Discussing Race and Culture in the Middle School Classroom

A DISSERTATION
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
OF THE UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA
BY

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IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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August 2009
Acknowledgements

I wish to thank the members of my committee, all of whom have influenced and inspired me as a scholar and teacher. A special thank you to Timothy Lensmire, whose careful, thoughtful feedback and advice throughout my research (and my graduate career) were invaluable. Thanks, Tim, for believing that I could do this work.

I also appreciate the support—and commiseration—my fellow graduate students and friends (including the many talented student teachers I worked with) shared with me at the University of Minnesota.

My mother and father have always encouraged me without reservation, even in the midst of serious health problems they faced in the past year. Here’s to continued peace and strength as we confront the next challenges together, Mom and Dad. Thank you for your guidance and unconditional love throughout all my endeavors.

I thank the rest of my family—Susan, Cathy, Jack, my “sister” Pam, JJ, and especially, John—for caring for me and cheering me on whenever things were tough.

Finally, I am grateful to the staff and students at Metro Arts School, whose work I found important and inspiring.
Dedication

For John and JJ
Abstract

While many educators recognize the need for multicultural education in today’s diverse schools, some teachers have struggled with how to meaningfully center culture in their teaching practices. This dissertation examines what happens when issues of race and culture are productively taken up in secondary classroom discussions. Eighth grade students of various racial, cultural, and socioeconomic backgrounds were the focus of the research, a year-long qualitative study of English and Social Studies classes with two white teachers where students did work related to race, culture, power, and privilege.

To begin, I show how two middle school teachers structured a critical multicultural curriculum. I then explore in greater depth how students responded to this curriculum, particularly a unit called the “Race Discussions.” Finally, I closely examine an interaction that occurred during this unit to illustrate the complexities and difficulties of teaching, learning about, and researching matters of race, culture, power, and identity.

Findings reveal that as students worked through units defining culture, studying cultural conflicts, and understanding cultural resolution, many of them were able to come to a greater understanding of themselves as racial and cultural beings and of the institutional forces that influence our society. Trends emerged across racial groups; as evidenced in their class participation, interviews, and work samples, African American and bi/multiracial students tended to respond positively, valuing the chance to discuss race and racism with their white peers and share personal stories of discrimination. The
reactions of Latino, Asian American, and white students were more varied, ranging from resistance to the idea of white privilege; to feelings of exclusion and guilt; to a sense of racial awakening, including the acceptance of responsibility and empowerment to act.

The efforts of these teachers and their students contribute to a growing and important research and teaching dialogue around the successes and dilemmas of critical multicultural practice, helping us to consider how we may—that we must—enact this work in our own ways, in our own classrooms.
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It is 1:00 p.m., naptime for my 3-year old son, JJ. Following our routine, we sit in his bed, reading together before I turn off the light and leave him to rest. One of our four selections this afternoon is *Let’s Go, Yankees!* (We live in Minneapolis, but my husband grew up in the Bronx; despite ribbing from the area’s Twins supporters, John wants his son to be a Yankee fan like he is.) On page thirteen, the illustration shows five players lined up on the first base line as they are announced to the crowd.

“Mommy,” JJ interrupts my narration, “I like these three Yankees.” He points to the three white players. “Which do you like?”

I catch my breath, wondering if he means what I think he does. “Well, I guess I like these four, because they are all smiling. Why do you like those players?”

“They all have light skin like you and me.”

Studies have shown that children develop racial awareness early (Hartley, 1944; Clark & Clark, 1939). Yet many teachers continue to insist children are color blind and that bringing up race serves only to create problems, not alleviate them. I know that is not true. And now I am seeing it here in my son’s sunny yellow room.

My mind raced. How should I begin this conversation?

“Well, JJ,” I said calmly, “some of those players don’t have light hair and dark eyes like you do, even if they do have light skin. You can like people who aren’t the same as you.”

“But dark skin feels different. It’s not soft like yours.”
Why did JJ believe white skin had a softer texture? A doll or toy at school? A comment he overheard somewhere? His idealizing of anything related to his parents? I could only speculate. But I suddenly had an idea of where to take the conversation.

“What about your friends at day care? Levi’s dad has dark skin, and Levi’s skin is darker than yours. Same with Sydney. And your teachers—Kristine and Christina have brown skin. Have you ever touched their hands or arms?”

“Yeah.”

“Did they feel different than yours?”

“Uh, no.”

“And how about Jermaine, from across the street? He has dark skin too.”

“Yeah, I guess so. And also Mr. and Mrs. Bishop.” JJ looked thoughtful. “I like when Mrs. Bishop gives me popsicles.”

I laughed. (How quickly his mind moved on.)

We went on with reading, the issue closed for now. This conversation—the first explicit talk about race we shared—showed me that John and I were going to need to continue to think about how race impacts our lives and experiences in the world, and work through that with our son. I was relieved that JJ has friends and neighbors who aren’t white to help us make some of this talk concrete. But I also know that just glossing over matters of difference will not suffice; a ‘we are all the same’ approach will not help him learn what he needs to know about the insidious ways race has shaped American society.

When I began this study of Metro Arts School, I hoped I would find some insights that I could share with my students, future secondary English teachers: ways to
productively take up matters of race, power, privilege, and culture. I found that the critical multicultural curriculum practiced by the 8th grade teachers and students in this research can, in fact, provide inspiration in language, ideas, and a historical framework to use to think about these issues. Over the course of the year I spent at Metro Arts, I was also reminded that I will need to continue to consider the multiple facets of my own identity. As a daughter, wife, mother, teacher, student, and citizen, I know that race matters, whether we wish it to or not.

I begin this work in chapter 1 by telling about who I am and how I conducted this study. Here I explain my methods and describe my theoretical frameworks, paying particular attention to theorizing about the difficulties of qualitative research related to power, privilege and identity. I also explain some of the personal history that led me to this dissertation, telling a story of who I am.

In chapter 2, I review some of the literature that informs this research. I focus on the ways that discussions of race and culture have been facilitated in classrooms, how teachers and students work with these topics. I also discuss the features of student and teacher responses that are important for understanding my study of Metro Arts School.

One problem with past attempts at critical multiculturalism is that they have often occurred in isolated texts or units that have little connection to what has come before or what will follow. For this reason, in chapter 3, I show how two middle school teachers structured a critical multicultural curriculum. I do not take up in this section how students and teachers experienced this curriculum in any great detail; that is the work of subsequent chapters. Instead, this chapter focuses only on the teachers’ careful scaffolding.
In chapter 4, I explore how students responded to this curriculum and pedagogy, particularly a unit called the “Race Discussions.” I look at the responses of individual students as well as patterns that emerged in students’ reactions. In this chapter I also consider some of the challenges of this work, including questions about the place of the oppressor in critical pedagogy. Here I consider how white students and teachers can work with students of color in a multicultural classroom to disrupt systems of white privilege and racism.

Finally, in chapter 5, I examine an interaction that occurred during the “Race Discussions.” I take a closer look at this discussion in order to illustrate the complexities and difficulties of teaching, learning about, and researching matters of race, culture, power, and identity. This particular exchange was a potent example of how my own positioning shaped the way I experienced what was happening in this classroom, uncovering a number of the difficulties inherent in qualitative research. The discussion also reflected decades of complicated American racial history.

The questions that guided my research over the course of the study were as follows: What happens when race and culture are centered in a diverse middle school classroom? Pedagogically, how are these issues addressed? How do different individuals react to discussions of race, culture, power, and privilege? What are the possibilities that emerge in these new spaces? Likewise, what problems surface when issues of race and culture are taken up?

During the year of this research, I observed moments of conflict, boredom, resistance, turmoil, and confusion in the classroom. But there were also many instances of laughter, joy, engagement, and deep learning—for all of us, students, teachers, and
researcher. I hope to convey some of what happened, bad and good, in the following pages.
Chapter 1:
What I Did and Who I Am

What I Did

Jim Garrison (1997) writes that teaching is characterized by “tragic loss.” As he explains, making heartrending choices “is a part of teaching that we all live with every moment of every day. As finite and limited human beings we must constantly choose between mutually exclusive goods” (p. 18). Giving attention to one student means focus taken away from another. Choosing a text to study means sacrificing a different, worthy one. There is never enough time to be as creative, intentional, and well-prepared as we would like. (The flip side of this problem is that there is always something new to do, explore, and change—I think this is one of the best and worst parts of teaching.)

I felt similar tensions, a comparable sense of tragic loss, while conducting this research. As issues arose, I tried to address them as best I could. Was I documenting the right things? I wrote, recorded, and transcribed as much as possible, filling three spiral notebooks of field notes. What did I miss or misinterpret because of my biases? I reflected in writing after each visit to the school about my identity and positioning. How could I help these students and teachers, reciprocate in some way for the opportunity to be witness to their work, so that I didn’t constantly feel like I was imposing on them and their time? I chaperoned dances and field trips, ran errands and made copies, brought donuts to the staff room, sat down with students to help them with their assignments. I experienced a sense of loss over students who left the school or did not participate in the study. (There was not much I was able to do about these shortfalls.) I certainly felt
disappointment over abandoning the many thought-provoking comments, interactions, and ideas that I do not have time or space to examine in great depth here. As I wrote in my journal after one interview, “There is always the wish for more” (Field notes, 4-14-08). But as Garrison (1997) says, we must “embrace the messiness of vital practice and seek practical wisdom to help deal with vagueness, uncertainty, and loss” (p. 18).

As a beginning researcher, I am just starting to grapple with issues that other qualitative scholars have identified. In this study, I was a white, middle class, able-bodied, heterosexual 35-year-old woman in a classroom with two married, male, white, early career teachers and multicultural 8th grade students from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds. I am a former secondary educator, one participant teacher’s former supervisor, and, as a researcher, a representative of the academy. These identity markers, as well as the way I conceptualized and implemented the research, created both problems and possibilities for my work related to power, privilege, and positioning.

In this chapter, I delineate the theoretical frameworks that undergird this study. Next I explain my methods, what exactly I did to document the world of Metro Arts School. I follow this explanation with a synthesis of some of the contributions of feminist, postmodern, and poststructuralist theorists who problematize aspects of qualitative research and how those issues relate to this study. I end with an account of some of my personal history, a story of what led me to this research.

Theoretical Framework
Sociocultural learning theory. This study is based on sociocultural theory, under the assumption that learning is primarily a social activity. Sociocultural learning theory draws from the work of Lev Vygotsky (1978) and explains how learners “acquire uses of certain practices and tools that serve certain purposes in social groups or communities”; further, through participating in these groups, the use of these practices and tools are “internalized and developed over time” (Beach, Appleman, Hynds, & Wilhelm, 2006, p. 5).

Consequently, sociocultural learning theory “emphasizes the importance of creating a social community that supports learning” (Beach et al., 2006, p. 6). The learning that took place in the Metro Arts School classroom was contingent on not just the teacher or the student, but the entire social and cultural context.

Vygotsky (1978) asserts that all learning is socially and culturally determined. Creating a “Zone of Proximal Development” (ZPD), an expert guides a novice through learning, helping the learner to understand and assimilate increasingly complex ideas and concepts (Vygotsky, 1978). The ZPD must be carefully maintained. In Thought and Language, Vygotsky (1962) writes, “it is necessary to possess the means of stepping from something one knows to something new. With assistance, every child can do more than he can by himself—though only within the limits set by his development” (p. 103). Should the expert stretch the novice too far, he or she will be unable to process the information; if the work is not challenging enough, however, learning will not occur. Vygotsky (1962) points out, “the only good kind of instruction is that which marches ahead of development and leads it; it must be aimed not so much at the ripe as at the ripening functions” (p. 104).

While Vygotsky himself did not use the term “scaffolding,” other educational theorists developed it in applying the ZPD to
educational contexts (Balaban, 1995; Beach et al., 2006). This study describes how teachers scaffolded their curriculum so that students could talk about issues of culture, power, racism, and privilege.

*Multicultural and critical theories.* In addition, multicultural education and critical pedagogy theories undergird this study. Critical pedagogy helps locate the classroom as a place for interrogating systems of power. Critical theorists consider the multiple ways that power and privilege intersect and influence both our schools and our society, with the ultimate goal of transformation for social justice. In Friere’s landmark work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2000), he describes how a “banking model” of education is counteracted as teachers’ and students’ roles overlap; they learn from one another as they enter into praxis. Friere (2000) explains, “human activity consists of action and reflection: it is praxis; it is transformation of the world. And as praxis, it requires theory to illuminate it. Human activity is theory and practice; it is reflection and action” (p. 125). Further, praxis can and should lead to social change: “Liberation is a praxis: the action and reflection of men and women upon their world in order to transform it” (p. 79). As Friere (2000) conceived it, dialogue is a key component of critical pedagogy; participants must be humble and open to one another, they must have an essential faith in people and hold hope, and they must engage in critical thinking—which dialogue both requires and engenders. Thus caring, open, critical classrooms and the discussions that occur there are fruitful sites for gaining new understandings with the ultimate goal of social transformation.

However, the title of Friere’s (2000) book reveals an inherent problem with enacting this type of teaching in American public school classrooms: their diversity.
Friere’s (2000) is a pedagogy of and for the oppressed. Yet in multicultural classes such as the one in this study, students from traditionally marginalized groups play, live, and learn with students and teachers from backgrounds identified with the oppressors. This situation raises questions about the place of the oppressor in critical pedagogy. How can white students and teachers work with students of color to disrupt systems of white privilege and racism in their classroom, school, and society at large?

Friere (2000) acknowledges that the oppressors may choose to join the oppressed in struggle, but that the pedagogy they create “must be forged with, not for, the oppressed” (p. 48). He also cautions that oppressors “almost always bring with them … their prejudices and their deformations, which include a lack of confidence in the people’s ability to think, to want, and to know” (p. 60). As a result, they may seek to take control in order to effect change, instead of letting the oppressed lead. Friere concludes that teachers, leaders, and learners “who authentically commit themselves to the people must re-examine themselves constantly” and that only “through comradeship with the oppressed can the converts understand their characteristic ways of living and behaving, which in diverse moments reflect the structure of domination” (pp. 60-61). Friere, then, allows a place for the oppressors in the fight, as long as they are willing to reflect and share power, but what this looks like in practice can be difficult to envision. One of the objectives of this research is to examine the extent to which Friere’s ideal was achieved in this classroom space.

Also important to this study is the framework of multicultural theory. Banks and Banks (2004) explain that multicultural education is an interdisciplinary field that draws from a number of other disciplines and traditions, such as ethnic studies, special
education, and women’s studies. The chief aim of multicultural education is to achieve educational equity, with “equal educational opportunities for students from diverse racial, ethnic, social-class, and cultural groups” (p. xi). Effective multicultural education serves an important purpose in a diverse society, country, and world, helping students cultivate the knowledge, dispositions, and attitudes necessary to productively work with “people from diverse groups to create a civic and moral community that works for the common good” (p. xi). As Banks and Banks (2004) observe,

> Because of its focus on equity, justice, and cultural democracy, multicultural education is consistent with the democratic ideals of the basic documents of the United States: the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights. One of its major aims is to actualize for all the ideals that the founding fathers intended for an elite few at the nation’s birth. (p. xi)

While multicultural education has often been conceptualized as a pedagogy for students of color, Banks and Banks (2004) show that the skills and attitudes fostered in effective multicultural education are essential for all students, white and non-white, to “function effectively in a pluralistic democratic society” (p. xiv).

Multicultural education as a field, however, has struggled with defining itself and maintaining focus. In some settings, it is conceived as a way to ‘celebrate diversity,’ a supplement to the normal curriculum (what some have called the ‘foods and festivals’ approach). These superficial efforts portray culture as “static, normative, and exclusive,” and often serve to reify perceived difference, marginalizing non-whites as “other” (Amanti, 2005, p. 131). Clearly this type of supplemental, shallow coverage is not in keeping with the field’s original intent. In response to the broadening and
weakening of the terms and pedagogy related to multicultural education, the term “critical multiculturalism” has emerged. Sleeter and Bernal (2004) declare that

Over time, as more and more people have taken up and used multicultural education, it has come to have an ever wider array of meanings. In the process, ironically (given its historical roots), a good deal of what occurs within the arena of multicultural education today does not address power relations critically, particularly racism. (p. 240)

As a result, a number of researchers and theorists have applied critical theories to multicultural education.


Ukpokodu (2003) defines teaching from a critical multicultural perspective as

a teaching-learning paradigm in which teachers and students consciously engage in the construction of knowledge, critique the various forms of inequities and injustices embedded in the educational system, and strive to gain the empowerment needed to engage in culturally responsive and responsible practice. (p. 19)

Further, critical multicultural pedagogy involves “interrogat[ing] the social system from a critical and social justice standpoint” (Ukpokodu, 2003, p. 19). Other theorists highlight the need to center issues of racism and white privilege. May (1999a) explains that critical multiculturalist practice “needs both to recognize and incorporate the differing cultural knowledges that children bring with them to school, while at the same
time address and contest the differential cultural capital attributed to them as a result of wider hegemonic power relations” (p. 32).

There are a number of impediments facing educators who seek to implement critical multiculturalism in the classroom. One problem for classroom teachers is the gap between theory and practice. Sleeter and Bernal (2004) note that critical pedagogy has been explored most deeply at the theoretical level, “often leaving practitioners unclear about what to do” (p. 244). May (1999b) asserts that “over the years, multicultural education has promised much and delivered little” (p. 1). Other obstacles facing teachers who strive to realize such work include the sensitive nature of race and culture issues and the difficulty white students have in acknowledging and understanding the role of culture in their own lives, as well as the unearned privileges they receive as a result of their skin color (McIntosh, 1990). Finally, the larger sociopolitical context of American education affects teachers’ perceptions of the feasibility of discussing race and culture. Teachers in the U.S. often have a sense that these issues are somehow peripheral, that the focus on standards and accountability reflected in (and created by) the high-stakes standardized assessment system, exemplified in No Child Left Behind, leaves no room in the curriculum for multicultural matters.

Despite the impediments, it is vital for teachers to address these issues with their students and help them learn in culturally responsive, critical ways. Thus it is important to examine what happened when teachers like those at Metro Arts School worked to implement a critical multicultural curriculum.
Alternative approaches to ‘truth’ and ‘knowing.’ Traditionally, research has been conducted to generate theories or discover ‘truth’ and valid, reliable, quantifiable ‘facts.’ However, theories such as feminism, postmodernism, poststructuralism, and constructivism openly acknowledge—and often center—humans’ subjectivity and the relativity of ‘truth.’ As Merriam, Johnson-Bailey, Lee, Kee, Ntseane, and Muhamad (2001) point out,

Constructivist and postmodern notions of truth and reality make for a much more complex understanding. … Constructivists argue that knowledge/reality/truth is constructed by individuals and by human communities, while postmodernists assert that there is no single truth or reality independent of the knower. (p. 414)

Further, postmodernism “calls into question the authority behind intellectual discourse and its claims to privileged ‘truths’” (Smithmier, 1996, p. 10). Poststructuralist analysis recognizes that “every telling is constrained, partial, and determined by the discourses and histories that prefigure, even as they might promise, representation” (Britzman, 2000, p. 32). Concepts like these highlight the complexity and multiplicity of human experience, a grounding that is important to this study.

Another issue for qualitative researchers is the very means by which knowledge itself is created, the epistemologies we use to think about knowing. As Britzman (2000) states, knowledge is “partial,” “interested,” and “performative of relations of power” (p. 37). Price (2000) points out “knowledge production is, in essence, political work” (p. 51). Racism, sexism, ageism, classism, homophobia, and other biases have all influenced social science research in various forms.
Particularly salient to this study is how race impacts epistemology. Scheurich and Young (1997) explain how five categories of racism each influence research and thus knowledge production: overt and covert individual racism, institutional racism, societal racism, and civilizational racism. They note that the educators, politicians, philosophers, writers, and other leaders who have deeply influenced American society have virtually all been white males, and it is they who have constructed the world we live in—named it, discussed it, explained it. It is they who have developed the ontological and axiological categories or concepts like individuality, truth, education, free enterprise, good conduct, social welfare, etc. that we use to think (that thinks us?) and that we use to socialize and educate children. This racially exclusive group has also developed the epistemologies, the legitimated ways of knowing … that we use. And it is these epistemologies and their allied ontologies and axiologies, taken together as a lived web or fabric of social constructions, that make or construct “the world” or “the Real.” (Scheurich and Young, 1997, p. 8)

Critical Race Theory, a theoretical framework originating in legal studies, has helped show “how seemingly innocuous educational practices—instruction, curriculum, assessment, school funding, and desegregation—are laced with racist underpinnings” and how “schools reify a racial hierarchy that serves the interests of middle class White individuals” (López, 2001, p. 30). Researchers must consider how the very knowledge we are seeking and the ways school practices function derive from a biased epistemology. This framework is important to this research as I, a white woman, consider data I gathered about diverse students responding to white teachers’ critical
multicultural curriculum. Later in this chapter, I explore in greater depth the dilemmas raised by feminist, postmodern, and poststructuralist researchers.

Methods

Data sources and collection. From October 2007 until June 2008, I was a participant observer an average of three days a week in eighth grade English and Social Studies classes at Metro Arts School (MAS). (I spent 71 days at MAS, logging over 400 hours of research time.) During this time, I took field notes on and audio recorded classroom discussions and activities. I kept a journal with three sections: field notes; thoughts about, comments on, and tentative interpretations of what I was observing; and reflections on my position as a researcher. I collected and examined samples of student work related to the research questions as well as course materials and handouts. I interviewed teachers and students, both formally and informally. I accompanied the 8th grade team on field trips, attended arts performances and graduation, and spent time with students and teachers outside of class during recess, lunch, and advisory periods (occurred once or twice a month; students often played games outside or did other team-building activities during advisory period).

Research site. All research took place at the school site or school-related events. Metro Arts School is a public magnet school housing grades 4 through 8. The magnet focus is the fine and performing arts, but there is no artistic screening or other arts-related entrance requirement. A key element of the school is its commitment to desegregation and diversity. An “integration district” with two schools, including MAS, was created in 2000 in an attempt to address the issue of white flight from the
Midwestern city where this research takes place. As the school promotional brochure reads, Metro Arts School is a “voluntary integration school” created by a multi-district consortium to “provide connected learning opportunities for students” from the city “and surrounding suburban districts.” There are several member districts from which the student population draws: the urban center (accounting for approximately 40% of the school population in 2007-2008, according to the local newspaper¹) as well as the surrounding suburbs. As a result, the school is socioeconomically diverse; there are students who live in million-dollar homes as well as students whose families qualify for public assistance (18% of student families were defined as low income in 2007-2008). Both the student population and the faculty are predominantly white. The students I studied were approximately 60% white, 35% African American, and 5% Latino or Asian American (Field notes, 10-15-07). Between 10-12% of the student population qualifies for special education services.

The school has a strong reputation in the region as a desirable place to send one’s children and has been nationally recognized as one of six model magnet schools by the U.S. Department of Education, chosen for its “strong student achievement,” “sustained success,” and “ability to bring white and minority students together under one roof.” All staff members (including even substitute teachers, whenever possible) attend training programs run by Pacific Educational Group, a consulting firm led by Glenn Singleton to address issues of race and educational equity. As a result, school personnel are strongly encouraged to reflect on their own racial identities and the ways

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all of the figures and citations in the rest of this section come from an article on the school published by the metropolitan area’s main newspaper. However, to maintain confidentiality, I have chosen not to provide the name of the paper and title of the article, since doing so would give away the identity of the school.
in which these impact their work with students. Administrators support the work of teachers who address issues of race and culture in the classroom.

Not coincidentally, the school has had considerable success closing the achievement gap. According to the school principal, 87% of MAS students achieve proficiency on state reading tests by 8th grade, higher than the state average of 70%.

More striking is the achievement of African American students at Metro Arts. Eight years after the school opened, the achievement gap on the 5th grade reading test had dropped from 60 to 7 percentage points. By 8th grade, 80% of African American students test proficient on state tests; the state average is a woeful 40%. And the African American 8th grade students in 2007-2008, the year I undertook this study, actually outperformed their white counterparts on standardized tests.

Participants. Thirty-eight 8th grade students and two teachers participated directly in the study. I requested interviews with 16 students; 11 of them agreed: 1 African American boy, 2 African American girls, 1 Latina/African American girl, 3 white boys, 3 white girls, and 1 Asian/white girl. I conducted all but one of these interviews individually (honoring the request of two girls who wanted to be interviewed together). Using a semi-structured interview format, I used a protocol (see Appendix A) for guidance, but did not ask all of the questions in every interview and often added

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2 Creative and funny as they are, many of the 8th graders I studied picked wacky or gender-bending names for themselves when I told them they could choose the pseudonyms I would use in this writing. One girl wanted to be “Fred”; a boy wanted to be “Lucy.” Another boy picked “Albus Dumbledore” (from Harry Potter); yet another wanted “McLovin” (a character from the movie Superbad). When I could, I talked to these students about the need for me to write seriously about them and offered compromises: thus McLovin became “Mack” and Albus Dumbledore became “Al.” In other cases, though, students refused to compromise, or I did not have the chance to ask them again. While I want to honor the students’ preferences, I also need to make sure the names are not distracting or confusing. Whenever possible, then, I am using the names the students picked or close variations.
follow-up and other questions in response to the students’ comments as the conversations proceeded. Student interviews lasted between 25 and 45 minutes.

The teacher participants were both married, white, able-bodied males in their late 20s. At the time of the study, the English teacher was in his second year of teaching and the Social Studies teacher, his fifth (fourth at Metro Arts School). I interviewed these teachers informally multiple times over the course of the school year and formally twice. Both interview protocols appear in Appendix B. Again, I used these questions as a guideline and found myself asking many more follow-up questions than appear in the protocol. The first interview lasted approximately 40 minutes; the second, about 75 minutes. I transcribed all interviews myself, using minimal tone and stress markers (primarily question marks, exclamation points, and italics for emphasis).

Identity markers and terminology. The words ‘race’ and ‘culture’ are terms fraught with baggage. My views correspond with those of Bettie (2003), who notes that race is a term that has historically been used to categorize human physical types based on perceived biological differences or a supposed genetic heritage but that in reality is socially, historically, and politically constructed. Thus, it does not have a fixed meaning, but is always under transformation and is currently used in multiple ways in popular and political discourse. (p. 207)

Despite its problematic nature, the word “race” is commonly used in our schools and our society, so it would not be helpful to eliminate its use in this study. Instead, I bear in mind that “social scientists widely recognize that race as a biological category is a falsehood and contemporarily use the term to represent socially constructed categories” (Bettie, 2003, p. 207). Similarly, I also utilize the term “culture” in this work. It is
important to recognize, though, that culture is not a monolithic entity, but can reflect merely some common beliefs, stances, and practices. As Florio-Ruane (2001) observes, people are “complex individuals whose identities are shaped but not determined by culture” (p. 11). Culture is one aspect of a person’s identity and should not be viewed as static and unchanging.

Despite the fluid and hybrid nature of identity categories, it is nonetheless still somewhat useful to use such imperfect designations to describe the participants in the study, including myself. Whenever possible, I use terminology that the participants themselves used; for example, some students identified themselves as “black,” while others preferred “African American.” I fully recognize that these positionings—of myself, the teachers, the students, and the rest of the school community—significantly impacted the way I experienced this work and the ways I write about it now. As Alvermann (1996) explains,

Because I write (or read) from perspectives informed by my personal history, by what I believe counts as knowledge, and by how willing I am to accept a text on its own terms, I can never separate my own experiences from the experiences of those I write (or read) about. Nor would I want to, mainly because I believe that the more multiple experiences represented, the more meaningful the text. This belief leads me to treat every text I create or review as partial and in the process of becoming. (p. 117)

I will strive not to divorce myself from the account on the following pages for these reasons.
Analysis. Because of the personal and sometimes provocative associations with topics related to race and culture, I employed qualitative methods to answer my research questions. As Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2000) point out, qualitative approaches such as ethnography “are concerned more with description rather than prediction, induction rather than deduction, generation rather than verification of theory, construction rather than enumeration, and subjectivities rather than objective knowledge” (p. 139). Bogdan and Biklen (2003) observe that the focus of qualitative research is “how people make sense of their lives, the meaning behind their action and words” (p. 7).

As Miles and Huberman (1994) describe, qualitative data analysis is an ongoing process; focusing data, organizing it, and drawing and verifying conclusions are procedures that are “interwoven before, during, and after data collection in parallel form” (pp. 11-12). At the end of most weeks I spent at Metro Arts School, I looked back over my notes and transcribed sections of discussion that related to the research questions. (Some weeks, I did so more or less frequently.) To begin my formal data analysis, I created a log: for each piece of data I had gathered, I entered the date I collected it, the type of source (audio file, field notes, student work sample, school document, interview, etc.), and then made notes about its significance, if any. I progressed chronologically throughout the school year, rereading all text and listening to all of my audio files again, adding to the class discussion transcriptions I had created. Producing this 55-page log helped me to generate themes and patterns in the data. I developed categories corresponding to the repeated topics and ideas that emerged (a list
of the primary categories appears in Appendix C). This process resulted in findings that I confirmed across data sources.

I used elements of critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2001; Gee, 2005) to examine transcripts in greater depth. Gee (2005) says that critical discourse analysis (CDA) can help us study “how language gets recruited ‘on site’ to enact specific social activities and social identities” (p. 1). Fairclough’s (2001) work pays close attention to the relationship between language and power, how language produces and maintains “social relations of power” and how it “contributes to the domination of some people by others” (p. 1). While the analysis I conducted does not use CDA extensively, the underlying assumptions of this method—the relationship of language to power and identity—was helpful in my general approach to the data.

Identity, Power, and Qualitative Dilemmas

Theorists have begun to explore the multiple ways that identity, power, and privilege intersect and shift in qualitative research. Data collection, analysis, and write-up are all impacted by power relations, particularly in studies that center on race and culture. Young (2000) identifies three major power imbalances: the different positions of the researcher and her subject, the determination and implementation of the study, and the researcher’s epistemology. Williams (1996) argues that participant-observers must constantly do their “homework”: “they must continually try to figure out the power implications of who they are (or better put, how they are being construed and by whom) in relation to what they are doing, asking, and observing” (p. 73).
In this study, I held considerable power. As the academic authority, I determined much of how interviews and observations played out, establishing the length of the research, the questions to be asked and answered, the intended audience for the work, the theoretical framework that shaped the study, the ways the results were presented, and so on. While feminist researchers have problematized the amount of power held by the researcher and sought to make the researcher-participant relationship into one of friendship to help address this imbalance, this supposedly more egalitarian relationship can sometimes be disingenuous and artificial (Wolf, 1996).

During my research, I found that, particularly in the first few months, participants tended to view me in a role closer to that of teacher/colleague (and adult authority figure) than a fellow learner, though the students did call me by my first name, unlike their teachers. These relationships grew and changed over the nine months I spent at Metro Arts School. Some students came to be less fearful of breaking (minor) rules in my presence, such as chewing gum and using profanity. I was sometimes a confidant for students. Nevertheless, due to my age, my previous teaching experience, and the amount of time I spent with the 8th grade teachers, I was likely perceived by most as more closely allied with them than the students.

Throughout the study, I tried to carry out “acts of reciprocity,” identified by feminist researchers as a way to address the power imbalance (Wolf, 1996; also see Tillman, 2002). As previously mentioned, I chaperoned field trips, ran errands, and worked one-on-one with students when appropriate. I also hoped that debriefing what was going on in the classroom with me could potentially help Mr. Ramsey and Mr.
Evans reflect further on their own practice. Nevertheless, I do feel that I am walking away with far more than I offered in return.

One significant issue related to identity is that of being an ‘insider’—a researcher who is similar to participants in one or more categories—or an ‘outsider.’ It has been assumed that each status has both advantages and disadvantages. As Merriam et al. (2001) explain, sharing gender, culture, race, and/or class markers with participants was thought to assure easier access, greater understanding, and therefore more meaningful findings. Perceived disadvantages of insider status included the threat of bias and the difficulty of raising probing questions. Similarly, outsiders were believed to benefit by having permission to ask for explanation and elaboration, since they were not presumed to ‘know how it is’ (Merriam et al., 2001). On the other hand, they were also assumed to lack the benefits of accessibility and the ability to develop relevant questions and “read non verbal-cues,” in order to “project a more truthful, authentic understanding” (Merriam et al., 2001, p. 411).

However, the insider/outsider dichotomy proves to be more nuanced than was once believed. Scholars have effectively questioned the notion that being an insider automatically leads to greater access (Olesen, 2005) and that a shared identity marker guarantees a true common cultural understanding (Tillman, 2002). Merriam et al. (2001) discuss how more recent discussions of insider/outsider status have unveiled the complexity inherent in either status and have acknowledged that the boundaries between the two positions are not all that clearly delineated. In the real world of data
collection, there is a good bit of slippage and fluidity between these two states.

(p. 405)

In addition, in a context such as the one in this study, there are multiple participants, each with identity markers that I do and do not share. This situation further complicated my position. For example, with some students, I shared racial, gender, class, and/or sexuality identity markers. I was also a student, like they were; however, I was more than twenty years older and a former middle school teacher as well. I noted in my journal one afternoon that when students were working in small groups and I circulated around the room, many of them noticed my presence and refocused on their assignment, clearly believing that I would tell them to get on task as a teacher would (Field notes, 1-14-09). On the other hand, Mr. Evans and Mr. Ramsey knew I was there to learn about and from them, and the fact that I had nine years of secondary teaching experience (more than the two of them combined) rarely came up. In this way, I occupied an in-between position.

As Merriam et al. (2001) assert, the clearly defined boundaries and advantages accorded to insiders and outsiders rely heavily on positivist thought, rather than the postmodern view that truth is highly contextual and dependent on those who experience it. A number of theoretical frameworks help sustain the notion of a complex, unstable identity. Merriam et al. (2001) find the notion of positionality, with its “assumption that a culture is more than a monolithic entity to which one belongs or not,” instructive in its recognition that age, gender, class, religion, political association, race, region, and other factors influence one’s experience of and with a culture, and that positions can and do shift (p. 411). Haw (1996) concurs, drawing on poststructuralist and feminist
frameworks to observe that the school experiences of the students and teachers she studied could be seen as a set of discursive relationships (discursive fields) consisting of a number of different and sometimes contradictory discourses, such as those of ‘race,’ gender, class, and religion. Further, each of these discourses can themselves be considered as a discursive field, consisting of its own different discourses. Impacting on these discourses are other discourses to do with, for example, age, competence, physically ability and sexuality. At any one time these discourses can shift and change places rather as the pattern shifts and changes as you twist the eyepiece of a kaleidoscope so that the combination of pieces which go to make up its pattern are altered. (p. 327)

Consequently, qualitative researchers must continually consider their positions within a study and how those changing and multiple positions impact their work; as feminist researchers advocate, reflexivity is vital.

Throughout the research, I practiced reflexivity in a section of my journal, where I wrote impressions, comments, and questions about the role I was playing in the classroom and the ways in which my relationships with students and teachers evolved. In my journal as well as in subsequent writing, I have worked to be open about my “values, commitments, and theoretical frameworks” (Young, 2000, p. 642) and therefore “accountable” for how I have “participated in research and produced knowledge” (Subedi, 2006, p. 575). An example came in the third month of the research. I wrote a long paragraph in the interpretations section of my journal about how much the teachers valued cooperative learning. Waxing poetic about the ways they
encouraged partner and small group work, allowing students to be social and learn from one another, I ended abruptly with a question, “But is it working?” (Field notes, 12-7-07). I recognized that my affinity for these practices grew out of my own beliefs about good teaching. What I was seeing seemed productive and valuable, but having little chance to examine student work at that point, it was hard for me to know if students were truly learning as a result of this pedagogy.

While it is important to consider the fluid, shifting, and hybrid natures of identity categories, it is true nonetheless that racial identity matters in research. Numerous studies have found that in interviews the race of the researcher often has an effect on answers given by respondents. Interestingly, though, it is not always the case that same-race interviewees get more information; rather, they get different information. Consequently, Twine (2000) cites a number of anthropologists (Merton, 1972; Jones, 1982; Phoenix, 1994) who assert that “it is optimal to have both racial insiders and outsiders conducting research because they reveal different—not better—kinds of knowledge” (p. 13). Nevertheless, it is still especially important to consider race when the researcher is a member of the dominant group, as I was in this study.

Another salient issue that I had to consider in conducting this research is how to represent my subjects. For most qualitative researchers, results are performed and shared in an academic setting using academic discourse. As a result, “not only is the knowledge detached from their participants’ lives but the manuscripts themselves are often inaccessible for many of the participants and nonacademics” (Young, 2000, p.

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3 Wolf (1996) relates the findings of Tixier y Vigil and Elasser (1976): interviewing the same Chicana women, using the same questions, the Chicana researcher found her participants to be fairly reticent about sex and menstruation, but willing to discuss racism and discrimination, while the white researcher experienced the reverse. This is the only study I read that tested this hypothesis directly.
While many researchers seek to achieve the illusion of “an objective authoritative voice” (Young, 2000, p. 639), feminist researchers acknowledge that such a stance is at best, ignorant. Young (2000) paraphrases Said, who wrote that “the act of representing the Other” is always “an act of violence” because it involves “reduction, decontextualization, and miniaturization” (p. 635). Most often, researchers use written language to present their work. Yet employing writing as a method of representation is not without its pitfalls. As Richardson and St. Pierre (2005) observe,

Language does not ‘reflect’ social reality but rather produces meaning and creates social reality. Different languages and different discourses within a given language divide up the world and give it meaning in ways that are not reducible to one another. Language is how social organization and power are defined and contested and the place where one’s sense of self—one’s subjectivity—is constructed. Understanding language as competing discourses—competing ways of giving meaning and of organizing the world—makes language a site of exploration and struggle. (p. 961)

Language is intimately connected to power. Britzman (2000) points out that language is limited and can present only partial windows on experiences:

The ethnographic promise of a holistic account is betrayed by the slippage born from the partiality of language, of what cannot be said precisely because of what is said, and of the impossible difference within what is said, what is intended, what is signified, what is repressed, what is taken, and what remains. From the unruly perspectives of poststructuralism, ethnography can only summon … “partial truths” and “fictions.” (p. 28)
As I wrote this account, I endeavored to consider carefully the language I used, the limitations and possibilities it holds.

While the power inequities of qualitative research can seem paralyzing, some researchers maintain that such disparities should in fact drive research, that research should be undertaken due to the responsibility that comes with being a member of a dominant group. Because of “the power imbalances in research and social relations,” academic “researchers are much more likely than the researched to have their perspectives heard by others in positions of privilege and power” (Young, 2000, p. 638). As Price (2000) observes,

all studies have political dimensions. The challenge for us as researchers, particularly researchers who benefit from access to privileges and options in our society, is to acknowledge the political dimensions of our work and our experiences and their concomitant and shifting location in an interconnected web of power relations. … [A]cknowledging the political dimensions of research means acknowledging, critiquing, and challenging the power of a text as a tool to examine and transform relations of power. (p. 52)

As Laible (2000) frankly recognizes, “I am working in an institution that gives me great benefits because of my race and class and denies these benefits to others” (p. 288). Her solution is to “make small changes in both my work and in the thoughts of colleagues who take my critique of university knowledge production seriously” (p. 688). Qualitative research can act to address some of the problems inherent in our educational system. Teachers and researchers who seek to institute race- and culture-conscious
qualitative research that works for social justice and equality must keep this goal in mind.

It must also be acknowledged that identity and power can cut multiple ways. Much has been written about gender bias faced by female researchers, particularly white women, who are the racial majority in the academic ranks (Wolf, 1996; Harding, 1987; Merriam et al., 2001). The fact that I was a female researcher in a classroom with male teachers in this study is relevant, as is the fact that I occupied a position of little power in the eyes of the majority of school personnel. Further, it must be noted that participants in qualitative research also inherently hold power and often have diverse agendas for participating in the research. Olesen (2005) notes that while it is important for a researcher to consider if and how she has authority and influence, it is also true that “the researcher’s ‘power’ is often only partial,” “illusory,” “tenuous,” and “confused with researcher responsibility” (p. 255). As is the case with identity, the locations and experiences of privilege and power are multiple and shifting.

One might be stymied by the many problems and pitfalls related to power and positioning that qualitative research can engender. However, asserting that one of research’s vital purposes is “to bring about cultural transformation,” Schultz (1997) argues that “it is critical for researchers to cross boundaries to try to understand and write about people different from themselves as well as those who are similar” (p. 507).

After all, even those who share some or all of a researcher’s identity characteristics are

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4 While Metro Arts School has occasional observers in classrooms, most of them are masters’ students completing observation hours for methods classes in a local university’s teacher preparation program. Despite the fact that I was present in the school for much longer than they were, many staff members assumed I was a preservice teacher. In addition, some of my fellow graduate students have told me about the respect afforded them at their research sites due to their position in the academy. Such was not the case at Metro Arts School, where teaching experience and pedagogical knowledge tended to be valued more than ‘ivory tower’ theory and experience.
not “wholly the same,” and therefore cannot purport to “assume sameness or full
understanding”: “No researcher has the ability to see and understand exactly as the
participant sees and understands. All research, then, involves crossing” (Young, 2000,
provide for a more in-depth and multifaceted understanding” (p. 641). Rather than
presenting one’s research as a definitive account, then, is important to recognize its
limitations and contextualize it within the larger body of work. Price (2000) remarks
that his identity positions render his understanding “partial and incomplete,” yet also
contends that his work is

intended to be considered as a contribution to various questions and issues in the
hope that our collective questions may help us explain and understand the lives
of these young men [his participants] as well as broader questions about race,
class, and gender relations of privilege and power. (p. 52)

Like Price (2000), I maintain that while this version of my and participants’ experiences
is surely only one of many possible versions, it nonetheless can provoke thought and
continue a dialogue about important matters.

The Impossibility of Research

Drawing on postmodern, poststructuralist, and feminist theoretical frameworks,
I strongly question any research that claims to uncover ‘reality’ or ‘truth’ and disregards
how the power and privilege of the researcher may have influenced the work. There
have been significant contributions by theorists who consider the interplay of power,
privilege, and identity in qualitative race-conscious research. Unfortunately, much of
this work involves participants who share one or more identity categories. Though there is often an admission that there is diversity within these groups, there is nonetheless less consideration in the literature of how power, privilege, and identity play out in mixed-race, mixed-culture, mixed-class, and/or mixed-gender groups, such as the one in this study.

A culminating and important concept to remember about this work is its complexity and messiness. As St. Pierre and Pillow (2000) write, feminist, poststructuralist research does not “produce nor desire” a “clear, consensual, and whole alternative” (p. 1). Rather, this research embodies “lusty, rigorous, enabling confusion that deterritorializes ontological reckonings, epistemological conditions, and justifications, and methodological striations” (pp. 1-2). It is impossible to locate all of the myriad ways that power, privilege and identity shaped this study.

Despite the seemingly irreconcilable dilemmas of qualitative research, I recall Garrison’s (1997) concept of tragic loss and recognize that we cannot be paralyzed by potential problems. As I move forward in my journey and continue to learn, I remember that the knowledge I seek is “a process whereby we re-create our worlds so that through explorations with others, we can critically explore our own” (Haw, 1996, p. 323). I now move on to tell you more about my travels. In the final section of this chapter, I will characterize this research in a different way, as a part of my larger life. As a result, the tone of the writing that follows shifts in service of telling a story of who I am.
Who I Am

I always wanted to be a teacher. The grades—and later, subjects—I wanted to teach changed. But I knew early on that I wanted to spend the rest of my life in school, a place in which I thrived.

I was a white, female, upper middle class only child whose family claimed I could read at age three; who brought books to Casa Comida, the Mexican restaurant we frequented at least once a week, to read before and after dinner; who loved shooting baskets, kicking a soccer ball, and performing on clarinet in the band; but also playing alone in my room and reading from the bright orange Funk and Wagnalls children’s encyclopedia my mother bought weekly, volume by volume, at the Shop-Rite Supermarket.

My friend Wendy, one of my 9th grade teaching colleagues at my second job, once told me she loved working with adolescents because of their “keen sense of injustice.” Several of my own high school teachers helped arouse that awareness within me. In high school in the 1980s—with the help of Mr. Moir, Mr. Fialkoff, and Mr. Flamm—I was troubled and moved by famine in Africa, the arms race of the Cold War, the Iran-Contra affair, the plight of the homeless, the income gap widening in the Reagan years. I started to do more community service, watched the news with a more critical eye, and discovered a liberal bent far different than my father’s conservative politics.

Now, let me be real: I was no great crusader for social justice. I contemplated these political and social problems from the comfort of my safe, steady racial and socioeconomic place in the world. School matched my cultural background. My parents
had the financial ability to fill my world with text, and gave me the generous gift of sending me to a prestigious private university debt-free. Yet I did feel that teaching was a career that could map itself onto my social and political leanings.

So that girl grew up and became an English teacher. I taught middle and high school for nine years, in a variety of settings: public and private, suburban and urban, hetero- and homogeneous. Like most teachers, in all of the settings in which I taught, I found the heart of the work to be forging deep connections with both academically successful and struggling students, white students and students of color, native speakers of English and immigrant students, engaged and resistant young people. Those connections resulted from working together in class, through coaching three sports, and advising individuals and student groups.

I lucked into perhaps my most life-changing teaching experience by answering an ad in the *New York Times* for summer teachers at Prep for Prep. This program identifies motivated, high-achieving 8th grade students of color in New York City’s public schools and prepares them for admission to and leadership positions in elite, private high schools that have ample scholarship money for them if needed. Throughout their academic groundwork, Prep students learn about the norms expected in the high-powered schools they will be attending so that they can achieve success there, at the same time uncovering the unjust power structures that exist in the U.S. Prep places great emphasis on giving back, on the responsibility to honor one’s roots and background once that success is achieved, giving students the tools to maintain their racial and cultural identities in these predominantly white schools and become leaders in addressing the disparity between the rhetorical ideals and the flawed reality of
American society. While no setting is perfect, in the five summers I worked at Prep, the program helped me see that exposing the myth of meritocracy and explicitly discussing institutional forces can be educationally productive, inspiring me to learn and understand more about culturally responsive and critical pedagogies. I have come to believe these issues must be addressed with all students if we are to work for social justice.

My teacher preparation had been minimal, as I began my career at a boarding school in New England, where all I needed was a degree in the subject I taught and the willingness to live in the dorm, coach, and teach. It was only when I went back to school for my masters’ degree that I began to discover educational researchers and writers who helped me understand some of what was troubling me in the classroom as well as what was working at Prep: Gee’s (1992) and Delpit’s (1995) writing about the language of power; Ogwu’s (1993) explanation of oppositional identity; Finn’s (1999) analysis of research regarding class biases in schools; Ladson-Billings’ (1994) study of culturally relevant teachers.

After earning New York State certification and teaching 7th and 8th grade in White Plains, a racially and socioeconomically diverse district, I was even more concerned by what can go wrong in U.S. education. Despite the student population of the school (60% students of color), twenty-six out of twenty-eight students in my honors class were white, reflecting national tracking trends. My ESL class included one student who was born in the U.S. and spoke English at home; when he struggled in 6th grade Language Arts, someone must have assumed (due to his Latino name and brown skin?) that his difficulties were language-based. Parent conferences were always
scheduled during the school day, when most parents were working (and may not have been able to afford to take time off). Expectations for classroom management focused on “sending out” any difficult or disruptive student to the “Behavior Room.” It was hard to find time to connect daily with all of my students. Many of them—and many of the teachers—did not enjoy being there. The year was full of frustrations despite the many good things I shared with these middle schoolers.

I decided to work towards my Ph.D. part time while continuing to teach secondary school, hoping that I could find more answers about how best to serve and learn with my students. A move from the east coast to upper Midwest, though, propelled me into full-time doctoral work at the University of Minnesota. During my Ph.D. program, I had the opportunity to coordinate and supervise student teaching placements in the English Education program. Working with these beginning teachers was one of the most rewarding aspects of my graduate work, and it kindled in me a new passion and career focus. I wanted to help preservice teachers think through some of the racial, cultural, and institutional issues I had been largely unaware of when I entered the profession.

One of the student teachers I supervised, Scott Ramsey (all names are pseudonyms), proved to be thoughtful, energetic, and committed during his student teaching experience at a Minneapolis public urban high school. After graduation, he accepted a job teaching 8th grade English. Talking with Scott in the fall of his first year of teaching, I was intrigued by his observation of what happened when a substitute covered his classes one day so that he could attend a staff development workshop. “When I looked over the note the sub had left,” he explained, “I saw all of the kids on
the ‘misbehaved’ list were black. So I thought, ‘Hmm.’ And I talked with the students about that.” I was curious about what had fostered Scott’s racial awareness and willingness to discuss the incident with his students, and I ended up conducting a case study on Scott for a qualitative research class, interviewing him about what influenced his beliefs about race and culture and how he translated those attitudes into classroom practice. Through this small study, I learned that the school where he taught did quite a bit of work with issues of race and culture, both in staff development as well as in direct curriculum efforts with students, which piqued my interest further.

Scott agreed to have me extend my work with him and study his classroom for my dissertation research. I understood that I would need to be there for the school year. I thought the heart of the study would be the “Race Discussions,” a unit examining white privilege, but I knew I had to gain an ethnographic big picture, a sense of the culture and curriculum that allowed these conversations to occur—as well as what happened when they were over.

I began in May of 2007. I contacted the principal, a man Scott had described as “tough,” “fair,” and “hard to read.” When I didn’t get a response to my initial email, I followed up with another, then a phone call, then another phone call. The building secretary finally scheduled an appointment for me to meet with Mr. Johnson in June.

I was nervous. I had conducted only two small-scale studies before, and I felt unsure of how best to present my research and myself. I am female, and he is male. And I am white, and he is black. All of the history tied to those identity markers played into my feelings of intimidation.
Mr. Johnson was direct with me. He had little trust for members of the university community. In his experience, educational researchers took time away from his staff and students, time he thought they should spend on learning. He had no way of knowing if my intentions were good, and I had no way of proving them so, except as expressed in my words and the trust his teacher, Scott, had showed in me.

We left the meeting with the outcome still up in the air. I contacted another mutual acquaintance of ours and asked her to put in a good word for me—calling in all favors at this point. Mr. Johnson and I exchanged emails several more times. He let me know that to study only Scott’s class would not be enough. I would need to meet with Frank Evans and get his permission as well; much of what happened during the “Race Discussions” originated in his 8th grade Social Studies class. And Mr. Evans traveled most of the summer, so he did not respond to my messages. Scott tried to help me, but things stalled.

Finally, in September, I showed up at Metro Arts School and met Mr. Evans. We talked for thirty minutes, and though he said he was protective of his students, he was willing to take a risk and allow me into his classroom as well. We immediately went up to Mr. Johnson’s office, and he—fairly reluctantly—said that if the teachers were willing to give their permission, he wouldn’t stand in their way. I was elated and scared. And that is how I came to this study.

School can be deadening for many kids. That doesn’t seem fair, given how much time they spend there. There are places where this isn’t the case, oases of classrooms and buildings where things, for the most part, work: where teachers and
students can talk about social injustice, learning things together that will inspire them to be better scholars, citizens, and human beings. In my opinion, Metro Arts School is such a place.

I think it is important for us to learn from such spaces. We cannot and should not try to mirror exactly what these teachers, students, administrators, and schools do. But we can be challenged and motivated to think about the ways some of these ideas may fit into our own practice. It is for this reason that I lived and worked and conducted my research for a year at Metro Arts School. In the next chapter, I describe the place of this study in similar research that has come before.
Chapter 2  
Review of Literature

“We tend to remain silent on issues of racism and ethnocentrism, both in the United States as a whole and within the educational profession in particular, engaging in what has been described as a ‘conspiracy of silence’ that promotes the ill effects of racism and reduces the opportunities for change and progress.” (Henze, Lucas, & Scott, 1998, p. 190)

What can and can’t teachers and students talk about together? Can the messy, elusive, and often taboo topics of race and culture be fruitfully discussed in a secondary classroom? Glazier and Seo (2005) declare that subjects like social class, politics, religion, culture, and race are generally “silenced,” seen as dangerous “hot lava topics” that teachers avoid raising, fearing the difficult, complex, and problematic dialogues that they may bring about (p. 687). Given the pervasiveness of racism and prejudice in U.S. society and the persistence of the achievement gap, it is clear that avoiding these hot lava issues serves only to perpetuate the status quo. Teachers and teacher educators must come to a greater understanding of how productive conversations about race, culture, power, and identity can happen in classrooms. These issues are messy and difficult to address; teachers often do not know where to begin, lacking “strategies and experiences with having conversations about race or racism across multiracial
experiences” (Greene & Abt-Perkins, 2003, p. 1), a significant shortcoming as the American educational system—and our society—grows increasingly diverse.

Despite educators’ lack of knowledge in this area, the work is vital. As Greene and Abt-Perkins (2003) write in Making Race Visible: Literacy Research for Cultural Understanding,

If we expect teachers to be effective, insuring that students acquire the social and cultural capital they will need to have in the 21st century, then they need to understand more fully the complexities of learning across both race and class. (p. 3)

Teachers must grapple with issues of race, culture, power, and identity and directly address them in classrooms with students. However, in general, there is not enough work in this area (Greene & Abt-Perkins, 2003). More effort is needed, as “educators at every level not only need to teach about and discuss issues of racial identity, but foreground the ways in which power operates in their classrooms” (Greene & Abt-Perkins, 2003, pp. 3-4).

This study contributes to a growing and important research and teaching dialogue: how teachers and students discuss matters of race and culture, the successes and dilemmas of these conversations. One issue to consider is how the issues are brought into the classroom. There is little research on classes that take up these matters in quite the same way as Metro Arts School, where 8th grade teachers address racism, ethnocentrism, power, and privilege directly, throughout the school year. Researchers have examined how multicultural literature as well as history-based curricula engage students with issues of power, race, culture, and identity. In terms of participants’
responses to this work, there is a more substantial body of literature about how college students, teachers, and teacher candidates react and not as much on younger students.

In this chapter, I review what other researchers have written about the curricular vehicles that have been used to facilitate discussions of race and culture and how teachers and students work with these topics, examining the features of student and teacher responses that are important for understanding my study of Metro Arts School.

The Curriculum

There is a rich body of work on teachers and students using multicultural literature to discuss matters of race and culture. In the opening of *High School Students’ Competing Social Worlds*, Beach, Thein, and Parks (2008) review the research on secondary students’ responses to multicultural texts, observing that educators have valued this literature because of the belief that it would change “students’ attitudes related to prejudice” and foster “tolerance for diversity” (p. 277). However, research shows that reading multicultural literature often leads to “little change in belief and attitudes related to race” (Beach et al., 2008, p. 277). As Glazier and Seo (2005) observe, “adding multicultural texts to the curriculum will not by itself create respect for cultural differences or an understanding across cultures” (p. 688).

In their study, Glazier and Seo (2005) found that the structure of and instruction in the teacher’s secondary English classroom valued students’ cultures and helped students “respect and understand the cultures represented in the text and those of classmates from various cultural communities” (p. 697). However, for this teacher, as for many others who engage in study of multicultural literature, whiteness remained
“unexplored cultural territory” and thus normalized, masking the fact that all cultures are “multifaceted” (p. 698). When texts that feature white people fail to mention race, “this practice reifies a silence around race”; language that is purportedly race-neutral “negates … social, historical, and political contexts and fails to challenge white dominance and privilege” (Rogers & Mosley, 2006, p. 475).

Students experience discomfort discussing issues of race and culture, and white students in particular tend to reject literature that they view as “challeng[ing] their privileged stance,” reacting by stereotyping the ‘other’ (Beach, 1997, p. 69). Beach et al. (2008) note that white students’ unfamiliarity with systemic racism and oppression impedes their understandings of characters’ actions. Students tend to rely on discourses of equality, meritocracy, and personal accountability, looking at characters in isolation and discussing their motivations and actions in terms of the individual (Vinz, Gordon, Hamilton, LaMontagne, & Lundgren, 2000; Beach, 1997). While this focus can at times be relevant, it is also essential to consider the “larger cultural or institutional forces associated with race, class, and gender systems,” the “social and cultural forces” that shape characters’ lives (Beach et al., 2008, p. 4). Other research on student response to multicultural literature pronounces the value of having students “talk back” to texts: exploring the influences of peers and authority figures as well as popular culture and other socio-historical narratives on their understandings (Enciso, 1997). This work indicates that teachers need to place a greater emphasis on institutional forces in the study of multicultural literature.

While discussions of race, culture, identity, and power are difficult, they are nonetheless of great value. Möller and Allen (2000) found that fifth-grade struggling
readers could engage with discussions of historical racism in their reading of a novel that dealt with themes of race, friendship, betrayal, and violence, and that these readers did not need to work on only low-level comprehension of a text; in fact, taking on critical issues proved more motivating. Similarly, the teachers in Vinz et al. (2000) all experienced at least some success in having students become “(other)wise,” “participating in the fictional worlds of possibility as a way for them to experience and examine the subjectivities of others” (p. 5), in order to understand the “complex intersections” (p. 3) of culture. And, as will be discussed further, high school teacher Daryl Parks experienced success in facilitating conversations about race and culture that served to shift students’ worldviews (Beach et al., 2008). Thus multicultural literature can potentially be a topic of study for initiating productive discussions of race and culture.

Another curricular vehicle for talking about issues of race and culture is the subject of history. Melinda Fine (1995) writes about values education, studying a curriculum called Facing History and Ourselves (FHAO). This program, which consists of guidelines and resources for teaching social studies, centers the Holocaust in its curriculum in the hope that “discussions about contemporary racism and violence may in fact be facilitated by focusing on a period of history more tangential to the cultural backgrounds of the course’s ethnically diverse students” (Fine, 1995, p. 11). In other words, this curriculum does not seek to confront students head-on, immediately, with difficult issues like prejudice and racism. Instead, it uses a more indirect approach. The Holocaust is not even introduced initially as the focus of the curriculum; instead “universal questions about human values, beliefs, and behaviors” ask students to
explore issues of identity in both personal and sociological terms. Students are encouraged to think about how one’s values are formed, what social factors influence one’s beliefs, and how social conditions can both enable and constrain action on what one believes in. (Fine, 1995, p. 27)

This approach has some parallels with that employed at Metro Arts School, where the curriculum builds intentionally so that conversations about race and culture can occur.

One specific congruence between the FHAO curriculum and the classes at Metro Arts is students’ examination of what impacts them as individuals. Students in FHAO classrooms make graphic organizers that map elements of influences on their identities (Fine, 1995). These identity charts “become topics of discussion among members of the classroom community and subjects for ongoing personal reflection” (Fine, 1995, p. 28). As an activity completed toward the beginning of the course, this examination of identity helps facilitate students’ consideration of the lenses they use to view the world; “throughout the course, a student may ask,” for example, “How does being black affect how I see myself and am seen by others?” (Fine, 1995, p. 28). Other texts—films, fictional texts, even children’s books—supplement and contribute to the discussions of identity. Thus while the curriculum is history-based, it does not rely on a traditional social studies textbook for material.

To consider the successes and shortcomings of ‘moral education’ presented in Facing History and Ourselves, Fine (1995) analyzes scenes from Marysa Gonzales’ 7th/8th grade classroom. As the students embarked on their Facing History curriculum, texts helped them explore how “an individual’s beliefs necessarily evolve in the context of social relationships and that acting on one’s beliefs inevitably affects one’s social
community” (Fine, 1995, p. 31). Once the readings and discussions began to explore anti-Semitism, they also centered on “the notion of multiple perspectives or ‘truths,’” (Fine, 1995, p. 45). At this point, Fine (1995) notes, students were being “provoke[d] … to critically reflect on their own cultural beliefs in light of the beliefs of others” (Fine, 1995, p. 45). Rather than expressing moral relativism, though,

the program seeks to help students recognize that their beliefs are, in part, culturally determined; to understand that these beliefs are often linked to power relations within any given society; and to examine their beliefs and attitudes about ‘others’ in light of this critical understanding. (Fine, 1995, pp. 46-47).

Thus divergent perspectives and viewpoints emerged as a result of this curriculum and were considered by both teachers and students in critical ways. The curriculum helped students understand some of the social and cultural forces that we shape and that shape us, the institutional influences Beach et al. (2008) reveal to be lacking in many students’ classroom discussions of race and culture.

As is the case in other research to be discussed later, the classroom teacher played a key role. Gonzales worked to trouble and to complicate both students’ ideas and the positions portrayed and privileged in course materials. She pushed students to understand that despite institutional forces, individuals do have agency as well as a deep responsibility towards others and the world. Throughout the unit, Gonzales reminded students of the “ground rules” several times, guidelines that include “no putdowns” and trying “to avoid making judgments about other people’s ideas and beliefs” (Fine, 1995, p. 45). In order to have productive discussions about difficult topics like race, culture, and religion, it is important that students be called back to rules that will help them to
feel safe and as comfortable as possible sharing ideas and explorations given the subject matter, for as Fine (1995) notes, these issues are neither psychologically nor emotionally easy.

However, not everything went smoothly. Fine (1995) also documents the less successful moments, such as Gonzales losing her patience, students becoming disengaged, and certain voices being silenced. Fine (1995) shows how a student’s journal entry disclosed an ethnocentrism that he suppressed in class, revealing that “for some students at least, less socially acceptable feelings may indeed exist but be kept hidden from public expression—either in response to perceived social pressure or in deference to the ground rules of respect” (p. 61). This study illustrates that teachers must constantly monitor their own as well as the students’ participation in these discussions.

During the last few weeks of the FHAO program, Fine (1995) notes that the “classroom dynamics reveal tensions about conflicting values and ideologies among teachers, students, and the Facing History curriculum itself, demonstrating the enormous complexity of the endeavor to catalyze critical, moral thinking among adolescent students” (p. 70). A key part of the curriculum was eliciting and honoring multiple perspectives for the purpose of “promoting tolerance among diverse peoples of often differing backgrounds,” and Fine (1995) concludes that the teacher generally modeled and advanced this objective. However, Gonzales also expressed disapproval toward “attitudes and beliefs that in any way repress or discriminate against social groups” (Fine, 1995, p. 71). Therefore, when students voiced unpopular, perhaps even dangerous, ideas, they were isolated or attacked, both by students and by the teacher.
who could not simply remain neutral. As Fine (1995) observes firsthand and later corroborates through student interviews, the power differential between the teacher and students proved problematic at times, allowing Gonzales to subtly “undermine, rather than muzzle” beliefs that she disagreed with (p. 78). This work proved challenging for students as well. While they “talk about valuing open-mindedness, a plurality of opinions, and the importance of free expression,” at times students “seek closure to controversies and rest easier in being told which opinions are ‘right’” (Fine, 1995, p. 92). Productive discussions around critical topics are not easy nor always successful.

Also significant is Fine’s (1995) observation that “classroom and school culture” were key to facilitating these discussions; the “students knew (and by and large trusted) each other before being asked to speak publicly about sensitive issues related to their personal lives” (pp. 64-65). When Gonzales reminded students of the “ground rules,” she was reflecting the values of the program and the school itself, a celebration of multiculturalism and diversity that staff had worked “very, very hard” to achieve (Fine, 1995, p. 65). At the end of the course, the teacher sought to focus the remaining “class discussions around contemporary political problems in order to highlight students’ own social and political responsibilities” (Fine, 1995, p. 69). Fine (1995) notes that the program was largely successful in having students consider issues in a critical light. However, the most contentious and sometimes fruitful discussions Fine (1995) documents center on religion, rather than race, culture, and privilege. I now turn to examining at those kinds of discussions and how teachers and students engage with and resist them.
Discussions with Teachers

There have been quite a few studies that examine how teachers and teacher candidates address issues of race and culture. Numerous studies have found that teachers “are often reluctant to openly discuss power, racism, and white privilege with colleagues” (Henze, Lucas, & Scott, 1998, p. 188). Indeed, research has documented the difficulty people have talking about race and culture, especially people from white, middle class backgrounds. For example, the literature on teacher education students’ examination of their own racial privilege (Florio-Ruane, 2001; Gaine, 2001; Huerta & Flemmer, 2005; Cross, 2005; LeCompte & McCray, 2002; Solomon, Portelli, Daniel, & Campbell, 2005; Allard & Santoro, 2006; Gay & Kirkland, 2003; Milner, 2006) shows that white pre-service teachers struggle with this work.

Like the students responding to multicultural literature discussed earlier, teacher candidates frequently rely on the discourses of colorblindness, meritocracy, and individualism to defend their views and avoid acknowledging white privilege. LeCompte and McCray (2002) observe that “White teachers are unable to ‘see’ themselves as raced or as having a culture. Subsequently, they may struggle with the notion that their Whiteness affords them privilege and power and threatens oppression for their students of color” (p. 26). Socialized into the normalization of whiteness, white students “resist seeing White as a race or the relevance of race to teaching or to their own lives” (Greene & Abt-Perkins, 2003, p. 20).

It is important to recognize that this phenomenon is not due simply to the individual and privileged resistance of white people. It is admittedly difficult for whites to recognize the racism inherent in institutions such as schools when they have enjoyed
invisible privileges and not been invited to question institutional racism themselves (LeCompte & McCray, 2002). Instead, many whites see racism as a series of individual acts or choices (McIntosh, 1990; Greene & Abt-Perkins, 2003). Unfortunately, though, defining racism “as an individual, ethical act shuts down discussions about racism—especially among White people or in mixed-race groups—because people do not want to be put in the position of being judged. White researchers/teachers then avoid this work” (Greene & Abt-Perkins, 2003, p. 7). This evasion occurs across settings, such as pre-service teacher education (LeCompte & McCray, 2002), professional learning communities (Lewis, Ketter, & Fabos, 2001), and K-12 classrooms (Beach, Thein, & Parks, 2008). Teachers and teacher educators, therefore, must make careful choices about how to engage their white students in discussions of race and racism.

As Lewis, Ketter, and Fabos (2001) point out, “if teachers and students do not learn to interrogate white privilege and power, then there is little hope for educational reform” (p. 319), reform that is vital for addressing the needs of our students and our society. Solomon et al. (2005) indicate that “it is important for whites to understand the extent to which their perceptions of self and other” are “historically constructed” as well as how “that construction was embedded in systems of normalization such as the church, the media, school, and even in the stories and folklores that formed a central aspect of the socialization of most white people” (p. 163). For white teachers, examining their own racial identity and coming to understand the institutional racism in American society are paramount. Greene and Abt-Perkins (2003) show how race should be construed as “a social phenomenon that is open to critique” (p. 9). As Milner (2006)
advocates, “We (teachers in P-12 and teacher educators) cannot teach in a color-blind or culture-blind fashion” (p. 369).

While it may be difficult to overcome teachers’ resistance, there are some studies that have addressed how this work may be done. Henze et al. (1998) list five criteria that can be used for defining success in professional development programs that seek to focus on issues of racism and white privilege:

1. they create a consensus around the definitions of terms like racism, power, privilege;
2. they foster understanding that a topic may inspire different perspectives that are influenced by participants’ identities (including race, culture, class, gender, sexual orientation, and so on);
3. they create acceptance of the fact that some members of society possess more power and privilege as a result of their race, gender, and/or class and that this fact is not random but systematic;
4. they help participants acknowledge that those with less power and privilege “have legitimate reasons to be angry, hurt, and frustrated”;
5. they utilize and create strategies that will help participants discuss power, privilege, and racism with others. (p. 189)

Henze et al. (1998) underscore the importance of establishing procedures and structure for these difficult discussions (corroborating the importance of “ground rules” seen in Gonzales’ classroom [Fine, 1995]) and creating collaborative definitions of “highly charged terms” like race and power (p. 206). While Henze et al.’s (1998) framework refers to staff development, their guidelines are also helpful for any classroom
discussion of race and culture issues. At Metro Arts School, teachers openly discussed matters of race and culture both with their students and with their colleagues. The teachers cited their staff development program as well as the support of the administration as vital to fostering this climate.

As Henze et al. (1998) observe, demographic factors make this work imperative. Calling us to action, they note

We need to break the silence about race, racism, and power differences in the U.S. educational system. This undertaking … will require honest reflection and self-examination as well as ongoing dialogue. … The fact that such a large and growing proportion of teachers are white adds even more urgency to this need since most teachers represent a different and more powerful group than their students but are unlikely to be fully conscious of these differences and their effects. (p. 193)

More research about how students engage with issues of race, culture, power, and identity may help us consider how teacher education can better prepare teachers to facilitate these discussions with their students.

Discussions with Students

Just as talking about issues of power and privilege are difficult with teachers, it is similarly complicated and challenging to do so with students. Again, students often normalize whiteness, advocate colorblindness, and insist on the notion that racism exists in individual acts (Beach, Thein, & Parks, 2008; Pollock, 2004). As Beach et al. (2008) point out, these attitudes negate “any implication that Whites are directly or indirectly
responsible for economic inequality related to institutional racism”; instead, they focus on the idea “that everyone is the same, assuming that racial conflicts and inequality would be solved if everyone just got along better” (p. 11).

Despite these difficulties, teachers need to work to examine these problems with students or risk complicitly supporting institutional racism. As previously noted, Henze et al. (1998) underscore the importance of establishing procedures and structure for discussion of race and culture, indicating that

this strategy is important both for leaders of professional development activities [like those in their study] … and for classroom teachers at all levels of education who want to encourage their students to break out of the silence about power, privilege, and racism. (Henze et al., 1998, p. 206)

There is not a great deal of research on how to address issues of race and culture with middle and high school students, but there is some with undergraduates.

College students. Again, it is important to recognize that while students often manifest resistance to discussing race, this opposition does not always stem from negative intentions. Trainor’s (2005) study of her college sophomores’ responses to literature points out that white students do often rely on discourses of individualism and colorblindness, but at times these rationales grow from the desire to see positive change in the world.

Discussing Ralph Ellison’s short story “Battle Royal,” Trainor’s (2005) students wanted to see both themselves and the story’s characters as “strong and powerful agents operating within a stable, predictable community” (p. 153). Students strove to view their social worlds as orderly and logical, expressing a “desire to get past racism”
Thus, Trainor (2005) points out, it is important to acknowledge that white students’ reliance on particular discourses does not always reveal merely a motivation for “self-interest, power, or gain” (p. 163). She advocates that teachers “help students honor their deeply held commitments to ideals like community and strength, while simultaneously finding ways to move beyond the White talk that expresses them, creating new rhetorics and new ways of understanding in the process” (Trainor, 2005, p. 163). Her study is helpful in its approach of trying to understand resistance more fully and suggesting ways of helping mitigate it.

Also discussing university students, Williams (2004) declares that educators need to lead the way in setting up productive discussions of race and culture. As she observes in her column on race and literacy in higher education, “we have not provided most of them [our students] with the discourse or approaches to get beyond fear or defensiveness to engage the more substantive issues about race” (Williams, 2004, p. 164). She, along with other researchers (like Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995), advocates the use of critical race theory (CRT) in college classrooms. Williams (2004) argues that CRT’s employment of narrative, storytelling and counter-storytelling, can foster important dialogue—between students and between purported truths. As she notes, it can “be a valuable approach to engage in the kind of cultural critique needed when the narratives that support the dominant culture seem to reflect consensus and common sense” (p. 166). She observes that while many teachers have embraced the use of multicultural literature in their classes, they tend “to read such works … as stories about individuals in unique situations” (Williams, 2004, p. 167). Counter-narratives have the potential to “open up other voices that have been marginalized” as well as “put them in
dialogue with the dominant narratives in ways that highlight connections and conflicts” (Williams, 2004, p. 168). While Williams’ experiences are with college-level students, her points could be applied to secondary students as well.

*Elementary students.* What, then, of the work done with younger students? In their research, which used critical discourse analysis to examine student talk regarding a survey measuring racism, Dutro, Kazemi, and Balf (2006) stress that there is not enough research about how students engage with issues of race in elementary classrooms (something that also proves to be the case with secondary students). Like other researchers, Dutro et al. (2006) argue that while explicitly raising race as a topic of inquiry is fraught at all educational levels … it is also necessary if children are to learn to question their own and others’ assumptions about race and the underlying systems of power and privilege that prevail in U.S. society. (p. 4)

Dutro et al. (2006) found in analyzing class discussions that the students were willing to question the validity of the survey in thoughtful ways, but that the manner in which issues of race were linked with privacy (by both teacher and children) served to close down discussion of institutional racism. The authors advocate that “instances of critical inquiry … are crucial for educators to study if we are to understand how these opportunities can be fostered and best employed to support children” (Dutro et al., 2006, p. 30). This study substantiates the notion that while there has been some research done on talking about race and racism with students, critical engagement with institutional racism is missing.
In another study focused on elementary students, Rogers and Mosley (2006) examined how white teachers and white, working class second-grade students took up race in their curriculum. As teacher-researchers, Rogers and Mosley (2006) sought to create an understanding of “a more fully developed notion of whiteness that includes the ideas of white allies,” as opposed to the notion that whiteness “inevitably means racism” and is “necessarily a reproduction of domination, oppression, and racism” (p. 466). While students reacted unevenly to the curriculum, they did experience and enact different episodes of “noticing race,” “enacting white privilege,” and “disrupting white privilege” that served to further their understandings of antiracist work (Rogers & Mosley, 2006, p. 472). Rogers and Mosley’s (2006) study also points to the importance of providing examples of white allies, cases in which “whiteness can be used to benefit society, rather than reiterate racism,” while also taking care to avoid “recenter[ing] whiteness” (p. 480). As they note, “racial literacy can create spaces for white, working class children to step into texts to identify, problematize, and most importantly, reconstruct whiteness in relation to social justice” (Rogers & Mosley, 2006, p. 483).

Secondary students. For middle and high school teachers, Diaz-Gemmati’s (1995) research is a helpful starting point. She writes about using literature to examine racism in her 8th grade multiracial classroom. Having looped together for two years with the teacher (the author), the students in her class knew each other well, had formed a safe classroom community, and were comfortable with the established norms for discussing literature. However, Diaz-Gemmati (1995) describes as “havoc,” “difficult,” and “agonizing” (p. 3) the results of her class’ examination of racism.
Students read *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Lee, 2007) and *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* (Taylor, 2001) to learn about racial prejudice from different perspectives. The first classroom conflict arose over the use of ‘the N word,’ with a white student claiming its use was never justified, an African-American student arguing it had been successfully appropriated by blacks, and the rest of the students taking sides as Diaz-Gemmati felt the argument spinning out of control. Later, students grappled with the meaning of prejudice, stereotyping groups for “hating” (Diaz-Gemmati, 1995, p. 9) others, and several students expressed dismay and resentfulness. In a poignant journal entry, one girl wrote to the teacher, “Why you have to bring all this garbage into the classroom? This was the only place I could be without being made to think about stuff like who don’t like who. Why you doing this to us?” (Diaz-Gemmati, 1995, p. 11). By the end of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, a fistfight had even broken out, and Diaz-Gemmati (1995) felt the students’ emotions were still “raw,” though they did not seem to want to “let the issue go” (p. 13).

Slowly, some issues of race and culture began to be taken up in productive ways. During the reading of *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*, students came to a consensus that “people are taught to be prejudiced and that racism and injustice have their roots in the home” (Diaz-Gemmati, 1995, p. 14). This step was an important one, though the role of institutional racism went unexamined. Diaz-Gemmati (1995) began to feel that some progress was being made as “the initial shock and reaction of talking about something that’s always present, yet avoided, had worn off” (p. 15). When they finished the second novel, many students came to the conclusion that they needed to “make up [their] own minds about prejudice” (Diaz-Gemmati, 1995, p. 20), rejecting
racist messages that they received from family, peers, and the media. Diaz-Gemmati’s (1995) work had important consequences, as her students “no longer tiptoe around issues of race” (p. 20), a significant achievement. Considering implications for fellow teachers, Diaz-Gemmati (1995) emphasizes the importance of not “reciting pre-rehearsed lines on a make believe stage” or glossing over these issues (p. 21). She concludes that “hard talk on candid issues can take place within the safety of classroom walls” (Diaz-Gemmati, 1995, p. 23)—but again, these conversations are rarely easy or tidy.

Beach et al. (2008) write about a college preparatory urban high school literature course in which teacher Daryl Parks addressed issues of race and culture through reading and responding to multicultural literature, structuring conversations around topics that were silenced in most other parts of the school. (Such was not the case at Metro Arts School, where talk of race and culture was fairly common throughout the school community, helping make the 8th grade curriculum possible.) For the working class adolescents in Parks’ classroom, both white students and students of color, sociocultural forces played a large part in their understandings of their worlds and the literature they read (Beach et al., 2008). Parks helped challenge some of students’ cultural models that serve to reinforce institutional racism (Beach et al., 2008). He used pedagogical techniques to foster perspective-taking and “dialogic tensions,” conflicts within and among text worlds, students’ assumptions, and students themselves, between authoritative voices and internally persuasive voices (Beach et al., 2008, p. 215).

Examining students’ development over the course of the study, Beach et al. (2008) define change as “the increased propensity to try on, amend, and revise
discourses and cultural models of race, class, and gender” (p. 250). For some of the students, beginning to “examine the limitations of their status quo discourses and cultural models … and explore alternative[s]” was indeed a significant transformation (Beach et al., 2008, p. 250). Parks was able to foster growth through a number of pedagogical techniques. He required the use of textual evidence; he helped students notice alternatives through the use of critical lenses (Appleman, 2000); and he led students to understand the institutional forces that influence race, class, and gender through metaphors like that of hurdles on a racetrack and concrete examples like an advertisement for a $2,000 East St. Louis home (Beach et al., 2008).

These successes did not come without a price, however. Some of the students in Parks’ class felt that his approach did not challenge white students enough (Beach et al., 2008). There is a difficult balance to strike when trying to approach these issues in a multicultural classroom. The teacher must strive not to alienate white students but also not absolve them of responsibility. In Beach et al.’s (2008) study, Parks did directly address skin color privilege, seeking to do so without “adopting an ideological agenda targeting White students” that would make them defensive (Beach et al., 2008, p. 280). Parks’ goal was to engage all of the class, both white students and students of color, in “interrogating the larger discourses of Whiteness” that shaped their identities (Beach et al., 2008, p. 281). This study found that it is important for the teacher to recognize that students of color may fear being perceived as “defensive victims of White privilege” and therefore loath to contribute to the conversation (Beach et al., 2008, p. 281). The teacher also must help students learn how white privilege is enacted in social institutions; in the case of this urban school, Parks needed to help students understand
how race and class interests can converge, that both white working class and working class people of color often “confront the same institutional barriers … within the economic system” that are quieted by “divide-and-conquer political agendas” (Beach et al., 2008, p. 280). As Beach et al. (2008) point out, “though some of the White students were able to adopt a critical perspective on race, they had no incentive to critique White privilege that perpetuated their status” (p. 258). Thus, the study “raises important questions as to how a teacher can encourage students of color to express their experiences with racism when the majority of the students in the class are White” (Beach et al., 2008, p. 275).

As noted earlier, the teacher plays a crucial part in facilitating discussions of race and culture. Beach et al. (2008) observe that

the teacher assumes a major role in creating contexts that can foster exploration of … dialogic tensions, suggesting the need to prepare teachers who not only can foster critical responses to literature but also can employ activities designed to challenge students’ status quo discourses. (p. 276)

As the authors make clear, merely “exposing students to cultural diversity portrayed in texts” does not adequately disrupt “students’ status quo discourses and cultural models of race, class, and gender,” leading to critiques of institutional racism and privilege (Beach et al., 2008, p. 277). Teachers need to structure activities that “allow for challenging these status quo discourses in ways that could lead to amending or revising discourses, particularly in terms of recognizing influences of institutional forces on characters’ practices” (Beach et al., 2008, p. 278). It is important to recognize that students’ growth and change will not be “a straight, linear transformation toward
enlightened racial tolerance,” but instead will be characterized by “momentary shifts, revisions, alterations, and regressions in students’ thinking” (Beach et al., 2008, p. 278). Beach et al.’s (2008) study informs mine in several important ways: the goal of the teacher, the multicultural student classroom, the introduction of notions of white privilege and institutional racism, and the definitions of change and success.

Another important work focusing on secondary students is that of Fine, Weis, and Powell (1997), who explore school spaces that exist in varying states of desegregation. The authors begin by establishing “three political and social conditions—none natural or automatic” that “must be intentionally set in place” in order for “multiracial youth relations to flourish”: “a sense of community; a commitment to creative analysis of difference, power, and privilege; and an enduring investment in democratic practice with youth” (Fine et al., 1997, p. 249). Once again, teachers in these settings play powerful roles in fostering these spaces. Fine et al. (1997) argue that we need to know more about

how a structured community of such relationships can be initiated, much less supported over time, for and by adolescents in actual communities that are porous and vulnerable to surrounding politics. … how adults—enthused, hostile, ignorant, frightened, or merely unsupported—can create and sustain such communities. (p. 250)

Unfortunately, the authors note that this “structured community” is all too rare in education; “Within multiracial settings, when are young people invited to discuss, voice, critique, and re-view the very notions of race that feel so fixed, so hierarchical, so
damaging, and so accepted in the broader culture?” (Fine et al., 1997, pp. 251-252).

Thoughtful integration in public school settings is deplorably scarce.

To Fine et al. (1997), true desegregation occurs only “where differences are self-consciously drawn upon to enrich and texture the community; where negotiations of difference lie at the heart of the community; and where democratic participation is a defining aspect of decisionmaking and daily life within the community” (Fine et al., 1997, p. 252). In the first site they explore, Freeway High, discourses of heterosexuality, whiteness, and masculinity caused students to construct females and students of color as ‘other’ (Fine et al., 1997). The school could have worked to combat these discourses; “Curriculum could have been developed to expose and deconstruct assumptions of whiteness. Teachers, administrators, and counselors could have intervened and attempted to derail these co-constructions” (Fine et al., 1997, p. 257).

However, this was not the case. Fine et al. (1997) note that Freeway is a site in which bodies of historic differentiation, privilege, and oppression are huddled together with little or no adult commitment to creating common ground. The fact that the teaching, administrative, and counseling staff is almost entirely White serves to both reflect and sustain this. The battle lines are drawn. We adults either affirm them or, more typically, stand by helpless, shaking our heads in disbelief. (p. 262)

The analysis of this setting points once again to the imperative need to confront issues of race and culture directly with students.

At the next school in the study, Arlingdale High School, a diverse student body and teaching staff both found racism difficult to address. Students “often ‘hear[d] adults
say nothing” to racial and cultural slurs (Fine et al., 1997, p. 264). The researchers attribute this to “the fact that race is a hidden and complex issue among the staff, making it far more complicated for them to support the students” (Fine et al., 1997, p. 264). While the school instituted a program, “Family Group,” that held the possibility of being a site for meaningful discussions, that promise went unfulfilled. The staff members segregated themselves along racial lines, and that division was transmitted to and reflected in the student body (Fine et al., 1997). As Fine et al. (1997) advocate, “adults must commit to and be trained to confront and explore rather than to shut down the clash of differences that occur when questions about race emerge through conflict” (p. 264).

The third school site in the study, Clear Mount High School, supported a detracked World Literature course that exhibited the greatest success in its desegregation efforts. The students and teachers in this course experienced “critical moments,” including “faculty trying to create community, decentering Whiteness, and youths exploring questions of ‘differences’” (Fine et al., 1997, p. 270). In these classes, “questions of race and ethnicity surface and then get complicated” (Fine et al., 1997, p. 272). The teachers actively sought to decenter so that “no race, no ethnicity, no position, no gender, no stance has hegemonic authority, silencing power, or monopoly on truth” (Fine et al., 1997, p. 274). There was resistance at first—“a cold, frozen white glacier … defending against talk about ‘race all the time’” (Fine et al., 1997, p. 276)—but as the year progressed, divisions began to break down and “categories ebb and flow” as students’ and teachers’ understandings shifted (Fine et al., 1997, p. 279).
Thankfully, Fine et al. (1997) acknowledge that it was not all powerful and productive, that there were times (as in Gonzales’ social studies classroom) when students were bored or when the work failed. I find it important for researchers to note the shortcomings of these classes, to acknowledge that teaching and learning, particularly about issues of race, culture, power, and identity cannot seamlessly move forward. Nevertheless, it is motivating and helpful to read about classrooms that “are mostly magic—the magic of imagining and creating a world that does not yet exist, a world in which difference is lifted and complicated. Culture gets to speak and then fracture into beautiful, diverse, contradictory slices” (Fine et al., 1997, p. 275). As Fine et al. (1997) observe, school environments like this class “signif[y] possibilities for a racial democracy, social challenge, and intellectual stretch from which public education has long walked away” (Fine et al., 1997, p. 279).

The Place of this Study

The existing research about teachers and students working with issues of race and culture guided my work in numerous ways. Many studies examined how students respond to multicultural literature, and there has been some work on history-based programs. Research has documented the resistance shown by white teachers and students; some studies have complicated that opposition and provided some guidelines for mitigating and working around it.

It is clear from this work that teachers need to grapple with issues of race and culture themselves before being able to embark on discussions in their classrooms. Further, they need to remain open and continue to learn alongside their students,
vigilant to their own responses, positions, and biases. The literature also reveals the need to help students understand and recognize the social and cultural forces that impact our society and the individuals within it, the institutional influences that too often remain veiled. Finally, this research cements our understanding that conversations about race and culture are complex, difficult, intricate, and rarely straightforwardly progressive.

Yet despite their complicated nature, it is also apparent that productive discussions of race, culture, power, and identity are direly needed in our classrooms. Fine et al. (1997) note how demanding the detracked World Literature course at Clear Mount High School proved to be: “perhaps this is too much of a burden for a small set of teachers” (p. 276). But they conclude by contending that “perhaps it is exactly the obligation, the responsibility, and the power of public education” (Fine et al., 1997, p. 276). Students need to discuss matters of race, culture, power, and identity in their classes—and teachers need to learn how to help make productive dialogues happen. The next chapter shows how teachers at Metro Arts School worked to do just that.
When I talk about my research, I find that there are teachers out there—more than I thought—who do work with racism, power, and identity in their classes. Some even have their secondary students read McIntosh (1990) and talk about white privilege, which was something that struck me about the work of the 8th graders at Metro Arts School. However, the teachers I have spoken with have had differing levels of success with these discussions. Several told me that they were frustrated with white students’ resistance to the notion of skin color privilege. Others became fearful of families’ or administrators’ reactions. Still more found the discussions important, but felt pressured to move on to other topics.

A vital feature of the work done by the 8th grade teachers at Metro Arts School, Mr. Evans and Mr. Ramsey, was their careful structuring of the year. This was not a one-shot deal. The teachers and students worked with culture and race throughout the 8th grade curriculum. The teachers made intentional, reflective choices about how to scaffold the curriculum in order to center culture in a meaningful, critical way. This chapter examines how Mr. Evans and Mr. Ramsey organized a critical multicultural curriculum, showing how issues of race, power, and culture can be productively taken up with a diverse group of students. In this chapter, I will not discuss how students engaged with the curriculum; that exploration will follow in subsequent chapters. Instead, because the teachers’ deliberate scaffolding is especially important (and different from much other similar work), I focus on only that here.
Critical multicultural practice entails a purposeful engagement by both teachers and students in the ways that they construct knowledge (Ukpokodu, 2003). It also involves “interrogat[ing] the social system from a critical and social justice standpoint” with the goal of being empowered to “engage in culturally responsive and responsible practice” (Ukpokodu, 2003, p. 19). May (1999a) explains that teachers implementing critical multiculturalism must acknowledge and integrate “the differing cultural knowledges that children bring with them to school,” and also expose “the differential cultural capital attributed to them as a result of wider hegemonic power relations,” with the goal of challenging these institutional forces (p. 32). A number of theorists highlight the need to center issues of racism and white privilege in critical multicultural curricula.

Helping white students see their own race, creating a positive, welcoming classroom space, and making all students aware of institutional racism were among Mr. Evans’ and Mr. Ramsey’s major goals. Mr. Evans structured his Social Studies course around the somewhat more ‘safe’ notion of culture, a concept that was easy to map onto state standards and one that would likely not immediately alienate or threaten students. However, the teachers and students took up more thorny issues of power, race, and privilege at multiple points. Mr. Evans organized the four quarters of the academic year into evolving themes: (1) defining culture; (2) cultural collision; (3) cultural conflict; and (4) cultural resolution. In English class, the curriculum was more eclectic, but Mr. Ramsey did also center issues of culture and identity in students’ writing and literature study, complementing the work done in Social Studies.

*Defining Culture: Building Community and Introducing Race*
Both teachers started the year by building a constructive, collaborative classroom community in order to lay the groundwork for delving into the “hot lava” topics that are too often silenced in school (Glazier & Seo, 2005). Mr. Ramsey, fair-haired and bespectacled, welcomed laughter into his English classroom with teasing and ironic, often self-deprecating humor. His first quarter curriculum included reading, discussing, and performing *Romeo and Juliet* and creating short graphic novels. The Social Studies teacher—tall, thin Mr. Evans—exuded positive energy (which students jokingly attributed to his constant coffee drinking). He structured the first quarter in Social Studies to develop a foundation for students’ understanding of culture and to model the importance of self-reflection. In the first two months of the school year, students defined culture and discussed at length the many influences cultures had on their lives, including the role played by race.

Students worked both individually and cooperatively on culture-related projects in Social Studies. For an initial assignment, small groups of students selected quotations related to culture that they represented visually through painting. These “culture quotes” were then displayed throughout the classroom for the rest of the year—and referred to by both students and teachers at least three times during my observations (see Appendix D). The major project of this quarter was the creation of “culture collages.” In these pieces, students identified the cultures that they were part of and the relationships between those cultural identities and their individual identities. Although most of them had been classmates since fourth grade, students still learned new things about one another through creating, and then presenting, their collages. As Mr. Evans noted, they valued the opportunity to “define who they are and what cultures they belong to,” and
many students were “amazed” to discover what they did not know about each other (Field notes, 10-30-07). Nine students identified this project as their favorite activity of the year when asked on their final exam (Student work samples, 6-1-08).

To present their work, students gathered in a circle of chairs in the classroom and spoke about elements of their collages. Mr. Evans displayed prompts for students to answer during the presentation, such as, “If you really knew me you would know…” and “Tell us what we need to know in order to interact/be around you” (Field notes, 10-25-07). He modeled responses to the prompts, sharing information about his relationships with his father and stepfather. While others presented, students were required to take notes and also write several post-its of positive comments and praise, which they stuck anonymously on their classmates’ collages. During the sharing I observed, students were nearly universally attentive and respectful. The culture collages became meaningful, symbolic representations of individual and cultural similarities and differences; like the culture quotes, they were displayed in the classroom and referred to for the rest of the year.

The sharing structure and format of “circle” was important as well. Mr. Evans gave explicit instruction about the behaviors and practices expected during this time: focus on the speaker, one person at a time, use the talking piece (a wooden turtle) in order to signal taking the floor to speak, participation (both talking and listening) required by all. “Circle” was used for both serious academic topics and “check-in” time—a chance to hear how each classmate was doing that day and why. Mr. Evans typically implemented “circle” once or more per week throughout the school year, continuing to build and emphasize classroom community.
Another of Mr. Evans’ purposes for the culture collage project was the acknowledgement of race as a topic that was open to discussion. With issues like these typically silenced in school, finding a thoughtful way to bring up the topic is paramount. As Mr. Evans noted, “When you ask kids to talk about themselves, this stuff [race] just comes up. You don’t have to force it” (Field notes, 10-2-07). In the 8th grade, there were several students who self-identified as bi- or multi-racial. While a number of students’ collages displayed elements related to race, bi/multi-racial students’ collages and presentations strongly reflected the influences and conflicts between the racial worlds in their backgrounds. (An example of the ways race figured in the culture collages is shown in Appendix E.) Discussing projects like the culture collage, Mr. Evans explained how he used this first quarter to signal cultural responsiveness:

[I]t builds credibility with black students too. Because … in the first week or so when we’re doing the culture collage we’re talking about that and we say “Race is on the table here, we’re going to talk about it,” it’s a sense of relief to black students because they know all of a sudden that you’re, that you’re culturally aware. … You know that it exists and you’re not going to be standing in front saying, “I treat everybody the same!” and they, they know that that’s not true, you know. So, so I think it does help with our relationship with our black kids. (Interview, 3-14-08)

Mr. Evans noted that his students of color saw through so-called colorblind philosophy; in his experience, these students could and did want to talk about race. For white students in Mr. Evans’ class, defining and centering culture helped them begin to understand how their race was a key aspect of their identity.
During this quarter, some white students began to see that they were not just ‘nothing’ or ‘American,’ that their region, family status, and other identity markers shaped their experiences. After reading “Body Ritual Among the Nacirema” (Miner, 1956), a satirical look at American grooming habits, students discussed in Social Studies how what they took for granted as normal—shaving, brushing teeth, plucking eyebrows, wearing deodorant—could be viewed as strange, deviant, or perplexing from another perspective. Quarter one ended with an exploration of ethnocentrism, including a debate on whether one’s individual identity or cultural identity was more powerful.

In English class, students created graphic novels portraying events that defined or showed something important about them. This assignment complemented the culture collage project, as a number of students drew inspiration from elements of their collages in thinking about which events to document. Mr. Ramsey demonstrated great respect for students’ work, using current and former student samples as models. He held up these exemplars to illustrate artistic elements of graphic novels, discussing the choices students made and their effects on the reader/viewer. Throughout the unit, he referred to students as “artists,” no matter how strong or weak their visual arts skills (Field notes, 11-13-07). This project was one concrete example of how Mr. Ramsey created a safe classroom space and worked to get to know his students.

Readings, assignments, and class activities in both English and Social Studies built a foundation for critical multicultural work. Students’ beginning examinations of culture and race, as well as the classroom community fostered by the teachers, were necessary prerequisites for the discussions to follow.
Cultural Collision: Examining Marginalization and Power

In quarter two, students examined issues of colonization, marginalization, power, and language. In Social Studies, they looked at the patterns of contact that tend to emerge when cultures collide, as colonizing forces enter the territories of indigenous people. They analyzed texts and images from sources ranging from their own textbook to National Geographic to the film The Gods Must Be Crazy (1980) in order to see the ways that indigenous people were portrayed as exoticized ‘others’ and marginalized visually as well as historically. They also read accounts by Native writers regarding the history and impact of colonization.

In English, students worked through a unit on power in language. While reading and performing the play Novio Boy (Soto, 1997), they looked at the characters’ use of English and Spanish in different situations. Later, students brainstormed dialects, creating thinking maps, lists of guidelines, and sample dictionaries for distinct ways of speaking. Students practiced writing monologues and performed skits using multiple dialects, discussing how meanings and interpretations changed as the language did. They also wrote “language autobiographies,” explaining how they came to speak their own native language(s) and dialects (Field notes, 12-4-07). During this unit, Mr. Ramsey introduced the notion of the “language of power”: formal, “standard” English (Field notes, 12-18-07).

This unit incorporated explicit instruction about how language can be used and viewed in multiple ways, with the goal of teaching the language of power as a tool for achieving school success. Delpit (1995) explains how, for many students of color, it is difficult to navigate the terrain of school, based as it is in white, middle-class values and
practices. Delpit’s groundbreaking work, *Other People’s Children* (1995), finds fault with ‘progressive’ pedagogy, arguing that not all students’ needs are met with student-centered, choice-based teaching. Instead, those whose cultural practices may not match those valued in schools need to be taught explicitly the rules and norms of the culture of power in order to succeed within an unfair system. Echoing this approach, Mr. Ramsey wanted students to understand how “language is culturally constructed” (Field notes, 12-4-07). He emphasized that while it was important for all students to be able to use the language of power, the issue was one of access rather than correctness. Mr. Ramsey told me that this unit accompanied the exploration of ethnocentrism and discussions of which culture is “right” in Social Studies, showing how those in power, not the inherent value of something, determined what was deemed acceptable (Field notes, 12-18-07).

This quarter ended with a unit studying the work of Spokane/Coeur D’Alene writer Sherman Alexie, two short stories and his film *Smoke Signals* (1999), which Mr. Evans and Mr. Ramsey co-taught. As the teachers articulated in the permission slip that went home to families, they used Alexie’s texts to explore “issues of racism, stereotyping, and marginalization … the broader idea of what it means to be misrepresented” (*Smoke Signals* permission slip, 1-14-08). Students also studied facts about reservation life and debated the use of American Indian mascots for sports teams. The latter activity sparked a great deal of discussion and argument, with conversations and disagreements spilling over into passing time, lunch, and recess. Mr. Evans relished and reflected the passion with which students engaged with this issue, commenting to me after class one day, “I love it when kids are coming up to me to talk and debate this stuff—I love teaching this!” (Field notes, 1-16-08).
Still, not all students participated fully. From time to time, both Mr. Ramsey and Mr. Evans expressed frustration over students who seemed to be tuning out. The teachers worked to get them engaged without negatively judging them, calling them to action by warning them about the dangers of indifference. During a discussion on an Alexie story, Mr. Evans implored,

“These are important things that we’re talking about and they build on each other … we need to keep you guys with us. … We’re missing out on the community piece of how we can better understand this as a group.” (Audio file, 1-16-08)

Rather than asking students to participate to facilitate their personal advancement, Mr. Evans emphasized the ways that the class could—and needed to—learn from one another, “to get smarter as a class” (Audio file, 1-25-08); “let’s work together” (Audio file, 1-30-08). Unlike the individualistic ethos emphasized in most schools and classrooms, these teachers often worked to focus on the ways people can and should work together to learn.

During this unit, I also observed something that I saw several more times over the course of the year: mentally preparing students for the work ahead. Mindful of the normal daily distractions of an 8th grader’s day, Mr. Evans asked students to put their heads down and “wind down” for one minute at the start of class. Reminding them that the subject matter was “tough stuff,” he helped students make transitions from the excitement of recess or the subject of math to the serious work around race, power, and culture in his and Mr. Ramsey’s class (Field notes, 1-18-08). The teachers used this type of quiet time as well as individual journal writing to foster metacognition and reflection (Field notes, 2-13-08, 3-12-08, 3-14-08, 3-19-08, 4-14-08).
Further, the teachers were explicit about their goal of fostering students’ critical perspectives. As they watched a scene from *Smoke Signals* for the second time, Mr. Evans asked, “You got your critical lenses on?” When some students pretended to put on imaginary glasses, he urged, “Focus ‘em” (Audio file, 1-30-08). The students took the advice to challenge and be critical seriously. For example, in May, one student engaged the class in a lengthy discussion of why two-thirds of their Social Studies curriculum focused on Western countries. This discussion was encouraged and continued by Mr. Evans (Field notes, 5-13-08).

Throughout the second quarter, Mr. Evans, Mr. Ramsey, and their students continued to raise issues of race, considering how skin color difference played a role in colonization and exploitation, as well as how racial issues were linked to language. Such examinations helped students continue to stretch and grow in their critical and cultural understandings.

*Cultural Conflict: White Privilege, “Othering,” and Artistic Responses*

“*Race Discussions.*” Quarter three focused on cultural conflict, issues of power and privilege that emerge as a result of racial and religious difference. Perhaps the highlight of the year was the week of “Race Discussions,” a unit that Mr. Evans again co-taught with Mr. Ramsey. The teachers’ stated goals for this unit were as follows:

- Have students test out talking about race and racism inside and outside of a classroom
- Give students of color a voice and forum for sharing their experiences with racism
- Facilitate students’ understanding of white privilege—particularly, but not solely, white students
- Help students develop the language and skills of anti-racism (Interview, 12-18-07)

These goals reflected the ways Mr. Evans and Mr. Ramsey believed discussions about race should happen and helped anchor what they did during the unit. They valued student voices as a testimony to the pervasiveness of racism in our society. They recognized the difficulty students have, especially white students, in talking about matters of race, and sought to provide a safe space for such discussions. They also had explicit goals of having students understand and ultimately work to combat sociocultural forces such as institutional racism.

After growing more comfortable participating in large group discussions with the team-teaching of Alexie, students prepared to talk about race and white privilege in a combined class setting. They started the unit by defining racism, with each student using reference books, websites, and interviews of friends and family members to create a list of five explanations of the term. The class came together to share and discuss these definitions, comparing and contrasting them. Next, guided by teachers as a whole class, students read and discussed “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack” (McIntosh, 1990).

Before starting the next discussion, Mr. Evans and Mr. Ramsey went over “Four Agreements” that students were required to use as a guide:

1. Stay engaged
2. Experience discomfort
3. Speak your truth

4. Expect and accept non-closure

By working through these agreements—discussing what they meant and what they looked like in a classroom—the two teachers again prepared students psychologically for the difficult work ahead. As Mr. Ramsey noted, “This is not the way you tend to behave in a school setting, and we’re asking you to do something different this week” (Audio file, 2-4-08). The teachers used “circle” check-in and reminded students of these agreements before diving into discussions each class (Field notes, 2-5-08, 2-6-08).

While these agreements were not perfect—the “speak your truth” guideline in particular proving problematic, as I discuss in the next chapter—they nonetheless did provide some important principles to guide the discussions. Mr. Evans pointed out the structure needed to facilitate difficult conversations, particularly with white students.

That conversation too is about educating white students. About the reality of it.

And—and I believe that part of the problem of racism is that white people don’t talk about it, you know, so. So I think it gives them some language and some words, and an ability to enter into conversations and that’s why we keep going back to that, with the agreements and stuff. (Interview, 3-14-08)

Mr. Evans pointed out the structure needed to facilitate difficult discussions such as this, particularly with white students.

Next, students examined their own skin color privilege. Filling out a chart called “Because of my Race or Color” (see Appendix F), students gave themselves scores (5 if it was often true, 3 if sometimes true, and 0 if never true) on items such as how easily

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5 These guidelines come from the staff development program that all Metro Arts School staff participate in, led by Pacific Educational Group, and can also be found in Singleton, 2006, p. 58.
they saw their race positively represented in mainstream media, how likely they were to see someone of their skin color in power in everyday situations, how often they could count on their race to work in their favor when shopping or traveling, and so forth.

Students and adults in the room—the teachers, myself, the principal (who sat in several times during the week), and educational assistants—then sat in a circle according to their scores. The numbers ranged from 115 (those with the most skin color privilege, which ends up being the score for almost all whites) to the low 30s (those with the least).

Mr. Evans and Mr. Ramsey began the discussion by asking students to respond to what they saw in the circle—the ‘color line’ that was formed as a result of the survey, with white students around one part of the circle, Latino and Asian students following, and African American students on the other side (a pattern that had persisted in the four years the teachers have done this unit). During the week’s conversations, students delved into personal stories of bias, the notion of reverse racism, the role of institutions in perpetuating racial injustice, the black-white dichotomy, the difficulty that people (particularly white people) have discussing race, feelings of guilt and responsibility, and other weighty topics.

The teachers ended the week of “Race Discussions” by having students read a handout on “Characteristics of an Anti-Racist Leader,” do some journal writing, and publicly state to the class one thing they planned to do, a commitment they could make regarding racism moving forward. Mr. Evans put forth a challenge,

now, once you’re armed with that information, that there is something wrong out there, what are you going to do? … It—you guys, the only thing you can do, is
to continue to educate yourselves, and to work against it. And especially being white, it’s not about saying, “Well, I just want to get rid of these privileges that I have.” You can’t! In fact what’s happened is somebody has handed you a megaphone in your life, without asking for it … your skin color works for you in all these different situations. And if you’re using that? To work against the system of racism? Only then are you not contributing to racism. (Audio file, 2-7-08)

While students displayed a range of reactions (to be discussed in greater depth in the following chapters), the class largely took these challenges seriously.

*World War II and the Holocaust.* Quarter three proceeded with a return to a more ‘traditional’ Social Studies curriculum, a unit on World War II. Mr. Ramsey and Mr. Evans continued to co-teach, with Mr. Ramsey leading discussions of the graphic novels *Maus I* and *Maus II* (Spiegelman, 1986; 1992) to accompany Mr. Evans’ historical focus on the Holocaust.

During this unit, the teachers emphasized the effects of “othering,” the ways in which dehumanizing a person or group of people can lead to violence and trauma. Material from the textbook, Mr. Evans’ PowerPoint presentations, and media sources (a biographical film on Hitler and *Schindler’s List* [1993]) facilitated students’ understanding of this era. The teachers also connected the historical period to the present; as Mr. Evans insisted, “we have to look at where otherness is happening in our world right now and act” (Audio file, 4-14-08). He told me in an interview,

> When we start doing the Holocaust … I want to really teach them about that idea of otherness, and I have that as a theme … otherness vs. understanding. …
trying to get that idea that it’s the racial other, or the religious other, or … the other in the middle school, like the way humans—the way we do that.

(Interview, 3-14-08)

Mr. Evans sought for students to understand not only the historical implications of dehumanizing, but the seemingly small ways such processes persist in middle school life.

Concurrent with the World War II unit, students worked on a combined English-Social Studies assignment that extended into quarter four, a research paper on a topic of their choice related to cultural conflict. Writing inquiry questions, taking notes from both online and print sources, creating outlines and graphic organizers, writing thesis statements, formatting the paper, and documenting sources, students practiced traditional research skills. They also reflected on the personal, emotional impact of their research topics through creating digital collages on the subjects they investigated—topics including children in the Holocaust, genocide in Rwanda, Jewish gangsters, racism in music, and Malcolm X—and the feelings the topics evoked in them. This approach to the research paper allowed students to continue to make personal connections to the curriculum.

“Finding Your Voice.” A final project of the third quarter was preparation for the “Finding Your Voice” concert: a dance, music, visual media, and spoken word show given by the 8th graders. A hip-hop performer and a singer/rapper/writer spent time in the 8th grade English classes as visiting artists and worked directly with students. The students’ assignment was to develop a piece—poetry, prose, and/or music—whose focus was to “look at the things in your life that have affected you and how that impacts
you as an artist” (Field notes, 2-25-08). Students used feedback from their peers, teachers, and the visiting artists to polish their work, which many of them chose to perform in the “Finding Your Voice” concert. For a number of students, writing about their identity and influences necessitated examination of race, culture, and power. As one of the arts teachers explained in the written program for the show:

Tonight’s performance represents the eighth grade students’ deep emotional connection to some of the darkest moments in human history. … Students observed many of the ways that artists respond to conflict or social issues and use their art to effect change.

While some of the work you will see tonight can be raw and painful, other students focused on hope and progress. … We hope this performance helps you to think about history from a new perspective, and that our students’ unique and powerful voices will inspire you to change the world. (“Finding Your Voice” concert program, 5-1-08).

Discussing racism and white privilege, studying “othering” and dehumanization, and considering how to respond to conflict (personally and artistically) were all significant to students in the 8th grade curriculum. This work allowed students to understand some of the social and cultural forces that perpetuate institutional injustice. At the same time, the teachers’ emphasis on making personal connections and taking action allowed students to see themselves as potential change agents. Such agency is vital in order to help students avoid feeling paralyzed and hopeless when dealing with difficult issues related to race, culture, power, and identity.
Cultural Resolution: Concluding the Year

Quarter four focused on the theme of cultural resolution, though extensive testing and other disruptions intruded upon the curriculum. In preparing students for the state’s standardized English test, Mr. Ramsey returned to the idea of the language of power and taught strategies for success on the test, while openly maintaining a critical perspective on the test’s purpose and format. He also examined the notion of resolution by having students analyze speeches by the Dalai Lama and then-presidential candidate Barack Obama. Students’ primary text in English was Kaffir Boy (Mathabane, 1986), a memoir of growing up in South African apartheid.

In Social Studies, the curriculum focused mainly on Africa, including the ways in which the diamond trade shaped politics and the reconciliation of apartheid. Students continued to explore issues of race, exploitation, and power along with culture. However, with the last eight weeks of school interrupted by testing, field trips, performances, holidays, and other schedule irregularities, it proved difficult for the teachers and students to follow a curriculum that built on itself as logically and meaningfully as the rest of the year had. Mr. Evans commented that, like most teachers, there were times he got tired and could not put the effort into preparation that he would have liked to. He himself felt that the idea of cultural resolution got short-changed.

In the last week of school, though, Mr. Evans asked his students to reflect on their five years at Metro Arts School and what they learned in 8th grade in particular. After they laughed, talked, and reminisced about their experiences, he finished class by reading a poem and then issuing a final challenge: “You guys, my final thoughts for you
all. Think about those conversations we had. Think about being critical, challenging things. Not accepting status quo. Looking out for others” (Audio file, 6-2-08).

_The Importance of Scaffolding Critical Multiculturalism_

Teachers need to learn to implement critical multiculturalism in order to teach in relevant and responsive ways. Hatcher and Troyna (1993), quoted in Moodley (1999), assert that schools and teachers need to find ways in the curriculum to help children to engage with how “race” works in their lives. To reflect cultural diversity positively and to teach about racism in society are both vital, but it is equally important to connect these interventions with children’s own lives by bringing children’s relationships and the conflicts within them, including racialized forms, into the curriculum itself. (p. 146)

This work does not come easy. In her study of a book club that focused on issues related to culture and ethnicity, Florio-Ruane (2001) notes that the critical thinking and “willingness to risk” eventually fostered in discussions of difficult topics was a slow process; “It took 2 years” (p. 139)—and this in a group whose members voluntarily came together to consider issues of culture. It is therefore important to consider how these issues are brought into the classroom.

Mr. Evans and Mr. Ramsey noted that each group of students responded differently to the 8th grade curriculum. Mr. Evans told me that he was sometimes frustrated with this particular 8th grade class:
I would say, like, for me, um, it’s the, I don’t know, fourth year now I think that we’ve had that discussion and in similar, somewhat similar form, um, and the curriculum that I do, it’s kind of, it kind of builds you know throughout the year. And this year … it feels like, it—it hasn’t become like a snowball that keeps going … and um, now it’s more up to me to make a lot of the connections to how it all relates together. … And I think because of that, um, it’s just, it’s almost too hard for me to make those connections, like, it just takes too much out to try to constantly go back to how this relates to people, how it relates to otherness, and how it all connects to think the way we think about each other.

(Interview, 3-14-08)

While there is much to learn from the work these teachers and students did together, Mr. Evans saw room for improvement and noted the struggles he felt making links for his students. He also pointed to the need for passion and energy on the part of the teachers for this kind of work to take place. Far from being satisfied with how things progressed, these teachers saw room for improvement, demonstrating the reflective practice that marks good teaching.

Moodley (1999) also comments on the importance of the teacher’s stance, explaining that students must be “allowed to work through their own stereotypes without being embarrassed or silenced from the outset. All too often antiracist advocates display a self-righteous superior morality that by definition exempts the speaker from the sins of racism” (p. 141). By modeling and fostering self-reflection and acknowledging their own as well as students’ struggles with these issues, Mr. Evans and Mr. Ramsey created a space for their students to explore issues of race, power, and
culture together with them. Structuring experiences that lead to meaningful examination of one’s own cultural identity therefore takes time, sensitivity and careful design.

In her list of guidelines for critical multicultural practice, Nieto (1999) writes that “[c]ritical multicultural education affirms students’ culture without trivializing the concept of culture itself”; it “challenges hegemonic knowledge” (p. 206); it “complicates pedagogy” (p. 207); and it “encourages ‘dangerous discourses’” (p. 209). While the work is messy and uncertain, the 8th grade curriculum and pedagogy at Metro Arts School attempted to live out these principles. The efforts of Mr. Evans and Mr. Ramsey, like other critical teachers and their students, contributes to a growing and important research and teaching dialogue around the successes and dilemmas of critical multicultural practice, helping us to consider how we may—that we must—enact this work in our own ways, in our own classrooms.
Chapter 4
Student Responses

The response of students to critical multicultural curriculum is complex. As discussed earlier, research has documented the difficulty people have talking about issues of race, culture, power, and privilege. Many white teachers struggle to understand the role that race plays in their identities and fail to recognize the racism inherent in institutions such as schools. White students often express dismay and resistance, relying on the discourses of colorblindness, meritocracy, and individualism. The response of students of color is also complicated. Some are justifiably reluctant to enter into conversations of racism and privilege, afraid that they will be accused of overreacting or exaggerating (Beach, Thein, & Parks, 2008). Yet other research has documented how students of color feel great relief when issues of race are discussed openly and are subsequently highly engaged in classroom discussions of these topics (Glazier & Seo, 2005; Fine, Weis, & Powell, 1997). It is important, therefore, to consider how teachers can use critical pedagogy to engage all students in discussions of race, culture, power, and identity.

As shown in chapter 3, the teachers in this study made careful choices about how to engage their students in productive conversations about race and racism. They wanted to challenge, but not alienate, both white students and students of color, in the hopes of empowering them to take action against social injustice. The responses of Metro Arts School students can help teachers and teacher educators think through some of the possibilities as well as the difficulties of this work.
In this chapter, I explain the reaction of individual students to Mr. Evans and Mr. Ramsey’s critical multicultural curriculum, noting patterns that surfaced across racial groups. I then turn to exploring some of the challenges that emerged as a result of this work.

Student Responses to “Race Discussions”

Students displayed a range of reactions to this curriculum. Many identified the “Race Discussions” as a particularly influential experience, with 16 out of 37 students indicating it was their favorite activity of the year, calling the week “eye opening” and “real” (Student work samples, 6-1-08). One girl noted that she “loved” the experience: “I felt like I finally [sic] got to say what I have been wanting to say for years!! I feel very proud of myself” (Student work sample, 6-1-08). Another commented, “I think one of the most powerful discussions we had was the race discussion. … I felt much more comfortable talking about racism with my family, friends, and many people who I didn’t really know” (Student work sample, 6-1-08). Twenty-three students identified their newfound knowledge of racism and white privilege as the most or one of the most important ideas that they would take away from the class (Student work samples, 6-1-08). However, patterns across racial groups did emerge, revealing variation in the reactions of African American, white, Latino and Asian students.

African American and multi-racial students. In general, as evidenced in their class participation, interviews, and work samples, African American and bi/multi-racial students tended to respond positively, valuing the chance to discuss race and racism with their white peers and share personal stories of discrimination. Nicole (a student
who identified her mother as “black and Puerto Rican” and her father as “black and white”) conveyed this perspective in her interview:

Well, I felt that it was important because like, um, I appreciate like hearing, uh, from everybody … I felt honored, I think we all should have felt honored, like all the African American kids … well, for them to hear us, for other people to hear, like kind of what we go through and kind of how we felt about it, and you know for us to even hear what they had to say about how they felt, which we had like no idea, I thought that was a privilege to both—for both of us. So we got to hear each other out. And even at this young of an age just think, like, what we think about when we hear about racism and … our past history. How we felt about that. (Interview, 3-18-08)

Nicole went on to say that although there were many cross-race friendships at Metro Arts School, the subject of racism did not often get raised in conversation, so it was important that they were able to talk about it in a classroom. She commented that, “for my white friends to actually, like, understand and hear, like, what I knew and what I felt inside, was, was important” (Interview, 3-18-08).

Mack, an African American boy, agreed, explaining that his white friends often did not realize the things that happen to him as a result of his skin color, like being more closely watched while shopping:

Just the other day, actually, I was in a store and I was just, I just walked in. And then the owner of the store, or the person who worked there, they looked at me, and then they were Hmong, or Asian. And I walked in and I looked at him, and they looked at me. And I went down and like, went around the corner to see if
they would follow me. And I looked back, and they were following me. You
know I was like, “Aw, man.” (Interview, 4-26-08)

Experiences like this were common among students of color. Several of them, including
Manhattan (a black girl), told about personal experiences with racism even in this
school, where teachers are trained to reflect on race. These stories were vital for
students to tell and for their classmates to hear. As Mack said, “it brought us closer as
friends. And um, it helps us understand each other more” (Interview, 4-26-08). As will
be seen later, stories were powerful vehicles for facilitating understanding of
institutional racism. But it was not only sharing their own stories that was significant;
Nicole also pointed out that it was important for her to hear that white students often felt
guilty about the racial history of the United States. The reactions of Nicole, Mack, and
Manhattan were typical of many students of color in these classes.

When asked about how often they discuss race with friends and family, white
students tended to say not much, while students of color noted that they did talk about it
often. However, Sheree, an African American girl, said the week of discussions helped
her expand her conversations with her family: “I talk, a lot with my family now. And,
we talked about it before, but it was just—it wasn’t as much” (Interview, 5-15-08).
Mack also brought the discussions home with him, having a family friend (who is
white) and his father fill out the “Because of my Race or Color” chart and instigating
discussion with them about it. Both Mack and Sheree said that conversations with their
family members as well as their classmates helped them to see that racism still does
exist in a systematic way and that there was a need to get it out into the open through
discussion. Manhattan noted that she and two other friends now made an effort to talk
about race at their diverse lunch table: “we talk about it way way a lot” (Interview, 4-15-08). When I asked if she could see herself participating in these conversations next year in high school, Manhattan said she hoped to continue talking with friends about racism, but also pointed out that she would prefer to have the discussions with people she knows and trusts.

Manhattan’s comment highlights a final important facet of the “Race Discussions” shown in the responses of African American and bi/multi-racial students: that there needs to be a strong sense of trust and support for them to occur. Sheree pointed out the importance of the teacher-student relationship, that she believed these discussions could not take place unless students had a good connection and rapport with their teachers. Mack agreed, explaining,

It—this environment and this school and the circle, that was like, this is not the safest, but like the most open that I’ve felt to talk about racism. ‘Cause anywhere else, it felt like if I said something wrong, then I would be, shot down, or told that I was wrong. But here, I felt like if I said what I felt, and they would help me, like, it wouldn’t just be like “Ooh no, that’s wrong.” But they would help me realize the other view of people. (Interview, 4-26-08)

Mack believed this classroom space was the most productive he had experienced in talking about racism. He sensed that if he expressed a differing opinion, he would not be silenced, but that the teachers and students would work with him to help him understand the views of others. The fact that Mack felt this was a space where he could speak and truly learn from other’s perspectives was remarkable. Mack trusted that the discussions provided a forum for educating others about his experiences as well as
listening and learning from his classmates, providing him not only the opportunity to change his mind if warranted, but also the freedom to honor and maintain his own beliefs if he so chose. Despite their position as a part of the oppressor’s racial group, Mr. Evans and Mr. Ramsey therefore empowered students of color to reflect, working towards praxis. For at least some students, the teachers managed to create an environment that facilitated Frierean, critical dialogue.

Manhattan made a related point in her interview, one that should be carefully noted by teachers and teacher educators: that white teachers should not be afraid to talk about race with their students, including students of color. She declared,

it’s if you say something that, that if you don’t think twice about it, then it’s racist. But if you’re just bringing it up and trying to clarify on it, then I’m completely fine. I’m glad that you’re trying to figure out what’s good and what’s not. … it’s not a bad thing, you just have to notice it. As long as you’re aware of it, you’re good! (Interview, 4-15-08)

While many white teachers express doubt and fear over raising matters of race and white privilege with students, Manhattan’s words reveal that, as a black girl, she is not offended when teachers note race, that she appreciates when teachers are explicit about trying to work through these issues themselves. Teachers do not have to have all the answers, but they do need to have positive, caring, and respectful relationships with their students—and they need to work to create a safe climate among students in their classrooms, a place where praxis can begin.

In Mr. Evans’ and Mr. Ramsey’s class, the responses of Latino, Asian American, and white students to the “Race Discussions” were more varied. Some
students expressed resistance to the idea of white privilege; others were mired in feelings of exclusion and guilt. In the best cases, students accepted responsibility and were inspired to act, to work for social justice.

*Asian American and Latino students.* The discussions were significant to Rachelle, a girl whose mother is Japanese and father is white American. She realized when they were filling out the “Because of my Race or Color” chart that there would be a separation of her classmates based on skin color, but said she was shocked to see how clearly the color line was defined when students lined up according to their scores. She talked at length during discussions as well as with Mr. Ramsey outside of class time about her struggle to define herself. Raised primarily in white culture, she discussed how she knew that the first thing someone saw about her is her Asian physical characteristics, which made her wonder about her identity. The week of “Race Discussions” helped Rachelle consider the ways that race has influenced and shaped her. She noted that this unit also facilitated her ability to identify racism more clearly around her:

I just noticed—I just went to Disneyland, and we went on “It’s a Small World.” And, I—I couldn’t enjoy the ride. I was just looking at—they had everything, like, separated. Like they had in the last room, all the people are dancing around and they were with, like, couples, and it was all just like the white couple, the black couple, the Asian couple. And they had, like, this, like, almost like a pyramid with people standing on it and all the white people were up top, and like black and Asian people were on the bottom. So just like, stuff like that, people just notice it more often. (Interview, 4-17-08)
Unlike many African American students, Rachelle said she had not often talked about race with her parents. Even when she brought up the couples on the “Small World” ride with them, her mother and father downplayed the racial pyramid she saw. Her pledge at the end of the “Race Discussions” was to “recognize it more often … realize it’s there, and to, tell … people about it so that, you know, just get more people to consciously think about it, versus just pushing it back” (Interview, 4-17-08). Rachelle repeatedly said in her writing and in conversations that the “Race Discussions” were the most important thing she had done in school.

Not all students responded as positively as Rachelle, however. Claudia, a girl of Mexican heritage, expressed frustration several times that the complexity of her situation was not being addressed in the “Race Discussions.” Not black and not white, Claudia faced challenges related to racism and anti-immigrant backlash that were not taken up much in the week’s conversations. Later in the school year, Claudia felt empowered to question this issue further; she was the student who engaged her class in the lengthy discussion (that spilled over into passing time) of why they studied primarily Europe, the U.S., and Africa in their Social Studies curriculum, neglecting South and Central America (Field notes, 5-12-08). While I was not present during this class, both Claudia and Mr. Evans sought me out to tell me about it. Claudia remarked that she was pleased that she felt brave enough to raise her question and that the students had “a big debate” about the issue, even though she was frustrated that not everyone agreed that Latino issues were neglected in the curriculum (Field notes, 5-12-08). Mr. Evans was also proud of the discussion, remarking that in other school settings it might have been shut down (Field notes, 5-13-08). To address the issue further,
Claudia also chose to do her research paper on Latino immigration. Claudia and Rachelle displayed some of the differing, complex ways that Latino and Asian students responded to the “Race Discussions.”

White students. White students also reacted to the unit in different ways. Quite a few expressed at least some resistance in the act of filling out the “Because of my Race or Color” chart. In the class I focused on for this study, white students’ scores ranged from 115 down to the 80s, indicating that students were unable to acknowledge the privileges they earned solely based on skin color (in another class I observed, almost all white student scores were above 100). During the class when they filled out the chart, the questions fielded by the teachers from white students showed that these students were often thinking about age, gender, or other identity markers and not just race. (The responses of several white, Jewish students will be examined in greater depth in the next chapter.) Frances told me in her interview that she found it difficult to score herself according to her (white) skin color and not how she perceived herself as “a personal person” (Interview, 5-10-08). Comments like Frances’ indicate a perception that white people are somehow color-less individuals who are beyond race.

In addition to resistance, white students grappled with feelings of guilt, as Nicole alluded to in her interview. Al also explained this to me:

I just wish that, I just wish that we all could have been made equal and everything. … That, um, there just didn’t have to be differences. And, and I feel guilty that, that I, not doing anything, was just given, the opportunity to, um, probably pass by other kids that won’t get some of the opportunities that I might have the chances to get. (Interview, 4-30-08)
Al said he believed that this guilt may have influenced the scoring of white students’ charts, explaining why there was such a range of scores among them. As Trainor (2005) observes, sometimes white students’ resistance to talking about race does not stem from a desire to maintain their own privilege, but out of a genuine desire to see racial equality in the world—a wish that things were more just. Like Al, Kacie embodied this idea, saying, “I don’t think race should ever be an aspect at all. I wish the idea of it never really existed because I think it’s just kinda stupid” (Interview, 4-8-08). Whether out of a genuine desire for fairness and justice, or an inability or unwillingness to acknowledge modern racism, some white students were not able to move past their guilt and resistance.

For others, however, the “Race Discussions” met the teachers’ articulated goals. Tyler, a white boy, noted the importance of hearing stories from his classmates, saying you can’t understand it [white privilege], unless you’re on the other side [of the conflict]. ‘Cause … you don’t see a white person walk in and get privilege and a black guy walk in and not get it. You have to be, black or Asian or something, you have to be the other group, to see what’s going on. Like culture. You can’t see your own culture. You have to be in the other culture to see your culture. (Interview, 3-20-08).

Like other students, Tyler felt he noticed examples of racism more frequently now, telling the story of an African American classmate’s unfair treatment in the lunch line. When I asked him if he would have been aware of that situation before now, he replied, “I wouldn’t have noticed it before, no. But after going to Metro Arts School and like,
learning about racism and stuff, I was like, ‘I see that’” (Interview, 3-20-08). Other white students agreed; Al wrote that

One of the things I learned is that even though so many people have fought and died to stop racism it still exists [sic] today. It might not be as obvious or right in front of everyone’s face but it’s still there. When listening to kids of other skin colors talk about how, here and there, there were still bits of racism, it was something I didn’t know about because its [sic] become so hidden only able to be seen by the people who experience it. (Student work sample, 6-1-08).

For many white students, then, hearing their classmates’ personal accounts convinced them of the prevalence of modern racism and the ways it persists in our society today.

It is significant that a number of white students took away from the week the necessity of talking about these issues. Al noted that, like some of the other students, he used the week’s discussions as a springboard for discussing race more with his classmates. Al said he also perceived instances of racism more than he did before, and declared that it would be important for him to continue to cultivate cross-racial friendships in order to help him recognize and understand institutional racism better. Luke noted that that the week of “Race Discussions” gave students a foundation for carrying on the conversation. He told me that the unit made it “way easier for us not to like hate each other for what we say about it. … if someone says something I disagree with, it’s easier to disagree, I think” (Interview, 5-3-08). Olga agreed, saying that before the week, “I was like, really afraid to talk about it, with friends at least. Because I didn’t know if I was going to say the wrong thing” (Interview, 5-15-08), but also noting that she was at least a little more comfortable discussing race after this experience.
A number of white students also demonstrated an understanding of the need to take action as an antiracist leader, using the forums that they have to work for social justice. As Al wrote, “I’m going to know and remember that my life is better because I’m white, and that I need to show others that this is wrong” (Student work sample, 6-1-08). Luke concurred; he wrote,

I think I’ll see (as I’ve started to see) racism more and more in America. I think I’ll be vocal about Racism, Ethnocentrism, and othering—because the idea of talking about racism (and the like) as the only way to get rid of it has really stuck. (Student work sample, 6-1-08).

Specifically, students spoke of being more aware of stereotypes, stopping the telling of racist jokes, questioning the racial makeup of their tracked classes in high school, forming or participating in antiracist organizations and clubs, creating art and writing around themes of social injustice, and instigating conversations about racism and privilege with friends and family as steps to take (Field notes, 2-11-08). These students were on the road to developing the language and skills of antiracism, as the teachers wished.

**Challenges**

It is clear from the discussion above that this work is not easy. Indeed, there were a number of trouble spots that surfaced during the “Race Discussions,” including a racial dichotomy, difficulty with one of the agreements, tension over the teachers’ role, and a struggle over appropriate discourses.
One problem was how the class’ discussion of race got caught up in what scholars have identified as “the black-white paradigm,” the binary of racial discourse in the United States (Alcoff, 2003; Delgado, 1998). This dichotomy is problematic, for as Alcoff (2003) notes, “to understand race in this way is to assume that racial discrimination operates exclusively through anti-black racism” (p. 8). Not only is it “disadvantageous to all people of color,” but also for “white union households and the white poor,” all of whom would benefit from coalition building (Alcoff, 2003).

It is true that the majority of students of color in the class were African American, and they were the ones who shared the greatest number of stories of discrimination. But as a result, Latino and Asian American students expressed feelings of exclusion. As Sheree pointed out,

A lot of people said, ‘cause there was a lot of different comments and I remember a lot of people kept saying over and over, “black and white,” “black and white,” and so, um, I—my friend Nicole stood up and said something that it’s not just black and white, there’s other races. She’s Latino and so, it—it’s just—those are the main things when you think of racism, is between those two groups. (Interview, 5-15-08)

Sheree explained how the discussion focused mainly on issues related to and between African American and white people. White students also called attention to the fact that Arab, Middle Eastern, and other groups were not discussed much during the week (Frances interview, 5-10-08; Audio files, 2-3-08, 2-4-08). Even the teachers fell into this pattern, with Mr. Evans making a comment about racism impacting both whites and blacks, failing to address other racial identities (Audio file, 2-5-08). Alcoff (2003)
explains how this black-white binary dominates much of the dominant discourse around
race and “inhibits an understanding of how racism operates vis-à-vis Latino/as and
Asian Americans” (p. 6). Such an emphasis prevents the formation of potentially
productive alliances as well as the meaningful examination of related problems, such as
nativism, xenophobia, and worker exploitation—issues that relate to racism and white
privilege that were not taken up in the week’s discussions.

Another difficulty materialized regarding the agreement to “Speak your truth.”
This guideline proved problematic: since the teachers explained that students’ truths
cannot be right or wrong, when students expressed ideas that they felt to be borne out of
their past, some felt judged when the teachers or fellow students questioned their
statements. On the third day of the “Race Discussions,” Mr. Evans and Mr. Ramsey did
a “circle” check-in to see how students were doing. Kacie and Gordon, two white
students, remarked that they felt fearful of saying what was really on their minds out of
fear of being “shut down” (Field notes, 2-6-08). Kacie announced,

I love doing this, I think it’s really good, like most people don’t get to do this.
But also I know I’m not the only one who thinks this, like I’ve talked about this
with some of my friends, um, that sometimes there are some things we really
want to say but we feel we’d get attacked for them, and that we really couldn’t
say them, or that like these teachers would be like, “No, you’re wrong.”
Because, I don’t know. It’s just stuff that’s in the back of our heads, that we,
just, know would, cause stuff if we said them, so we don’t want to. But, we’re
still being able to say some things and we are making progress. (Audio file, 2-6-
08)
When another student asked Kacie what kinds of things she wanted to talk about, she did not provide any specifics. Mr. Evans responded by assuring Kacie that people often tend to remain silent on issues of racism because of the fear of offending someone, yet whatever thoughts they have in their heads are still there. However, he did not address Kacie’s concern that her teachers would move to silence her or work to change her mind, an issue that she repeated in her next turn.

As previously mentioned, Mr. Evans and Mr. Ramsey gleaned the “Four Agreements” from the work of Glenn Singleton (2006). However, their explanation of “Speak your truth” differed somewhat from Singleton’s. In his book *Courageous Conversations About Race*, Singleton (2006) identifies this agreement as requiring “a willingness to take risks … being absolutely honest about your thoughts, feelings, and opinions and not just saying what you perceive others want to hear” (p. 60). His observation that people often do not speak their truth “out of fear of offending, appearing angry, or sounding ignorant” (Singleton, 2006, p. 60) was one that was echoed and explained several times by the two teachers. In further explanation of this agreement, Singleton (2006) equates speaking our truth with “say[ing] what’s on our minds” (p. 61) and goes on to note silencing patterns that tend to occur in racial dialogues: people of color are discouraged from sharing their observations related to race; white people fear addressing race because they don’t want to say the wrong thing. He concludes this initial exploration of the agreement by advising that people of color will be more likely to open up when White people simply validate their experiences without shutting them down, interrogating them, or redefining their experience into more familiar diversity terms. A White person
can never ‘own’ the experience of a person of color, just as a person of color cannot ‘own’ the White experience. We are only experts in defining our own experiences and personal realities. Part of our struggle is rooted in our inability to search for meaning in the racial perspective of others, no matter how different another’s experience may be from our own. (Singleton, 2006, p. 63)

Singleton (2006) does not address, here, how best to encourage whites to speak their truth; his concern focuses more on encouraging the voices and participation of people of color.

Mr. Ramsey’s and Mr. Evans’ explanation of this agreement varied a bit from that emphasized by Singleton. Before beginning the week of “Race Discussions,” Mr. Ramsey and Mr. Evans projected the four agreements on PowerPoint slides and discussed them with the class. Reading the “Speak your truth” agreement aloud, Mr. Ramsey then asked, “You guys understand that one? What does that mean? As opposed to what?” (Audio file, 2-4-08). Several students responded, and Mr. Ramsey sought to define the agreement in opposition, “As opposed to not speaking, as opposed to… Speaking somebody else’s truth. Ok? So what would that look like? What would it look like to speak somebody else’s truth?” (Audio file, 2-4-08). After a student made a comment, Mr. Ramsey elaborated:

Right. Just like throwing out someone else’s ideas. Saying, “Well, other people have seen this, or other people feel this way about that,” or “Here’s the final answer about racism that we’re talking about, the global issue.” That’s not what we’re looking at. Ok? The way that your discomfort in this classroom will be
justified is, as long as you’re speaking what you have seen, what you have felt, you can’t be wrong. It’s your truth, so it’s ok. Alright? (Audio file, 2-4-08)

While Singleton (2006) emphasizes the need to express one’s opinion, to say what’s on one’s mind, Mr. Ramsey framed the agreement more in terms of right vs. wrong—a natural extension of the term “truth.”

Mr. Evans then went on to explain how the “Speak your truth” agreement complemented two of the other agreements:

Put, put a star on either side of that. Ok? Because that’s a, it’s a huge one. It’s a huge one. It’s, when you’re speaking your truth, you experience discomfort and you’re staying engaged. Ok. When you are, when you all agree right now to say I’m only going to speak from my experience, and, be honest about that, right? Then that also means, the other side of that is that you’re assuming that everyone else in this classroom is speaking from their truth. Ok? And the tendency, just like ethnocentrism, is to judge someone else’s truth based on your own truth. We’re asking you to not do that this time. So even if every experience you’ve had disagrees with what somebody else is saying you have to remember that they are speaking from their truth. You have to believe that people can be honest. Ok? Ok. (Audio file, 2-4-08)

Mr. Evans extended the notion further to seemingly encourage a suspension of judgment on the part of the class participants. He said he wanted students to consider each other’s opinions and beliefs and not immediately jump to critique when a student offered a comment.
Students became entangled in this idea throughout the week. Given the explanations of Mr. Ramsey and Mr. Evans, some interpreted this agreement to mean that if a student disagreed with another, that was a negative judgment, and therefore the student’s right to speak his/her truth was violated. Gordon articulated the problematic nature of this agreement as perceived by many of the students soon after Kacie’s statement about being fearful of saying something. He echoed Kacie’s assertion, his clenched fist and emphatic gesturing showing his anger:

Well, it says on #3 “Speak your truth,” but I agree with Kacie that some of us have tried to speak our truth, and we get called out on it. We get—we say that we’re wrong. We say that our viewpoints are wrong. And that they’re, like, screwed up in some sort of way. And, when it says “speak your truth,” I feel like that we can’t really speak our truth from having fear all about being told we’re wrong, when, I thought we were having a discussion but it seems like—now this isn’t all the time, but some of the time—that we are getting called out. And, we are being told we’re wrong. When we’re just trying to speak our truth. (Audio file, 2-6-08)

Gordon’s comment embodied the way in which “truth” was tied up in students’ identities. When he expressed frustration in being told he was “wrong,” he showed his understanding of “truth” being something inviolable for each student. As the discussion proceeded, students struggled to identify ways that they could respectfully disagree with one another and continue the conversation.

Later on, Luke tried to explore how disagreement and truth could coexist. He noted,
I think a lot of people are saying that you shouldn’t think, like if you’re debating something like that you shouldn’t say that the other person is wrong? But if this is your truth, and somebody else is saying something that’s different to your truth, that would then make you—you might not say it, but you would think that it is wrong, so, I think it’s ok to say that you think they’re wrong. You shouldn’t be saying it rude and you shouldn’t be, you shouldn’t be throwing it in their faces, but you should be able to say that they are wrong. And that your opinion is the correct opinion. And, I mean that’s kinda the point of a debate. Is to, for your truth to be the truth. (Audio file, 2-6-08)

To me, Luke’s explanation of the agreement seems closest to the teachers’ true intention. They did not want students to silence one another or be close-minded. However, neither did they want only a public declaration of each student’s beliefs, with students’ ideas reified and unchallenged. It may be, then, that the “Speak your truth” should be eliminated, or at least explained or unpacked differently. The word “truth” implies an absolute, something that cannot be altered. But the teachers (and some students) were in fact working for change—working to transform the “truths” that students believed up to that point.

Another challenge of this work was the tension over student- versus teacher-led discussion. On the second day of the “Race Discussions,” an extended discussion of ‘reverse racism’ occurred; students struggled with the elements of racism related to institutions and sociocultural forces. With strong teacher input, a consensus began to be formed that those who did not have power (people of color) could not be racist against those in power (whites), though prejudice and discrimination certainly did exist.
After this point, one white boy commented that even if reverse racism was a myth, there were still stereotypes of white people, to which Gordon replied in apparent relief, “Thank you!” (Audio file, 2-5-08). Students continued to return to this issue each day of the “Race Discussions,” revisiting discussions of how stereotyping, prejudice, and racism differed. Students’ unwillingness to move on from this topic frustrated the teachers. Mr. Ramsey called the issue one of “semantics,” expressing impatience that students were not able to be more “intense” and have greater “emotional attachment” (Field notes, 2-7-08). However, students’ return to this subject signaled that they found it important to discuss. The teachers had difficult choices to make about when to honor student preference and when, in their judgment, a topic had been explored in great enough depth.

Indeed, this difficulty brings up the issue of what the teachers’ role should be in this process: the leader, the facilitator, the mediator? Some students felt that the teachers imposed their viewpoints too much; Luke said that, “Generally it is kind of hard to like, state an opposition in the class” (Interview, 5-3-08). Tyler felt that “Mr. Evans cut everybody off. ‘Cause everybody kept trying to prove the point and he’d be like ‘No, it’s this this this, let’s move on.’ And other people would try to help and he’d just cut ‘em off” (Interview, 3-20-08). Tyler went on to say that he felt the teachers should have encouraged more participation, that the same voices were heard over and over, and that he especially would have appreciated hearing from more African American students. On the other hand, Kacie remarked that, “putting it very frankly, it seemed like the teachers … were siding with the students of color more” (Interview, 4-8-08). She said later it might be interesting to have the teachers leave the room for part of the discussion.
and let the students work it out themselves. Still others, like Frances, felt that the teachers were “too gentle” (Interview, 5-10-08).

Clearly there is no easy answer to this dilemma. When I asked Mr. Ramsey and Mr. Evans about their role, they said that they have discussed different options, such as having one teacher serve as the facilitator and moderator and the other as a true participant in the circle. They had yet to come to any definite conclusions about what would be most effective in generating productive dialogue among students. The role of the teacher in these discussions—and in critical pedagogy in general—is one that needs to continue to be examined. Indeed, while this curriculum certainly took up critical issues, it was very much teacher-created. Friere (2000) might argue for greater student input, a more student-led experience.

Another trouble spot was the establishment of norms for class discussion. The conversation instigated by Gordon and Kacie showed how students struggled with the role of emotion in this academic setting. These two, as well as other white students, noted that they felt “attacked” at various points (Field notes, 2-6-08, 2-7-08). As Kacie said,

Um, well, I just think, you know, when someone’s speaking their truth, you should listen, and wait for them to finish. And I don’t know, I think that should be added to the rules. That you have to wait for them to finish. And that you can’t like—even if you’re not saying, “You’re wrong, you’re wrong,” if you’re saying it angrily, and staring the person down, you know, if you’re gonna, contradict someone you should do it in a respectful, like, calm way. Because
that, that can ease tension. And just because something’s a debate doesn’t mean we have to be like, yelling at each other. (Audio file, 2-6-08).

As far as I could tell, they were referring primarily to statements by Nicole, a frequent contributor to discussion. Responding to Kacie’s comment, Nicole contended that the conversation should be framed as a debate, and that it was good to be passionate about her viewpoints. Kacie, though, talked about how students should be calm, detached, almost emotionless—identifying the white, middle class discourses that dominate school (hooks, 1994). (Interestingly, despite Kacie’s feeling that she was being attacked, my field notes indicated that Nicole barely raised her voice [Field notes, 2-6-08].) Some explicit discussion and consideration of what discourses are present in school settings and why and how passion and emotion can be productive in learning may have helped students think about these issues. Mr. Ramsey potentially laid the groundwork for such a dialogue in the unit on the language of power.

The emergence of a black-white binary, the “Speak your truth” agreement, the role of the teacher, and the place of emotion all were challenges confronted by teachers and students during the week of “Race Discussions.” And for some students, the week was not all inspiring or comforting; Manhattan wrote on her final exam that she came to realize “that a lot of people are oblivious and/or close-minded [sic] to race and racism” (Student work sample, 6-1-08).

Learning from Student Responses

Despite these difficulties, there were a great many successes. Even a student like Gordon—at times angry, resistant, and frustrated—still did gain much from the week of
“Race Discussions.” Gordon’s tense, angry body language relaxed over the course of the week (Field notes, 2-7-08). On the third day, he stayed after class to continue a conversation with several students of color, one of whom explained what his mother had warned him about dealing with the police, “not if, but when” he would, as a young black male (Field notes, 2-7-08). In June, Gordon identified the “Race Discussions” as one of the year’s most important experiences on his final exam (Student work samples, 6-1-08). One of several students chosen to speak at 8th grade graduation, Gordon declared in his speech, “Maybe over the years we can teach some other people too … like Mr. Evans says, you guys are going to change the world and we will. That’s a promise” (Field notes, 6-5-08).

What is to be learned about critical, anti-racist pedagogy from these teachers and students? First of all, the careful structuring of this unit—and the entire curriculum that built up to it—cannot be underestimated. The deliberate scaffolding of the year facilitated teachers’ and students’ work with culture and race throughout the 8th grade curriculum. It is important to emphasize that this curriculum cannot be transplanted; so much of the work is contextual. Mr. Evans noted that the unit changes even at Metro Arts School from year to year, as each collective group of students responds differently to the material. However, the ways in which these teachers pedagogically addressed difficult issues of race, culture, power, and identity can give us ideas and inspiration to work in our own classrooms, whether they house secondary students, pre-service teachers, or seasoned professional educators.

It is also important to recognize some of the patterns that emerged across racial groups. While white teachers often fear raising issues of race, particularly with minority
students, the responses of students of color at Metro Arts School indicated that most of
them welcome such discussions. Their reactions showed that a supportive classroom
environment is an essential prerequisite for holding these conversations. They also
illustrated that sharing personal stories of confronting racism was valuable both to them
and to their white classmates.

White students responded in a variety of ways to critical multicultural work. Some resisted the notion of white privilege; others felt excluded or paralyzed by guilt. In the most successful cases, white students gained a deeper sense of themselves as racial beings and were motivated to take action as antiracist leaders. In her book on multicultural teaching, Dilg (2003) discusses how her own secondary students often found studying racial identity theory helpful as they read multicultural texts and talked about racism. For students like Mr. Evans’ and Mr. Ramsey’s, knowing that the stages they experience through this curriculum—for example, white students’ feelings of denial and guilt—are commonly experienced could be helpful. While Mr. Ramsey did briefly talk about his own awakening to white privilege, a more direct examination of how racial identities are developed, in all students, might deepen understanding and create even greater openness. In any case, it is important to acknowledge that even in such safe spaces, difficult and dangerous situations can arise.

Moving Forward

When I interviewed Mack, I ended his as I did most of the interviews, by asking
for any final comments, anything that we had not yet talked about that he wanted to
bring up. Mack’s words showed how important it is for all of us to remain vigilant and join the fight against racism.

I wanted to say, um, that I don’t necessarily think that people who don’t know about racism—I think it’s just they’re, they’re just too lazy. … it’s really dependent on the generation of kids now, us. To get the word out. To show them how to, and get them motivated to do it, actually. (Interview, 4-20-08)

Like Mr. Ramsey, Mr. Evans, and their students, we are all called to “get the word out” and engage in critical, anti-racist pedagogy. It may be messy and difficult, and sometimes it may not succeed. But we must not be too lazy, too complacent, too fearful, too overwhelmed. We must find ways to begin, to act and reflect, to create praxis.
The previous chapters showed how two teachers structured a critical multicultural curriculum and examined student responses to this work. In this chapter, I carefully examine an interaction that occurred during the “Race Discussions” to illustrate some of the complexities of teaching, learning about, and researching matters of race, culture, power, and identity.

One of the earliest conversations during the “Race Discussions” revealed a number of tensions. This particular interaction embodied the near-impossibility of this work, on all levels. It was a clear example of how my own positioning shaped the way I experienced what was happening in this classroom, uncovering a number of the difficulties related to power that are inherent in qualitative research. It was reflective of decades of complicated relations between African Americans and Jewish Americans. And it brought to the forefront a challenge of doing critical pedagogy with students with conflicting identity markers—tying them to oppressed groups as well as the oppressors. Specifically, it showed the complicated place of Jewish people in the American racial hierarchy, the historically uncertain place of their whiteness. For all of these reasons, this exchange bears considering in greater detail.

The Discussion

That day was the first full day of the “Race Discussions.” After students filled out the “Because of my Race or Color” chart and gathered in the circle, Mr. Evans
began the discussion with the question, “What do you notice?” Rachelle answered, “Well, like, as soon as he said to line up according to your score I could guess what was going to happen, but now that we actually are doing it it’s kind of surprising” (Audio file, 2-4-08). Soon after, Al remarked:

Well, just when I was filling this out, um, I didn’t really have to think about the questions; I mean, I just kind of knew that this was a 5. I didn’t have to debate, “Oh, I might be a 3, it’s possible.” It’s just: 5. (Audio file, 2-4-08)

Another student then pointed out the pattern of white students and students of color. Here students were beginning to explore the color line that the survey revealed, and Al noted that some of his skin color privilege was quickly exposed to him in the survey questions.

Next, a student wondered why there was such a range of scores among the white students, who presumably should have all scored 115. Kacie responded by noting that she “just thought about the questions differently” because she sometimes did feel she was “judged” because of her white skin. Following her remark, John, a white boy who is a Jehovah’s Witness, commented that he found it difficult to separate his skin color from his religion. After another student reminded him that the survey was supposed to be based only on race, Luke and Gordon chimed in to offer their corroboration of John’s statement.

Luke: It’s hard to like separate—at least for me.

Gordon: Yeah.
Luke: It’s like hard to like be given a survey and say “Ok, you can’t put anything down about your religion,” because it really is a strong part of my identity.

Gordon: Yeah.

Luke: So it’s hard for me to say, you know, answering these questions, like I would’ve based on religion, say like, “Yeah, that one I probably would have put a 3 or that one I would put a 0,” but then I have to look back at the top and say, “Oh, I have to do the race.” That’s really hard. (Audio file, 2-4-08)

A young man who strongly identified with his Jewish heritage, Luke expressed difficulty with being positioned solely according to his skin color. He said that he intellectually understood the exercise, but vocalized his discomfort with the isolation of this one part of his multi-faceted identity. He stated that he wanted to address the survey questions based on his religion, but kept reminding himself that they were meant to address his race. Gordon, another white, Jewish boy, agreed with Luke’s comments.

The principal, Mr. Johnson, who sat in on the “Race Discussions” for part of the week, then responded to Luke and Gordon’s observation.

Mr. Johnson: Do you guys think it’s, it’s easy for black people just to separate race out? Like, I think black people go through the same internal struggle. You know I’m black but, uh, there’s a religious piece as well. I get what you’re saying. I understand where you’re coming from, but, you’re saying as if it is something that is unique, um, to the white experience.

Luke: I don’t think it’s unique to the white experience. I think it’s probably like unique to Jewish experience, because there’s something that you wouldn’t
understand unless you’re Jewish. I think that’s true for a lot of religions. (Audio file, 2-4-08)

Mr. Johnson challenged Luke’s statement by asserting that it is similarly difficult for African Americans, like himself, to parse their identities. He affirmed that his religion was an important part of him just as his race was, and with his last sentence, made an interpretation that Luke’s comments were intended to apply only to white people. Luke responded by denying that he meant religion was important only to whites, but went on to claim that there perhaps was something particular to Jewish people’s situation. He then ended by broadening his point out again, saying that perhaps there are unique experiences to be had by all religious groups.

**My Reaction**

When I listened to and started to write about this discussion, I sensed the same tension and discomfort rising in my stomach that I felt when it occurred. I know that my own white, middle class bias shaped my experience of this exchange—I am sure I felt uneasy about Mr. Johnson’s (only slightly) raised pitch and passionate tone. Like Kacie in the previous chapter, I am at times most comfortable with fairly detached, dispassionate academic discourse in the classroom, the “bourgeois models of decorum” that bell hooks (1994) describes (p. 179). As hooks (1994) observes, traditionally in schools “silence and obedience to authority” are “most rewarded,” and “loudness, anger, emotional outbursts,” conflicts, and disagreement are “deemed unacceptable” (p. 178). Though I realize that, as hooks (1994) warns, such conventional practices and
values lead to silencing, their hold over some part of me remains intact, since I was successful and comfortable in this traditional system.

I also recognize that much of my reaction is due to my own strained relationship with the principal. I was able to gain the trust of many of the 8th grade teachers and students with my constant presence and participation in class and school activities. But Mr. Johnson did not see me on a regular basis, and while we had some cordial conversations during the school year, I never was confident that I had earned his respect. In this way, my experience of this conversation was strongly influenced by what Fairclough (2001) calls the relational value of Mr. Johnson’s words, the “trace of and … cue to the social relationships which are enacted via the text in the discourse” (p. 93). I heard what I did, and the way I did, because of the way I had previously interacted with Mr. Johnson. During this exchange, then (and in thinking about, listening to, and reading it later), I felt myself allying with Luke.

In addition to my own awkward association with Mr. Johnson, I was affected by the power differential that existed: student vs. principal. While in another class Mr. Johnson had taken care to say that he was participating in the circle as a learner, not the school leader, and that he was sharing his own personal experiences, not the official school position, he had not made a similar statement in this group. I felt uneasy about the fact that this adult, the most powerful person in the school, was challenging a student directly. In addition, Mr. Johnson made this statement quite early in the conversation, before any other adult had done anything but ask a few brief questions (Mr. Evans and Mr. Ramsey did offer opinions and make observations and comments later in the discussions). Talking about “social determinants,” Fairclough (2001) asks
about the power relationships that influence discourse at three levels: situational, institutional, and societal. While in American society at large, Luke and I most often enjoy more privilege than Mr. Johnson due to our whiteness, in the situational and institutional context of this conversation, we had less power and Mr. Johnson had the greatest influence. This is an example of the complex ways that identity markers can conflict and complicate the simple categories of “oppressed” and “oppressors.”

Further, in this exchange I positioned myself with Luke as a white person potentially misjudged by Mr. Johnson. When I negotiated access to the school site, I felt frustrated that I could not somehow prove that my intentions were good—that I thought about social justice and race in my work; that I was trying to be a white ally but knew I carried baggage of my race, class, gender, sexuality, and all other identity markers; that I knew I had a lot to learn; that I would make mistakes but believed that preferable to claiming that I had all the right answers. I was not as eloquent as I could have been in trying to explain myself to Mr. Johnson and had the impression that my inadequate words alone did not suffice.

I believed Luke to be similarly well-intentioned. In class, he was one of the most vocal contributors to discussions. I found his comments, most often, thoughtful and insightful. He socialized with students, mostly girls, of different races. He also had a half-sister whom he identified as biracial. I believed he was willing to work to learn more about whiteness and race. So, I felt defensive about his comment, wanting Mr. Johnson to understand Luke as I had come to (and believing therefore that I knew more about Luke than Mr. Johnson did, which may or may not have been true). These were my reactions to the conversation at the time they occurred.
I asked Luke about this part of the discussion in the interview I conducted with him later. (You will recognize here that I have no interview of Mr. Johnson to ask about his intentions and impressions. Because of my own time constraints during the research, Mr. Johnson’s busy schedule, and our lack of connection, I did not request an interview with him.)

Luke: And, uh, my first instinct was to just fill out everything: “Ok, here I have white privilege, here here here here.” But, I wanted to actually think about the questions?

Jill: Mmm-hmm.

Luke: And, when I did, it was hard for me. Because I’m Jewish. It was hard for me to fill out a question and say, “This is not an area where I feel I am put down just because of race.”

Jill: Mmm-hmm.

Luke: Because, it was, you know to me as a person. I wanted to put down, to think about the Jewish side,

Jill: Mmm-hmm. Mmm-hmm.

Luke: I suppose. But, you know, the survey said only on race.

Jill: On skin color, yeah.


Jill: Yeah. And you said that during class too, you said that that was hard for you,

Luke: Yeah!

Jill: and you worked to do it.
Luke: Yeah!

Jill: And then Mr. Johnson was there, and he said, “Do you think that’s easy for, black people to be able to separate out their religion?”

Luke: And he kinda—I, I don’t know. I was kind of pissed. Like, frankly. When he said that. (Interview, 5-3-08)

Luke reiterated that he found it challenging to think about only his whiteness and not about his Jewishness. He asserted that it would have been “easy” to just answer according to his race, but instead he wanted to really “think” about the survey and consider himself “as a person” (echoing Frances’ comment, reported in chapter 4), which meant including his religion. When I asked Luke how he felt about Mr. Johnson’s statement, he explained that it made him angry.

As the interview proceeded, I then complimented Luke on not being “intimidated” and thus “able to respond.” Listening to the exchange again, I find my own preconceptions clear here. I located Mr. Johnson as someone who was threatening—due to his age, authority role in the school, physical stature (he stands 6 feet 5 inches tall), and surely his gender and race.

I recognize how Mr. Johnson and I were caught in prevailing discourses of othering and of the sexually predatory black male, historical storylines that influenced my experience of his authority. Many writers and researchers have discussed the ways that whiteness has been normalized, while in contrast, people of color are constructed as other: “different, inferior, less civilized, less human, more animal” (Frankenberg, 1993, p. 61). While this othering is practiced upon all people of color, it conjures a particularly powerful, violent stereotype of African American men in particular
(Richardson, 2007; Helg, 2000; Lensmire, in press). Frankenberg (1993) notes that a “key aspect of white women’s fear of Black men has to do with the persistent, racist image of the Black man as rapist,” a stereotype that has historically been used for larger political and social domination (p. 61).

Despite my work to reflect on race and consider my own racism, I know I am not immune to this potent, harmful construction of African American men. When I talked with Luke about intimidation, then, this history was surely present in my experience as a white woman. Let me be clear that Mr. Johnson never did or said anything to me that made me think he was threatening me. Rather, I recognize that I was responding to something bigger than our own words and actions, something not tied to his behavior but larger discourses of othering and African American men. I felt intimidated and somewhat vulnerable, sensing that he had a great deal of power. To this exchange I brought not only my own personal history with Mr. Johnson but also the larger sociopolitical context.

Next during Luke’s interview, I talked with him about how he felt about Mr. Johnson’s question. As I did so, I imagined how tongue-tied I might have been if I were directly confronted by him in this way, also remembering how I tried to respond to Mr. Johnson’s concerns about my research. Luke noted that he felt dismissed by Mr. Johnson’s challenge, yet asserted that the power difference did not play a part.

Jill: I would think that would be hard, to be like confronted by your principal, like that!
Luke: Mm, yeah. Well, I don’t know. When he’s sitting down there in that conversation though, like, I—I think it is better not to look at him as like your principal, just as like a participant in the discussion,

Jill: Mmm-hmm.

Luke: just like, you know, kind of treat him like a kid. (Interview, 5-3-08)

Luke stated that he did what Mr. Johnson wanted him to (and vocalized in the other class): to see him as an equal, a learner. He said that his experience of the conversation was quite different from my interpretation of what it could be. The physical place of Mr. Johnson (sitting down in the circle with all of the participants), his colloquial language (“you guys,” “you know,” “uh”), and, perhaps, the relationships he had built with students throughout their time at the school all may have helped create Luke’s interpretation of the experience—helped Luke “kind of treat him like a kid.”

Hearing Luke characterize Mr. Johnson’s status in this way and reflecting further later helped me comprehend some of the ways that my positioning impacted how I understood Luke’s and Mr. Johnson’s comments. As a result, my initial perception shifted somewhat, though I admit that part of me still remains defensive about and uncomfortable with Mr. Johnson’s response. This situation reiterates some of the dilemmas of qualitative research related to power, privilege, and identity catalogued in chapter 1. As a researcher, I found it impossible to analyze this interaction without considering, as Williams (1996) puts it, the “implications of who [I am] … in relation to what … [I was] doing, asking, and observing” (p. 73).

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Yet my reaction to this exchange is only one aspect of the tensions it raised. Following Luke’s and Mr. Johnson’s statements, other students entered the conversation to refocus the discussion on race (Mr. Johnson remained silent). Al commented,

This [circle] doesn’t have anything to do with your religion. This is talking about—ok, maybe, like if you were Jewish, like, is someone really going to come and like stalk you in a store because you’re Jewish? … I mean they’re not, they’re not going to think about “Oh, this person goes to a different place, uh, for prayers and everything.” And they’re not going to come and do that because you’re put into this group of people with power.

Al explained that religion was different from skin color in that it was not immediately apparent to others. He used the example of racial profiling while shopping, something a number of students of color said happened to them. He stated that because of their whiteness, students like him and Luke were accorded greater power. Manhattan corroborated Al’s point, remarking that if “people ask you whether you’re Jewish or not … you don’t have to say that you are. Black people and people of color can’t just say, ‘Oh, no. I’m a white person, actually.’ They’re not going to believe that” (Audio file, 2-6-08). Manhattan described how someone might choose whether or not to identify her religious identity, but her racial appearance could not be hidden.

These statements revealed that some students were willing to move the discussion away from the salience of religion. However, several Jewish students took issue with Manhattan’s and Al’s observations (John, the Jehovah’s Witness who had originally raised the issue, did not participate again). Luke responded by saying that he understood that his Judaism was not obvious on the outside, but Gordon and Danny
(another white, Jewish boy) returned to Luke’s first comment: that being Jewish was a primary facet of their identity, which set them apart, positioned them as different.

Gordon asked Al if he was saying that Jews had never been singled out and targeted before, ostensibly referring to anti-Semitic persecution. (Al did not have a chance to respond to this question, as other students entered the conversation.) Danny observed that his own “brownish, dark curly hair and a large nose … fit, like, perfectly into a stereotype” (Audio file, 2-6-08), refuting Manhattan’s claim that religious identity is not visible. Thus while some students were willing and able to recenter race, a number of Jewish students revealed the sensitive nature of this issue.

Fairclough (2001) explains that all texts—in this case, a spoken conversation—can be examined in terms of intertextual context:

participants in any discourse operate on the basis of assumptions about which previous (series of) discourses the current one is connected to, and their assumptions determine what can be taken as given in the sense of part of common experience, what can be alluded to, disagreed with, and so on. (p. 121).

One way in which this part of the “Race Discussions” must be considered is given the intertextual context of the historical association between African Americans and Jewish Americans, given that two of the strong challenges to Luke’s statement came from African American participants, Manhattan and Mr. Johnson.

Though the history of African and Jewish American interaction is a complicated one, the two groups share some bonds. Both, despite their diverse origins, have been reified as a monolithic entity, unjustly stereotyped and oppressed. Race was a socially constructed category used to define and marginalize Jewish Americans and African
Americans in opposition to the dominant white Anglo-Saxon culture. As a result, both groups sought to fight this essentializing: “Jews shared with Blacks the goal of proving that race has no basis in biological fact and existed only as a sociological concept” (Diner, 1997, p. 90). Historical events forged political and social ties between African Americans and American Jews, connections built in “political, philanthropic, and civil rights endeavors,” in “organizations like the NAACP and the Urban League, on the boards of Black schools, colleges, and social service agencies, and in outreach projects and unions” (Diner, 1997, p. 93; also see Weiss, 1997).

Historians have also written about Jewish traditions that led to alliance with African Americans’ civil rights interests. Jewish Americans saw in the experience of African Americans parallels to their own and their relatives’ experiences of subjugation; for example, the Yiddish press compared Russian and Polish pogroms to southern lynchings (Buhle & Kelley, 1997). During this period, many Jews did not only condemn slavery, but publicly and specifically linked themselves and their history and fate with that of Blacks. Jews and Blacks, they declared, shared a field of understanding and a common political agenda. Employing the resonant words and graphic imagery of Jewish life … Jews claimed to understand Blacks better than did other Americans. (Diner, 1997, p. 89)

Immigrant Jews also tended to be strongly influenced by socialism and committed to the labor movement, both of which “creat[ed] a world view in which Blacks were objects of sympathy rather than hate, potential allies rather than foes, people who could be helped and who could make Jews feel good for having helped them” (Kaufman,
As a result, a considerable number of Jewish Americans “prided themselves” on employing and renting to African Americans “when no one else would” (Kaufman, 1997, p. 109).

However, some historians have pointed out that not all Jewish Americans felt or acted on these bonds. For the most part, Southern Jews, often isolated and small in number, tended to remain silent on racial issues (Silverman, 1997). Greenberg (1997) argues that Jewish Americans were initially sometimes reluctant to jeopardize their “already tenuous position” (p. 157) by allying with another marginalized group. Scholars have also written about the ways in which the story of American Jews is one of assimilation (Silverman, 1997). As a result, some Jews adopted racism right along with other American ‘values’ (Kaufman, 1997).

Despite the exceptions, at times mutual self-interest cemented a link between American Jews and African Americans. Holding up the treatment of African Americans as an example of what could happen to them in a worst-case scenario, Jewish organizations worked for the cause of racial justice, seeing “the opportunity to promote a broader message of tolerance and anti-bigotry that would challenge anti-Semitism as it would racism” (Greenberg, 1997, p. 159; also see Diner, 1997). As totalitarianism spread in Europe, some African American organizations allied with Jewish groups against the threat. The rise of fascism caused many African Americans to make parallels between Hitler’s scapegoating of the Jews and race relations in the United States (Greenberg, 1997).
By and large, however, African American responses to Jewish offers of solidarity and assistance were mixed. Diner (1997) explains how American Jews sometimes served as a model for African Americans:

Black educators, ministers, writers, and orators held up the noble image of the Jews. Jews, they maintained, had succeeded because they banded together, they lived cleanly, they saved their money, they used their intellect, and they never abandoned those left behind. In short, several generations of Black leaders told the masses of recently emancipated slaves and their immediate descendants struggling with poverty and oppression: Be like the Jews. (p. 88)

Some members of the black press argued that “Blacks should pin their political future on an alliance with Jews, who were both powerful and sympathetic to the struggle for equal rights” (Diner, 1997, p. 93). Other African Americans, though, asserted that Jewish Americans were lucky compared to people of color and had nothing to complain about, rejecting the comparison of anti-Semitism to racism (Diner, 1997).

Day-to-day contact between African and Jewish Americans was common, and Greenberg (1997) points out that the close proximity between the two groups “both improved relations and exacerbated tensions” (p. 156). In the early 20th century, many interacted closely with one another: “at the backs of hundreds of peddlers’ wagons, across the counters of rural and urban stores, and in union meetings in the needle trades industry” (Diner, 1997, p. 88). In some cities (including the North Side of Minneapolis), Jewish and African Americans shared the same urban neighborhoods (Diner, 1997). Yet African Americans rarely competed with Jewish Americans for similar jobs, as they did with Italian and Irish immigrants and their descendants (Diner, 1997). The most
frequent contact between African Americans and Jewish Americans was in small business, with Jewish store owners maintaining businesses patronized by African Americans.

Because of these associations, as well as the involvement of Jews in social service professions like education and social work, Jewish and African Americans often interacted while occupying different places of power. African Americans were customers, students, clients—those with less clout and fewer resources. Greenberg (1997) points out that Jews “entered more often into hierarchical economic relations with African Americans, sowing the seeds for resentment based on class” (p. 156). As Buhle and Kelley (1997) explain,

The shift of many thousands of Jews from the industrial working class to the regions of lower middle-class professionals (prototypically teachers and social workers) inevitably emphasized a degree of meritocratic personal advance along with whatever benefits unionization and politically based expansion of government agencies could bring. Even in the most caring professions, individuals found themselves enmeshed in a system whose ‘objectivity’ promoted a subtle favoritism. (p. 212)

Many African Americans resented the fact that their contact “almost always put Blacks one step below Jews on the urban economic ladder,” and “bristled at the patronizing attitude that seemed to lurk behind every act of generosity” of Jewish Americans (Kaufman, 1997, p. 109). Although Diner (1997) warns that “observations by Black political activists about the stranglehold of Jewish stores on Black neighborhoods need to be taken with caution” (p. 98), it is still true that African Americans did frequent
many Jewish-owned businesses. Often there was no alternative—no African American-owned establishments in urban spaces (Diner, 1997). As a result, many “Blacks linked all small business, and indeed almost all exploitive economic relationships, to Jews” (Diner, 1997, p. 101).

Jewish and African Americans’ socioeconomic interests increasingly moved apart as the 20th century wore on. As immigrants in the late 1800s and early 1900s, most Jews came from European cities, unlike African Americans, who largely migrated from the rural South (Greenberg, 1997). As Greenberg (1997) indicates, the “combination of better skills and lesser discrimination brought most Jews more quickly out of the ranks of the poorest urbanites, and increased class differences between the two groups” (p. 155). As Jewish Americans moved into the middle and upper classes, “anti-Semitism retreated into fewer strongholds more on the periphery of society,” and “Jews as a group began moving rightward politically” (Greenberg, 1997, p. 167).

The forms of discrimination experienced by African Americans and Jewish Americans diverged more and more. American “anti-Semitism had declined far more quickly than had racism, and what remained was primarily social and non-governmental” (Greenberg, 1997, p. 165). On the other hand, racism remained firmly rooted in the law and in economic practice. Thus Jewish groups concerned about continued bigotry did not look to the legal or court system for change, but rather spent increasing amounts of effort in public relations or propaganda work: encouraging materials that highlighted tolerance and diversity. Although Jewish groups argued that these materials benefited African Americans as well, since the message was broadly construed, racism was in fact
far less responsive to such techniques, and in any case the central problems of racism lay in the deep structures of society rather than solely in the minds of individuals. Institutional racism had to be tackled in very different ways.

(Greenberg, 1997, p. 166)

Despite their shared vision of justice, political, social, and community organizations therefore found themselves dealing with different problems by the middle of the 20th century; “at the forefront for Black agencies were issues such as physical violence, exclusion from skilled and white-collar work, denial of political rights, and segregation,” while “Jewish groups focused more on social discrimination, restrictions on employment and in higher education, and immigration quotas” (Greenberg, 1997, p. 155). Thus Jewish and African Americans’ approaches to fighting social injustice strayed further apart.

By mid-century, political rifts between the two groups were readily apparent. A number of Jewish groups became more and more uneasy about changes occurring in the civil rights movement, including African Americans’ increasing public criticism of the Democratic party, the Vietnam War, and colonialism (a stance that moved some African Americans to side with Palestine) (Greenberg, 1997; Carson, 1997). Some Jewish Americans were uncomfortable with demonstrations and marches, which were reminiscent of the fascists’ appeal to mob mentality (Greenberg, 1997). The adoption of “Black Power” as a guiding principle alienated many young Jewish Americans who had been an important part of the civil rights movement (Buhle & Kelley, 1997). Another point of conflict was Israel (although Rubin [1997] cautions against overgeneralizing here). While there were exceptions, Israel’s occupation of the Suez Canal in 1956, the
country's policies toward the Middle East, and its ties to a South African regime that enforced apartheid all were points of contention for many Black Nationalists (Buhle & Kelley, 1997).

The decline of urban neighborhoods once dominated by Jews, Kaufman (1997) argues, drove “yet another wedge” between the groups (p. 117). As he explains,

By the 1970s America’s cities had come to represent the very different way the American dream had worked for Blacks and Jews. America’s cities had worked for Jews. They had arrived as immigrants, gone to public schools and colleges, lived in city neighborhoods, and climbed up the economic ladder of success through civil service jobs and jobs in the private sector. But cities had not worked for many Blacks. Increasingly many Blacks remained trapped in ghettos, unable to break through to prosperity. (p. 117)

As once-Jewish city neighborhoods became ravaged by poverty and crime, some Jewish Americans had trouble seeing or understanding the ways that these blights could be directly and indirectly traced to the oppression of urban African American residents.

By this point, it “became clear” that “the most basic visions of the two communities conflicted” (Greenberg, 1997, p. 166). Many African Americans no longer trusted in the good will of the courts, the legislature, and liberal whites; they believed that only mass, concentrated action had brought any civil rights advances, and the only way to progress was with similar or more extreme measures, including quota-based affirmative action and African American entrepreneurial self-support (Buhle & Kelley, 1997). In contrast, Jewish Americans “held tenaciously to the ideal of a race-blind society, and viewed nationalism and race-based solutions to the problem of inequality
as a dangerous undermining of that ideal” (Greenberg, 1997, p. 167). American Jews and African Americans increasingly struggled to find common ground.

In the late 20\textsuperscript{th} and early 21\textsuperscript{st} centuries, instances of African American anti-Semitism and Jewish racism continued to make the news. The inflammatory words of Nation of Islam leaders like Louis Farrakhan, violence in Crown Heights and Harlem, the Million Man March—these and many other examples of tension between the two groups have received extensive media coverage, often sensationalistic in its slant.

While there were no direct references to these events or the historical relations between Jewish and African Americans during the “Race Discussions” week, the weight of the past undoubtedly came to bear on the conversation. Though Mr. Johnson did not enter the discussion again, his, Manhattan’s, and other students’ statements point to this complex relationship. Luke’s desire to enter his marginalization as a Jewish person into the conversation was met with resistance. Some participants seemed impatient with Luke’s (and other Jewish students’) insistence that his Judaism was as prominent as, if not more salient than, his race. This eagerness to move on echoes the consensus that anti-Semitism has not been as pervasive and dangerous in American history as racism. Luke’s comment could have been taken up as a potential connection, something that might have helped him understand racial oppression better. Instead, such a link was dismissed, as Mr. Johnson and some students seemed keen to return the conversation to skin color—which was, indeed, the most public, prominent identity marker in this context. Without the history of complicated relations between Jewish and African Americans, however, this tension may not have emerged so quickly.
Luke and I each got to explore our responses to this interaction, in talking and in writing. However, I recognize again that it would have been valuable to interview Mr. Johnson and discuss the exchange with him. The complexity of this kind of work—this potent mess of race, religion, power, and history—makes it difficult to achieve understanding, difficult even to hear from everyone involved. This kind of research (and this type of teaching) is, in some senses, impossible.

Still, let us return to Luke.

Whiteness and Judaism

Responding to his downplaying of his whiteness, some might argue that Luke was simply resisting examining his own privilege. They would maintain that he is typical of whites who do not want to admit that race is a real problem. As discussed in chapter 2, numerous studies have found that many white people rely on prevailing discourses to gloss over issues of racism. And Luke did struggle at times to see the significance of the unearned skin color privilege he enjoyed.

Revisiting the issue during the next day’s discussion, Luke stated,

What I wanted to say, when people had said that yesterday, that I could you know like, go into, a store or something and have people not know that I was Jewish. But what I wanted to say in response to that was it’s not something that would be easy for me to do. Because there were people, Jews in the Holocaust, who looked—who had Aryan features, like me. And they could get by and say, “I’m not Jewish, you know, I’m—I fit under, I fit the bill.” But those people weren’t happy. Like, if you’re gonna kinda sell, what’s about you out, like that?
I don’t think that—you can’t be happy. So, if I were to just get by on, my race, I
would feel kinda like I was not true, to myself. (Audio file, 2-6-09)

Luke returned to the idea that it would be difficult for him to ignore what he saw as a
strong part of his identity, his Judaism. Marshaling the tragedy of the Holocaust, Luke
reminded his classmates of the historical horrors of anti-Semitism and how hiding his
religion would not feel right to him.

Yet it is also true that Luke experiences skin color privilege due to his
whiteness. When he claimed that “if I were to just get by on, my race, I would feel
kinda like I was not true, to myself,” he located white privilege as some kind of a
choice, something that he could actively reject. He could choose to ‘pass’ as a white
Christian, but felt that would be an inner betrayal. In this way, Luke still had some work
to do in understanding the impact race has on his everyday life. Skin color privilege is
not an option, something he could decide not to partake in.

However, Luke did make a relevant point about his minority status. Later in the
week of “Race Discussions,” Luke explained,

what I identify with, just like as my group, I identify as white, for sure, but that
doesn’t come before identifying as a Jew. Because, like, my ancestors did die for
that. And that is something stronger to me. Than, you know? Whatever else.
‘Cause, my mom’s side of the family, that’s like my cultural connection. And
that’s how I culturally identify myself.

Luke asserted the primacy of his Jewish identity over his skin color. He noted that
though he agreed that his whiteness is a part of his character, the fact that he had
relatives who were persecuted and killed due to their Judaism caused his cultural identification to be, most strongly, his religion.

When I interviewed Luke later, he elaborated on his difficulty with being positioned as a white person whose identity corresponded with the dominant culture, referring back to the “Because of my Race or Color” chart.

Luke: Oh, I remember in that circle activity, feeling kind of like, I think I scored like a 108 out of 115, and I’m sure if you asked Mr. Evans or Mr. Ramsey they would say, “Yeah. You should have scored 115.” And I probably—actually I do remember one question where it was saying, do you think you can find your cultural foods in a—just a store. And, I don’t know how I’m supposed to take that. Like, that my cultural foods have to be like lefse, and like, lutefisk, like,

Jill: Mmm-hmm, mm-hmm!

Luke: but that’s not what they are! (Interview, 5-3-08)

Luke rejected the notion that the practices of his culture were easily visible and practiced as the norm in this Midwestern metropolitan area. He identified less with the ethnic background that dominates the state—Scandinavian—and more with his religion. It is, in fact, more difficult to find traditional Jewish foods in this region than the Norwegian and Swedish staples he named above. This was another example of how our hybrid, shifting, multiple identities can make critical pedagogy difficult.

Thus Luke’s reaction was more complex than simple resistance. His words here and later indicate that he did not discount the importance of the task or the need to
examine race. In some ways, too, his Jewish identity did put Luke (and other Jewish students) in a unique position.

What seemed to be more significant to Luke was conveying his frustration about being positioned as white first and foremost—a positioning that was, in fact, largely the point of the white privilege exercise. In his interview, Luke went on to say,

Luke: ‘Cause, you know. What he said was like, “Are you saying this is some special thing for white people.”

Jill: Right, mm-hmm.

Luke: And I was like, “No, but it’s special for Jewish people,” and it’s special, for anyone, who has something like that

Jill: Mmm-hmm.

Luke: like a minority religion, or, you know, sexuality, whatever.

Jill: Mmm-hmm!

Luke: So, I was just, they asked us what our experience was, and I shared it and just kinda felt shot down.

Jill: Yeah.

Luke: You know?

Jill: Yeah. (Interview, 5-3-08)

Here, Luke’s recollection of events was slightly different from what actually occurred. At that point, the teachers had not in fact asked students to discuss their experience of filling out the survey, what it felt like for them, though they did ask that question later in the week. Rather, they had asked students what they noticed about the racial pattern of the circle. Luke said he was merely responding with an honest explanation of his
‘truth’ (that problematic term again), and that anyone with a “minority” identity marker might feel the same. As a result, he felt a sense of rejection when Mr. Johnson challenged his statement.

Luke fluctuated between asserting the uniqueness of the Jewish experience and a desire to universalize the situation to that of any marginalized group. Certainly a strong case can be made that Jewish Americans have occupied a distinct place in the social hierarchy. In the United States (and elsewhere), Jewish people have often been defined by their Jewishness first and foremost. As Davis (1997) puts it, individual Jews have been “homogenized and reified as a ‘race’—a race responsible for crucifying the Savior, for resisting the dissemination of God’s word, for manipulating … world markets, and for spreading the evils of both capitalism and communist revolution” (p. 66). Jewish people have faced bias and persecution throughout history.

American Jews experienced a particular trajectory through the U.S. social hierarchy. In Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigration and the Alchemy of Race, Jacobson (1998) traces how “the racial character of Jewishness in the New World ebbed and flowed over time” (p. 171). In the early days of the American colonies, difference was marked less by any physical perception of race, but rather by religion. Jewish Americans’ “status was characterized by a general state of toleration disrupted only by occasional anti-Semitic outbursts” (Jacobson, 1998, p. 177). Until the second half of the nineteenth century, most American Jews were perceived as white.

It was only after the Civil War that “overt depictions of the Jew as a racial Other rose sharply” (Jacobson, 1998, p. 178). Because of their presence throughout Europe, Jacobson (1998) explains that immigrant Jews were viewed “as somewhat anomalous,”
putting strain “upon the ideas of consanguinity and race which undergirded emergent European nationalisms” (p. 179). As Judaism gradually came to be accepted as a racial category in the U.S., sentiment about Jewish Americans was often negative, but not all visions of ‘the Jewish race’ were harmful. Jacobson (1998) explains that American Jews themselves “embraced race as a basis for unity” more and more (p. 184). In response to pogroms and challenges to their rights, “new secular and political notions of Jewish peoplehood” were engendered (Jacobson, 1998, p. 184).

However, the identification of Jews as a racial group was problematized when Nazi ideology began to take hold. Jacobson (1998) explains that “World War II and the revelations of the horrors of Nazi Germany were in fact part of what catapulted American Hebrews into the community of Caucasians in the mid-twentieth century” (p. 187). After the Holocaust, the “feverish and self-conscious revision of ‘the Jewish race’ was at the very heart of the scientific project to rethink the ‘race concept’ in general,” and “the racial devastation in Germany … was largely responsible for the mid-century ascendance of ‘ethnicity’” (Jacobson, 1998, p. 188). As Jacobson (1998) explains, the Jews’ version of becoming Caucasian cannot be understood apart from their particular history of anti-Semitism in Western culture, apart from anti-Semitic stereotypes that date back well before the European arrival on North American shores, or apart, finally and most obviously, from the historic cataclysm of the Holocaust. (p. 172)

Because of their long history of oppression, notions of race and identity are problematic for Jewish Americans.
Other social changes contributed to the shift in perception of Jewish Americans’ racial position. Jacobson (1998) explains that “Postwar prosperity and postindustrial shifts in the economy … tended to disperse Jews geographically, either to outlying suburbs or toward sunbelt cities like Los Angeles and Miami … to places where whiteness itself eclipsed Jewishness in racial salience” (p. 188). In addition, “racially tilted policies” like the GI Bill of Rights and Federal Housing Authority practices that privileged whites in suburban housing loans cemented Jewish Americans’ place in the (white) suburbs (Jacobson, 1998, p. 188). As the greatest divide became the color line, and “the steady but certain ascendance of Jim Crow as the pressing political issue of the day brought the ineluctable logic of the South’s white-black binary into play with new force in national life,” Jews were gradually constructed as white people (Jacobson, 1998, p. 188). By the second half of the twentieth century, Jacobson (1998) asserts, if anti-Semitism had been a ‘mask for privilege’ in the decades before the 1940s, then the racial revision of Jewishness into Caucasian whiteness would become the invisible mask of Jewish privilege in the decades after the 1940s. (Jews, for instance, would move in next door to Gentiles in the suburban neighborhoods that Federal Housing Authority policy so vigilantly preserved for members of ‘the same social and racial classes.’ If Jewishness never faded altogether as a social distinction, it did fade considerably in these years as a racial one.) (p. 197)

Further, Jewish (and other groups’) adoption into whiteness did not occur in a vacuum, but directly and adversely affected people of color. Jacobson (1998) argues that any comparison of a European immigrant group’s experiences to that of African
Americans is “facile”: “It is not just that various white immigrant groups’ economic successes came at the expense of nonwhites, but that they owe their now stabilized and broadly recognized whiteness *itself* in part to these nonwhite groups” (p. 9). (This is not to say, of course, that ‘whitening’ did not come at a price: Thandeka [2001], Jacobson [1998], Roediger [1991], and many others have documented the ways in which “becoming white” have harmed individuals and groups such as Jewish Americans, though I will not go into depth on white shame and self-contempt here.)

Thus Luke, Mr. Johnson, and I occupy a historical period in which Jewish people in American society have been established as whites, not people of color. Yet their history also holds a strong identification by themselves and others as a distinct group, one with a history of facing intolerance. As Jacobson (1998) asks, “the question is not *are* they white, nor even how white are they, but how have they been both white and Other? What have been the historical terms of their probationary whiteness?” (p. 176). Luke’s desire to claim a Jew-first identity had roots in that questionable status.

Towards the end of his interview, I asked Luke if he had anything else he wanted to share about his experiences in this school. He said he wanted to tell a story about anti-Semitism: in 7th grade, another student told him that he “liked to put Jews in the oven.” When Luke confronted him, the student claimed that he was talking about the candy Ju-Ju-Bes. Luke complained to the administration, and the offending student was called up to the office, but not suspended. Luke questioned the role that race played in this situation.

Luke: I can’t help but wonder, *if* that had been a white student saying that about a black student?
Jill: Mm-hmm.

Luke: If, they would have been suspended.

Jill: Mm-hmm.

Luke: ‘Cause, it *is* pretty—we *don’t* really talk about modern anti-Semitism in class here, and it *is* something that I think is very real. Uh—I just wish they would branch out into more areas. Not even just anti-Semitism, but like other than racism. (Interview, 5-3-08)

Luke questioned how seriously anti-Jewish prejudice was taken in school, wondering if a racist remark would have been punished more severely than this anti-Semitic one.

While by the time of the interview, Luke and his classmates had completed an extensive unit on the Holocaust, he felt that greater attention needed to be paid to other present-day forms of bias, including modern anti-Semitism. This statement could have grown out of Mr. Johnson’s and other students’ comments during the “Race Discussions,” which he may have perceived as a dismissal of prejudice against Jewish people.

While Luke’s comment again raised the issue of the hierarchy of oppression, it also related to his earlier explanation of his primary cultural connection, his Jewishness. Luke’s words remind us of the centrality of the Holocaust in Jewish identity, which leaves traces that we can see throughout the “Race Discussions” as well as in the historical relationship between Jewish and African Americans. As Salzman (1997) observes, one justification given for common ground between the two groups is a shared history of oppression that can be traced back to the Bible. Yet, as Salzman (1997) observes, this connection “makes little sense in the United States”:
Religious Blacks may have used the Old Testament as a source of inspiration for their own travails, but neither the story of Exodus nor the Jewish experience of voluntary immigration to the United States can be meaningfully compared to the way slavery has defined the lives of African Americans in this country. (pp. 5-6)

Though the groups do share some parallel historical experiences, Salzman (1997) shows how they also diverge considerably. Further, “for many Jews (myself included), however, it is not the story told in Exodus but the Holocaust in Europe that serves to define their Jewishness” (Salzman, 1997, p. 6).

Salzman’s (1997) statement rings true for Luke, who had relatives directly involved in the Holocaust; his Jewishness was inescapably linked to the catastrophe. And that fact could have served to divide him from his classmates. As Salzman (1997) points out, the centering of the Holocaust has frequently led to an insistence on the singularity of that atrocity. The determination of the Nazis to systematically exterminate the Jewish people has made that event different from other atrocities. But not all people accept the uniqueness of the Holocaust; not all people believe the Holocaust should be singled out from other holocausts. For some African Americans—noted television host Tony Brown, for example—there have been numerous holocausts. To particularize one atrocity over others is to suggest that what happened to Jews was more horrific than the onslaught against American Indians or the ravages of the Middle Passage and slavery. For the Holocaust to be singled out by the creation of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum
on federal land was to make clear just how much financial and political power Jews had managed to attain. (p. 6)

As Salzman (1997) remarks later, “All of this, of course, could only lead to the inevitable foolishness of comparative victimization” (p. 6). Despite the fact that Mr. Evans and Mr. Ramsey tried to acknowledge that there are multiple forms of injustice, with none more important than others, students could not help but feel the need to make comparisons and judgments at times. The fact that this significant part of the curriculum was focuses solely on race signaled its import to the teachers.

Salzman (1997) discusses the effects of the Holocaust deniers, “a small group of pseudo-historians and right-wing fanatics who contended that the Holocaust never took place” (p. 6). While it was easy for many Americans to dismiss these attacks as extremist and completely unfounded, Salzman (1997) says that the assault stirred up great fear among Jewish Americans:

What many non-Jews, Blacks and whites alike, were unable to appreciate fully was not only the extraordinary emotional tie Jews had to the memory of Auschwitz, Buchenwald, Bergen-Belsen, Treblinka, and the other camps of nightmare, but the fear and concern many Jews had that another pogrom was indeed possible—even in the United States. That fear, irrational though it may be, cannot be underestimated. (p. 6)

As Salzman (1997) points out, the ways that the Holocaust has shaped and continues to shape Jewish consciousness run deep, creating suspicion and sensitivity in many communities. We can see the ways that Luke’s Jewish identity, including his connection
to the Holocaust, influenced his experiences at Metro Arts School and his thoughts and contributions to the “Race Discussions.”

On the other hand, likely in response to Mr. Johnson’s question of whether or not his case should be considered “special,” Luke also tried to claim that any marginalized religion might have similar unique experiences. Luke commented, “And I was like, ‘No, but it’s special for Jewish people,’ and it’s special, for anyone, who has something like that, like a minority religion, or, you know, sexuality, whatever” (Interview, 5-3-08). Here Luke maintained that he actually agreed with Mr. Johnson’s statement, that it can be difficult for any minority group to ignore that “special” part of themselves. He commented that any minority might feel the same difficulty in separating out parts of their identities. Jacobson (1998) points out that “an earlier generation of Americans saw Celtic, Hebrew, Anglo-Saxon, or Mediterranean physiognomies where today we see only subtly varying shades of a mostly undifferentiated whiteness” (p. 10), so in some senses, the Jewish experience was indeed similar to other racial or ethnic groups. In addition, Luke’s identification of “minority” identifies groups that likely experience oppression due to their deviance from the ‘norm.’

Further, I imagine that is not by chance that Luke here discussed “you know, sexuality, whatever.” He alluded to another aspect of his identity; while he did not come out to me, I had the sense all year that he was gay, and Mr. Ramsey confirmed my conclusion. Like his religion, Luke’s sexuality was a part of his identity that was only semi-public. He could choose whether or not to reveal these parts of himself, unlike his
skin color. Yet they marked him as different and caused him to experience discrimination, bias that he felt keenly and seemed to want acknowledged.

This issue is one the students and teachers struggled with throughout the curriculum. Through their focus on race, Mr. Evans and Mr. Ramsey wanted to expose sociocultural, institutional forces that are most often hidden, especially to students of this age. They mentioned a few times that there is no hierarchy of oppression, acknowledging that there are many other forms of discrimination that need to be addressed. Yet for students like Luke, who experienced bias that went largely unexamined in this particular curriculum, there was tension.

Mr. Evans and Mr. Ramsey told me, before the discussions began, that Jewish students often found it difficult to see themselves only in terms of their race. The reaction of Jewish students to their positioning as white is something that needs to be unpacked in greater depth—particularly given that it was a pattern in the teachers’ work and not just an instance that occurred with this particular group. Though Mr. Evans and Mr. Ramsey believed that they addressed and worked to counteract this matter better later, in the extended study of the Holocaust, it might be productive to anticipate this difficulty and address it before students complete the “Because of my Race or Color” chart. Some understanding of the history of American Jews, and perhaps their relationship with African Americans, might inform Jewish students’ discernment of their ethnic and racial identity.

Multiple Stories, Difficult Questions
An important reason for looking at the interaction between Luke and Mr. Johnson (and my conception of it) is that it brings to the forefront the myriad layers of story that happen in any such situation. There are multiple truths, multiple experiences, multiple lenses that we can use to try to make some sense of what happened here. The ways in which I experienced this conversation were shaped by my identities as a white, female, middle class, heterosexual, able-bodied researcher and former teacher. Luke’s experience was influenced by his religion as well as his race and sexuality, among other factors. Both his and Mr. Johnson’s remarks were evocative of the at times uneasy relationship between African Americans and American Jews.

This work, and this conversation in particular, raises big questions. Are Jews white above all else? Is it easy for any of us to parse our identities? Is there a racial or religious group that can claim a unique status as more oppressed? Is this type of critical multicultural pedagogy—and research around it—too difficult, too scary and uncontrollable?

There are no easy answers to these questions. If my writing here, and in the rest of these chapters, has not made clear what I think, I will spell it out here.

Yes. This work is messy, dangerous, threatening. Sometimes it fails. Teachers and students (and principals and researchers?) make mistakes. We are upset and disturbed. We are angered. We are frustrated. We don’t know if we are saying, doing, living the right thing.

But the alternative is far worse. To not talk about race and culture. To gloss over issues of difference and injustice. To accept things the way they are. To continue
teaching in safe, predictable ways that reproduce the gross inequities in American society.

At some point, you just have to decide to take it on.

I believe it’s worth it.
Conclusion

“Ours is not the task of fixing the entire world all at once, but of stretching out to mend the part of the world that is within our reach.” (Estés, 2003, ¶ 8)

A Summary

In this study I was guided by questions about what happened when race and culture are centered in a diverse middle school classroom, how these issues were addressed pedagogically, and how different individuals reacted to discussions of race and racism. I wanted to find out about the possibilities that emerged in these new spaces as well as the problems that surfaced when issues of race, culture, power, and privilege were taken up.

I found that that these issues need to be intentionally integrated into teachers’ and students’ work. In chapter 3, I showed how Mr. Evans and Mr. Ramsey carefully scaffolded their curriculum. Because other attempts at critical multiculturalism are often isolated—reading a few texts by people of color, or studying issues in a detached unit—they do not necessarily achieve the goals of interrogating power and privilege or empowering students to work for social justice. It is important to recognize the structure that makes these discussions possible.

I also found that Mr. Evans’ and Mr. Ramsey’s objectives—to have students practice talking about race; to give students of color a forum for sharing their experiences with racism; to facilitate students’ understanding of white privilege; and to help students develop the language and skills of anti-racism—were achieved for many
students. In chapter 4, I explored how students responded to the curriculum, particularly the “Race Discussions.” The majority of students noted that their conversations about race and racism were quite significant to their learning. African American and bi/multi-racial students tended to react positively, valuing the chance to discuss race and racism with their white peers and share personal stories of discrimination. The responses of Latino, Asian American, and white students were more varied, ranging from resistance to the idea of white privilege, to feelings of exclusion and guilt, to the acceptance of responsibility and an inspiration to work for social justice. In this chapter, I also discussed some of the challenges of this work, including the emergence of a black-white paradigm, difficulty with the “Speak your truth” agreement, struggles over the role of the teacher in critical pedagogy, and conflict over the place of emotion in discussion.

Finally, I found that as a qualitative researcher, I needed to remember how multiple positionings—of myself and my participants—shaped what we experienced. In chapter 5, I examined an interaction among Luke, Mr. Johnson, and me, taking a closer look in order to illustrate the complexities and difficulties of teaching, learning about, and researching matters of race, culture, power, and identity. There are multiple ways this discussion could be interpreted, none with a claim to absolute truth. The complicated relationship between Jewish and African Americans, the racially uncertain place of U.S. Jews, discourses of othering and of the stereotyped African American man, and the ways that our identity markers shifted and were complicated all left traces in the exchange.

*What I Learned*
I embarked on this study in the hopes of gleaning insights that I could share with my students, future secondary English teachers. As my own attempts to productively take up matters of race, power, privilege, and culture had met with varying degrees of success, I wanted to understand how these 8th grade teachers worked with their students to tackle these matters.

The critical multicultural curriculum and pedagogy described and analyzed here does provide me inspiration in language, ideas, and a historical framework to use to think about these issues. I know I will share with my students how such a curriculum needs to build intentionally. I know I will pass on Manhattan’s comment: that white teachers should not be afraid to raise race in the classroom; most students can and do want to talk about racism. I know that I will emphasize to them the need to address sociocultural forces and the powerful role that students’ own stories can play in facilitating understanding of these institutional systems. I know that I will also be honest with them about the failures of this work, about the places where things got complicated and students were alienated. I will also urge them not to be paralyzed by the difficulties. I know that I will encourage them (and their students) to recognize themselves as activists, potential agents of change.

**Possibilities for Future Research**

I believe that, while Mr. Evans’ and Mr. Ramsey’s classroom was special, it was not the only one out there where meaningful discussions around racism, privilege, and power were occurring. We need more studies on critical multicultural spaces. We need to continue to contribute to the growing research and teaching dialogue around issues of
race, adding to our body of knowledge in order to understand the successes and
dilemmas of this work. We particularly need more of this research with secondary
students.

Personally, I am interested in if and how this type of curriculum and pedagogy
makes a long-term difference to students. Longitudinal studies following students who
have completed something like the 8th grade curriculum at Metro Arts School,
examining how their attitudes toward race shift and impact their daily experiences,
would be fascinating. Do any of these students truly become antiracist leaders? How are
the things they learned influencing them in their futures? Were seeds of change planted
even in students who seemed to resist notions of racism and privilege—did these
discussions engender further learning later on? All of these questions would be valuable
to answer.

Another angle for further research would place greater focus on the teachers. It
would be beneficial to pay more attention to their decision-making, both broadly and
narrowly construed. How does this kind of multicultural work come about? What
influences the choices that critical teachers like these make in their curricula and
pedagogy? How do specific facets of a school—the staff development program, the role
of administrators, the general climate and culture—help facilitate critical multicultural
work? What goes through the teachers’ minds when they have to make difficult
decisions in the midst of a tense discussion? What should be the role of the teacher in
critical pedagogy? Such a study could potentially provide further guidance and
encouragement to teachers and teacher educators.
It is a wet, warm, stormy June evening. I am driving home through the rain, my mind swirling with the evening’s events as the car’s tires whir across the wet pavement.

First: Metro Arts School’s “8th Grade Celebration,” the graduation ceremony for the students I came to know over the course of the year. Students, proudly dressed to the nines, gave speeches; received certificates; performed music, showed films they had created; recited poetry; danced; and sang. Afterward, they spilled out into the school’s foyer, laughing, crying, hugging one another, their teachers, their families, and even me. We gathered in the school cafeteria to eat dessert prepared by the PTA, commemorating the sweetness of the night. Though I had nothing to do with their accomplishments, I couldn’t help but feel a sense of satisfaction about their learning and growth, and mourn their departure from MAS.

Next: the 8th grade teachers and I met at the local bar. We, too, laughed and shared stories. They talked about which students had surprised them tonight by giving knock-out performances. Which students had grown over the course of the year. Which students they were excited to hear from as they moved on to high school. Which students they were sorry didn’t make it, or that they didn’t connect with. We drank beer, talked about summer plans, teased one another. They told me that when I was ready to get a “real job” again, I should come join them.

I am humbled at the generosity of these teachers and students, their opening their classrooms and lives up to my scrutiny. I am daunted by the task of trying to represent them on these pages. I am honored that they were willing to give me the chance to do so. It is my hope that some of the respect and admiration I feel towards the
staff and students at Metro Arts School is conveyed in this work. Despite the difficulties and conflicts, what happened in the 8th grade classroom at MAS was important. It was significant for all of our learning about how and why race has mattered in the United States, helping us to consider some things we might do to fix the grievous injustice perpetuated in our country. All of these thoughts run through my head on my drive home in the rain.

As I pull into my driveway, I think of my son asleep upstairs, his small body sprawled across the sheets, his mouth slightly open as he breathes the deep breaths of sleep. I wonder what school will hold for him, how his life will unfold. I cannot protect him from pain or heartache; I cannot ensure that he will live in a fair and just world. I can only hope that he learns from mistakes, that he is generous and forgiving and grateful, that he works for good in his life. I know that John and I will continue to love, guide, and support him as best we can.

My hope for all children is the same as I hold for JJ. I hope that they will have caring and inspiring teachers like Mr. Ramsey and Mr. Evans, friends and classmates like the engaged and resilient Metro Arts School students during the journey. It is through work like theirs that we may see change.
References


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Clark, K.B., & Clark, M.P. (1939). The development of consciousness of self and the


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Appendix A
Interview Protocol for Students

Tell me about your culture collage. What is your racial and cultural background?

Think back to the week of “Race Discussions.”

What was your experience during that week?
What did you think went well?

Did you sense tensions? If yes, over what?

What was the pledge that you made at the end of that week? Is that something you think you are going to be able to do?

Have your feelings about your own race changed? How about other races?

How do you define race? How do you define culture?

Do you feel like you have an understanding of racism? If yes, explain.

How would you describe institutional racism?

Do you feel that you can personally do anything about racism? If yes, what?
Appendix B
Interview Protocols for Teachers

Formal Interview #1

How do you feel things have been going so far this year?
What do you want students to learn about race and culture in your class?
Have the units you’ve done so far build that? If yes, describe how.
Tell me about the classroom community in your room.
What students are you concerned about at this point in the year?
What students are you excited about or grateful to have in your class?

Formal Interview #2

How do you feel the “Race Discussions” went this year?
What would you say is the overall goal of that unit?
   Is the goal different for white students and students of color?
   Would you say it was achieved?
Moving forward, what do you feel these students need to learn, especially in terms of race/racism?
   Will the upcoming units facilitate that? If yes, how?
Talk about the decision making you have to do during the “Race Discussions.”
How do you know when to step in, when to challenge, when to let go? (ask for an example)

How do you feel about the timing of the “Race Discussions” and the time spent on them?

Tell me about your take on some of the issues that I saw come up: the place of Asian-American students like Rachelle, the Jewish students’ reaction.
Appendix C

Categories

List of the primary categories developed:

- calling students to action
- working together as a class
- fostering respect/community
- students raising issues of race (unprompted by teacher)
- preparing students for intellectual/emotional work (shifting gears)
- fostering critical thinking
- encouraging participation/other voices
- teacher looking for one ‘right’ answer
- frustration with this particular group of students
- role of teacher/difficult decision-making
Appendix D

Culture Quotations
Appendix E

Race in One Culture Collage

The exterior of the collage
Unfolding the collage: the interior
Appendix F

“Because of my Race or Color” Chart

Note: This version of the chart is one that I helped the teachers to revise to make a few of the items more directly applicable to students. The one they used during the class I observed was much the same, but aimed at teachers/adults.

White Privilege
Score 5 if the statement is often true for you.
Score 3 if the statement is sometimes true for you.
Score 0 if the statement is seldom true for you.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Because of my race or color …</th>
<th>My score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.  I can easily choose to be in the company of people of my race most of the time (in school, shopping, in a park or other public place).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.  If my family needs to move, we can be pretty sure of hassle-free renting or buying in a safe, desirable neighborhood where we would want to live.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.  I can be pretty sure that my neighbors in such a location will be neutral or pleasant to me.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.  I can go shopping by myself most of the time without being followed or harassed.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.  I can turn on the television or open the front page of the paper and see many people of my race represented in a positive way.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.  When I learn about our national heritage or about “civilization,” in school and in the media, I am shown that people of my race made it what it is.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.  I can go into most supermarkets and find the staple foods which fit with my racial/ethnic traditions; I can go into any hairdresser’s shop and find someone who can cut my hair.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.  I can count on my skin color not to work against me when I shop, whether I use checks, credit cards, or cash; store clerks assume that I have enough money to pay for my purchases.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>9.  I can swear, or dress in secondhand clothes, or not answer letters, without having people say that these choices are due to the bad morals, or the poverty, or the illiteracy of my race.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>10. I can do well in a challenging situation without being called a credit to my race. (For example, if I earn a school award, I am not identified as especially good or talented for a person of my race.)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. I am never asked to speak for all of the people of my racial group.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

SUBTOTAL

Adapted from McIntosh (1990) and Pacific Educational Group
White Privilege, page 2

Score 5 if the statement is often true for you.
Score 3 if the statement is sometimes true for you.
Score 0 if the statement is seldom true for you.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Because of my race or color …</th>
<th>My score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>12. I can be oblivious to the language and customs of persons of color without feeling any penalty for such ignorance from the people of my race. (In other words, people of my race are not angry, disappointed, or frustrated if I don’t know about the cultural traditions of people of color.)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. I can criticize our government or talk about fearing or opposing its policies without being seen as a racial outsider.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. I can be pretty sure that if I ask to talk to the “person in charge” in a school, business, restaurant, or other location, I will be facing a person of my race.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. I can conveniently buy posters, postcards, picture books, greeting cards, and magazines featuring people of my race.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. I can go home from most meetings of the clubs or organizations that I participate in feeling tied-in, not isolated, out-of-place, outnumbered, unheard, feared, or hated.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. I can take a scholarship without having others suspect I got it because of my race.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. If my family goes on vacation, we can choose a hotel without fearing that people of my race cannot get in or will be mistreated or mistrusted there.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19. I can be sure that if I need legal or medical help, my race will not work against me.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>20. If my day, week, or year is going badly, I don’t need to wonder if each negative situation is due somewhat to my race.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>21. I can comfortably avoid, ignore, or minimize the impact of racism on my life.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>22. I can speak in public to a powerful group without my race being an issue.</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>23. Most dolls, crayons, band-aids, makeup, and any other item that comes in “flesh” color is more or less a match for my skin.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>24. If a substitute teacher disciplines me, I can be sure I haven’t been singled out because of my race.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

TOTAL