to believe in their own ability. (p. 23)

It became clear to me in this discussion, as it has many other times since I have started to

think about these ideas, that many teachers **do** operate on the idea of a meritocracy. They think

that students who do well with the canon deserve to be academically successful and those who

do not do well do not deserve academic success. All of this, without ever stopping to think about

what cultural capital each student brings to school; what they are or are not exposed to in their

home culture; and that what they bring to school with them would have an impact on their

academic functioning.

Subtleties.

This is subtle in some ways because all teachers probably would say/believe they want all

their students to be successful. Sometimes the expectation that all students should know certain

things is so basic that we are totally unaware of it. I was talking with a friend of mine about this

issue of cultural capital and she gave me a perfect example of the blinders even the most well-

meaning of educators might have in this regard. She is a counselor for bi-lingual students in a

suburban high school with a significant Latino population. One of her students was struggling

with U.S. history. First of all, we often make the assumption that all students have grown up

with some of the rudimentary information about our county's history. That is not true, however,

for students who attended elementary school in Mexico or Jamaica or any other country than the U.S. This particular student, according to my friend, was a bright young woman who wanted to be successful, so when my friend offered her help, she came in for some tutoring for the U.S. history. They were discussing the War of 1812. After understanding the American Revolution quite well, where the revolutionaries were seeking independence from the English, she was somewhat confused by this new war. She said to my friend, "Who the heck are these British people?!" Such a simple thing that the teacher had overlooked. No one had ever made explicit that the "English" were also called the "British." The students who grew up in the United States were familiar with the interchangeability of the two words. They remembered, "The British are coming! The British are coming!" from many an Independence Day celebration. This girl did not. As educators, we need to be cognizant of these ideas before we can even tackle them. I am becoming aware of them and through this research, I am beginning to address them. Sometimes it is a simple as recognizing the language differences as in the incident above. Other times it is much more complex.

I certainly could not say that I lacked in cultural capital as a student, but I did have an experience that lets me feel at a very real level the frustration some students feel in regard to this issue. When I was in high school, we read *A Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man* by James Joyce. I found this book extremely difficult to understand and was confounded by the metaphors the teacher and other students seemed to see in the text. I finally realized that the allusions were all to the New Testament, with which I was almost completely unfamiliar having been raised in a Jewish home. I just did not get it. They were talking about things about which I was totally unaware, so despite being a dedicated and able student, I failed abysmally in my understanding

of this particular book. I did not have the cultural capital to understand it and for the longest

time, I did not even know that I did not have the resources needed.

Dilemmas Facing African American Students

Other Issues Generated in the Discussion.

There was a sense on the part of some of the teachers that changes needed to be made to

help the students of color be more comfortable in the classroom. Discussion centered on issues

of classroom management and language employed by the teachers. Teachers were quite

interested in the feedback of the students on things like making groups for class projects. Of

course, this small group of students were again put on the spot to speak for all students of color

in honors and advanced classes, which they cannot do. Even so, they were glad to have the

opportunity to discuss their own personal feelings. This particular group of students felt most

comfortable if the teacher assigned groups rather than let students pick their own. Since they

were often one of only a handful of Black or Latino students in upper level classes, they were

sometimes uncomfortable not having a cohort to meet with for group projects outside of school.

Since, other students did have a cohort, students of color often went unpicked for a group or

were added on as an afterthought. One young lady shared that she felt like crawling through the

floor when a teacher held up her arm and said, "Susie needs a partner. Who doesn't have a

partner?" It was so humiliating to her. The teachers seemed quite interested in having this kind

of feedback from students. Discussion ensued about assigning seats versus letting students sit

where they choose and the advisability of clustering students in classes so there were more than

just a few students of color spread over more classes. There appeared to be a burgeoning

sensitivity to some of these more concrete issues among the teachers present.

Theresa Perry's Dilemmas.

The next time our small student discussion group met, conversation focused on the teachers who felt that the books the students had suggested were not "intellectual" or "academic" enough. They were, understandably, hurt by that remark. We had in previous discussions talked about Theresa Perry's ideas about the dilemmas faced by African-American students. When Perry came to speak to our staff development group, she had shared with us a list of six dilemmas, which she writes about as well in *Young, Gifted and Black*. (2000) My colleague and I had shown this list to our students and asked them to discuss their experiences with the dilemmas at one of our group discussions. Perry's dilemmas are as follows:

> *How do I commit myself to achieve, to work hard over time in school, if I cannot predict (in school or out of school) when or under what circumstances this hard work will be acknowledged and recognized?*
>
> *How do I commit myself to do work that is predicated on a belief in the power of the mind, When African-American intellectual inferiority is so much a part of the taken-for-granted notions of the larger society that individuals in and our of school, even good and well-intentioned people, individuals who purport to be acting on my behalf, routinely register doubts about my intellectual competence*
>
> *How can I aspire to and work toward excellence when it is unclear when and if evaluations of my work can or should be taken seriously?*
>
> *Can I invest in and engage my full personhood, with all of my cultural formations, in my class, my work, my school if my teachers and the adults in the building are both attracted and repulsed by these cultural formations – the way I walk, the way I use language, my relationship to my body, my physicality, and so on?*
>
> *Will I be willing to work hard over time, given the unpredictability of my teachers' responses to my work?*

Can I commit myself to work hard over time, if I know that no matter what I or other members of my reference group accomplish, these accomplishments are not likely to change how I and other members of my group are viewed by the larger society or to alter out castelike position in the society? I still will not be able to get a cab. I still will be followed in department stores. I still will be stopped when I drive through certain neighborhoods. I still will be viewed as a criminal, a deviant, and an illiterate.

Can I commit myself to work hard, to achieve in school, if cultural adaptation effectively functions as a prerequisite for skill acquisition, where 'the price of the ticket' is separation from my reference group? (pp. 4-5)

As we discussed these dilemmas with our students, it became apparent that, while they had experienced some of these issues themselves, they were having trouble relating to the way they were stated. So the first thing we did was try to deconstruct what the dilemmas actually meant in relation to their lives. We took each dilemma and talked about it, restating it, if necessary. The students and we gave examples of ways in which we had seen these dilemmas play out in our own experiences. For example, all of the students and my colleague shared experiences of being followed in stores and we determined the various ways in which that carried over to their attitudes about school. After that, they were able to relate to them better and to discuss their experiences with the staff development group.

Dilemmas Black Students Face at My School.

The next step we took, after processing the dilemma discussion using the Perry text with our small group of students was ask what dilemmas, if any, they would say they had experienced or seen in play at our high school. I thought that if these students could identify some of the problems they had encountered, we could then begin to look at how they had approached those dilemmas and in the process build on their resiliencies.

This turned out to be an ongoing discussion over several meetings. The students came up with four basic dilemmas they felt occurred at our school among students of color. The first dilemma was similar to one of Perry's. They felt they are not always certain from where White teachers are coming. That is, they are never sure they can count on the teacher not to be racist even if there is no evidence of racism shown by the teacher's actions. I found this dilemma thought-provoking. I wondered aloud about myself in this regard. In response, the students said that they trusted me because I had shown myself to be trustworthy and that there were teachers about whom they could say with confidence that they were trustworthy. I asked the students to expound further on that thought…trustworthy behavior from teachers.

As I understood their responses, it seems that some faculty members make it clear by their actions in an unambiguous way, usually by showing interest in students beyond the classroom. A combination of showing that they care about the students as people not simply as students and going out of their way to help students to be successful shows that they are not racist. The conclusion we came to is that this particular dilemma occurs when students have teachers who have not shown by their actions that they are trustworthy so students of color are always girding themselves to protect against the possibility of hidden racism rearing its ugly head. It takes a lot of energy to be on guard against that hurt or unfairness all the time -- energy that then is not going into learning.

It takes energy to try to ascertain whether or not the teacher is to be trusted. Sometimes, the students indicated, they are blindsided. One young woman told us about an assignment she had that required her to approach a teacher from another class to ask about stereotypes. She chose a teacher she thought she would feel safe with and asked her what came to mind when she thought of Black people. The teacher responded with a barrage of negative stereotypes that

really took the student aback. She could not understand from where this vitriolic response came.

The teacher couched her comments by saying that she knew the student wanted her to be honest.

As the student told the story, she was visibly upset. She was so stunned by this teacher's unabatedly negative response that she said nothing to the teacher other than thanking her for answering the question and walked out. After she shared this story, we discussed what, if anything, she could or should do now, weeks after the fact of this occurrence.   I wanted her to confront the teacher; both my colleague and I offered to accompany her if she wanted to do that.

She did not want to talk to the teacher about it, however, and I could easily understand her reluctance. This encounter had taken a lot out of her in several ways.

The feared dilemma had surfaced. *How can this student engage fully, giving her all as the bright committed student she is if she is never certain how her White teachers are really thinking about her? How can she give her all when so much of her energy goes into girding herself against this kind of hurt? How can she ever be wholeheartedly committed to being a conscientious student when assignments sometimes put her in the position of being blindsided by racism?* She did not want to be the one to have to educate this teacher or confront her on the inappropriateness and insensitivity of her remarks. Even as I felt that this teacher should be confronted, I understood how the student felt. It made me think about my role as a facilitator and how important it is to have these kinds of discussions with teachers so that issues are confronted.

However, the students are not the ones upon whom that responsibility rests…it rests with the adults in the school.

Another, quite different, dilemma was raised in our discussion. It goes like this: *How do I as a committed, conscientious African American student respond to my classmates of color who are doing the behaviors that reinforce the negative stereotypes of Black people?* I was more

uncomfortable discussing this dilemma than with the others. Looking at why, I realized that it was harder for me, as a White person, to confront the idea that yes, in fact, some African American students are behaving badly in the halls and in classrooms and are not taking school seriously. Why, I asked myself, do I find this harder to address? It made me uncomfortable that I felt awkward about the topic. I have to admit that I was glad my colleague fielded most of this discussion, at first. Then, I realized that my discomfort was ridiculous. More than that, it smacked of trying so hard to be politically correct that I was being patronizing, not a trait I liked seeing in myself. So, I jumped into the discussion.

We do not have control over other people's choices. The students realized there is not a lot they can do about the behavior of fellow students. However, they did continue to see the negative behavior of some Black students as having a deleterious effect on their own functioning as students. They were angry at the Black students who were behaving badly, who were not taking school seriously, or were not taking advantage of the opportunities offered. They felt, at times, a subtle pressure to behave that way, that such was the way "Black kids" are supposed to behave if they are truly part of a Black culture. The students in our discussion also were angry at those teachers who bought into stereotypes and made assumptions about all students of color based on the behavior of some. Interestingly, they were most upset by the students who were misbehaving because of the negative effect it had on them personally. More globally, they were upset because they felt that there were so many opportunities at our school that kids should be taking advantage of so they could get ahead, but were not.

A third dilemma the students recognized was the difficulty of being successful in a high level class when there were only a few African American students in the class. That dilemma is stated thusly: *How can I be successful if I am one of only a couple of Black students in a class*

and we must work in groups to be successful and I am not accepted into a group? It is not as if

the other students are not nice to me, they indicated, although that does happen sometimes, but

more that the groups form based on people who have known one another for years, have been in

and out of one another's houses, know each other's parents and are completely comfortable

meeting in the evening at one another's homes. Even if I am invited into a group, I am not

always comfortable with the process of getting together outside of school to work on the project,

where I will be an outsider without the protection of school. A corollary to this dilemma is that I

may not be picked for the group to begin with because as a Black student, the others may not see

me as having the intellectual capability to contribute substantively to the group project. (This

dilemma is similar to one identified by Perry.)

A last dilemma was one that before I began to think deeply about these issues might have

been surprising to me. It was this: *How can I be a committed student and see myself as*

successful when some of the role models I have in faculty members of color are not supportive of

me so I feel undermined by them? This was an issue that came up in several discussions. Not

only did the students acknowledge this, but also, I, personally, have observed that sometimes

Black teachers expect more of Black students than they do of White students. I have always

thought that this was a function of wanting to have the students of color be the very best they

could be. It seems to follow an idea that I have heard espoused by many a Black parent that their

children may be just as intelligent and able and dedicated to success as any White child, but that

they have to work twice as hard to get anywhere due to the insidious racism in our society. It

seems that some Black teachers have internalized this notion and respond accordingly to their

Black students. Lena Williams (2000) talks about her experiences with Black teachers in her all

Black school,

> …our teachers also never allowed us to lose sight of the facts: America was a
> racist society. Blacks were still considered to be inferior to whites, and no matter how
> intelligent we might be, we would always have to work twice as hard to get half as far.
> (p. 65)

As Leroy Lovelace says in Michelle Foster's, *Black Teachers on Teaching* (1997),

> The one thing that black students don't need is teachers who let them get away with
> saying, "I can't do this. I can't do that"—teachers who feel sympathetic because the
> students are black…teachers who let them get away with doing nothing. Teachers have
> to realize that black students – or all students, but I'm talking about black students now –
> are very clever, especially with white teachers. Too many black students have learned to
> play the game, to play on a teacher's sympathy in order to get away with doing nothing.
> Teachers have to demand from black urban students the same as they would demand
> from privileged white students, and they have to be consistent. Urban black students can
> do the work and in the hands of skilled teachers they will do it. They may have to work
> harder to achieve success. (pp. 47-48)

Mr. Lovelace, an award winning teacher, is clearly committed to the achievement of the Black
students whom he teaches, yet as he himself says, "It particularly disturbs me when I see a black
teachers letting black students get away with doing nothing…A lot of my black colleagues
thought I was too hard on students" (p. 48). As a Black teacher of Black students, he has a
commitment to being demanding of his students, precisely because he cares about them and their
success.

Sometimes, there is a tendency when we identify with people to want them to show
themselves to their very best advantage. I have felt that way about people in my family, about

Jews in the news and about students with whom I have developed close relationships. I expressed these thoughts to the students, who agreed that all of the above might be happening, but that the end result, regardless of the reasons for the attitude of the Black teachers was that they sometimes felt unsupported and even put down by the very people they thought they could feel most comfortable with because they would not have that earlier dilemma of having to guard against racism with Black teachers.

Handling the Dilemmas.

After identifying these dilemmas: not knowing where a teacher is coming from; dealing with other students of color who are behaving in ways that reinforce stereotypes; being isolated in an honors or Advanced Placement class with no cohort; and responding to the expectations of Black teachers, we then talked about how one could deal with these dilemmas. Sometimes, in some situations, the dilemmas can be resolved. More often, the students found ways to work around them. At this point, I asked them to examine their resiliencies, to look at what made them successful in spite of these identified dilemmas. The first and most important source of resilience they articulated was family support. What each saw as most important to his/her success, (and, although it was not always unqualified success, these students were in honors and AP classes and doing fine; all were college bound) was the support and encouragement of their parent(s).

This support took a variety of forms. One student indicated that her mother was loath to come into the school because she felt uncomfortable there. She did come when absolutely necessary, but not often. Her support was given at home, in the form of high expectations for her daughter and her unwavering contention that her daughter would be successful. Another student talked about the lunches her mother made her every day as being a strong show of her support.

Some of the parents were more comfortable entering the school building and attended all the parent conferences and open houses, letting their children's teachers know how involved and invested they were in their children's well being. While the support was given in a variety of ways, it was palpable and readily identifiable by the students. Our discussion recognized, though, that school personnel have no control over what goes on at home and what kind of family support and relationships students have. What, then, we asked can we at school do to help build resilience.

Whom Do We Hold Responsible?

It comes dangerously close to blaming the victim when we talk about family situations. Perry (2003) warns us about this in her discussion about the risks inherent in any conversation about the "achievement gap."   She says,

> Notwithstanding the seemingly good intentions, the desire to improve African-American school performance, and the commonsense notion that the first step for a district committed to improving African-American academic performance is acknowledging that there is a problem, this conversation will almost surely reinforce the national ideology about Black intellectual inferiority…We have to face the fact that if we are going to have this public conversation about African-American student achievement, it will inevitably become a conversation that blames Black parents, Black students, and the Black community. (pp. 8-9)

Ladson-Billings (1998) says it thusly:

> CRT [Critical Race Theory] suggests that current instructional strategies presume that African American students are deficient. As a consequence, classroom teachers are engaged in a never-ending quest for '*the* right strategy or technique' to deal with (read

control) 'at-risk' (read African American) students. Cast in a language of failure, instructional approaches for African American students typically involve some aspect of remediation.

This race-neutral perspective purports to see deficiency as an individual phenomenon. Thus, instruction is conceived as a generic set of teaching skills that should work for all students. When these strategies or skills fail to achieve the desired results, the students, not the techniques, are found to be lacking. (p. 19)

As I facilitate these conversations on race and education both formally and informally, I see that this phenomenon does occur. I thus have learned to be sensitive to the idea that we have to look to ourselves as educators to enhance the educational experiences of *all* our students. It is not always easy to do. I know I make mistakes. Likewise, I see well-meaning educators often do cast students in the role of being "at-risk" rather than looking at their promise in our single-minded effort to increase achievement.

In my experience as a clinical social worker in a school, I know that family situations do play a part in a student's sense of him/herself in many ways: self concept, self esteem, sense of place in the world, amount of energy that goes into survival in any given home situation. This is true for all students. I recognize that this is true for my own child. So when I saw I might be doing something toxic to her, I tried very hard to change. As a result, in many ways, I have changed my parenting, so I know that it is possible to do. The reason I began our monthly Parent Enrichment groups was so that parents, together with a mental health professional, could begin to explore some of their own parenting issues. As one parent told me, by attending Parent Enrichment, she learned that she had a lot less control over her children than she thought she

had… and a lot more influence on them! So, family, I believe, does have significant impact on a student.

The danger comes, however, when we talk about "Black parents," or "the Black community." First of all, in my experience, there is no one, unilateral Black community; any more than there is one White community or one Jewish community with one voice, one point of view, etc. So, it is misleading to ascribe something to **all** of any group. Secondly, as Ladson-Billings (in Michie, 2005) reminds us, it is not a teacher's "job to try to be saviors who 'rescue' the students from their families and communities. Rather, teaching is about a complex set of interactions, intellectual development, and social responsibilities'" (p. xiii).

Thirdly, I feel quite strongly that while we can effect change in others by example or in reaction to things we say and do, the only person one directly can change is oneself. It follows, therefore, that if we are looking to improve the school experience for any students, we educators must first look to ourselves and what we are doing that bears on the perpetuation of their problems and at what we can/must do to ameliorate the situation. We must scrutinize ourselves and make the changes in ourselves and our practices rather than try to put the onus on others (i.e. students, parents, communities). That is not to say that there are not situations out there in our communities, in our homes, both Black and White that need changing or that nothing should be done about those things; it is to say that as educators, this is not where our energies can be most productively directed. It is from this premise that the discussion turns to what students need from us as professional educators to enhance and encourage their resiliency in the face of the potentially debilitating dilemmas they face daily.

What Students Need from Educators.

In talking with students in a variety of settings, one desire emerges over and over again: the need for teachers to be caring and concerned, to take a personal interest in the student, not just to look at his/her academic ability. I am struck by this. I have attempted to tease out what it means. It seems *not* to mean, for example, that a teacher should ask personal questions of a student; in fact, that is sometimes seen as an affront. Nor does it mean that a teacher talk about personal issues; sometimes kids do not want to discuss their personal stuff with teachers.

So what does this desire for care and concern from teachers mean? Some examples that students have given me are:

- a teacher held study hours before every exam, not just at school or during the normal before, after, lunch times, but at the local library at 7:00 PM to accommodate students who work or are in extracurricular activities;

- a teacher who not only attended the funeral of the parent of a student, but went to the house in the evening to pay a condolence call;

- a teacher, knowing that there were unusual tensions and occurrences in a student's home, changed the due date for a big assignment for the student;

- the teacher who took free time to attend a student's performance;

- a teacher who took a student out in the hall and told him that he, the teacher, knew the student could do better and so for him "C" work was not acceptable, even though he was passing;

- a teacher who called home to say how *well* the student was doing;

- the teacher and student who were having a disagreement during which the teacher really listened to the student and acknowledged that the student was right.

All of these are caring from the point of view of the student.

Once a student knows that a teacher cares, then, it sometimes follows that personal discussions ensue and an intimacy develops between adult and child. This is the byproduct of the original recognition of teacher caring on the part of the student. It does not necessarily, nor should it, occur with every student. I look at the qualities demonstrated in these examples and wonder it they are innate personal qualities these teachers possess or something that can be taught to pre-service teachers – or both. I used to be naïve enough to think that all educators went into the field because they liked kids and wanted to help them grow and learn. I still think that is true to a large extent, but I also see educators who are into a kind of power trip, and others who are totally enamored of and excited by their subject matter, but not very interested in forging relationships with the students to whom they supposedly are imparting valuable information. While imparting information is part of teaching, much more revolves around helping students become lifelong learners, critical thinkers, curious adults who want to continue to explore the world beyond school, sparked by the enthusiasm teachers have helped engender in them.

Enhancing Resiliency

Among the concrete things students said could help enhance resiliency was to forthrightly acknowledge the dilemmas. They offered some examples. One assignment that several students enjoyed and found valuable was the writing of "counter narratives." Perry talks about the importance of narrative in the Black educational tradition and about schools in the pre and post Civil Rights movement that intentionally created narratives designed to "counter the positional identities of Black students," the myth of Black intellectual inferiority, as embodied by the

dominant White narrative in our cultural, social and educational institutions. Perry (2003) says, in speaking of "organized, intentional educational communities,"

> These schools were counterhegemonic communities inasmuch as they were organized in opposition to the dominant ideology of white supremacy and Black intellectual inferiority. They were designed to forge *collective* identity of African Americans as a literate and achieving people. Central to the formation of a counterhegemonic community is the continual articulation and passing on of counternarrative. (p. 91)

The students who were writing the counter narratives for a class assignment first discussed what a narrative is, how it can help to form a person's identity, how narratives figured historically in the Black educational experience and then focused on a narrative that would recognize and support Black intellectual ability and achievement.

Another assignment was to choose to read a book individually, on a topic of their choice, and then to present the book and the ideas espoused in a class discussion. There were some variations on this assignment depending on the particular class. As was mentioned earlier, one of the students read *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?* by Beverly Daniel Tatum (1997). She carried this book around with her for a long time and quoted from it extensively and appropriately. This was clearly a book whose concepts had a great impact on her.

Meanwhile, as these discussions were happening formally and informally with students, the faculty group continued to meet. While the members of the group loved having these successful students come talk to them, they brought up the idea of hearing the voices of less successful students. My colleague and I were quite willing to invite such students and suggested to the faculty group that they do so, as would we. Unfortunately, none of the students anyone

approached were eager to give up their free time to come to the table to discuss the issues. Something about changing the focus away from the voices of the students who wanted to be heard bothered me, but I was not quite sure what it was. I did not want the students with whom we were working to be frustrated in their attempts to communicate their concerns and suggestions, but it was more than that. These students were all bright, committed young people, but they had not always been academically successful; a lot of effort on their part, on the part of their families and on the part of various teachers had gone into making them the students they are today. I thought back to the idea of focusing not on the failures or risk factors of the students, but looking towards their promise. I decided that we really *were* on the right track talking with these students about the dilemmas they faced and how they successfully navigated them. There is a lot to learn from that approach. It is not learning just from what the students say, but from the thoughts and ideas sparked in us as we interact with them and with one another, grappling with these issues, from what we observe as we see them/help them negotiate the pitfalls of our educational system.

Dilemmas I See for Students of Color

As I thought about the dilemmas the students had raised, I thought of others that had gone unvoiced but that we may put before students as the discussion continues to unfold. The reading and talking and listening in which I have engaged have sparked some thoughts in me of additional dilemmas my students might face. One of those dilemmas is: *How can I be successful if I cannot be certain of how I will be perceived by my teachers, White and Black, when sometimes I feel I am treated differently or unfairly because of the color of my skin? And when I speak up about it, I am told that I am playing "the race card," either by White teachers who might be threatened by me or bigoted or by some Black teachers who might want me not to*

make excuses for myself? What do I do in such situations? How do I handle the perceived

discrimination if I cannot talk about it, if it is not acknowledged?

One of the reasons I see this as a dilemma is that I myself have dismissed students' claims of racism as not being the "real" issue. In a discussion with my Black colleague about this topic, he, too, spoke of times when he has counseled a student not to focus on the racism of a teacher but to look at things not only from his, the student's point of view but also from the teacher's. While validating that racism exists and that the student might indeed feel it was racism that motivated the troubling interaction, we have both asked students to look at their own behavior and see what part their actions might have in the interchange between student and teacher, especially in cases where we knew the teacher well and did not think race played a part. I am not saying that this is not a good approach to mediating a conflict between student and teacher. Sometimes, it is. I am not saying that tried and true mediation techniques should not be engaged at some point. I am saying that I have come to believe that it is very important ***not*** to invalidate a student's feelings that racism is involved. As I have explored this topic, I have come to believe that, ***however unintentionally or with whatever degree of lack of awareness***, that racism does play a part in students and teachers interactions, indeed in the interactions of all of us at times. I am saying that it is incumbent upon all educators, White and Black, to look inside ourselves and respond as honestly as we are able to a student's perception or sense that we are approaching a situation with overt or latent racism in our hearts. I include Black teachers in this scenario because sometimes even Black teachers have absorbed the insidious racism within our culture into their own psyches and that it could leach out in some situations with students. I am struck by the words of Mica Pollock (2004) when speaking of her own introspection into her experiences as she researched her book, *Colormute*:

During my teaching year, as my notes reminded me years later, I myself had started advising students to avoid saying race mattered to student-adult relations if it "really" did not. Fearing that students were wearing out the accusation on minor disagreements with teachers I called many such accusations, "crying wolf," and I counseled students to save their energy for moments when there was "serious" racism to fight. (p.72)

She later gives an answer to helping a student figure out when race appropriately matters when she says, "…it is thus important to inquire *how* race *does* matter to our social relations (among students, among educators and between educators and students)…we must thus *take the time* to go beyond simple statements or dismissals of race's relevance" (p.222).

How we contribute to this dilemma for students of color when we do not validate their feelings! How we silence them! We discourage success and feelings of empowerment when we nullify their sense that a teacher's actions were racist by dismissing that possibility out of hand. I reiterate that every time a student invokes racism as the reason for a teacher's actions, racism may not in fact always be in play. As we discussed this scenario, my colleague and I agreed that we have had many experiences that through mediation and/or discussion with the student and/or teacher we have been able to facilitate enhanced communication between student and teacher and all parties recognized the real issues. It is, however, true in my experience that sometimes racism is at the root of the issue and that, even when that is not the case, it is important to listen to and discuss with a student his/her feelings in the matter.

Another dilemma I see for Black students is the dilemma of moving forward in a world where inequity and oppression are realities for people of color. *How do I maintain my resiliency when I am forced to acknowledge the realities of bigotry, racism, inequity and oppression and deal with the feelings of shame and lack of power as well as rage that this recognition engenders*

in me? One of the students in our group, in response to the question, "When did you first see yourself as different?" said that it first really hit her when she was applying to colleges and thinking about what she wanted to be. She started thinking about her experiences as a Black woman and recognizing that there were limitations placed on her simply because of her race and she felt very discouraged. This particular young woman, quite resilient and able to seek out help and support from others as she is, was able to marshal her resources both internal and external and engage in a process that ultimately led to her getting into an excellent college in the program she wanted where she has become a leader in the Black Student movement. But not all students have her resilience or resources. As Glass (2004) says,

> The truth of oppression and the power of dominant ideology in our lives can be humiliating and reinforce a sense of incompetence, fostering even overwhelming feelings of guilt and shame at being thus dominated or controlled by forces beyond us. These feelings of humiliation, guilt, shame and weakness must themselves become objects of critical reflection and be linked to the reality that must be denounced and actively resisted. (p.30)

I see this dilemma played out in a variety of ways. Sometimes students eschew educational opportunities in favor of addressing the sense of weakness by proving strength in other areas. Other times, students see educational opportunity as a way to gain a sense of competence and control over their lives. Perhaps by recognizing this dilemma, acknowledging it and helping students to deal with their feelings, we can empower them.

Chapter Six

Dilemmas Facing White and Black Educators as We Reach for Understanding

There are also dilemmas faced by educators attempting to engage in discussion about race and education. One of those dilemmas is that it is really hard work and sometimes we feel like giving up on it. Glass (2004) says it thusly,

> The relentless press of the dominant ideologies leaves no space for respite. The burdens of libratory work weigh on our emotions and sap our energy. The temptations to forget the struggle and lose oneself in the oblivions of consumerism and escapism flood the mass media. The righteous demands and needs of our loved ones and friends are sufficient to occupy us without the added responsibilities of repairing the world. (p.31)

I surely can relate to what Glass is saying. Sometimes, I want to forget about all the strife in the world and the things that require change and simply get in the bath tub with a taut thriller. Sometimes, I do just that! The issues keep calling my attention, however, in the day-to-day work as an educator and as a citizen of the world. Still, it remains a dilemma.

Some people think that such dialogue cannot truly exist between people of different races. While, I know that these are extremely difficult conversations, I believe not only that they can occur, but that I have experienced them. The biggest stumbling block is trust. There are trust dilemmas for both White and Black teachers surrounding such conversations.

Dilemmas for White Teachers

To me, one of the biggest dilemmas facing White teachers of Black students is the fine line we walk in dealing with political correctness, with wanting to discuss the pertinent, real issues that our students of color face and have to deal with daily and also being able to discuss the issues we educators face in trying to provide the best education we can for all our students

without offending anyone or being labeled racist or uncaring. We have to be able to address these issues honestly and openly without rancor or hidden agendas, but, I have discovered, that is not so easy to do. As important as it is not to blame the victim or look to the student having difficulty as the center of the problem, it is equally important not to blame the White educator for all the issues facing students of color. That is not to say that we do not need to look within ourselves to see where our responsibilities lie, to see what our biases and prejudices might bring to bear on the issues. We **must** look within ourselves, but **not** to assign guilt or blame. Rather, it is important that we garner our integrity and add to the discussion the things that we might be doing that we could do differently to confront racism and privilege, so we are in partnership with people different than ourselves as we engage in a struggle we can all believe in even if we come to it with different experiences.

Sometimes, it is difficult to find the words to speak even when we want to harness our integrity and forge ahead to new understandings and meaningful interchanges with people who are different than we are. We do not want to insult or antagonize anyone else, so we choose our words carefully, sometimes so carefully that we end up losing the meaning or point of what we want to say in our attempts at being politically correct. The very fact of our faltering, hesitant speech is an example of the importance of overcoming our reticence and moving forward. As Mica Pollack says,

> The everyday anxiety many Americans, particularly "whites," admit they face over labeling someone else as "black" or "African-American" (and the stumbling and pausing many Americans exhibit before using the very word) not only illuminates general fears of being "racist" by making others' "race" inaccurately or inappropriately relevant in one's words; it also suggests a tendency to associate the full danger of a racialized system with

those described. Such anxiety about using the word "black" also suggests insidiously, as it has for several centuries that simply labeling someone as "black" in the United States still feels to many "whites" and others like a dangerously negative evaluation. Indeed, that racial descriptions of patterns involving "blacks" *are* so often latched to racialized evaluations of "black" *people* reminds us that race and racism have always been at root *about* evaluating people – about creating hierarchies and displacing responsibility for social 'problems' rather than simply describing "difference." (p. 205)

So, part of the dilemma and the hesitancy to describe people as Black or African-American, comes from the discomfort we feel about having created the hierarchy. While I talk about this subject a lot and I do not think I stumble anymore over the descriptive words, I do continue to recognize in myself that discomfort engendered by using them. It is like saying, as people so often do, when talking about a person, that s/he "happens to be Black." The person does not 'happen to be' Black; s/he *is* Black and that may or may not have relevance to the story. I have wondered why we Whites so often use that phrase. I think Mica Pollock has hit upon the answer.

This work is ripe with opportunities for growth and fraught with pitfalls. I have learned so much yet I recognize that I have much to learn. I have developed sensitivity to the language I use yet I do not want to become so bogged down in what is politically correct that I perseverate on that rather than on personal growth and moving forward. While it is of paramount importance to choose our words carefully so that in defining the issues needing to be addressed we do not exacerbate the problems, we need to avoid using political correctness as a roadblock or an excuse not to grapple with the issues. I have been involved in many a discussion about terms to use: "African-American," "Black" or 'people of color," for example. Some people prefer one description, others another. I have had Jamaican students who grouse at being called African

American, saying, "I am not American at all; I'm Black". It can be intimidating and conversation-stopping to get so involved in what is acceptable or politically correct that one loses sight of the really important end goals. That is a dilemma I try very hard not to let happen to me.

Another part of the dilemma for me has been not trusting that I will be understood as wanting to take an honest look at myself and begin to work on the changes necessary for me to be the antiracist person I want to be. While I have forged relationships with some Black people that I feel are open and within which I feel I can be honest and make myself vulnerable, I do not always feel that way when I am engaged in a dialogue with Blacks about race and education. Part of the reason for that is that I sometimes have one ear on how I sound. Am I being politically correct? Am I sounding too privileged? It is only when I stop focusing on how I sound and home in on how I feel and what I think that I am most authentic. It is with that authenticity that I find honest, heartfelt conversation can occur. I have learned that if I want to do this work, the first vulnerability and peeling away the layers of saying what I think the other person wants to hear must come from me. Once I am honest and willing to make myself vulnerable, I find, other people respond in kind.

One of the things that make doing so difficult, however, is another dilemma that White educators (people) face. That is that we do not always recognize our own privilege and biases even as we are struggling to have the frank conversations to facilitate change. And we do not always recognize how – or even that – our take on the whole situation is tinged with our own experiences as Whites. We have a tendency to extrapolate from our own experiences to understand others' experiences. While there are many universal feelings that such extrapolation can help us understand, there are others that defy our understanding if we have not experienced them or listened carefully to someone else's story that includes them. We often generalize from

our own experience without recognizing or acknowledging the possibility that the life experiences of others make their lenses quite different from ours so that what seems simple or clear cut to us may not be to another who may see things very differently. This difference in interpretation of an event or an understanding of a dialogue can affect the way a conversation proceeds as well as affecting our actions. As Audrey Thompson (2005) succinctly says, "Power and privilege shape both what gets heard and what gets said" (p. 28).

Vivian Paley (2000) acknowledges this same dilemma in the original preface to *White Teacher,*

> …I doubt that the image I carry of the intelligent, capable child has changed much since my own elementary school days. It has been intellectualized and rationalized, but I suspect it is much the same, and that image was never black…
>
> …My luggage had 'liberal' ostentatiously plastered all over it, and I thought it unnecessary to see what was locked inside…
>
> …The challenge in teaching is to find a way of communicating to each child the idea that his or her special quality is understood, is valued, and can be talked about. It is not easy because we are influenced by the fears and prejudices, apprehensions and expectations, which have become a carefully hidden part of every one of us. (pp. xviii-xx)

The challenge in having the honest conversation is to bring those hidden parts of ourselves to light. It is only by confronting what is hidden that we can change it. As Jennifer E. Obidah and Karen Manheim Teel (2001) conclude,

> good intentions alone on the part of teachers may not be enough, given the racist nature of American society. Because of their powerful potential to influence students' lives,

teachers need to make conscious efforts to recognize the subtle and unintentional biases

in their own behavior. (p. 108)

Whites Understanding Ourselves as Racial Beings

As White educators we have not often, if ever, had to examine our own sense of racial

identity development, of what it means to be White in our society and/or of what that Whiteness

means in our roles as teachers. Through my work, I have come to realize how very important it

is to make these kinds of explorations into our own selves. For me, it is an ongoing experience,

fraught with scary moments when I have to face parts of myself that bring me shame or sadness.

Yet, overall, it is an exhilarating experience: I feel as if I can delve into and then deal with issues

that will make me a more effective communicator and facilitator - and a better person. Sharon

M. Chubbuck (2004) gives much food for thought in this regard when she says,

> The tension of the discontinuity between White people's self-proclaimed commitment to
>
> democratic equality for all and the internalized message of White supremacy drives
>
> racism into even deeper unexamined realms. Even well-intending teachers can fall prey
>
> to this unexamined racism, rendering their actual practice and policy with students of
>
> color ineffective, if not downright discriminatory." (p.302)

This seems threatening to some, I know. It seemed somewhat threatening to me when I first

started delving into the issue of race and achievement. That is why I think it is so important not

to lay blame. Thinking about these issues as a White person is difficult; one has to overcome

one's own denial. Feeling that such introspection and honest sharing of feelings will engender

the wrath or hostility or derision of others provides a powerful stumbling block to pursuing such

reflection. It comes back to the need for courageous conversation, both self conversation and

discourse with others. The conclusion I have come to is that if it is true that we live in a racist

society, and I believe that is so, and we strive for equity and social justice, as I believe I do, then

we just have to bite the bullet and do this work. Still, there is the dilemma of how to actually

begin to engage in the dialogue, how to begin to make the changes that will, it is hoped, result in

substantive, meaningful improvements in education without putting oneself in some psychic

jeopardy.

Deconstructing Whiteness.

Chubbuck (2004) does a great job of explicating two different approaches to what she

calls disruption of Whiteness. She says,

> Those who favor abolition of Whiteness define it solely as an ideology of oppression
>
> expressed in personal choices and systemic structures…Given this definition,
>
> Whiteness can be disrupted only by completely abolishing the category itself….
>
> The other approach to eradicate the racist effects of Whiteness is a rearticulation
>
> of Whiteness to an anti-racist White identity…
>
> Though they differ in their definitions and approaches, both rearticulationists and
>
> abolitionists share the goal of eliminating racist effects. Both also acknowledge that all
>
> people are a mixture of multiple aspects of identity, a reality that plays a role in reaching
>
> that goal. (pp. 308-9)

What Chubbuck calls disrupting whiteness, Nelson Rodriguez (2000) calls "dismantling White

privilege." He, too, talks about abolitionists and rearticulationists. Rodriguez makes a strong case for the

rearticulationist position by saying that "any project that proposes the destruction of (the white) race

seems unwilling to acknowledge or to take seriously the *embeddedness* of race in culture, social relations,

and at an institutional level" (p.11). This resonates with me. In some ways, I feel I fall into both

camps even though they are very different, because I do see the need to create a critical mass of

White people who refuse to take advantage of the privilege associated with being White, but I

also see a need to repudiate my essential nature as a White person as being racist by definition, but rather to describe my essence as a White antiracist. I agree that to truly effect change, we have to look at what works most effectively to engage people in the struggle. That, it seems to me, is most definitely not going to be accomplished by vilifying White people and Whiteness. Rather, as Rodriguez (2000) postulates,

> By highlighting the necessary tension between understanding whiteness as oppression as well as thinking through its potentiality, such a dialectical approach to the study of whiteness pushes the boundaries…not only by bringing whiteness inside multicultural education for critical analysis, but also by thinking through its potential as a progressive racial identity linked to a broader democratic project…such a critical multiculturalism wants to link, in this case, the question of race to a politics that challenges social inequality and cultural injustice. (p. 15)

Here, Rodriguez is talking about a rearticulationist approach to multicultural education, but his words are applicable to the discussion on race and achievement as well.

From her research, Chubbuck (2004) concludes that neither abolition nor rearticulation "is sufficient." One of the things she thinks that educational researchers need to do is to invest in "microanalytic exploration of how individual White people struggle to disrupt Whiteness in their own lives and in the institutions within which they function" (pp. 329-30). Such exploration is what I am attempting to do in this research.

In any conversation about race and education, it is important for all participants to consider their own racial identity development. This is often difficult for White people to do because they see themselves as the norm. As Laurie Fuller (2000) says, "For many 'whites' it is

unthinkable to actually conceptualize whiteness; most 'whites don't think about being 'white' at all. The unthinkable is constraining" (p. 87). Fuller wonders

> if there is a way to think about race, whiteness specifically, that undoes current ways of
> using race theoretically as well as a way that undoes the current use of the term "race" to
> imply "people of color." Such an implication often leaves whiteness absent from
> theorizing about race, which can normalize whiteness as just human (meaning not
> "race"). (p. 75)

Seeing Ourselves as "Other."

I have found that in facilitating discussions about race and education, it is important for participants to have the opportunity to reflect on their own racial identity development and to share their (in the case of most White participants) burgeoning sense of themselves as racial beings. Sometimes, the best way to help foster understanding is to ask people when they first, if ever, thought of themselves as "other." As San Juanita Garza (2000) says,

> It is a curious word, "other." When used in cultural studies it is meant to denote those,
> well, other entities, forces, subjects outside the perspective of the subject. In
> layman's terms: it is the base or origin of a particular vantage point, kind of like a
> camera lens. Using one particular vantage point, a subject "sees" others. And those
> others are different because they are not the subject. (p. 65)

Thinking of oneself as other can be a catalyst to understanding the position of another person who is 'other' to oneself and to recognize that one may be 'other' to that person. Interestingly, some people get the concept immediately and are able to give scenarios that show that understanding. One White male in a group I facilitated talked about how he never felt like an 'other' until his car broke down near a predominantly Black neighborhood one summer

evening and he walked down the blocks looking for assistance with people sitting on porches and street corners staring at him, the interloper to their neighborhood. He felt both otherness and fear.

Some people do not get the concept as quickly. One woman said in response to the same query that she really did not ever feel like an 'other,' though she recognizes that her students sometimes do and she feels bad for them. It is hard not to get frustrated with an answer like that but I have to remind myself that people are starting at many different places and at least the dialogue is commencing.

In these discussions, the dilemma for White educators often surfaces. Sometimes, people want to talk about feeling like an 'other,' want to share something that happened to them, or want to make statements about things they have observed, but they feel constrained to do so because they are not sure how their colleagues of color will take their remarks. It is imperative to overcome this dilemma, though, if we are to engender any kind of change within ourselves and our society.

Garza (2000) says,

…to sincerely respect difference we must all be willing to invest the time and effort in respecting others. To sincerely respect one another, we must be willing to engage with one another. We must recognize that respect for an other grows out of a relationship *with that other*, and to have a relationship with an other, one must know that other, not just assume that one knows that other because of one's assumptions. (p. 63)

Dilemmas for Black Teachers

Although I have not experienced the discussions from the point of view of a Black person, my reading and listening to my colleagues of color have led me to believe that trust is a

big dilemma for Black educators engaging in the conversation, as well. Jennifer E. Obidah

(2001) discusses this trust issue in relation to her work with her White colleague, Karen

Manheim Teel.

> A connecting thread permeates my notions of risks in the collaboration between Karen
>
> and me. This thread is a lifelong nurturing of self-protection as an African American
>
> person against the potential threat embodied in every White person in America. Distrust
>
> of White people is nurtured in every African American child as part of his or her ethos of
>
> existence in America. I believe that perhaps this is similar to the way a lingering sense of
>
> African American inferiority continues to exist in the minds of White and other American
>
> people (including African Americans). And the two are most definitely linked. As an
>
> African American person you ask yourself, "How can I trust someone who thinks,
>
> consciously or subconsciously, that something is wrong with me to the extent that this
>
> something (tangible only in terms of physical difference) makes me an inferior human
>
> being?" (p. 70)

Obidah's words are reminiscent of Perry's description of one of the dilemmas facing African

American students. Obidah, though, is talking about herself as an adult grappling with racial and

cultural differences between her and her colleague as they work on the best ways to educate

students of color. Their struggle was not easy according to Obidah, although she and Teel

worked through the distrust and eventually became "close friends" (p. 77).

> I find that my friendships with Black people often involve a discussion at some point

about how they do/did not find it easy to trust a White person. I am honored to have gained that

trust from my friends and try always to respect it. From Obidah (2001), I have learned

something about the value of that trust. She says,

The distrust to which I refer is not, in many cases, linked to hatred or fear. Rather, this distrust is equivalent to a parent's concern for his or her child who develops a penchant for playing with fire but who may be unaware of the potential danger involved in such play. In the African American lived experience, awareness of the danger is paramount because reliance on the power structures in society is necessary. And these structures are dominated by White people to such an extent that Black people are forced to play with fire in many instances (e.g. employment, housing, schooling, etc.) (p. 71)

Clearly, trust is a dilemma for Blacks. But, thinking about it, brings me back to myself and my relationships with Black colleagues and friends. The trust dilemma faced by Black educators bounces back and creates a dilemma for me. I do not want to be distrusted, yet I am a part of the White culture that has engendered such distrust in Blacks. What do I do about that? Can I have disagreements with my Black friends without every thought being linked to race? There have been disagreements, intellectual arguments, friendly challenges between my friends of color and me, but it never occurred to me that from their point of view it might all be linked to race. Is it? I do not think so, but the question needs to be asked.

My colleague/co-facilitator and I have had myriad personal discussions during which we have disclosed a lot about ourselves. I know I trust him implicitly as, I believe, he does me. That did not happen overnight. We grew into our relationship with each other. With each tentative sharing of vulnerability or a fear that was received by the other with care, concern and respect, we were able to move forward, sharing more and more as time has passed. With each revelation brought out in our private conversation, we have each become empowered to speak about such things with others in a more public setting.

When my colleague told me about how he feels it so important to speak well and have a good vocabulary and make eye contact (all of which he does) when talking with clients, especially White parents, so that he will be taken seriously, I listened supportively. When I told him that I feel left out sometimes when it seems as if friendships or perks or promotions occur along racial lines and that if you are not Black, you are not included in a certain in-group, he listened to me with care and concern. He allowed me my feelings and refrained from pointing out that it was ever thus for Black people. That conclusion I quickly arrived at myself as we talked. He, however, did not invalidate or discount my feelings as I do not his. I care about what he thinks about me and value his friendship as he does mine. We are gentle with and kind to each other and together have explored many sensitive issues that have informed and changed us both.

As I think about the issue of trust as it affects my Black friends and coworkers, I am reminded of a conversation I had recently with a young Black woman who, in response to my talking about my work and sharing my poetry, told me about an experience she had while at a conference. She and two White colleagues were sightseeing and they decided to inquire about renting bicycles to ride across the bridge. They approached the man in charge and began asking questions. My friend asked a question and the attendant did not respond either by making eye contact or verbally. She listened for awhile as the others chatted and then asked another question. Again, she was ignored. Then, one of the other women asked the same question and received an answer. As they walked away discussing whether or not they would rent the bikes, my friend, who at first had been the most interested, told them that, while she would have liked to have had that adventure, she could not patronize a person who was so clearly racist. The others were aghast when she pointed out what had happened. They had not even been aware of

the byplay. My friend commented to me about how this experience of hers reflects that need to be girded against hurt that I talk about in this dissertation.

This story, in turn, reminded me of something that occurred years ago when I first began the Professional Book Club for a Community of Learners. In our discussion of the feelings engendered by racist actions, one of the Black teachers talked about how she feels at our school. She said that often when walking down the hall she feels invisible when her colleagues or administrators do not speak to her. She told of a time when she was walking down the hall with a White colleague and a White male former administrator spoke to the colleague but not to her. She went on to say that she called him on it and he said, "Sorry, I didn't see you." Didn't see her? She was right there! The saddest thing is that I believe his brain did not register that he saw her because of her race. Part of me really could not believe that had happened. I did not doubt that was **her** perception, but I thought it must have been a **mis**perception, until I witnessed a similar situation. I was standing with a Black staff member, chatting in the hall, when a White colleague came by and said hello to me and said nothing to the other person. Had I not been involved in the Book Club discussion, I, too, might not have noticed this phenomenon. But notice it I did! I said, "Don't you know my friend?" Then, the person, flustered, responded, "Oh, yes. Hi!" This experience reinforced for me the insidious nature of racism, but also how one can be unaware of something and just not see it. Once I saw it, I felt bad that I had questioned the feelings expressed in the discussion. This is an example of something Black teachers face that had never occurred to me. It also exemplifies how honest conversation can raise awareness and inspire change.

Can the Conversation Really Happen? Varying Points of View

Some people doubt that honest, authentic conversations about race between people of different races can occur. I know they can transpire because I have experienced them. They are not easy, however. It takes a strong commitment on the part of everyone engaging in the conversation to have it be truly substantive. It takes wanting to establish trust with others in the discussion. And, it takes a willingness to make ourselves vulnerable as we are reflective and introspective. It takes a certain eagerness to engage in the course of action. The process involves a personal journey as well as a collective movement towards understanding one another.

At least that has been my experience. When I first became engaged in antiracist work, I read a lot. At that time, I found myself responding to everything I read as if it must be so. It is not that I was intellectually naïve and thought that if it was in print, it must be true. It was more that I had not found my own voice or my own stance on the issues. I was swayed by the persuasive positions of the authors I read. That became somewhat problematic for me when I realized that everyone was not saying the same thing. Yet, they all sounded so sure of themselves and certain of their positions. It was confusing. At the time I was reading a particular viewpoint, it seemed to make so much sense and to be so right. Yet, when I read someone whose point of view was different, sometimes even diametrically opposed, that often sounded just as right. This was especially true when I read Black authors who at times were telling me things I had not thought of or known about previously. At some point, though, I realized that just as in my community no Black person speaks for all Blacks, anymore than a Jew speaks for all Jews or a woman speaks for all women, no Black author speaks for all Black people studying the racism in education, nor does any one White author speak definitively for all people studying Whiteness. It was about the same time, that I realized that both Black and White

voices in all their varied tones are important to the discourse. It was difficult, but necessary, to sort out what made sense to me in each of the various perspectives presented. The discussions with others were instrumental in helping me figure out my own perspective and opinions and place, and continue to be so. In the process, I found my voice strengthening and my ability to look at myself honestly increasing as my defensiveness lessened. This did not happen immediately; it was, and continues to be, a deliberate process. Each conversation in which I have engaged has not been as intense or substantive or candid as every other discussion. The honesty, though, does occur. I know it is possible, though sometimes painful. And, it has to start somewhere, so every conversation is important in its own way, even when it is the beginning of the process. I am, therefore, committed to facilitating such discussion.

Even colleagues of mine have expressed doubt as to whether or not honest conversation about race can occur among our diverse faculty. Some think it should not be discussed. I have not been able to understand exactly why anyone thinks race and education should be a taboo topic for educators to address. I have come to understand, though, why some people think it cannot happen. To reiterate: It is about trust. It is about willingness to make oneself vulnerable. It is about fear on the part of both Blacks and Whites: Fear of being caught out as having racist feelings on the part of Whites; fear of perpetuating racism on the part of Blacks, as well as fear of unleashing rage. It is about not wanting to have a meaningless or "feel-good" dialogue. Well, some of those things may happen, but without attempting the conversation there is no chance to engage together in meaningful, action-producing discourse.

Robert Jensen (2002), in his piece in *When Race Becomes Real* in talking about his own grappling with White privilege, says,

I don't want to be well-intentioned, and I don't think we need more well-intentioned white people. Non-white folks have been suffering the good intentions of white folks for long enough. What we need are honest white people who can act not only out of a concern for justice, but out of the urgent need to find, and save, our own souls. (p.156)

While they may not start out that way, and for some, may never reach that point, for a lot of us engaged in antiracist work, having these conversations is about finding and saving our own souls.

In the same book, David Bradley (2002) writes,

I do not want to believe the conclusions to which the data have led me. Like the boy who begged Shoeless Joe Jackson, I want to beg myself, "Say it ain't so." But even if it isn't so, I must admit that I, myself, am very much afraid.

Whenever I see those red and blue lights flashing in my rearview mirror, or note a squad car parked on a street down which I must walk, I feel a tightening in the gut and a nauseating sense that, at that very moment, my life might be spinning out of my control….

I am afraid, moreover, of my own thoughts and speculation….

I believe that many white Americans work to maintain…the social status quo. I believe that many more White Americans do not mind this. I believe there exists, not some vast conspiracy, but an unspoken understanding that it is best if black Americans be periodically reminded of the ephemerality of their citizenship, of their expectations, of their very existence. (p. 137)

I include this quotation because I think it exemplifies some of the emotions that people fear confronting in conversations about race. Yet, David Bradley does confront his feelings and puts

them out there for others, both Blacks and Whites, to respond. His powerful words evoke strong

reactions. Yet, should we not have the opportunity to discuss his reality – and the realities of

others? Not only the experiences others share, but our own reactions to them inform us and upon

reflection have the power to change us. So, while these kinds of powerful, angry feelings are the

reason some do not want to engage in the dialogue, they are really the very reason we must.

In her book, *Democratic Dialogue in Education: Troubling Speech, Disturbing Silence*,

Megan Boler (2004) brings together a diverse group of educators discussing the place

discussions of race have in the classroom. While these authors are focusing on students in a

classroom, rather than the adult educators grappling with these issues among themselves, they

raise some points I have found provocative. It is a measure of the distance I have come in

trusting my own instincts, voice and place as well as the distance I have yet to travel, that I was

troubled by some of these viewpoints and actually put my writing on hold for awhile as I

struggled with them, but ultimately was able to use them to problematize my own thinking and

have come through the experience with my confidence in my work strengthened.

Audrey Thompson (2005), in her review of Boler's book, tells about Ann C. Berlak's

chapter, "Confrontation and Pedagogy: Cultural Secrets, Trauma, and Emotion in Antioppressive

Pedagogies."

> In teaching her diversity course, says Berlak, "I had reached a point where I thought I had
>
> gone about as far as I could in designing a curriculum that would raise students'
>
> awareness of the ubiquity and severity of racism and internalized racism" (p. 125). She
>
> was therefore unprepared for the white students' traumatized response when she invited
>
> in an African American speaker, Sekani Moyenda, to talk to them about the limitations of
>
> teacher education programs. Moyenda's "call to the students went beyond the expression

of anger. She expressed rage" (p. 137). For the single African American student in the class, her rage was affirming; for the white students, it was excessive, abnormal, wounding. Yet her rage was also a call for a response, and her passion broke through the students' and teacher's complacency. "Whereas, before Sekani's visit, we had discussed racism in tones we might have used to talk about the weather, afterward, virtually everyone was emotionally as well as analytically engaged" (p. 131). (pp. 26-27)

It was this passage in Thompson's review that spurred me to read Boler's book. The experience Berlak (2004) describes validates the importance of conversations about race, especially for educators. Berlak tells us that what happened with her guest speaker was not an ordinary event, but she says that particular event helped her to understand what is needed in a discussion about issues such as race.

> What I have come to understand from teaching since the encounter is that it is not necessary to initiate a process of exploding cultural secrets by inviting a guest to class. I have become increasingly aware that whenever racism…is the topic of discussion trauma, in one guise or another, is also present, an ubiquitous, but most frequently unrecognized and uninvited guest. We simply need to recognize its presence, the courage to acknowledge and explore the disturbing feelings it evokes, and the willingness to support {participants} in mourning the pain that bursting open cultural secrets entails. If we do not recognize the presence of trauma and welcome and reflect upon it, we insure that {participants} will be left in harmful repetitions that reproduce the status quo. (p. 142)

Berlak makes a powerful case for the importance not only of having these conversations, but also for being prepared for dealing with the emotions engendered in them.

> Alison Jones (2004) raises the question,

> What is this desire for dialogue? Why should we want to talk to each other? The commonsense answer is that it has to be a good thing to be able to communicate across difference. In its ideal form, dialogue between diverse groups dispels ignorance about others, increases understanding, and thus potentially decreases oppression, separation, violence, and fear. (p. 57)

As I read this, I thought, "Yes, this is exactly why this kind of conversation is so important. Jones, however, goes on to question the veracity of that premise. She says that "dialogue is based, however cautiously it might be considered, in a dominant group fantasy of romance about access to and unity with the other" (p.62). I found her arguments powerful and thought-provoking. Jones (2004) says that this "truly magnificent… ideal" is flawed because

> Inevitably, anxiety and anger are readily expressed when such a romance appears thwarted or threatened in any way. The loss of the ideal of democratic dialogue and its promise of social cohesion is a serious one; it suggests loss of the basic fantasies on which western democracies are built. Therefore, those with sincere and benevolent desires for a unified and egalitarian classroom and society are likely to identify as a threat any apparently contrary practice such as the withdrawal or active silence of some groups. (p. 62)

"Wow," I thought as I read that passage. That describes **me** at times. I ruminated back on my reaction to the middle school Black parents who wanted to have a Black caucus as described earlier in *Need for Safe Spaces*. I was clearly threatened by that idea, I reflected. Then, I read the next paragraph in Jones's (2004) essay:

> The experience of this threat is not uncommon in education, particularly among white people in multicultural settings. Virginia Chalmers (1997) tells a story that illustrates the

anxiety and threat felt by some white parents in New York City when she organized a

lively evening for parents of color at her school. People of color did not normally come

to school meetings, and the separate meeting was an attempt – successful as it turned out

– to encourage their participation. The angry reaction of the white parents who were not

invited to the meeting was marked by words such as "exclusion" and "loss." …the white

parents in the New York school believed that racial equality and communication could

not occur with any separation of ethnic groups. However, for the parents of color, the

separation from white people was a necessary strategy to discuss and plan change that

would lead, they believed, to improved possibilities for high-quality education for their

children – and thus, ultimately increased equality. (p. 62)

I was agog! I could hardly believe that Jones, through Chalmers, was telling my story! My

thoughts tumbled over one another. First, I thought, with some smugness, well, I was there once,

but am no longer. I see the need for the separate places. And, I do. I do see the need, but, I

must admit that I am still at times uncomfortable by my lack of access to some of these places.

Well, I am a work in progress, I realized. To me, that very fact points up the need for the

dialogue. I once felt outraged and excluded by the need for separate spaces; now I understand it,

champion it, stand up for the right of people of color to have their own space, but I cannot say

that I still do not feel a sense of loss. It is the dialogue, the discourse, written and talked about

out loud that has helped me move from one place to another and that helps me continue on the

journey as this piece by Jones has done. I think it is important to raise these questions. The

raising of them, in forums such as the books I have read and the conversations in which I have

taken part, has clearly helped me to peel away layers of resistance and ignorance in myself and

enhance my understanding. I think that is a powerful confirmation of the importance of the conversation.

Of course, I am a White person. So, clearly, I see things through that lens and have the attendant privilege. Jones (2004) says,

> In education the threat to dialogue has particular emotional force because it is a threat to the dominant group at the very point of their/our power in education – to their ability to know. A sense of exclusion and outrage marks the refusal of the already privileged to accept that some knowledge and relationships might not be available to them/us. The Enlightenment project of mapping the world, rendering it visible and understood, does more than shape our educational system: It is also at the root of the threat we feel when nonwhite peers separate from us… (pp. 62-3)

Many times I have had these kinds of feelings. I have discussed them with my Black friends, who it seemed did not understand exactly what I was feeling. I recall one such conversation during which I felt inarticulate, stuttering about how I sometimes feel left out, then just trailing off as I realized that I was evidencing a position of privilege where I assumed I should not be left out, and that my friend had often been excluded by virtue of race, the very condition I was bemoaning. When I read what Jones wrote, a piece fell into place for me. Someone else had been able to say succinctly, to deconstruct, something with which I had struggled and helped me to understand my feelings. Such is the power of dialogue!

At least that is the power of the dialogue for me, a White person. Is the dialogue harmful or hurtful to people of color? I do not think so, but then, I am coming from the ideal that dialogue can make a positive difference in making connections and reaching understanding that is the precursor to social change. The power is in the hands of the dominant group, Whites, so it

seems to me that to enlighten Whites, to help us recognize the oppression and inequities that exist in our society, however subtle they may be, is to influence change. So, if only for that reason, the dialogue is important.

Jones's (2004) conclusion is that "in the talking cure, it is clear that power remains concentrated at the usual places – that is with the powerful, as they/we attempt to grant subjugated knowledge a voice. The members of the dominant group remain the dominant actors in the dialogic relationship" (p. 66). She takes exception to the idea that

> when dominant groups gain a better understanding of marginalized groups through
>
> dialogic teaching by them, the outcome might be in the interests of the marginalized.
>
> To the extent that dialogue results in the reduction of prejudice and ignorance in members
>
> of the powerful groups, positive social change will ultimately result. When this result
>
> occurs, it raises the troubling possibility that dialogue may be understood as a sort of
>
> colonization where the powerful require the subordinate to open their territory for
>
> exploration (so the powerful can hear the marginalized voices). Armed with this new
>
> knowledge the white knowers will, we are meant to believe, run a more just world. Many
>
> indigenous and colonized peoples would attest to the failure of this strategy. (p.66)

These are challenging words. Certainly, I am not so naïve as to believe that mere dialogue will change the world. I do think it is a place to start. I do not think of myself as running the world, far from it, or requiring anyone to open his/her territory for exploration. More, I see myself wanting to make a connection. To share differences in an effort to understand them, with me sharing my experiences and point of view as well as listening to someone else's. The ultimate goal of this understanding is, for me, personal growth that leads me to action. I may not run the world, but my voice is out there and the words I speak, which may - or may not - have influence

on others, are informed by the introspection that the dialogue leads to in me. I search my soul with Jones's thoughts in mind and continue to come to the conclusion that the dialogue **is** important. What I take away from Jones's work is her exhortation that "desires for shared communication must be mediated more by cautious critique and limited expectations than by urgent and ultimately self-defeating optimism" (pp.66-67). I do not think that we should be hapless, well-meaning do-gooders. I do not think I am that. I hope not. I do not have unbridled optimism about the power of conversation. I have, though, learned to dream in the sense that Leonardo (2004) defines it. I am engaged in a search for alternatives in order to change reality and conversations about race and education are a part of that search for me. I retain my optimism and hope that dialogue about race and education can lead to positive change.

As Thompson (2005) says, "How we listen across difference depends not only on what we are listening for but *why* we are listening ….Power and privilege shape both what gets heard and what gets said" (pp.27-28). With these thoughts in mind, I go forth more carefully trying to be aware of the privilege of my place as I engage in conversations about race and education. I ask myself why I am listening and try to be respectful to the process at all times. I recognize that there need to be spaces and places for people of color to have their own conversations and, I think my voice is important in conversations with White people. I remain committed, however, to the idea that dialogue across differences is important and productive.

I think such conversation has implications on a more personal level, too. In the very honest, soul-searching, intense conversations I have with my friends of color, they, too, walk away with a heightened understanding and a glimpse into the thought processes and experiences of someone different from themselves. Perhaps not on a global sense, perhaps not something

that will change the world, but I do think these kinds of conversations are connection-building and have a restorative, positive effect on the people who engage in them.

Perhaps most importantly, we educators are engaging daily with impressionable, vulnerable young people looking to us for guidance, direction and modeling. Therefore, it is of paramount importance that we make visible the issues of race and education that do and will continue to have a strong impact on our students. We need to know not only who they are but who we are. What better way to understand ourselves in regard to race and education than to recursively read, talk and reflect? My optimism and hope lead me to believe that as educators we can influence what ultimately, maybe not in my lifetime, will be a prevalence of a just and liberated society. To that end, I work on facilitating conversations about race and education.

Recognizing Change in Myself

In the most recent conversation about race and achievement that my colleague and I co-facilitated for new teachers at our school, I realized that something really had changed within me. It was a startling revelation! It began with the planning of the program we had been asked to provide for new teacher orientation. We were exhorted to do a piece on "school culture" for the new teachers. What that really meant was that we were to facilitate a conversation on race and achievement at our high school. This was the first time the new teachers were together as a group. Instead of my usual agonizing over what we should do, because I was fresh from my immersion into this dissertation, I had a clear idea of what I thought we should accomplish. I thought we should start out with the exercise "Who Are You?" adapted from *Values Clarification: A Handbook of Practical Strategies for Teachers and Students* (Simon, Howe & Kirschenbaum, 1972, pp. 306-7) even before we did formal introductions. My colleague wanted

to talk about the history of our work together and these ideas melded perfectly into a wonderful, thought-provoking morning.

I could hardly believe that I went into this program without my usual self doubt and insecurity. That is not to say that I was loaded with confidence or complacent about what I was about to do. Clearly, though, there was a change in my sense of myself as being able to facilitate such a discussion. I cannot say that I no longer get butterflies in my stomach when I approach this task. What I can say is that I have crossed a barrier from feeling like a possible interloper who approaches antiracist work with a somewhat reticent air to feeling as if I have a legitimate voice which I can use with respect not apology to bring about change.

Helping New Teachers Grapple with Race and Education.

The new teachers were a varied group. For some this was their very first teaching job; others were experienced veterans who were coming to our school for the first time. All were nervous and anxious as they got together for their first morning as professionals at our school. I was nervous, too, as I always am when I begin to facilitate a group or give a talk. I was mopping my brow with some napkins I had cadged from the bagel breakfast we had provided. My anxiety always shows itself by drenching me in perspiration. I realized, though, that while I was nervous about getting up in front of the group, I was **not** timorous about the subject matter as I had been previously. "Hmm… ", I thought; "I will have to think about this later." It was time to get started.

I asked for volunteers and chose three of the fifteen or so people at our seminar. They left the room, and we instructed the rest of the group as to their role in the game. The first volunteer, a White male, entered the room. He was asked, "Who are you?" ten times. He could not repeat an answer. The next volunteer was a White female and the last, a Hispanic female.

We then, gave everyone in the room an opportunity to tell who they are. It was a diverse group in terms of race, gender, age and role in our school. Then, we went back and looked at the way people define themselves: name, family relationships, gender, race, ethnic background, profession, avocation, character. All of these were represented in the answers elicited from our volunteers. It was very interesting, but not surprising, that the White male did not identify himself by either race or gender. The two females both identified by gender, but only the Latina identified herself by race or ethnicity. She said she was Hispanic. The White male got it; he talked about how he does not think of calling attention to the fact that he is a White or a male. It is just who he so obviously is. Heads bobbed. We talked about that sense of normality as privilege. Everyone seemed to recognize the entitlement and arrogance that comes with that privilege, some perhaps thinking of it for the first time. A very interesting discussion ensued.

We tied the idea of who someone is with the culture at our school and how important it is for faculty to be aware of the various ways their students might answer that question. We talked about the different lenses through which we see ourselves and our students, discussing both the fact that our own personal lenses are ever changing and the idea that no two people have the same lens, since our personal lenses are so colored by our own personal experiences. We discussed the need to listen to our students: hearing what they say and being aware of what they do not say. We told our stories.

My colleague talked about how he and I had gotten into this work and how we might not have because we had both been afraid and unsure of ourselves. We shared our vulnerability and our drive to overcome our reticence because we found the work so important.

We discussed the importance of not making assumptions. One young woman, a blue-eyed blonde jumped in on that issue. She told us that she moved to the United States from

Poland when she was in third grade and did not speak English when she entered school. Passionately, she described how she felt, her sense of being different, of being other. She said that in gym class one day when she was in elementary school, the Physical education teacher was choosing teams by calling out characteristics of the students: All the kids with red shirts were called first to join a team. Then, all the kids wearing blue sneakers. Then, all the kids wearing pigtails. The young woman said that she was wearing pigtails but had never heard that word before, so she had no idea what he was talking about. She didn't move. The teacher came up to her and yelled in her face, "I said all the kids wearing pigtails!" She was confused and sat there. "Are you stupid?" the teacher bellowed. "I SAID, all the kids wearing pigtails." By now, she was mortified, but she did not know what was expected of her. She sat there and cried, embarrassed and humiliated. "Don't make assumptions!" she told us. "You don't know anything about me and my experiences just because I have blonde hair and blue eyes." A hush came over the room as we all digested this story. It was the perfect segue into our discussion of "other."

As I have found to be the case in such discussions, people were at different places in their abilities to see themselves as other. One young Black man talked about growing up in a predominantly White suburb where he felt very safe until one day when he was about ten years old, he saw some graffiti near the middle of town. Someone had written "Nigger" on a wall. He looked over his shoulder, as if he could see who had done it, even though there was nobody around. He said he never felt safe again. After that, he always wondered when he encountered people if they were the ones who had written that hate word or if they secretly agreed with it inside.

A White woman told about how she had been one of two female students in an advanced calculus class in high school and how the teacher patronized and diminished her. She had

wanted to go on to take a multivariable calculus course at the local university, but he had

discouraged her, telling her that she probably wouldn't have the need to use that level of math.

An aspect of that story is that although very talented in math, in response to that teacher and the

feeling that she was out of her element, did not take the class, and ended up as an English

teacher, doing nothing to pursue her math bent.

Some people, usually White people, don't have stories about when they felt like an

"other." Perhaps they never have felt so. Perhaps they are just not in touch with it at the time we

are having the discussion. In any case, listening to other people's experiences helps us all to

understand the feeling, and that empathy moves the discussion forward.

We then talked about Theresa Perry's (2001) dilemmas facing students of color. Some

people wondered if our students really feel these dilemmas. We shared the responses we had

heard from our students and the ones they had come up with specifically for our school. They

were especially interested in the dilemma of having students in the halls acting inappropriately

and creating or reinforcing stereotypes that some Black students then felt they had to live up to

or be ostracized by a large number of other Black students. That let to a discussion of teachers'

responsibilities to speak up and call students on inappropriate behavior and also not to generalize

to all students of color the actions of a few.

One of the participants asked what one does if a student, in an attempt at manipulation,

tries to pull the "race card.' Several people talked about how they respond to that. One White

teacher said she responds with outrage that a student would think that of her. Others said they

challenge the student, perhaps even chastising him/her for pulling the race card. This gave me

the perfect opportunity to talk about the dilemma that I think students of color face in this regard.

I saw people begin to nod in response. I think that many of them had never thought about the

dilemma (as discussed in Chapter V) that students face if they experience racism, real or perceived, and then if they try to confront it, are accused of "playing the race card.'' We talked about the importance of validating rather than silencing a student in such a situation as a means to exploring the situation and coming to an effective and just resolution. If nothing else, we planted some seeds, gave people food for thought and new tools for handling such situations, gave people a chance to share their stories and derive meaning from their own experiences as well as the experiences of others. In fact, the participants agreed that this whole conversation would be meaningful to have in a few months after they had actually experienced the school culture firsthand. We said we would be delighted to pursue this with them.

Language Privilege.

The story the Polish teacher told about her experience in school as a student for whom English was not her first language made me think about the fact that language privilege is another form of institutional racism. The language with which a child is most comfortable is the language s/he first learns at home, as Lisa Delpit (Perry & Delpit, 1998) so eloquently says, "…the language they heard as their mothers nursed them and changed their diapers and played peek-a-boo with them…the language through which they first encountered love, nurturance and joy" (p. 17). Of course, students need to be conversant and competent in the standard code. That is not at issue. "Proficiency in the standard code is essential to survival in the United States. But, using the standard code does not mean that students have to give up all the stylistic and rhetorical features associated with Black Language/Ebonics" (T. Meier, 1998, p. 99). What becomes an issue is how we as educators perceive our students who come to school not yet conversant in the standard code and how we respect the language with which they do come to school. I started out my academic career planning to be an English teacher. Language is

important to me. As a social worker and as an educator, communication is important to me. Being able to choose just the right word to transmit my thoughts and feelings is important to me. Through my reading and discussion with my colleagues, I have learned that none of those things is in opposition to respecting children who come to school less fluent in the standard code than I. Not understanding the importance of language in culture, in the self of each unique student remains one of the areas where identity and privilege combine to produce an insidious form of institutional racism.

> African-French psychiatrist Frantz Fanon (1967) taught that "every dialect, every language, is a way of thinking. To speak means to assume a culture." To speak Ebonics is to assume the cultural legacy of U. S. slave descendants of African origin…to assert the power of this tradition in the quest to resolve the unfinished business of being African in America…since it is not accepted by the white mainstream, difference became deficit all over again…. (Smitherman, 1998, p. 37)

Privilege again shows up when White educators assume inferiority because Black or Latino students come to school with a first language different than their own. Sometimes we are not even aware of our own reactions to these differences. It is important to begin to be more aware of ourselves and our own reactions because, for example,

> there is a vast difference between the pedagogical and interactional strategies employed by a teacher who believes she is working with a child who lacks a concept of plurality and one who realizes that the child is simply unfamiliar or unpracticed with how this concept is coded in Standard English. (T. Meier, 1998, p. 122)

Delpit (Delpit & Dowdy, 2002) waxes poetic again when she says,

Despite good intentions, if we cannot understand and even celebrate the wonders of the language these children bring with them to the school – the language forged on African soil, tempered by two hundred years of love, laughter, and survival in the harshest of conditions – then we have little hope of convincing them that we hold their best interests at heart….We must make them feel welcomed and invited by allowing their interests, culture, and history into the classroom. (pp. 47-8)

That we have a way to go in creating a culture where students feel comfortable when they do not speak the standard code was reflected in a conversation I had with one of my students who speaks Jamaican Patois as her first language. We were talking about how being in the program we have for kids who come from the Caribbean was helpful to the students. This bright young lady said, "When I first came here I was afraid to talk in class because people would make fun of my accent. In math class, I would say I didn't know the answer when I knew the answer, if it had a three in it, because I said 'tree' for three, and the students would laugh. The teacher thought I wasn't a very good math student."

Not to honor the language children bring to school, not to set the tone so that everyone honors one another, not to at the same time help them to understand the importance of learning the standard code, not to give the tools to code switch, and not to facilitate the ability to know when to code switch promulgates privilege and is a powerful impediment to student achievement.

My Transformation

Often I have asked myself what I as a middle-aged, White female educator can do to address these issues. I have wondered if I have a place in the discourse. In response to this question, one of my professors, Dr. Becky Barr, said that she, too, had been thinking a lot about

the place of White women in this struggle. To paraphrase her, she said that maybe in order to deconstruct privilege, one must come from a position of privilege. She gave words to what had been unformed for me. I think that I, as a White woman, am an appropriate person to write about White privilege precisely because I have experienced it. For the same reasons that I cannot write authentically about the experience of racism from a Black perspective, I am the best person to write about this piece of it from a White perspective. I have come to the conclusion that I do have a place. That place is critical praxis: using my own whiteness and my own experiences to challenge the issues of racism and White privilege.

Tatum (1997) says, "We need to acknowledge that an important part of interrupting the cycle of oppression is constant re-education, and sharing what we learn with the next generation" (p. 74). She urges us to educate ourselves and others. She acknowledges that this is difficult, often daunting work as I have experienced myself. Sometimes, it is hard to move forward, to set up the situation in which the dialogue can continue, the conversation can be pursued. I often worry that I will make a mistake and offend someone, that I will be considered racist or naïve or not fit to do the work I want to do. Tatum (1997) speaks directly to my fears when she says,

> "What if I make a mistake?" you may be thinking. "Racism is a volatile issue, and I don't want to say or do the wrong thing." In nearly twenty years of teaching and leading workshops about racism, I have made many mistakes. I have found that a sincere apology and a genuine desire to learn from ones mistakes are usually rewarded with forgiveness. If we wait for perfection, we will never break the silence. The cycle of racism will continue uninterrupted. (p. 205)

I think that is why when I was grumbling to my co-facilitator about how hard and scary it was for me to put myself out there and offer the staff development group, opening myself up to the

possibility of criticism, he said to me, "But you can't NOT do it!" And he was right, difficult

though it may be, I feel impelled to do it. I have discovered that somewhere along the way I

have internalized the idea that this work must be done and that I can do it. So, while it is still

daunting and even scary at times, I do not face it with the trepidation that I once did. When I

started this research, I felt I wanted to write a dissertation that nobody other than my committee

would read because I felt it was so personal; I was shy about putting myself on the line. Now, I

am much less reticent; in fact, I feel that I can and will do this work with strangers. I have found

my voice and it is robust.

One of the important things to me about the conversation with new teachers was what I

learned about myself. I can see my transformation so clearly. In that discussion my timidity was

gone. I felt confident in my knowledge gained from being engrossed in the writing of this

dissertation and the processing that has gone into it. My convictions are more solid. It is not just

that I am more comfortable with my level of understanding, which I am, or that I now think I

know everything about the subject, which I don't, but that I am empowered to act on my

principles. My voice is getting stronger and stronger. I feel that I can make a difference. To me,

the crossroad of self-understanding and the ability to act to have an effect on social justice is

where change does reside.

What is exciting to me when I have values-laden discussions with students and

colleagues are the different points of view expressed during discussion of particularly

controversial topics. I believe that morals and ethics, what is right and wrong, how one looks at

the world can be discovered and understood by each person through discussion, reading,

exploring much more than through imposition. I struggle with this especially when it comes to

issues of White privilege. I find that, as the controlling person I know myself to be sometimes, I

want to tell people what they should think about these issues. The realist in me recognizes that such is not either possible or desirable, so I have taken the alternate route of wanting to share with others the things that have helped me to understand White privilege and the limitations it imposes on society in general and on me in particular.

So, I am finding my way. I want very much to be the best I can be, to be a viable, productive voice in the discourse and actor in the struggle within the boundaries of my own grappling with the issues of racial identity development, White privilege and institutional racism as well as within the boundaries of our society and the cultures of our schools. D. Meier (1995) says, " Acknowledging the depth of harm that racism has caused and yet not allowing it to be an excuse for expecting less of our kids or the school, always plagues us, our students and their families" (p. 58).   And Delpit (1995) tells us, "When we teach across the boundaries of race, class or gender – indeed when we teach at all – we must recognize and overcome the power differential, the stereotypes, and the other barriers which prevent us from seeing each other" (p. 134).   I recognize those barriers; I am working to overcome them. Difficult though it is for me at times, daunting and scary as it may be, I feel compelled to persevere. I try hard to reach inside myself to find my own truths, to work on what needs healing or changing within my soul, to pull out any leadership ability I have, to raise my voice and dream my dreams that lead to action. Again Tatum (1997) says it beautifully,

> We all have a sphere of influence. Each of us needs to find our own sources of courage so that we will begin to speak. There are many problems to address, and we cannot avoid them indefinitely. We cannot continue to be silent. We must begin to speak knowing that words alone are insufficient. But I have seen that meaningful dialogue can lead to effective action. Change is possible. I remain hopeful. (p. 207)

I, too, believe change is possible; I, too, am filled with hope – and the resolve to act.

Chapter Seven

An Ending and a Beginning

It is striking to me as I reread my work how much I have changed during the process of writing this dissertation. I have used the word 'transformation' to describe what has occurred. To me that means I have changed dramatically for the better. It may not be apparent from the outside (though I think it is), but I feel it profoundly within myself. I have changed in that I am more informed about the subject of race and education; I understand White privilege and Whiteness differently than I did years ago when I began this work. I have changed in my understanding of myself; I have taken a difficult look into my thoughts and feelings, trying to be as honest as I could, so I have learned about myself and in the course of that learning, my mind and heart have been affected. I have changed in my sense of my ability to make a difference and the intensity of my mission; I approached this work with commitment tinged with apprehension, even fear. Now, I have lost most of that timidity and trepidation and feel a much stronger sense of being able to facilitate a discussion on race and education. I wonder about how that happened even as I hope that my work will have a similar effect on others. I think about the nature of this work. I have explored the ideas of racism in education and Whiteness and White privilege by starting at the outside and peeling away layers, probing more deeply into myself and the subject with each successive layer, investigating the ideas of others and examining more carefully my own inner self as I approached each succeeding layer. I have not reached an end of the research; in fact, this has been a search and as it is recurring and recursive, I will continually re-search. I have come to the point in the dissertation, however, when I need to take a look at where I have been and where I am going.

Looking Back

When I look back and see the tentative nature of my voice, I marvel at how far I have come. My essential nature, though, makes me wonder about the efficacy of my work even as I realize that my voice, my ear, and my resolve to continue this work have all been strengthened. The fact that as I read my poetry and my words to others, they are invariably provoked to comment on how it resonates with them or how they have experienced something similar or even how what I have said makes them think about their own interactions with others spurs me to continue with this antiracist work. I feel humble in the face of the enormity of the task. I have to remind myself that I am one person who has a small sphere of influence and that is where I have started. The 'doing' of this project, the reading, listening, speaking, interacting, reflecting and writing has engendered a fierceness in me that propels me forward. It amazes me at times how important the process has been to me and how much I want to share it with others so that they may experience something akin to what I have experienced. When I have been immersed in writing all day, starting at 7 AM, finding the glass of tea that my husband placed beside me untouched with ice melted hours later, and finally stopping to have dinner with him, because that, too, is important to me, the words tumble around in my head as I fall spent upon my pillow at night. The words will not be stopped. The emotion I feel as I am writing and thinking comes out in my dreams. Words of poetry, sometimes rhyming, sometimes not, pour forth in my head, so that some nights I have to get up to write them down. At times, the emotion has been too much to lend itself to the prose of a dissertation. I feel self conscious about writing this, but it is the truth.

I fantasize about what I will do next. I caution myself not to fall into the traps I have noticed along the way. I am no savior; nor should I be. I cannot romanticize Black people,

imbuing them with an innocence or perfection that others, Whites, do not have. People are people, in all their goodness and with their warts and horns. I do at all times try to keep in mind that race matters in our society. I have the privilege as a White person not to be aware of that all the time, but as I have learned through my work, it is something that many Black people always have in their consciousness. It permeates everything. Now that I realize the enormity of that, I cannot let it go. I recognize that even though I understand the concept of White privilege, I still take advantage of it, albeit unconsciously – or perhaps I should say that I allow myself a lack of awareness sometimes. I try to avoid the pitfalls of blame and guilt: I do not want to blame the victim so to speak, nor do I want to blame myself or other Whites. Blame does not move us forward; it merely puts people on the defensive, provokes anger, makes people dig in their heels to keep the status quo. Rather, I want to spark in others the kind of thinking that has transformed me. How do I do that? What is next? Where do I go from here?

What Next?

Would that these were easy questions to answer! It is not that I do not have ideas for the next step. I have lots of ideas! It is more that I wonder if anyone will ever want me to do the things I want to do. I am apprehensive: I have had this epiphany; I have changed in profound ways: is there anywhere for me to go with these insights? I would like to teach teachers about the things I have learned. I would like to work with pre-service teachers as well as do in-service or staff development work. I would like to give workshops, to consult with schools around these issues. I would like to write and hope that someone would want to read my words.

I have no idea how to go about the next step, however. While I think I can do the work if someone wants me, I have no idea how to put myself forward so that they will. I do think I have something to offer. I think my voice, my point of view; my deconstructing of my experiences

could be of interest to others and might give them something to think about for themselves and

their own growth and development. Race is of paramount importance in education as it is

everywhere in our society. How we approach it is important; we do not want our words or our

attempts to solve problems to end up exacerbating them. But, approach it we must! It is

important to begin or continue to talk about the relationship race has in education in a way that

allows for honest communication among people with differing views and experiences. Whether

it is in diverse communities or homogeneous communities, this is an issue that cries out for our

attention as we struggle to improve education for all students. I believe this with every fiber of

my being, but I still do not know quite how to take the next step.

One thing I have begun to do is to submit to conferences to present on conversation about

race and education. This takes me far out of my comfort zone and exposes me to a variety of

people, some of whom are very receptive to my ideas and others of whom seem quite

disinterested, which is disconcerting. I had an experience where I presented my paper and it

seemed to me that everyone in the room was more interested in hearing the paper of the other

presenter. Everyone there seemed to know one another and I felt very isolated and unimportant.

I had worked hard on my presentation and I think it was a good presentation, but due to the fact

that we started late, it was truncated, so I did not get to make all my points. It was not my most

comfortable moment. At the end, though, the power of the subject prevailed and after the other

presenter's discussion petered out, a Black male professor in the audience asked to come back to

my presentation and was moved to share a story about himself that had been sparked by some of

the stories in my presentation. Then, another person joined in, and another. That speaks to the

importance and power of the topic of race and education as well as to the evocative nature of

conversation. My work can be, in fact **is**, thought-provoking, kindling in the minds of others

their own reactions to the things about which I speak and inducing them to tell their own stories. (Interestingly, I later received an email from that professor expressing his interest in my work and asking me to submit it for the conference proceedings publication.)

Can I teach a class to pre-service teachers akin to the program my colleague and I presented to new teachers at my school? How do I go about designing such a class? That is one of the next steps I hope to take.

Another project I would like to undertake is creating conversations with students. We started our student conversations with self-identified students who had participated in the Minority Student Achievement Network conference and wanted an opportunity to interact with teachers. They were all Black and that was where their comfort level was when we began. As time went on, however, they decided they wanted to include White students who were interested in the discussion, so that is our next step. When I think about these kinds of conversations with students in a multicultural group, all the caveats that have been mentioned by authors I have read come into my mind and I am reminded to move cautiously. Still, having done some workshops with diverse groups of students to help them begin to think about these issues, I know there is a place for such conversation to occur in an ongoing way in our schools.

I would like to further my work on tapping into the resiliency of students of color as they face the various dilemmas promulgated by being Black or Latino in our society. To that end, I have begun, and would like to do more, working with students who come to our high school already marginalized and marked as 'at risk' and help them with the emotional piece of becoming students who achieve their potential. While others are focusing on the academic changes that can be made in reading and math, I would like to have groups of STARS, Students Together Accessing Resiliency and Strength. That emotional piece is important: Taking the

elephant out of the living room, so to speak. Talking about the very real dilemmas with which these students grapple and helping them tap into their resiliency and strength. As I move into this work with students, I am exhilarated at the opportunity to practice my ideas. In meeting with a small group of young men of color who are seniors in high school, I asked them what they thought stood in the way of their success. Invariably, they all answered with things that they could do differently or better to change themselves: study harder, don't watch tv when they get home from school, do their homework. Maybe those were the things they thought their teacher and I wanted to hear. Maybe those were the things that had been drummed into their heads through the years. Probably those are things they do need to work on. There are, however, additional issues that have gotten in the way of these students' success. These are the dilemmas introduced to us by Theresa Perry and discussed earlier in this paper. My idea in working with these students is to examine with them the dilemmas they face. Then, once having acknowledged those dilemmas and deconstructed them, to facilitate finding ways to triumph over them, go around them, under or over them or eradicate them, helping to build skills that will stand the students in good stead for the rest of their lives as they traverse our racist society even as we work on equity in that society. I brought to our second discussion a tennis ball and a heavy book. I was so glad when, as I was talking about them being STARS, one asked me what resilience meant. First, I dropped the book, which landed with a loud thud, unmoving. Then, I dropped the tennis ball, which, of course, bounced right back up to my waiting hand. I asked what would happen if I dropped a china cup. It would shatter into pieces, several responded. They got it! So, I am moving on with this group, eager to meet with them weekly to see where we go.

Now that I feel more confident about my ability to facilitate discussion about race and education with people who do not already see the issues the same way I do, I would like to do just that. I want to offer my services to schools to help them begin the discourse on race and education both in schools where there is diversity and a differential in the achievement levels of Black and White students, and in homogenous schools where often race is not seen to matter even though it does matter in our society. In addition, want to offer my services to schools where the students are of color but the teachers are predominantly White. My next task is to figure out how to do that.

These projects are things I want to do because this research has unleashed something in me that cries out for sustenance. As I finish my doctoral work and complete my dissertation, I find myself at the end of a long process. I breathe a sigh of relief and pat myself on the back and feel good about my accomplishments. I am 57 years old and I look back on a life that I have tried to live with integrity and care for others; I see some shining moments with which I am pleased. As I finish my doctoral studies and complete this writing, I find myself at the beginning of the rest of my life. I am only 57 years old, about to be "Dr." Selway, about to retire from my 30+ years of working with adolescents in high schools, on the verge of exciting opportunities and new challenges. I am lucky to have people in my life who have helped me, sometimes gently, sometimes quite pointedly, to get where I am, to be the best I can be. Without my family, friends, colleagues, teachers, students, mentors I would never have made it this far. I count on their help in future endeavors. I want to be there to help others be the best they can be, as I have been nurtured. I do not know what the future brings, but I meet it with the resolve to continue my antiracist work, to continue to fight against the privilege of my place, to try through the act of conversation to make the world a better space.

Writing as a Political Act

As many people have pointed out, writing is a political act. I have found that to be true in the sense that, as I have shared my writing with others, conversations ensue that have the potential and power to lead to introspection and change. Within this dissertation, a very personal journey unfolds, written in a narrative style of prose. I have shared various pieces and parts of this writing with others and found that not only has my voice gained strength and my position been clarified for myself, but also that others have responded to me with their own stories and tentatively begun their own searches. The writing of prose is powerful. Yet, there have been times when those words have not been expressive enough for me and I have had to strike out in a different form. The muse overtakes me. Nerdy and weird as that may sound, it is true. The enormity of the emotional response I have experienced through this work will out! My poetry, too, is a political act as well as a poetic one. In some ways, others can respond more on an emotional level to my verse than to the body of the dissertation. Who I am in relation to antiracist work and passion for social justice reaches out at some visceral, intuitive level and grabs hold of others in their hearts and guts in a way that the prose can not. So, I take a very big risk, because the poetry reflects me at my most vulnerable and open, and share with others the result of my midnight musing. For me, there is power in the melding of the intellectual and cognitive, the intentional searching for answers to the question of how to bring about social justice in our society (and most particularly in education) and the introspective reflection of looking into one's heart and soul for those same answers. So has my poetry unfolded. It is my profound hope that my words will touch someone else. In the meantime, this autoethnography has prompted change in me that has led to the expressions that follow. These poems are my first political act.

Chapter Eight

The Privilege of My Place

Musings

The poems in this chapter embody the muse that visited me, often at night in my dreams but also during waking hours, throughout the time I worked on this dissertation. They are personal and heartfelt renditions of the profound introspection and reflection of the places in my heart and soul that I visited on this journey of transformation on which I have embarked. It is my sincere hope that my words and what they symbolize will spark an answering chord in others.

The Poems

The poems that follow tell my story in a way that is different than the prose of the dissertation. They tell stories that are authentic and real and represent who I am at different times in different places. Storytelling is an important part of having a conversation on race and education, I have found. Trust and respect for one another are also keys to a meaningful conversation. On the pages that follow, I am entrusting you with my truths and my struggles. May these poems, a piece of my political action, add to the colloquy.

Speaking Out

Are there words to express the depth of my feeling when I hear that people, people who look like me, would pave over a swimming pool rather than have it integrated?

As I hear such stories told by my friends and colleagues, I imagine how I would have felt. A tide of
RAGE

washes over me.
Rage that could consume me,
change me,
forge a hatred in me that threatens to overcome me.

I imagine my White self being there in those towns at that time and standing up to say

NO! THIS IS WRONG! YOU CANNOT DO THIS!

I imagine my White self orating.
Unafraid.
A proclaimer of truth.
A defender of social justice.

And then…

I think of the times I have heard a racial slur expressed at a party – and said nothing.
The times when I laughed, uncomfortably, at an inappropriate joke.
The occasions when a friend told a story that had a tinge of gay-bashing and I said nothing.
The times when I catered to, even embraced, sexism.

Where were my words then?

As I explore issues of racism and privilege, the discussions with others engaged in their own struggles for understanding and enlightenment, the stories I hear, the voices that come to me through the reading,
transform me.

I hope, I pray, that, as I grapple with the contradictions within myself, I find the strength to move past my insecurity and speak up for what I believe.

May I find within myself the words…and the power to use them…

Forged

I was a squalling babe in arms
Born to a loving Dad and Mum
I was a curly topped toddler with lots of charms
Happily, safely, sucking my thumb
I was a chubby child at play
Chortling and jumping with glee
Till coming home with a babysitter one day
Some teenagers accosted me
And called me a dirty Jew, a Kike
And told their dog to jump on me and bite
I ran as fast as I could without my bike
But couldn't escape the terrible fright
Those hate-filled words haunt me still,
To this day have the power to make me ill.

I was a fun-loving little girl
When we moved to our new home
Suggest something to me and I'd give it a whirl
As we played on the grass and dug in the loam
Excitedly, I entered my new school
I was 7 years old and quite the student
I followed every edict and rule
I was mentally daring, but in my actions prudent
I loved to read by myself or play with a friend
Or ride my bike or shop with my mom
I thought my childhood would never end
Then, one day some friends dropped the bomb
That they were moving north to get away from the Jews
To me this was extremely puzzling news.

I could not understand why my friends and their folk
Would say such a thing, make such a fuss
I thought it must be some kind of joke
Why would they want to move 'cause of us?
I asked my mother and she explained to me
She seemed quite calm, although she sighed
As she told me of hatred and bigotry,
I got a very scared feeling inside
The kids with their dog came into my mind
The shivery thought jumped into my head
That there were people who wished harm to me and my kind
That some would be happy if we were dead
I couldn't understand it then as I cannot now
It's become my passion to reconcile it somehow.

Tikkun Olum*, we are exhorted to do
Repair the world, make it whole
There are so many things that must be made new
I struggle hard to figure out my role
In searching for justice and righting wrong
In abolishing racism, ignorance and hate
In ensuring the next generation is strong
In helping to finally get it straight
I search intensely to find my voice
Grapple with what course I should seek
I feel as if I have no choice
I must act on my convictions and speak
So, I look within myself and share
The thoughts and feelings I find there.

As a Jew, as a person, I find I must
Work on myself and within my sphere
To do what I can to live up to the trust
That *Tikkun Olum*, it is very clear,
Expects of me, mandates, and shows the way
Repair the world, make things right
Stand up for your beliefs; enter the fray
When it comes to injustice, get into the fight
For me that means words rather than fists
For me that means reflection and thought
For me it is thinking that clears the mists
Then acting in the way I know I ought
First taking a good hard look inside
Then writing and speaking to help change the tide
To me, that is where change does reside.

*Tikkun Olum is Hebrew: the Jewish mandate to repair the world

<div align="center">Uncloaking</div>

Cloaked in the mantle of privilege
    I search my soul
        Throw open my arms, my innermost thoughts vulnerable
           Embracing enlightenment
I speak from my heart
    About ideas that stimulate intense feelings with which I grapple…

Is anyone listening?
Does anyone hear?
Is there a reply? A response from another's heart?

I hope so!
But whether or not an answering arm stretches out to clasp my hand extended in partnership,
I resolve to continue my exploration
For, as I pursue understanding, I have become aware, and am transforming …

To Teach

Oh, to teach! To teach!
To stir young hearts and minds,
To spark, to delve, to reach
Students of all kinds
As they explore wondrous finds

Oh, to change the culture
Starting with one young brain
To make a burgeoning vulture
Think no more of material gain
But pick up a new refrain.

Oh, to see a look of rapture
On a shining young face
As with thoughts he worked to capture
He fills a former vacant space
And finds a state of grace.
.
Oh, to change the world
Or at least our small corner of it
To see our flag unfurled
And have it be something to covet
To feel that **all** of us can love it.

Until we change profoundly
Alas, that is not to be.
Drastically and soundly
It is very plain to see
We must change society.

Racism and hate abound
What happened to 'unprejudiced' and 'fair'?
I ask you please to look around
And see the injustice lurking there
It is in our very air.

Yes, in the very air we breathe
Are the seeds that we have planted
That make decent people seethe
From the racist practices decanted
As White men first supplanted

The Native people found on this soil
Then brought Africans to their enclaves
To work, to sweat, to toil
To be their property, their slaves
Going as chattel to their graves.

Those seeds of racism have germinated
Into full-fledged discrimination and hate
Though many of us want it terminated
And hope against hope it is not too late
Some think it is just our fate

To live with what has been wrought
To go along with the status quo
Giving perhaps a passing thought
But not really wanting to know
How wrong is the path on which we go.

Can we change, can we unravel
This miasma of shame, this cloud
Under which we travel?
Can we begin to say aloud
That we must eschew this shroud?

This cycle of hatred and anger
In which we are caught?
That with so much danger
This legacy we have wrought?
Disdain it we must, we ought.

Oh, to teach! To teach!
To stir young minds and hearts
To spark, to delve, to reach
With math, science, literature and arts
Children from many parts

But more than that to make them think
To instill hope and help them dream
So as they are on the very brink
Of being the ones to change the stream
They join the antiracist team.

The American Way

What is the American way? the speaker asked.

Truth, liberty and justice for all, responded a Black woman with a grimace on her face that showed her sarcasm. Yeah, right!

People helping one another in a disaster regardless of race, said another, thinking of recent catastrophe.

Opportunities for all, chimed in a third person.
Without regard for religion, creed or color, added an older White woman.

Anyone can grow up to be president.
But who would want to? added someone else. The audience laughed.

A diverse group of people gathered at a conference struggled with the idea of stereotypes and the realities of racism.

Remember these things, the speaker exhorted:

Starting with WIIFM – What's in it for me?

And THAT is the American Way came a young voice from the back of the room.

But, does it have to be so?
Can we breach the lack of trust?
Can we heal the history of hurt?
Can we reach each other, heart to heart, soul to soul to reclaim humanity?

I hope so.
I dream that one act, one conversation at a time we can create a critical mass of comprehension and connection.
That's why I am at this conference.
That is why I do the work I do, painful and difficult as it is to reach inside myself and see who I am and what I need to change.
That is why I extend my hand hoping another will grasp it, understanding the spirit I intend.
Can we make that the American Way for the generations that follow?

The Privilege of My Place

She is young and beautiful; I am not.
In so many ways, she has quite a lot;
Sometimes I covet her place, her spot.

Not so young that she is uncertain or always striving
In her middle thirties, she is just about arriving
At a place where she and her family are thriving.

She is a consummate professional as well as a mother and wife.
Her husband has a great job; they have a wonderful life.
Of course, nothing is perfect, so they have the normal strife.

But looking from the outside in
It seems that she, so lovely, so smart, so thin,
Has **everything** it takes to win.

She's training for a marathon race
She seems to have everything in place
Her life moves at a perfect pace

As she balances motherhood, work and play
Finds time to read, meditate, exercise and pray
And has the confidence to say what she has to say.

Her kids are darling, fun-loving and smart
She gives them all they need for a great start:
Confidence, culture, problem-solving skills and heart.

She exposes them to many different experiences and things
So when they are launched and ready to spread their wings
They will have the tools to hobnob with both commoners and kings.

She lives in a charming home overflowing with joy and love
When life gives her a kick, she comes back with a shove
She has a strong faith in herself and in G-d above

That allows her happiness and success
No one could ever say her life is a mess
She has more of everything rather than less

Sometimes I look at her with envy and think
I would change my life with hers in a blink
But her skin is brown – and mine is pink

Would I be willing to relinquish; to give up, to forego
The privilege that comes with being White to deal with the woe
Of being Black in a culture like ours? I just don't know…

For all the wonderful and special things my friend has that I desire
The accomplishments, the brains, the beauty and confidence to which I aspire
I just cannot say. I do not know if I have the intestinal fortitude and fire

To be a person of color, a minority
In our unjust, racist society
Where people filled with hate and piety

Discriminate daily and constantly cause pain and anger
For others make life a danger
Be they friend or be they stranger

So, much as I like and would like to be like my friend
In the last analysis, in the end
I cannot say that I would want to fend

To deal with the things I would have to face
If I were of a different race
Ultimately, that I don't have to do so is the privilege of my place.

Tsunami

"If you're not part of the solution, you're part of the problem."

The slogan from my youth pops into my head as the

Eruption, disruption, vitriol, rage confronts me,
A geyser of anger, the tide of pain overcomes me.

I am listening to a Black colleague talk about his experience of oppression.

Destruction, devastation, annihilation, frustration
Pain beyond tears challenges me for a response.

How do I respond to his overwhelming emotion?

What can I say as a White person, as one whose visage is like that of the oppressor?
I am not the enemy. I do not want to be perceived as the enemy. Yet, I experience the privilege
of my skin color. Even as I denounce it, I feel its advantage.

I bow my head before the tsunami, not in shame, but in sadness.
My tears mingle with his anger as together we decry the society that has brought us to this
juncture.

My tears are for us all: For myself as I search my soul to look for ways to make things better.
And for my friends, colleagues, students who bear the rage, the brunt of the scourge of racism.

I raise my head, stretch out my hand; he grips the fingers I extend to him. The quake has passed
over us. Exhausted, we rise up, different, but united, vowing to overcome the plague that is upon
us.

Changed by the cataclysm, chastened but not daunted by the deluge of anger and hurt, we move
forward understanding we are dissimilar in some ways, but united in our common humanity to
forge ahead searching for social justice, together in pursuit of equity, turning the fury into energy
for change.

I Am No Savior

Sometimes, as I struggle to find my place in the antiracist work I want to do, I picture myself as

A Savior.
Righteous.
Speaking up for Social Justice

Defying policemen picking on my students for driving – or walking – while Black

I am no savior – nor should I be

In my imagination,
I can move mountains;
I can and do make a difference,
people look to me for solutions and actions.
In the real world, I realize that the only person I can change is myself
– and that is not so easy…
In the real world, I ponder why I want to make these changes in myself
-- and the answer is complicated …

Changing means personal growth, being a better person, acquiring understanding.

Also

It has the potential to effect change in others: As I change, others may change in reaction to me.
That is, **if** I share my grappling and transforming with others, which I am scared to do…

I am afraid to put myself out there with my own foibles and shortcomings
With my own racist thoughts
With my own grandiose, self-absorbed dreams of being a savior
With my own advantages garnered from White privilege even as I decry it
I am afraid

Yet

If I am to make meaning from the things I have learned about myself,
about social justice and equity,
about the world and my place in it,

Then, I must
overcome my fear and enter the fray, put my voice into the discourse, stand up to be counted

I am No Savior –Nor should I be

I am just a person who must live with myself and do what I know is right…

Legacy

I gaze upon the countenance of my daughter who is on the brink of marrying, facing a wonderful life ahead…

She is beautiful both inside and out.
Her fiancé is a splendid young man,
reminiscent of her father in his gentleness,
devotion, competence and intellect.
Their lives spread before them ripe with opportunity for success…

My heart fills with love as any parent's does when contemplating her offspring.
I am gratified that my daughter has chosen to follow in my footsteps and become a social worker.
I am proud of her and impressed by how naturally she falls into that role and how well and with what passion and compassion she discharges her responsibilities.

Who am **I** now? I wonder, as I finish my doctoral studies, contemplate retirement from my current job and think about my daughter's impending marriage.
Who am I in the process of becoming? Who will I be?
These questions are fraught with anxiety.
My definition of myself will necessarily change as my various roles disappear:
Although I am a lifelong learner, I will no longer be enrolled in graduate school.
Although, I must work at some gainful employment, I will no longer be the Student Assistance Services Coordinator at my high school.
Although I will be always my daughter's mother, what that means will be different as she begins her life as a married woman.
Thank heavens for my own true love, my life partner, my best friend, my husband - one constant in my life.

My lovely daughter
with the as yet unwritten story of her life like the unblemished sands stretching along the shoreline
occupies my reverie.
It is not that she has never known adversity or made bad decisions that have left their mark.
She has.
But, hopefully, that sadness, those losses and bad choices have strengthened her and added to her depth as will, I hope, the challenges that she must face as her life unfolds.

Have I done everything I can to help her be happy, strong and healthy? I ask myself.
It is difficult to relinquish the parenting stance that has been so important to me for so long.

As I have become immersed in the transformative experience of writing my dissertation, I have wondered how it is that this antiracist effort has become so important to me.
There are myriad reasons for my desire to do this compelling work.

As I consider them, it occurs to me that perhaps the most important is the legacy I desire to leave
my daughter.
I would like her to know how meaningful it is to care about an ideal so strongly that you are
impelled to act on it, to try to change yourself, to make yourself a better person.
I yearn for a society rid of racism and bigotry so that her children can live in a better world.
I want her to recognize the privilege of her place, so that she can fight against the forces that
cause inequity.
I hope she will understand what it means to be a White antiracist woman.
I want her inheritance to be that her mother has worked with integrity for freedom and
opportunity to truly be the birthright of **all** people.

In all the years I mothered my sweet, wonderful girl when she was growing up, I did not know
these things to tell her except in the most inchoate way.
Now, I have so much more to share with her about equity, ethics, and social justice.
What is exciting is that we will learn together.

My role is changing.
I do not know who will hear or hearing, heed, my words, but my daughter will.
She already has.

Who am I becoming?
I am not certain, but now as I think of my daughter and the legacy I want to leave her, I face the
prospect with exhilaration and hope rather than apprehension.

Resurrection

I sit at the bedside of my sister who is dying of breast cancer, choking back the tears. "Do you want to see what cancer looks like?" she asks me. I don't, really, but my head nods of its own volition. She unwraps the bandage that covers her middle digit, so it looks as if she is constantly giving fate the finger. Maybe she is. I look at something indescribably horrible. Cancer is the scariest, ugliest scourge I have ever seen. This repulsive, hideous malignancy is killing my beloved sister. I cannot stand it.

After my sister died, I felt as if I could not function. I managed to put one foot in front of the other and get to work and do my job. The clamoring needs of my students took me out of myself in some ways, so to lose myself in my demanding work was a relief. In many ways, though, I withdrew from life. I didn't get my hair cut; I ate dinner alone in my room rather than interact with my family, whom I dearly love. I was frozen inside even though I did the things that had to be done.

I was accepted into the doctoral program at National Louis, but I did not think I could summon up the energy to pursue it.

Till I thought of the encouragement my sister had given me and how excited she was that I was undertaking this goal. I realized that I would be defiling her memory if I did not re-involve myself in life. I thought of the things that she believed in and acted on so strongly: family; children, her own and others; social justice; love; books; discourse. So many things that she was missing, but would not want me to eschew. In my grief, I was letting her down…

Death is ugly. It drains the living and leaves us bereft. But there are many kinds of death.

I look into the eyes of a child who has been berated by his teacher unfairly and see a piece of him die.

I look at our society that decries racism yet practices it daily and another piece of me threatens to die.

I think of the inequity in which our culture is steeped. The unfairness of the privileged system in which business as usual takes place even in that most sacred of institutions, our public schools. I see that we are perpetrators of a kind of death without even being aware of it. Would that I were a skilled surgeon who could excise racism from the breast of society!

I don't seek faultlessness or flawlessness, but in arising from the lethargy of pain and loss, I search for fulfillment. I hope I am not a hapless, well-meaning do-gooder. I strive to have the courage of my convictions and act on them in a meaningful way.

For I have looked at the ugliness of death and although it threatened to vanquish me, I triumphed over it and vowed not just to live, but to live to fight the injustice that envelops us.

It has been six years since my sister died. I can hardly believe that so much time has gone by. During those years much has transpired. Among all that has occurred I count as paramount the transformation that I have undergone during my immersion in the Curriculum and Social Inquiry program. In those years, I have read, discussed, thought, cried out in pain, shared with family, friends and colleagues, laughed and learned. I have found a new voice and the courage to raise it in pursuit of social justice. My sister would be proud of me.

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