Racial Discourse in Predominantly White Classrooms:

A Phenomenological Study of Teachers' Lived Experiences Discussing Race

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that whatever one chooses to do in life, one has a responsibility to work hard – that any school, workplace, or organization should always be left a better place because of your contributions to it. He left this world a better place. Thanks Mom, for being one of the greatest educators ever, who taught me firsthand that to be a great teacher you must believe that all students can be successful, and who modeled the passion and hard work that is required of teaching. Also, to my uncle, James Ray, who was gifted with a passion for research and writing – thank you for channeling that when I needed it! I miss you all so much and felt your support and pride as I finished.

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Dedication

To Bob, Sam, and Josie

Abstract

This dissertation examines the lived experiences of white middle school teachers in predominantly white rural communities as they discuss race and race issues with students. Using methods of descriptive phenomenology, interviews were conducted with teachers to explore what it was like for them to talk about race in classrooms comprised of only white students, and when classes included one or two students of color. The essence of the experience was determined through phenomenological analysis, making meaning of how teachers' experienced dialogue focused on race.

Findings reveal six themes illuminating how teachers' experienced talking about race and issues of race with students, whether the discussions were intentional or unplanned. Their experiences were characterized by fear and discomfort, uncertainty, anger, frustration, experience, and paralysis. Teachers experienced fear and discomfort as race became central to the discussion, especially concerned about how racial discourse would negatively impact the one or two students of color in the classroom. Uncertainty surfaced as teachers struggled with issues of colorblindness, "politically correct" language, and the possibility of reinforcing white supremacy. Anger and frustration emerged as teachers found they were unprepared and lacking experience in facilitating lessons and discussions surrounding race. However, experience acquired through exposure to aspects diversity in college, or years of integrating social justice issues into lessons, made teachers more likely to have discussions of race with students. Finally, as a result of the negative feelings they associated with discussions of race, some teachers

experienced a sense of paralysis as they considered eliminating lessons in which issues of race might surface.

This study contributes to an understanding of the experiences of white teachers as participants' in a racial society within a predominantly white rural setting. Implications of the study suggest a need for teacher preparation programs to address race and racism more directly through curriculum and practice. This will significantly impact how white students and students of color make meaning of race in predominantly white communities.

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Introduction

Throughout my first year of teaching, I would marvel at the interactions of my eighth grade students while at recess, the boys either shooting baskets into a hoop with a net made of metal chain, or practicing break dance moves, moonwalking across the blocked off streets where they played. But the girls especially, the jump-rope rhymes I'd never heard before, complex and elaborate hand-clapping games, and the way they would simultaneously giggle while hurling insults at one another, both individuals and the entire group doubling over in laughter. While endlessly fascinating, this insult game would invariably result in me asking that they try instead to be more complimentary to each other. This would spark new giggles, but the taunts would end for the day. Once, after such an exchange, a student pointed out the obvious to me, giggling, "Ms. Lee, you is so white!" "Keshia," I replied, ignoring her cheekiness, but correcting her grammar for the seemingly millionth time, "It's *are*, you *are* so white." Our conversations would predictably end with Keshia grinning, "*Ooooh snap!* Ms. Lee, that was a good one!"

That was in New York City. It would be at least twenty years later before I would really understand the meaning of this dialogue with Keshia and the rest of my students. Born in Nebraska, my middle and high school years were lived in a suburb of Denver, Colorado, one of my brothers referred to as "Lily-White Littleton." At that time, all I knew about being white was that I wasn't black, and all I really knew about not being black was that we were all created equal, so the color of your skin didn't matter. From history classes, I understood slavery and racism as terrible things in our nation's past, but that wrongs can be made right and we, as a country, were better now because the 13th

Amendment, Civil Rights Act, Citizenship Act, and other laws made it so. In a middle school class, I watched a movie that included Dr. Martin Luther King's *I Have a Dream* speech. It left a lasting impression on me, specifically when he said, "I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character" (King, M. L., Jr., cited in Clayton, 1964). I remember vividly how that line gave me chills, feeling so sad that such a great man has been assassinated, but I also felt so proud that his dream had been realized. Proud that this dream was realized? Back then, absolutely. I remember feeling so proud that I was fortunate to live in such a wonderful country that was always doing the right thing. A country so generous, that we trained volunteers to go beyond our borders to help everyone have things as good as we have here. I dreamed of being a Peace Corps volunteer and making the world a better place. I carried this spirit of doing the right thing along with me into college, where I studied science, and how to teach children in K-12 settings… and ultimately into the classrooms and schools where I worked with students and families as a teacher, and later as an administrator.

In retrospect, back in that predominantly white, middle-class suburb where I lived my preadolescent and teenage years, I was getting mixed messages about the color of one's skin and the content of one's character. The same year I watched the *I Have a Dream* speech, I was also forever impacted by a line from the book *Animal Farm*, assigned in English class, that read, "All animals are equal, *but some animals are more equal than others*" (Orwell, 1946, p. 133). I think that subconsciously I was aware of a disconnect between the goodness of America that I believed so strongly to be true and the

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reality I lived in the suburbs - that while we may say, and perhaps want to believe that all are equal, we are also witness to the inequality we either don't see, or choose not to see.

I learned this subliminally from comments I heard around me. If I held the door for someone at school, I might hear, "Thanks - that was mighty white of you!" Once I asked a guy named Pat where he got his belt that said "Bruce" on it and he replied, "I rolled it off a dead Mexican." Many of my friends would look at a mess and say, "We'll let Consuela clean that up!" These sorts of remarks, and "Mexican jokes" too awful to print, were commonplace. And though I think I remember hearing them with a sense of uneasiness, more likely, at the time I am not sure I gave them that much thought at all. Today I recall them with alarming clarity.

When I did think about whiteness, I thought of differences in color as skin deep. Of the very few people I knew whose skin color was "black," they seemed otherwise pretty much the same as me, living in the same kind of house, driving the same cars, wearing the same clothes, parents working the same kind of job. But then there was a large Latino population, the "Hispanics" that lived in large communities throughout the Denver metropolitan area. Their skin wasn't black, but it wasn't white either, and *they* certainly weren't living in the same houses as *us*, *they* were the *"Consuelas"* cleaning white people's houses, visible mostly in service and industries, and the subject of jokes my mother would call "off-color." And so, my experiences in school and home, the utterances of my peers, the color of the people who lived in my middle-class neighborhood vs. the color of the people in the poorer neighborhoods, shaped my

understanding of race, and gave me this troubling sense that while all people are created equal, some people are indeed "more equal than others."

I carried these largely unexamined notions with me from white suburbia via a predominantly white college into the original melting pot of our country, New York City, where only 45 % of the population looked like me. Never questioning my ability to work effectively with the racially and ethnically diverse students in my first classroom, I would say, like so many other white teachers, that I didn't see color, I only saw students. And it wasn't until over twenty years later, as a student in a course on race and literacy taught by Tim Lensmire at the University of Minnesota, that this singular perspective was challenged. There was a moment, much like an awakening, where I suddenly understood Keshia's commentary about my racial identity. That moment was reading Thandeka's (2000) *Learning to be White* and wondering what she meant by the term "Euro-American" that she used repeatedly… until it dawned on me that it was *me* to whom she was referring. And suddenly I knew that I too, was a hyphenated American. I also knew that my ignorance of that was the epitome of white privilege (a term I hadn't yet encountered, but somehow now understood clearly). Immediately, I understood my relationship with my students in New York and actually cringed to think that instead of doing the *right* thing, it turned out I was doing the *white* thing. And I was to discover that doing the *white* thing often meant unintentionally doing the *wrong* thing.

While experiencing a sort of racial enlightenment, I was also developing an overwhelming sense of how white teachers' lack of knowledge and awareness of race issues impacts how both white students and students of color see themselves and others.

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Just as I learned through my own K-12 schooling, I had considered racism a thing of the past. I did not consider how race might play out in education even with attention focused nationally on closing the "achievement gap." Following the two years I taught in New York City, I settled into teaching and administration in small and predominantly white towns in rural communities where it seemed as though issues of race just never came up. So at this moment of awakening I experienced in a graduate class, where I began to understand what it really means to be white and the potential consequences when we ignore issues of race, I also began to wonder if I was alone. Was I the only white teacher who had not considered my own racial identity and the privileges that come with it? I never talked about race in my classroom. Are other white teachers addressing issues of race in the classroom? I was horrified and ashamed that in over fifteen years as a classroom teacher and principal, issues of race and the impact of racism had never been a consideration in my own practice of teaching. Soon, exploring this phenomenon became an obsession.

From that moment, I became extremely watchful of what was going on in white classrooms in both suburban and rural communities and found that indeed, I was not alone. My observations led to a collection of stories and incidents illustrating how we as well-meaning white educators can unintentionally perpetuate inequality, discrimination, and racism. With much of the research on white teachers focused on experiences in culturally diverse classrooms, I was interested in how race is addressed or not addressed in predominantly white classrooms.

Parallel to my studies focused in the area of culture and teaching, I was fortunate to have opportunities to work with pre-service teachers as a field experience supervisor and as a graduate instructor teaching introductory classes for elementary education majors. This allowed me to integrate issues of diversity into all aspects of learning about teaching and also to observe how race was negotiated in a variety of settings. It also gave me firsthand experience in talking about race with students (pre-service teachers). This was something I was only beginning to gain comfort with myself through graduate classes centered on critical pedagogy and the intersection of race, class, and gender in education. What I found was that while talking about race isn't easy, and is often uncomfortable, it is of critical importance. When I read reflection papers at the end of the semester, my students indicated a level of understanding of issues of equity and equality in education that gave me great hope in how they will address race in their own classrooms.

My own experiences in forming an understanding of racial issues and how race is addressed in predominantly white schools compel me to understand this in a larger context. There is so much I want to know about student learning in predominantly white schools, and where to start? With limited research on white teachers in white classrooms centered specifically on race, and much deliberation, I drew on my own lack of preparation, knowledge, and discomfort to guide my research in this area. I felt this need to better prepare teachers to understand and talk about issues of race. But in order to do this, I wanted to know what it is like for white teachers who have had the experience of discussing race in their predominantly white classrooms.

I also think place matters, with distinct variations in experiences depending on differences in rural, suburban, and urban settings. In 2005, 60 % of teachers surveyed reported receiving undergraduate degrees within 150 miles of their home, with 66 % teaching within 150 miles of home (National Center for Education Information). I had this sense, based on my own experiences, that perhaps the most influential sites in which white teachers construct racial identity and attitudes are within the white settings in which they were educated. When left unchallenged, future teachers carry these orientations through pre-service experiences and back into the classrooms where, now as practicing teachers, they have become part of the cycle that can perpetuate racism. I believe that teachers are some of the most caring and dedicated people in the world. And I also believe that because of limited engagement with issues of race and other areas of diversity, well-intentioned and well-meaning teachers can unintentionally reinforce white supremacy in predominantly white classrooms.

At the same time, this study will show that there are teachers who have brought race into discussions in their predominantly white classrooms. Some hesitantly, others more confidently, some extemporaneously, still others with great fear of what lies ahead as they test the waters of uncertainty. But what they all have in common is that they have made a courageous decision to disrupt the silence before them. A glimpse into the lived experiences of white teachers who are talking about race with their predominantly white students underscores the importance of teacher education programs preparing future teachers to do this important work.

The text that follows describes how I came to understand what it is like for white

teachers in rural communities to talk about race in their mostly white classrooms. This began in Chapter 1 with a review of literature, first describing the post civil rights era of colorblind racism that framed the experiences of most practicing teachers today. Second, I identified studies that delineated how race is taken up in teacher education and K-12 classrooms. I focused especially on studies that began to define research within the narrow demographics of my study.

In Chapter 2 I explored phenomenology as a philosophy and methodology, discussing related assumptions, strengths, and challenges. I considered phenomenological studies within the context of race and racism, with attention to discussion of the insider-outsider status of the researcher in these studies. I then described methods of descriptive phenomenology that I used to gain access to the lived experiences of teachers. I included an outline of the process I used to analyze my data to make meaning of my participants' experiences discussing race and race issues.

In Chapters 3 and 4, I provided insight into the lived experiences of white teachers as they took me into the moment when race became part of a discussion with rural white middle school students. In Chapter 3, I began with a focus on the silence surrounding race in white rural communities and then moved into classrooms, where teachers described how fear and discomfort overwhelm aspects of discussions of race. In Chapter 4, I continued to make meaning of the uncertainty, anger and frustration that surrounded conversations involving race, and explored how paralysis threatened to silence these discussions. I then summarized the significance of this study in ways that demand close attention to how we prepare preservice teachers and support practicing

teachers in anti-racist pedagogies to interrupt a cycle of misunderstandings regarding

race.

Chapter 1: Review of the Literature

When I considered how I came to be writing a dissertation focused on race, it seemed serendipitous. Registering for a course on race and literacy, a pivotal class challenging my monocultural perspective, was by pure chance. As a middle-level principal relocated from Maine to the Midwest, I needed both recertification credits and the Human Relations/Multiculturalism class required for licensure. In a position of leadership, I had been focusing my professional development in literacy studies, and hoped to effect positive change toward an interdisciplinary focus on literacy. Being a non-matriculated student limited my choices, so when an open class had "literacy" in the title, I sought permission to join. I thus embarked on a journey that had me questioning nearly everything I knew about race and racism as a student, teacher, and administrator. At times I wondered how I could have been so ignorant, and for so long.

Along the way, I became a teacher educator. I understood my destiny after assigning graduate students a reading from *The White Architects of Black Education* (Watkins, 2001). I will never forget the evening when my mostly white students entered the classroom almost angry, nearly all asking the same question I have pondered throughout my doctoral studies, "Why is this the first time I've heard about this?" In this case, students were referring to a dual system of education for white students and black students, intentionally designed to keep blacks in subservient positions. I was right there with them wondering how, with so much attention on "the achievement gap" we failed to mention our complicity in creating that disparity in academic success between white students and students of color. As I saw William, an African-American student, just

shaking his head, I sensed that my white students, practicing teachers in a range of K-12

settings, had likely entered teaching via a system similar to my own. And at that moment

I understood the power of teacher education programs to interrupt a cycle of inequity. I

was also figuring out there were indeed, many more teachers with experiences like mine.

In this chapter, I use my own trajectory from student to classroom teacher as a

framework for understanding why it is only by chance that some white teachers come to

understand a complex system of institutionalized racism. I began with a brief review of

race and racism located in the post civil-rights era, where, as a white person, my own

understanding of race took place. I include scholarship on whiteness to further examine

this perspective of race. Next, I provide research illuminating how race is addressed in

teacher education. Finally, I examine literature describing how race is taken up in three

different K-12 classroom settings: first, generally in educational settings, second, with

white teachers in predominantly white classrooms, and third, with white teachers in rural

settings.

Race in a Post Civil Rights Era

> "What color is God's skin? What color is God's skin?
> I said, "It's black, brown, it's yellow, it's red It is white.
> Everyone's the same in the good Lord's sight."
> Lyrics by Thomas Wilkes and David Stevenson

Songs like these reinforced my understanding of race and racism in the post civil

rights era. Attending Catholic schools through middle school, I played guitar at morning

mass each day, earnestly singing such lyrics that informed me, 1) we are all different, and

2) we are the same. I also knew my catechism regarding the Lord through rote

memorization: What is God? God is love. My interpretation then, was that we are all loved equally. In my world, in the middle-class suburbs of Denver, there was no racism.

Most Americans today were not even born when the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was passed (Brown, Carnoy, Currie, Duster, Oppenheimer, Schultz, & Wellman, 2003). In the 70's, white suburbs provided insulation from issues such as poverty, racism, crime, and war. Those were issues you might have caught a glimpse of as you turned from the nightly news to the *Brady Bunch*, a sitcom that further normalized being white and middle-class.

According to Bonilla-Silva (2001) "color-blind racism has become the dominant racial ideology in the post-civil rights era" (p. 195). He continued:

> Most whites formally accept the equality of the races and the principle of equal opportunity, do not support white supremacist organizations, and are less likely than ever to support old stereotypes about blacks. (p. 199)

Roy Brooks used the term "smiling racism" (cited in Bonilla-Silva, 2001, p. 138) and used examples such as banks rejecting black loan applicants based on credit risk, college admission denied to students based on test scores, and the friendly clerk offering assistance to black shoppers, when actually profiling and surveiling them.

For whites, racial discourse included statements such as, "*I* am not a racist," or "*I'm* not prejudiced, but…" or "some of my best friends are…" (Bonilla-Silva, 2001). Or, whites silenced racism as a thing of the past, "Don't you think the best way of dealing with America's racial problems is by not talking about them? By constantly talking about racism you guys add wood to the racial fire, which is almost distinguished" (Bonilla-Silva, 2006, p. 207). Lewis (2007) adds:

Whites resolutely avoid the subject. Others (primarily people of color) regularly talk about race or racism, but when they do so publicly, they pay for their expressions or 'transgressions' in feeling alienated, expending a lot of energy, being labeled, and having to contain their anger and frustration. So race becomes an issue constantly at play, but only rarely named ...Race shapes understandings, attitudes, and behavior; race affects where students live, whom they play with, and where they go to school; and race shapes how kids understand their life chances. (p. 86)

I called attention to this because when studies talked about how race shaped students' understandings, I kept in mind that if unattended in K-12 classrooms, those understandings were retained through teacher education programs as well.

Frankenburg (1993) spoke to well-intentioned individuals, a term I have often used to characterize teachers. And here, she captured how I viewed myself, and fellow white teachers:

Because we were basically well-meaning individuals, the idea of being part of the problem of racism (something I had associated with extremists or institutions but not with myself) was genuinely shocking to us. And the issue was also terrifying, in the sense that we constantly felt that at any second we might err again with respect to racism, that we didn't know the rules and therefore didn't know how to prevent that from happening. There was, perhaps, a way racism was disembodied in our discussions, sometimes an issue of standpoint, sometimes one of etiquette, and definitely an issue that provoked the intense frustration that came of not being able to "get it," or "get it right." (p. 4)

Even the most caring of white individuals often did not see themselves as racist, yet they failed to recognize how they were complicit in racism through everyday practices that allowed them to remain privileged over people of color, thus reproducing racial inequality. "Color blindness, then, is a very disturbing yet revealing metaphor for the dominant ideology of race in America" (Rosenberg, 2004, p.257). For Chubbuck (2004), "the erroneous belief that a race-neutral 'color-blind' position is a viable stance for

eradicating racism," (p. 305) called attention to how social constructs had undergone

contextualized modifications in meaning to safeguard privilege.

Frankenberg (1993) defines the location of race privilege as whiteness:

> First, whiteness is a location of structural advantage, of race privilege. Second, it is a "standpoint," a place from which white people look at ourselves, at others, and at society, Third, "whiteness refers to a set of cultural practices that are usually unmarked and unnamed (p. 1).

I was interested in Frankenberg's work because she explored the intersection of

whiteness and gender within the construct of racism. Specifically, she was looking at how

women viewed racism as an external experience rather than one in which they themselves

were implicated. This was of interest to me because gender is a significant factor in

education with the majority of teachers being women (82 % according to 2005 statistics

from the National Center for Education Information). According to Frankenburg (1993),

"Analyzing the construction of whiteness is important as a means of reconceptualizing

the grounds on which white activists participate in anti-racist work" (p. 242). She

challenged views of racism based on individual and unintentional acts and addressed the

importance of understanding how white people are complicit in racism and how it should

be challenged in the many complex ways it operates. I thought of schools as some of the

most important locations to challenge racism. We now had the national support of a

president who understood personally the effects of racism and urged us to address these

issues, with schools identified as a conduit for change. Obama (2008) stated:

> In the white community, the path to a more perfect union means acknowledging that what ails the African-American community does not just exist in the minds of black people; that the legacy of discrimination - and current incidents of discrimination, while less overt than in the past - are real and must be addressed.

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Not just with words, but with deeds - by investing in our schools and our communities; by enforcing our civil rights laws and ensuring fairness in our criminal justice system; by providing this generation with ladders of opportunity that were unavailable for previous generations.

As I moved into literature that positioned race in teacher education, I reminded myself that most preservice teachers had only recently graduated from high school. This was important in this discussion because in order to learn about race and racism, we were asking preservice teachers to unlearn much of what their history books had told them about race. In *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong,* Loewen (1995) analyzed twelve of the leading textbooks used in high school history classes. He wrote, "When textbooks make racism invisible in American history, they obstruct our already poor visibility to see it in the present" (p. 169). They presented what Loewen called a cheery optimism about how our government (not the people) eliminated evils such as slavery, lynchings, and segregation. This was problematic because it inferred that racism was over.

Missing was an honest and critical examination of racial history. For example, Loewen highlighted omissions about the FBI's campaign against the civil rights movement and the president's initial action to stop the 1963 March on Washington. Textbooks missed opportunities to inform students how citizens, especially black citizens, had forced the government to listen and respond to inequality, a message that could empower students to become involved in issues of injustice. Loewen (1995) concluded:

Educators justify teaching history because it gives us a perspective on the present. If there is one issue in the present to which authors should relate the history they

tell, it is racism. But as long as history textbooks make white racism invisible in the nineteenth century, neither they, nor the students who use them will be able to analyze racism intelligently in the present. (p. 170)

It is no surprise, then, that as a graduate instructor, I was wondering, along with my students, "Why is this the first time we are hearing about this?"

Race in Teacher Education

Virtually invisible until the mid 1960's, race entered teacher-training programs as multicultural education (Asamen, Ellis, & Berry, 2008). It emerged as a response to the civil rights movement. Banks (1979) located the birth of multicultural education as educators took action following the race riots in the Watts section of Los Angeles in 1965. From its beginning, multicultural education was intended to address race for both whites and students of color. Nieto (in Howard, 1999) believed it was essential for white teachers to actively participate in multicultural, anti-racist practices:

> Just as the identities of people of color include more that simply being victims, the identities of Whites are about more than being victimizers. Involving Whites in multicultural education therefore needs to resolve two seemingly contradictory aims: to confront in a brutally honest way White oppression, and to promote the healthy White identity that is at the same time anti-racist and multicultural. (p. xiv)

Like Nieto, Banks felt "Multicultural education is consequently as important for middle-class White suburban kids as it is for students of color who live in the inner city" (Banks, in Howard, 1999, p. x). But, the following research pointed out, it was the white suburban kids, now in teacher education programs who were having difficulty with multicultural education in practice.

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In spite of efforts to address diversity in teacher education programs, literature suggested that white teachers were ill prepared to address racial issues in meaningful ways. Cross (2005) described how a teacher education program designed to give white preservice teachers the knowledge and experience needed to work effectively in racially diverse schools actually had the opposite effect. In her study, Cross found that the practices of recent graduates, now teaching students of color, were: passive in relation to culture, were not skilled in teaching students of color, and used diverse literature in a limited and superficial way. Ultimately she found that classroom and field experiences in the program resulted in "learning racism, ignoring power, and ignoring whiteness" (p. 269). This study was significant because it illustrated how teacher education programs were well intentioned in the same way that accreditation institutions and states were making efforts to ensure that licensure programs were effectively preparing teachers, as the following study indicates.

This recent survey (to be published next year) that compiled information about the diversity or multicultural requirement for state teaching licensure (Miretzky & Stevens, 2012) found that the standard in accreditation for teacher education programs remains the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE), having accredited approximately 80 % of colleges and universities offering licensure programs. In 1977, NCATE adopted a diversity standard that required teacher education programs seeking accreditation to provide evidence that they had prepared teachers to address issues of diversity. This meant that most teachers today met licensure requirements from a program that:

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Designs, implements, and evaluates curriculum and provides experiences for candidates to acquire and demonstrate the knowledge, skills, and professional dispositions necessary to help all students learn. Assessments indicate that candidates can demonstrate and apply proficiencies related to diversity. Experiences provided for candidates include working with diverse populations, including higher education and P–12 school faculty, candidates, and students in P–12 schools. (NCATE website)

From my experiences observing student and cooperating teachers in schools, I had two questions. First, did NCATE standards *not* require the critical understanding of racial issues and the experience needed to effectively address content and discussion in the classroom? Second, was there a disconnect between assessments NCATE had approved to evaluate effectiveness, and evidence that preservice teachers had met the diversity standard? Miretzky and Stevens (2012) asked these questions as well, directed specifically at rural communities that were geographically isolated from racial diversity.

An on-line survey conducted by Miretzky and Stevens (2012) asked NCATE coordinators from teacher education programs serving primarily rural areas to report how they were meeting diversity standards. Their findings concluded:

Rural teacher education programs do experience difficulties with meeting requirements of the of the NCATE diversity standard. Respondents singled out recruitment and retention of diverse faculty and candidates, inability to provide high-quality diversity experiences, and location as the biggest issues. (n.p.)

This was an important finding because it offered an explanation for the lack of preparation teachers have in talking about race, described in Cross' (2005) and additional studies that follow in this chapter. I was interested in the mounting evidence that suggested teachers were unprepared to implement multicultural education. In the

following article, published in 1979, Banks listed responses of educators as to why the

multicultural movement had not acquired legitimacy in our educational system:

1. Our children are unaware of racial differences; we will merely create problems, which don't exist if we teach ethnic content. All of our children, whether they are Black or White, are happy and like one another. They don't see color or ethnic differences.
2. We don't have any racial problems in our school and consequently don't need to teach about ethnic groups.
3. We don't teach about ethnic groups because we don't have any ethnic minorities attending our schools.
4. Ethnic studies will negatively affect societal unity and the common national culture.
5. We don't have time to add more content to what we are already teaching. We can't finish the books and units that we already have. Ethnic content will overload our curriculum.
6. We don't teach much about ethnic groups because we don't have the necessary materials. Our textbooks are inadequate.
7. We can't teach ethnic studies in our schools and colleges because most of our teachers are inadequately trained in this area of study. Many of them also have negative attitudes toward ethnic groups. They would probably do more harm than good if they tried to teach about ethnic and racial groups.
8. The local community would strongly object if we teach about race and ethnicity in our schools.
9. We don't teach much about ethnic groups in our schools because there is a lack of scholarship in this area. The research in this area is largely political and polemical. (pp. 243-244)

Twenty years later, Ladson-Billings and Tate described multicultural practices as

those limited to, "trivial examples and artifacts of cultures such as eating ethnic or

cultural foods, singing songs or dancing, reading folktales, and other less than scholarly

pursuits of the fundamentally different conceptions of knowledge or quests for social

justice" (1995, p. 61). Studies ten years beyond that indicated that teachers were still

inadequately prepared and lacking an understanding of racism as an institutionalized

system of disadvantage. I saw such potential in teachers to challenge racism, but there needed to be a way to effectively prepare teachers to do this.

In the following section I reviewed literature that examined race in the context of schools and classrooms, first generally, then in white classrooms, and finally in rural communities. Within these setting, the connection between teacher preparation and teacher effectiveness was illuminated.

Race in the Classroom

Schools, as a reflection of society, have a paralleled history of racism in our country (Lewis, 2007). This is most noticeably through segregation generally, but specifically in overtly racist acts that went unpunished in schools (the treatment of the "Little Rock Nine" as they pioneered desegregation came to mind). Marx (2006) made a strong statement about the effect of racism deeply-rooted in our American culture, and our need to address it in schools:

> Just as we are all influenced by our culture, we are all influenced by the racism that is an inescapable part of it… The racism that influences teachers' perceptions of children of color is much more prevalent among educators than anyone is willing to admit. (p. 1)

Because the influence of racism was not always explicit, it was important that we made certain teachers were aware of how racism impacted their perceptions.

This assertion is important given the colorblind stance pervasive in the schools where classroom teachers have been studied (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005; Irvine, 2003; McCarthy & Crichlow, 1993; Marx 2006; Vavrus, 2002). Sleeter (1993) addressed this perspective as she introduced and followed a staff development project

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focused on race. Sleeter found teachers resisted learning about integrating discussions of

diversity in the classroom, in a school where students of color made up one-third of the

student population. Sletter noted:

> The teachers perceived staff development on multicultural education as useful if it
> gave them new information about groups they did not already "know all about,"
> or if it reaffirmed what they were doing in the classroom. However, since they did
> not perceive that there would be anything worthwhile to learn about African
> Americans and Latinos, or about racism, and since constant and direct attention to
> these groups brought their own negative associations, as well as white guilt, to the
> surface, some of the white teachers stopped coming. Of the pool of teachers in
> both districts who had been invited to participate, I assume many did not apply
> precisely because they did not see value in acknowledging their own negative
> associations with people of color, or any suggestion that racism still exists. (1993,
> p. 163)

How teachers enacted this colorblind stance in schools was of great interest to

me. As I became more conscious of teachers' attitudes, I was watching carefully to see

multicultural education in practice in schools where I supervised student teachers as a

graduate student. I found it particularly interesting how some white teachers celebrated

Martin Luther King, Jr. Day and Black History month. Over three years, without fail, I

saw hallways and classrooms covered with student versions of the *I Have a Dream*

speech, and student or commercially prepared posters of accomplished black athletes,

scientist, and celebrities. This was also noted in a study by Lewis (2001) that looked at

racial messages students received from teachers who took pride in their color-blind

stance. Her participants went on record to say that in their community race did not matter,

every one was treated the same. The results of Lewis' interviews and observations

suggested quite the opposite, where Black history month artifacts come down on March

1st. This was exactly what I observed in local schools.

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Lewis' study found additional consequences of a colorblind position, observing

that white students did not want to play with black students because they were considered

different. It was interesting to see something that teachers usually noticed, a child that did

not seem to have friends, or the more obvious segregation, and not attribute it to race.

Also on record as saying race didn't matter, a teacher, when asked to define race, had a

difficult time, and mumbled, "There's different cultures, and, with different races-um,

like Chinese-they have their own culture and their own churches that they go to, and their

own food that they eat, and the same way with Black people" (Lewis, 2001, p. 791).

Teachers needed to see visible effects of a colorblind stance that ignored the

consequences of institutionalized racism. I am interested in finding how schools can

create moments of clarity for teachers, such as I experienced in graduate school.

A more expansive body of research concerned with race in schools, existed, but I

was more interested in studies that were centered on white teachers in predominantly

white classrooms. Next, I examined studies that took me closer to my research focus.

White Teachers in White Classrooms

Finding research focused on the practices of white teachers in predominantly

white classrooms is frustrating. Several years ago, I found the first book published that

addressed exactly what I was looking for, *What If All the Kids Are White?* (Derman-

Sparks, Ramsey, & Edwards, 2006). While addressing the very issues of my research, it

was involved specifically with teachers and students in early childhood education.

Derman-Sparks et al. discussed the early days of multicultural education when teachers in

predominantly white programs often assumed that multicultural education was not

relevant to their children. These teachers believed that because their children were not

confronted by negative racial stereotypes, there was no need to include practices to

counter those images. According to Derman-Sparks et al., this has changed:

> More recently, however, many teachers of white children have become aware of how discrimination affects everyone. They understand that a false sense of racial superiority is damaging, causes isolation, and ill prepares children to function in a diverse society. Such teachers also recognize that working for social justice will benefit all people, but cannot be achieved unless people in all groups, including whites, join the long-term struggle. (p. 1)

This suggested to me the importance of recognizing that teachers may be unaware of how

white supremacist attitudes are created and perpetuated, and a need to have this pointed

out. Otherwise, the effects of such attitudes may be less likely to be recognized and

remain under the radar of teachers in predominately white schools.

The authors stressed that it was not sufficient to simply "embrace" racial and

cultural diversity. They emphasized the importance of giving our students the support to

understand and develop identities that would allow them to challenge damaging ideas of

racial superiority and privilege rather than fostering either negative beliefs and

stereotypes, or colorblind stances.

The three studies that follow brought me closer to the setting in which I conducted

my research. These were set in schools with student populations ranging from 90% to

98% white, similar to the racial makeup of my research sites. They differed in that they

took place in more largely populated areas, though not in urban centers. All studies took

place in language arts classrooms, two at the high school level, and one in a fourth grade

class.

First was a year-long ethnographic study centered on the racial discourse of students conducted in an all-white suburban high school in the eastern part of the country. Trainor (2008) found students' understanding of race was largely shaped by experiences within in the school. For example, one student, whom she described as "casual and purposeful in his use of stereotypes and epithets" (p.69), shared his knowledge of race. He noted his all-white surroundings and suggested he learned to use racist language at home:

> Look around, at this place. I mean, look around. I don't even know any Black people. How am I going to know about racism when I've never even met one? Well hardly ever met one. I mean you could say I learned about racism from my dad, but he's not really racist; he hates everybody. (p. 68)

While this student may have learned racist language at home, Trainor found the racist discourse of students was reinforced at the school, attributed to a hidden curriculum within the structure of the school itself, in the "many tacit, unexamined lessons, rituals, and practices that exert a powerful but largely unacknowledged pedagogical and persuasive force" (p. 4). She found students tended to use emotional connections as a structure for learning, so that hidden messages were all the more influential. For example, she noticed that the school encouraged positive attitudes throughout the building, beginning with a cheerful, "Have a great day," at the end of the morning pledge over the loudspeaker. So when students read works by Maya Angelou, they would describe her critique of racism as "whiny" (p. 26) and criticized Angelou for her complaining. Trainor suggested that students saw negativity associated with racism because it ran counter to

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the positive messages they were exposed to, and attributed their responses to emotional, rather than racist, reactions.

In a second study, Leer (2003) worked with white high school teachers using multicultural literature in a small Midwest town (population 22,000). Leer found that while teachers expressed their commitment to using multicultural literature, they were largely unprepared for the discussions that followed. Their discomfort was ascribed to lack of preparation in teacher education programs, but Leer also found they were not always familiar with the texts they had chosen, and addressed racial themes only superficially.

The third study took place in a predominantly white (90%) elementary school in a small city in the Midwest (population 120,000). Hollingworth (2009) explored a fourth grade teacher's use of multicultural literature to address racial inequities throughout history. According to Hollingworth, the teacher's discomfort with the text led to difficulties managing conversations when they directly confronted race. As a result, the opportunities to engage in the very conversations about privilege and social justice necessary to interrupt racist views were intentionally avoided, reinforcing a color-blind stance.

These studies were interesting in that they all took place in language arts classrooms. This suggested to me a limited range of opportunities in which a multicultural approach was implemented in schools. It also indicated that in teacher education programs, a possibility that only through literacy, using culturally diverse literature have we found a place for introducing race issues in the classroom. It was

unfortunate then, that teachers in the Leer (2003) and Hollingworth (2009) studies

exhibited discomfort, inferring a lack of preparation and knowledge of issues of race that

these teachers brought with them to the classroom. Trainor's (2008) study shed light on

what I also found in the predominantly white schools I visited, a number of hidden

messages that reinforced white supremacist attitudes. I noticed this more in what I did not

see, a lack of visual images of diversity that suggested that we lived in a monocultural

society. There was a need for conversations that interrogated these issues in schools. In

studies such as Trainor's, research that introduced and followed an intervention that

addressed the hidden curriculum would have provided helpful insight.

White Rural Classrooms

In a search of literature focused on white teachers and issues of race, diversity,

and multicultural education in the context of rural education, there is a limited, albeit

significant presence. Recognizing that rural is not synonymous with homogeneous white

populations, the research is further limited as I excluded those with geographically and

socioeconomically segregated communities of minority students. In the studies that

follow, first I provided research that presented an overview of how diversity, generally, is

addressed in rural schools. I next looked at studies that discussed a need for rural schools

to take on issues of race through multicultural education. These included differing

perspectives; one from the academy, and the other from superintendents of rural schools.

Next I examined studies that took place in rural schools. The first was focused on

teachers using culturally diverse literature. The second explored how a rural school

addressed an influx of students who were English Language Learners, enrolled in the

district within a racially charged atmosphere. I ended with literature commenting on bias in rural communities and possibilities for disrupting racism.

Yeo (1999) observed at a multicultural education conference, that there appeared to be little or no interest in multicultural issues in rural areas, nor were multicultural issues at the forefront of rural education associations:

> Both are missing a connection that is vital for rural schools at the close of a century when so much change that is inherently multicultural in nature is affecting and will drastically affect rural schools in years to come. (p. 3)

Yeo criticized the "virtually nonexistent" research addressing multicultural education within a rural context. He found that studies which did include diversity take a "tentative approach" that is limited to race, which he said was problematic because it minimizes other issues such as class and gender that are prominent in these communities (1999). Also important, according to Yeo, it permitted teachers to

> Facilitate the status quo ... and ignore the implications of deeper notions of culture, ideology, and oppressive stratification within local communities ... it facilitates teacher educators in contextualizing teacher education outside the lived experience of rural preservice teachers. (1999, p. 1)

Likewise, Ayalon (2003) asked why rural education was overlooked in the discussion of multicultural education. His study explored a duality that existed in rural culture when "on one hand rural culture stresses independence, honesty and religiosity, and on the other hand it was characterized by prejudice, ethnocentricity, and intolerance to nonconforming ideas" (p. 25). The author suggested that unless schools took an active role through various multicultural approaches, stereotypes were likely to be maintained.

But this seemed unlikely according to Wiles (1992), whose own research presented a

broad look at how issues of diversity were viewed by educational leaders. Wiles' study

examined how school districts in the State of New York with K-12 student populations

below 2000 (average 1111) responded to a 1990 mandate requiring an inclusive and

diverse study of history. These school districts were rural, small town settings, and

predominantly white.

A survey of 41 participants (66% return rate) were superintendents responsible for

overseeing the implementation of this curriculum in their districts. Wiles found that 73%

felt that multicultural issues were urban concerns, but that economically disadvantaged

students were of concern in both urban and rural settings (p. 9). Only 4% agreed that

"sensitivity to democratic values in 1990's America means our primary consideration

must be race and ethnicity issues," (p. 10) though 34% felt that "mandating a curriculum

of inclusion was vital to guarantee that New York children understand the distinct and

diverse nature of our society" (p. 10). Significant in this study were findings that school

leaders in rural, small towns did not see multicultural issues or those of race and ethnicity

to be of concern in their school settings.

The next studies in particular helped me understand the context of white teachers

discussing race in rural settings. Situated in a rural Midwest community, Ketter and

Lewis (2001) and Lewis, Ketter, and Fabos (2001) examined teacher beliefs about

multicultural education by examining practices surrounding the use of multicultural

literature. Among their findings, in the two related works, were that teachers did not have

the background necessary to challenge assumptions through critical examination of the

texts. Instead, they "try their best to remain blind to color, to make sure that oppression is discussed only in more neutral historical terms" (p. 182). This was an interesting contrast to my use of the Watkins (2001) text, which angered my students in realizing that history wasn't neutral from lessons they learned about oppression in historical terms.

These teachers in the studies expressed concerns that discussion of race would single out the one child of color in the classroom (Ketter & Lewis, 2001). This was related to the authors' position that critical dialogue surrounding the texts that was of greatest importance, which was in great conflict with teachers' discomfort surrounding discussions that strayed from superficial treatment. This discomfort was largely due to a complaint from the parent of a student of color criticizing the portrayal of black people as victims, a confrontation that left teachers constantly worried that their actions would be second-guessed.

The parent was concerned that multicultural approaches were limited to literature rather than being integrated in other subject areas. Also contributing to teachers' discomfort was a lack of cultural competence evidenced by discussions suggesting they did not understand the basis of the parent's concerns in relation to texts they had chosen. This underscored the importance of addressing these issues in teacher preparation programs. The concern of the parent was significant, "Based on her experience with her son's teacher, she felt that it would be better not to teach multicultural literature than to teach it the way it was taught to her son" (Lewis et al., 2001).

This research was important in relation to my study because it is was the only study I found that was closely situated to my research and gave me insight into the

significance of rural schools with few students of color and white teachers unprepared for discussions surrounding race.

I am interested in the concept of community in rural areas, the idea that everyone knows everyone. The Lewis et al. (2001) and Ketter and Lewis (2001) studies were conducted in a town of approximately 9,000 residents, over four times the size of towns in my study. I was interested in the following study because it addressed that component of community in small rural towns.

In this qualitative study, Brunn (2002) explored the large and unexpected increase in a minority population experienced in a predominantly white rural Illinois community in 1994. Due to the bankruptcy closing of a local meat-packing company and subsequent reopening by a major corporation, migrant and immigrant workers were recruited en masse to the outrage of displaced white workers. In spite of the tension in the school, resistance and negative attitudes of many teachers, most felt it was their responsibility to provide positive social and academic experiences for all students. I think most significant was, "they believed that they could have a significant effect on the biased attitudes of their Euro-American students, and that they set that as one of their continuing goals" (Brunn, 2002, p. 12).

Key to the success was that the teachers understood the significance of integrating both cultural groups as opposed to assimilating one. Also, faculty took an aggressive response to prejudicial acts and comments. Another contributing factor was the similar economic status of each group - in many rural agricultural communities, such as was experienced in this one, there existed a large percentage of low-income families (Brunn,

2002). The idea of an initial resistance, compared to the positive outcome, was discussed

indirectly by Yeo (1995), Jaret (1999), and Goodman (2000) in the following literature.

First, Yeo (1995) suggested that unconscious racism was especially prevalent in

rural schools. He writes:

> In many rural schools (and therefore their local communities) there seems
> to exist a lack of knowledge about and/or unwillingness to acknowledge
> the existing and/or increasing demographic diversity of their areas and
> communities. In general, this is equally true of other issues of difference,
> such as socioeconomic status, gender, language, and religion. (p. 4)

One factor that influenced rural attitudes toward minority populations was the history of

immigration outside of the European migration, the ancestry of most people in my

research sites. While many conservatives were careful in how they positioned race in

discussions of immigration, the condition of the economy (loss of jobs, lower wages) was

often used to justify anti-immigration stances (Jaret, 1999).

Finally, Goodman, (2000) felt it was a belief in principles of fairness and equity

that offered hope for changes in attitudes and practices. Summoning moral and religious

values has motivated and prompted action (Goodman, 2000). This, along with empathy

toward victims of oppression created a sense of responsibility that led to transformation

(Goodman, 2000). Goodman's research centered on motivating people from privileged

populations to work toward social justice by looking at the characteristics of those people

from the dominant culture that did support rights of oppressed groups of which they are

not a part. She found that there were three: First were people who have had a direct

experience with an individual from a marginalized group to which they related their own

experiences, or empathized with. Second are those who saw unfairness and were

uncomfortable with the disparity between their moral values and what they observed in conflict with those values. Third was a group of individuals who had self-interest as a motivation. These people acted because they wanted to see a nicer world in which to live, a safer world in which to raise a family.

As Ladson-Billings (1995) advises, "most oppression does not seem like oppression to the perpetrator" (p. 54). She suggests that stories from marginalized populations can interrupt what she calls dysconscious racism. I think that, like we saw in the Illinois town, there are opportunities for rural residents to get to know each other to bring about acceptance and build community between groups, as Goodman's work suggests. In Illinois, this was initiated by teachers, and makes me think there is great promise in educators to disrupt cycles of both conscious and unconscious racism in rural communities.

In summary, first a look at race in the post civil rights era framed my own understanding of race. And, unless there are K-12 educators still working beyond a retirement age of 65, this era, defined by colorblind racism, is the racial landscape for most practicing teachers today. Next I looked at whiteness studies to explore the racial makeup of the more than 85 % of inservice teachers working with white students and students of color. I also looked at studies centered on race in teacher education programs including an overview of the history of multicultural education. The selected literature found a majority of white teachers, teaching in a colorblind society that privileged white people, and did not understand what it meant to teach with a multicultural orientation. I

also found that research tended to define deficiencies in teacher education programs, and did not offer solutions that addressed the shortcomings.

Research studies focused on white teachers in white classrooms were limited. The larger body of research on race in schools that included studies of white teachers was found in schools where students of color were in the majority. In studies conducted in predominantly white schools, researchers found hidden curricula in a high school reinforced an acceptance of racist discourse, and teachers unprepared to use multicultural literature at the high school and elementary level. Research centered in rural America concluded that multicultural education is typically overlooked, and that such curriculum is felt to be unimportant in a rural setting. The one study conducted in a predominantly white rural elementary school (Ketter & Lewis, 2001) found teachers using multicultural literature in a superficial manner prompting the parent of an African-American student to complain, suggesting that it was better to not teach it at all than to do it poorly.

The Ketter and Lewis (2001) study especially, because it was close to the demographics of my study, served as cautionary message to the dangers of having teachers who are inadequately prepared to have discussions about race. But in all studies I found a need to address systematic racism in a more urgent way in teacher preparation programs, because the literature concludes that there are many teachers who are similar to me, but have not arrived at the point of asking, "Why is this the first time I'm hearing about this?"

The Place of this Study in Literature

Most teachers are white. The most recent figures estimated that 85% of teachers

are white in contrast to a student population comprised of 45% students of color and 55% white (National Center for Education Information, 2005; U.S. Census Bureau News, 2007). In a nation that privileges white students within an educational system that reproduces the inequalities of society, it is critical that educators become aware of their complicit role associated with this cycle, (Bonilla-Silva & Embrick, 2008; Bowles & Gintis, 1976). I think this is especially true in predominantly white communities where teachers can have significant influence in how students understand race and racism. Research in the area of white teachers in white communities is crucial and underrepresented. This study will contribute significantly to literature that offers insight into the experiences of white teachers as participants in a racial society.

In defining the contemporary notion of racism as more colorblind than overt, Bonilla-Silva (2001) stressed the significance using innovative research strategies, suggesting a new approach in which white scholars "design projects to investigate whiteness from within...in private white spaces" (pp. 201-202). Although he is speaking more of social and family gathering spaces, I submit that it is the faculty rooms, staff or team meetings, curriculum committees, and classrooms in rural and suburban areas that are the predominantly white spaces where researchers can gather data to fight this new racism. Bonilla Silva suggested that we:

> Combine research strategies (e.g., surveys and interviews) to cross-examine whites' views and behavior on racial matters. It is also time to develop new research agendas such as the ethnography of whiteness and sensibilities to the data we gather. It is surprising that very few social scientists have ventured into suburbia with a focus on understanding the white racial formation. (p. 201)

Stovall (2006) writes, "because we exist in a society that is systematically racist, the challenge becomes to forge community with the purpose of producing agents of change" (p. 257). The subjects of my research are, in effect, the white students, educated by a majority of white teachers, who then became teachers themselves. In my study, I am most interested in locating opportunities to interrupt this cycle of practices, which have served to perpetuate racism and white notions of superiority. My dissertation study examines the experiences of these white teachers, who can be the agents of change in predominantly white settings as they participate in discussions surrounding race issues.

Chapter 2: Methodology

Then there is the other secret. There isn't any symbolysm [sic]. The sea is the sea.

The old man is an old man. The boy is a boy and the fish is a fish. The shark are

all sharks no better no worse. All the symbolism people say is shit. What goes

beyond is what you see beyond when you know. (Hemmingway, 1952, p. 4)

This study was designed using a qualitative phenomenological methodology. Qualitative research methods are used to study natural phenomena to "make the familiar strange and the strange familiar." In phenomenology this was accomplished through "close analysis of lived experience to understand how meaning is created… and a deeper understanding of lived experiences by exposing taken-for-granted assumptions about these ways of knowing" (Starks & Trinidad, 2007, p. 1373). The purpose, then, was to capture the meaning of the lived experience of an event or encounter. Starks and Trinidad (2007) described phenomenological analysis in this way: "The truth of the event, as an abstract entity, is subjective and knowable only through embodied perception; we create meaning through the experience of moving through space and across time" (p. 1374).

Van Manen (2002) described good phenomenological studies as those that provided a tangible representation of lived experiences, and extended insightful consideration of the significance of those experiences. This was why I chose phenomenology. The goal of my research was to find out what it was like for white middle level teachers in predominantly white rural communities to have discussions with their students about race. One aspect of phenomenology that I thought would be

especially helpful was the limited focus of the interview centered on the lived experience of the phenomenon. I knew this would be difficult for me, to stay focused. But concentrating the interview on the experience would allow me to gain access to the experience, to be "in the moment" as participants in my study relived what it is like for them to have these important discussions.

During the time that I was preparing for my study, I had the fortune/misfortune of having to make weekly trips between Minneapolis and Denver to care for my mother. The good part was that I spent much of my time in airports and on airplanes honing my skills as a phenomenological interviewer. Even better was that I was getting good at striking up a conversation with a stranger, latching on to an experience and then keeping my unwitting participant in the moment by refocusing the conversation on the experience and how it was lived. I was so surprised how people opened up when I simply asked, "Wow! What was that like?" It was fascinating for me to see how powerful this methodology can be in exploring lived experiences. In the beginning I asked too many questions, some leading, and often I would interject with my own experiences. As I gained experience it became easier for me to keep the conversation focused. I was becoming a researcher.

In this chapter I provided the philosophical underpinnings of phenomenology. I used this as a foundation to understanding the methodology, which I then discussed in greater detail. Next, I delineated the underlying assumptions of phenomenology. I then debated phenomenology in relation to ethnography to illuminate how I came to conduct a study of teachers' lived experiences discussing race with students. I followed with brief

look at phenomenology used in studies concerning race issues. I continued to explore

research centered on race in defining the strengths and weaknesses of phenomenology in

relation to my research. Finally, focusing on descriptive phenomenology, I outlined the

methods I used to conduct my research, and provided a framework for my analysis.

Phenomenological Philosophy in Research

The philosophical origins of phenomenology were rooted in a focus on the

apparent truth (as opposed to absolute) during the 18th and 19th centuries (Dahlberg,

Drew, & Nystrom, 2001). Referred to as the "father of phenomenology," Husserl

developed the philosophy into what he considered foundational for all scientific thinking

because, according to Dahlberg et al., it:

> Takes into account the scientist's relationship with research projects, thereby assuring the objectivity upon which that science is founded. The way to the new foundation was, in Husserl's words, 'to go to the things themselves.' (p. 44)

Husserl understood science to be a part of the everyday world in which all people

lived and moved. He also described "the inherent power of what he called 'the natural

attitude', that he wanted to understand through the intentional consciousness, an idea that

understands consciousness as directed towards the world" (Dalhberg et al., 2001, p. 45).

The natural attitude, according to Dahlberg et al. was key because it was:

> The everyday immersion in one's existence and experience in which we take for granted that the world is as we perceive it, and that others experience the world as we do. In the natural attitude we do not critically reflect on our immediate action and response to the world, but we just do it, we just are. (p. 46)

Phenomenological studies began with a research question that asked about the lived experience of a particular phenomenon. Participants in a study must have experienced the phenomenon central to the study. Interviewing is the principal instrument used for data collection in a phenomenological study. During the interview, the researcher was focused on eliciting a detailed account of the experience so that a high degree of clarity is obtained (Van Manen, 1977). The process of analysis often utilized placing statements into "clusters of meaning" that represent the experience, ultimately providing "rich thematic descriptions that provide insight into the meaning of the lived experience" (Starks & Trinidad, 2007, p. 1376).

Giorgi (1997) described the impact of phenomenology on contemporary thinking "not only because of its rigorous descriptive approach but also because it offered a method for assessing the difficult phenomena of human experience" (p. 238). According to Giorgi, there were three main components central to an understanding of phenomenology as a methodology. They were the phenomenological reduction, description, and search for essences, which I further described.

Husserl developed the notion of reduction to allow for precision within the methodology. For Husserl, human subjects had a tendency to live in what he referred to as the "natural attitude," an unawareness of everyday life unless an event or object appears out of the ordinary. Phenomenology posits that we must explore our taken-for-granted experiences. The reduction then "directs one to step back and describe and examine them as a presence" (Giorgi, 1997, p. 239). Reduction also necessitates "bracketing" past knowledge of the experience in order to "be present" – to be able to be

more precise in the phenomenon as it is perceived. The reduction was central to

phenomenology. It meant:

> That a person must withhold past knowledge about the phenomenon he or she is
> researching in order to be fully present to the concrete instance of the
> phenomenon as presented by the subject's description; the second requirement is
> that no existential claim is being made for the description. That is, the only claim
> that the researcher will make is that the concrete experience is an indication of
> what the subject was present to, and not necessarily that the description is an
> objective account of what really took place. (p. 244)

The description was also key in giving language to the experience of the subject,

or as Giorgi explains, "to the object of any given act precisely as it appears within that

act" (1997, p. 241). Debate within the academy surrounds interpretation of the experience

that describes the hermeneutic phenomenological tradition of Heidegger, but Giorgi

insists that for "pure" phenomenology, the task was to describe the intentional objects of

consciousness from within the perspective of the phenomenological reduction" (1997, p.

241).

Finally, an important defining aspect of phenomenology, according to Husserl,

was the intent to "seek the 'essence' of the phenomenon being researched through a

method he calls free imaginative variation" (Giorgi, 1997, p. 242). According to Van

Manen (1977), the "essence of a phenomenon is a universal which can be described

through a study of the structure that governs the particular manifestations" of the

experience in a "systematic attempt to uncover and describe the structures, the internal

meaning structures, of lived experience" (p. 10). "Free imaginative variation" according

to Dalhberg et al., (2001), meant that:

> If the data gathering has been conducted in a productive way, it consists of
> variations, that is, a variety of naïve descriptions of experiences of the

phenomenon, which is the basis for the search for an essence or a general structure of the data. The researcher can further use her/his own conscious ability to imagine or intuit further variations, in order to clearly see the essence or general structure. (p.191)

Free imaginative variation involved the researcher removing a theme (imaginatively transposing them within the reduction) then asking if the essence of the phenomenon remained (Giorgi, 1997). In this way, researchers kept in check the phenomenon by freely exchanging aspects of the description to make sure the experience remained particular.

Another key feature of phenomenology is Husserl's theory of intentionality. This referred to "our primordial approach to the world, in which we are spontaneously, rather than critically engaged. Intentionality characterized the most basic mode of being. When we are, we are intentional, so to speak" (Dahlberg et al, 2001, p. 55).

A discussion of phenomenological methodology usually included mention of the hermeneutic perspective because both phenomenological and hermeneutic philosophies have common roots. While both are based in the experiences of the living world, there are defining differences:

> In its narrowest sense, the difference between phenomenological and hermeneutic philosophy lies in phenomenology's emphasis on transcendence and pure description, and hermeneutics' emphasis on pre-understanding and interpretation. Both Husserl, as a representative for phenomenology, and Heidegger, as a representative for hermeneutics, acknowledge the existential and ontological reality of phenomenology as a face-to-face meeting with being… Whereas Husserl exhorts us to go to the things themselves in order to understand, Heidegger, as well as his followers, saw that once we are there, understanding depends on recognizing what we bring with us, namely, our pre-understanding and interpretations.' (Dahlberg et al., 2001), p. 92)

According to Dahlberg et al., (2001), "hermeneutical researchers often insist that objectivity, or neutrality, is unachievable, even undesirable, because of the impossibility

of freeing oneself of involvement as a member of the lifeworld" (p. 93). Also aligned

with hermeneutics was Gadamer, but significant to a descriptive approach was his

understanding that, "the lifeworld cannot be reached through method, but rather met in an

open way of approach, which is the natural way in which we belong to the world, the way

of true understanding ... Gadamer always returns to *openness*. We must have an *open*

mind if we want to discover anything new, or as Gadamer put it, to see the 'otherness' of

something" (Dahlberg et al., 2001, p. 81). Gadamer was also responsible for the use of

the idea of "horizon" to describe understanding, its possibilities and limitations. It was

the concept that our range of vision includes *everything* from a particular vantage point,

meaning that as researchers we must take in everything expanding openness to include all

that we can see (Dalhberg et al., 2001).

Assumptions

It is essential to understand the underlying assumptions that position any type of

research. Methodological assumptions are the philosophical frameworks that inform the

different theoretical perspectives. They ultimately determine the appropriate methods to

be used to collect data, and the "analytical framework that guides fieldwork and

interpretation" (Patton, 2002, p. 78). The underlying assumptions considered essential to

the phenomenological perspective were outlined by Patton. First, Husserl's, "most basic

philosophical assumption was that *we can only know what we experience* by attending to

perceptions and meanings that awaken our conscious awareness" (Patton, 2002, p. 106).

And second, that of Van Manen, who insisted, "The assumption of essence, like the

ethnographer's assumption that culture existed and was important, becomes the defining

characteristic of phenomenological study" (p. 106). Additionally, Eichelberger (as cited in Patton, 2002) emphasizes:

> Phenomenologists are rigorous in their analysis of the experience so that basic elements of the experience are common to members of a specific society, or all human beings, can be identified ... A phenomenologist assumes a commonality in those human experiences and must use rigorously the method of bracketing to search for those commonalities. (p. 107)

One of the difficulties of a phenomenological methodology was that there was already knowledge of the phenomenon before it was explored. Van Manan (1977) explained, "our 'common sense' pre-understandings, our suppositions, assumptions, and the existing bodies of scientific knowledge, predisposed us to interpret the nature of the phenomenon before we have even come to grips with the significance of the phenomenological question" (p. 46). Therefore, "it is better to make explicit our understandings, beliefs, biases, assumptions, and theories" (p. 47).

Ontological assumptions are concerned with the nature of reality or who we are in the world, based on beliefs about what is true. They answered questions such as what was real, what was truth, what do we believe about the nature of reality? These were foundational beliefs about the nature of reality, those beliefs that we knew to be true, yet we cannot prove. Theories, for example, have ontological roots. Phenomenology itself explores the (ontological) nature of consciousness and how we live and move in the world. Van Manen, (1997) says Heidegger "calls ontology the phenomenology of being" (p. 183). Therefore, we might suspect that the only reality was that reality which we experienced. Phenomenological assumptions surrounding a proposed study focused on

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how teachers experience discussions involving race might ask questions such as, "Who am I in relation to my students?" or "Who am I as a white person?"

Epistemological assumptions, on the other hand, speak to what we can know. These assumptions are based both on reality, and on knowledge. For instance, phenomenology helps us examine the lived experiences from which knowledge was constructed, for the epistemological basis of phenomenology was the belief that all knowledge of the natural world was gained through experience. Assumptions that inform the examination of race issues were the methods used in phenomenological research that better increased our understanding of the lived experiences of teachers as they participated in race discussions.

Phenomenology in Relation to Ethnography

To compare aspects of phenomenology with ethnography as a research methodology began by taking a look at properties central to all qualitative research. Interpretive research situated researchers in places with groups or individuals through which they attempted to understand the world around them. Theory emerged rather than preceded interpretive practices according to Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2000). But, according to Fetterman (1998), "theory is a guide to practice; no study, ethnographic or otherwise, can be conducted without an underlying theory or model ... the researcher's theoretical approach helps define the problem and how to tackle it" (p. 5). For instance, I was interested in studying white teachers in predominantly white classrooms. Because I sought to understand "the subjective world of human experience" I was directed toward interpretive research (Cohen et al., 2000, p. 22). As such I have considered both

ethnography and phenomenology as methodologies to explore this interest. What was important though is not which methodologies interested me most, but rather defining the purpose of my research – and here the methodological choice had clarity.

Ethnographic research has intended "to create as vivid a reconstruction as possible of the culture or groups being studied (Cohen et al., 2000). During the course of ethnographic research though, teachers may talk about their experiences discussing race issues, the purpose of the research was, according to Cohen et al., "holistic, that is, seeks a description and interpretation of the 'total phenomenon'" (2000, p. 138).

Phenomenology narrowed the focus to the lived experience of the subject allowing for a more detailed construction and analysis of the experience to illicit meaning. Phenomenologists made meaning of the world through the experiences of individuals, and while this might also be true of ethnography, the foundational question explored in ethnography was focused on the culture of a group of people (Patton, 2002). A significant distinction in phenomenology was the in-depth exploration of a singular experience. For example, in an article that explores phenomenology within sociological ethnography authors Katz and Csordas (2003) struggle with how the two perspectives work against one another:

> Phenomenology is a natural perspective for ethnographic research that would probe beneath the locally warranted definitions of a local culture to grasp the active foundations of its everyday reconstruction. This research perspective is always to some extent irritating because the formal, represented, linguistic, materially congealed culture of a people never grasps the active bases of conduct in the social world that produced the culture. The culture lived is never quite the same as the culture as represented. In this sense, phenomenology is an anti-culture, a constant challenge to the presumption that culture, no matter its political slant, can capture its own living basis in real-time social action ... Phenomenology may be especially disturbing because it always shows that culture effaces the

process of its creation. Because culture always makes moral claims, this is equivalent to saying that culture, including cultures produced by peoples who have been cruelly suppressed, systematically lies. (p. 285)

Though Katz and Csordas clearly outlined the two as distinct disciplines, they allowed that they are also "genuinely complementary ... we read the anthropologists as exhibiting existential breadth without sacrificing presentational immediacy, and the sociologists as exhibiting descriptive precision without sacrificing a compelling sensibility for being-in-the world" (2003, p. 285). According to Giorgi, "a descriptive approach would limit itself to what is given, and the argument is that a sufficiently rich description would include an intrinsic account of the phenomenon" (1997, p. 242). Kincheloe and McLaren argue that there is only interpretation in qualitative research and cite hermeneutics as evidence that the way an observation is perceived, in itself is an act of interpretation (2002). They observe that, "the quest for understanding is a fundamental feature of human existence, as encounter with the unfamiliar always demand the attempt to make meaning, to make sense" (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2002, p. 97).

One of the most important facets of this methodology for purposes of my study has the precise meaning of the term phenomenon that exists in phenomenology, because it is the object as given that is the focus, "only its presence for the experiencer counts, and an accurate description of the presence is the phenomenon, and it usually contains many phenomenal meanings" (Giorgi, 1997, p.3). These phenomenal meanings speak to Kincheloe and McLaren's concerns that, "mainstream research practices are generally, although most often unwittingly, implicated in the reproduction of systems of class, race,

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and gender oppression" (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2002, p. 105). For my study, focused on the experience of my participants when they discussed race with students, I thought of this as removing all variables and only looking at what the phenomenon meant for the individual teacher I was interviewing. In phenomenology, I understood the context as my participant's relation to the world. How a participant experienced an event, though influenced by context and relation, cannot be argued. As the researcher I removed, or bracketed, my own understanding of systems so that I could intently focus on how an individual experienced an event. Using phenomenology, my aim was to draw meanings from those lived experiences to help me understand how we need to prepare preservice teachers to have discussions of race with students.

To understand further, I explored the concept of intentionality within phenomenology. Husserl used the term to describe the essential feature of consciousness (Giorgi, 1997). The intentional relation can be specific, general, real, or fictitious. For example, "to be emotional signifies that one is emotional about some situation or person" (Giorgi, 1997, p. 3). Husserl argued that the relation between perception and its objects is not passive. Rather, human consciousness actively constitutes objects of experience. Consciousness, in other words, is always consciousness of something. It does not stand alone, over and above experience, more or less immaculately perceiving and conceiving objects and events, but, instead, exists always already – from the start – as a constitutive part of what it is conscious of ... consciousness constructs as much as it perceives the world. Husserl's project is to investigate the structures of consciousness that make it possible to comprehend an empirical world. (Holstein & Gubrium, 2005, pp. 484-485).

Understanding Racial Issues Through Phenomenological Research

I'm drawn to stories. I loved telling them as a means to better explain complex

ideas (not to mention stories can be captivating and entertaining). I did this as a teacher,

telling stories of my experiences in the classroom that illustrated how we facilitated

learning. Interestingly, student response affirmed that this was also an effective means of

conveying information. I also loved listening to stories. Initially, stories my parents and

other relatives told me that took me to new and exciting places, and introduced me to

people (often my own ancestors) I would otherwise have never known.

Today I love listening to stories because I still find them entertaining, but also

because of the powerful way they have helped me understand people. I am especially

drawn to the stories of people's experiences because these have told me so much about a

person, given me insight to what they were thinking, how they were thinking, and what

influenced both their thinking and their action.

According to Cohen et al. (2000), "the purposes of the research determine the

methodology and design of the research" (p. 73). In this study, my interest in exploring

the experiences of teachers led me to phenomenology. I believed that using

phenomenology in researching race would have a powerful impact on how we interrogate

our practices. I wanted to know how the experiences of white teachers, as they became

involved with discussions that focus on race issues, could better inform larger issues of

how race has been addressed in schools today.

As I reread an article that addressed the use of the word "tolerance," I discovered

in it the potential for phenomenological examination of the experience of a college

professor in a predominantly white university. This author described a pivotal moment

when the only African American student in this particular graduate course challenged the

use of the term tolerance: "When I hear you talk about tolerance, I hear you telling me

that I am something to be put up with. That doesn't make me feel very good" (Vacarr,

2001, p 286). As Vacarr relived the experience she noted:

> In the silence that followed this moment I had the uncomfortable privilege of
> confronting myself as I struggled with the decision to address the differences in
> the room ... Remaining present in that struggle led me into a disturbingly
> vulnerable place where I was forced to confront my ineptitude ... In that moment
> the silence of the room amplified the noise of my internal distress. Speaking felt
> risky... I sensed that several students wanted me to be their ally and to excuse our
> ignorance and our racism. And in fact, I wanted to do just that; it would have been
> so much safer. It was a preciously frightening moment, laden with potential
> betrayal ... During the interaction, I was acutely aware of the dialectic, wanting to
> be seen as a 'good' person and at the same time not wanting to be seen at all,
> fearful that I would be found lacking. (pp. 286-292)

I saw powerful potential in giving teachers opportunities to relive their experiences so

that we might gain insight into how teachers see themselves racially and how this impacts

how they discuss race in the classroom. Consideration of experiences that they have had

in addressing issues surrounding race and class have ultimately allowed them to become

reflective and learn from their experiences how to more effectively confront the

uneasiness that may have surrounded these discussions.

Phenomenology had been used in studies of race issues, but it was not

widespread. Most of the research appeared to be in the health care field, centered on

nursing practices. Gunaratnam (2003) explored the significance of understanding the

experiences of minority hospice patients as a means to improving existing conditions:

Challenging and seeking to transform the essentialism of categorical approaches of 'race' and ethnicity in research. It also means connecting theory with lived experience, where the claiming of personhood through categories of 'race', ethnicity, gender, and sexuality, for example, needs to be recognized and examined critically as part of a potential move towards social transformation. (p. 35)

While I am focusing on descriptive phenomenology, a hermeneutic study that explored the nature of race-related guilt was compelling in its use of interpretation of the lived experience of being white (Arminio, 2001). The author began by engaging in conversations about race with the subjects, who then wrote reflective pieces that were analyzed. My concern in this process was that the theme of race-related guilt, while initiated by some of the participants, was introduced to all members by the researcher and ultimately became one of the emerging themes. The participants agreed that the analysis "made clearer the meaning of their life experiences" (Arminio, 2001, p. 243). Throughout the analysis, I found myself aligning with Husserl and wishing the researcher had used reduction in her analysis of the experience rather than introducing her pre-understandings to the participants.

Strengths and Weaknesses (and Challenges)

The obvious strength in phenomenology is the possibility to gain deep understanding and insight into the lived experiences of practicing white teachers as they talked about race in predominantly white settings. This is why I felt it was the appropriate methodology for my dissertation study. I want to identify what teacher education programs need to know to help preservice teachers have these important discussions

about race. To do this effectively, I felt I needed that deep insight into what it was like for practicing teachers' having discussions.

A weakness of phenomenology arises sometimes in a misunderstanding of what validity means within this methodology. According to Polkinghorne (1989):

> The concept of validity ordinarily refers to the notion that an idea is well-grounded and well-supported and thus one can have confidence in it. Some confusion exists in the literature about how to apply the notion of validity to phenomenological research … [which] approaches validity from a more general perspective – as a conclusion that inspires confidence because the argument in support of it has been persuasive … The validity of phenomenological research concerns the question, "Does the general structural description provide an accurate portrait of the common features and structural connections that are manifest in the examples collected? (p. 57)

The accuracy is important. Obviously you can't check the accuracy of a subject's experience, but this was partly understood in the phenomenological perspective, that you were not interested so much about the accuracy of the event but rather how the subject experienced the event. But there still would be the possibility the subject was making up a story to gain sympathy, or alter an experience so they came out looking better. With practicing teachers there may be fear of being judged, fear of being exposed.

More importantly though, accuracy implies the methods involved in the methodology. This would include not influencing the subject during the interview, precision in the transcription of the interview, and accuracy in the analysis. Built into the method of analysis is a check on this - the essence elicited, through the free imaginative variation in the search for essence, as described earlier.

Another weakness would be biases on the part of the researcher. Frankenberg (2004) argues that the "positionedness of the researcher/theorist must be examined and accounted for ... The researcher's perspective is also connected with a politicized, thinking consciousness such that one's mode of interpretation will be connected with communities of meaning in significant ways" (p. 107). This is also addressed in an essential step in the analysis, the reduction (also described earlier). To further explain this, Van Manen (1997) describes the steps in this process:

> In the reduction one needs to overcome one's subjective or private feelings, preferences, inclinations, or expectations that would prevent one from coming to terms with a phenomenon or experience as it is lived through … One needs to strip away the theories or scientific conceptions and thematizations which overlay the phenomenon one wishes to study, and which prevents one from seeing the phenomenon in a non-abstracting manner … One needs to see past or through the particularity of lived experience toward the universal, essence or eidos that lies on the other side of the concreteness of lived meaning. (p. 185)

Personally, this was an area in which I would have to pay careful attention because my perspective included a desire to find ways to interrupt the often unintentional but unchallenged racist practices that can exist in predominantly white rural/small town and suburban schools.

In researching the experiences of hospice patients, Gunaratnam (2003) found that she was more drawn to analyzing experiences in which racial themes were explicitly identified/identifiable. She found interpretations were difficult when she attempted to discover the hidden meanings based on silences, what was not being said (Gunaratnam, 2003). I had to be careful of this because I was often tempted to read into pauses and hesitations.

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A significant amount of literature addressed concerns with the race of the interviewer in race studies. This issue was interesting for me in terms of insider status, because I was a white woman interviewing white subjects. I was especially interested in the research of Charles Gallagher who, "had initially assumed that his insider racial status as a 'white' was sufficient to establish rapport with other whites" (cited in Twine, 2002, p. 10). Because Gallagher was a white person, interviewing white people, he did not consider race a salient issue. "Being white, like being a member of any social group, has a host of contradictory, symbolic, and situationally specific meanings" (p. 10). Social characteristics such as perceived class and even perceptions about the role of a university researcher limited access to his subjects as an "insider."

Islam (2000) further clarified this as he described the "outsider within status" that seeks to understand "the multiplicity of belonging" (p. 42) that attends conducting research within your community. At my own research sites, I shared that multiplicity in being white, a woman, a teacher, a parent, a resident of the geographic area. But I was also a student at a Minnesota (vs. Wisconsin) university conducting research, a "former" teacher and administrator – and when interviews crossed into my own small community I was identified as a rural resident (vs. from town), and the "pilot's wife" (I share irritation at this with my neighbor, a clinical psychologist, who is identified as "the doctor's wife").

According to Islam (2000), "both insider and outsider status hold specific meaning and consequences" (p. 42). This was especially true in research regarding race issues when insiders make assumptions that you share their racial attitudes and

sometimes-racist discourse about the "Other." Blee (2000) shared this insider-outsider position in her research study of female white supremacists: "My role as a white person conveyed access and a basic level of rapport with white racist activists that would have been impossible for a non-white researcher to achieve" (p. 108). But she was clearly in a precarious position with consequences that were potentially violent. That precarious position also included the dilemma that Islam faced risking a perception by research subjects that by not responding to often-racist sentiments that you are in fact agreeing with their stance.

Alternatively, Young (2004) claimed that outsider status must be given more attention because in certain cases it serves as a causal factor for stimulating important and revealing conversations in the field. Like Blee, Young shared the insider-outsider position, but found that "at certain moments this experience has been riddled with moments of bewilderment, confusion, and tension, all of which resulted from assumptions that some of the men made about me on the basis of assumed insider connections" (p. 194). This is especially important in phenomenological interviews, as the focus needed to remain on "the thing itself" – as an insider you may be so familiar with the experience that you miss the nuances that otherwise would have stood out.

Racism was a highly charged and emotional subject. Twine (2000) found that researchers "committed to an antiracist agenda may find they are being positioned as 'traitors' to their communities on account of their research" (p. 27). This would be true of participants as well, afraid of being identified as a "race traitor." Islam's (2000) conclusion offered reflection and insight into this challenge:

My research reemphasized my own need to interrogate everyday narratives since racism is deeply embedded in everyday language, and in ways of knowing and living. If I sanitize and silence parts of my research that challenge the Bangladeshi community's image of itself and its role in perpetuating racism, I betray my commitment to struggle against racism ... Ultimately such silences subvert an analysis and understanding of how racism operates and how racialized systems of domination and inequality are maintained. Therefore, such silences are a betrayal of antiracist politics. (p. 59)

I thought that the major strengths and weaknesses for the purposes of my study were again, in the methodology in relation to the topic. As these studies suggested, race is a complex issue for both researcher and subject. The responses elicited from white female supremacists in the Islam study had me wondering if teachers would possess that "openness," and whether I would be able to effectively draw the experience out from my participants? And always, would my research make a difference?

Methods

My study was conducted in rural middle schools in the Midwest. I chose to focus on middle schools because I am most interested the developmental aspects of students at this level, especially as critical thinkers figuring out the world in which they live. Also, my experience in middle schools as a former teacher and administrator, while bracketed, helped me with an understanding of curriculum and practice in grades 5-8. I sought participants from a geographic area in the rural Midwest defined by accessibility from my house (I live in a rural area). This area included all towns that were considered "rural" for school reporting (having fewer than 2500 residents). Within the area, I selected schools that had a white student population of between 92% and 98%, accessing this information

from state department of education demographic data. These percentages would create a better likelihood of finding a "predominately white" population in middle schools that had a range of grade level configurations from 5th to 8th grade. This ensured that my participants would have a greater chance of having a student of color at some point in a 3-4 year rotation. This would give me a pool of approximately 100 or more potential participants. I hoped to have twenty interviews.

I called the administrative assistants at each school and set up a meeting with each principal. I met with each principal, gave them a copy of my curriculum vitae and a copy of a participant package (discussed below). I explained my study and asked permission to include their school in my study. I indicated to each that I would need a letter granting permission to meet the requirements of University of Minnesota's Institutional Review Board. I offered to share the results of my study with each school and also offered, in appreciation for their participation, to assist them with any work surrounding issues of diversity in their schools. Principals either invited me to meet with the staff in a scheduled faculty meeting, meet with grade level teachers at team meetings, or took participant packages to distribute personally after speaking with their staff about the study.

Participant packages included:

1. A cover letter outlining my study (Appendix A).

2. A consent form (Appendix B).

3. A response card (Appendix C) to be returned via mail so that only I would know which teachers were participating in each school.

4. A stamped envelope for returning the response card if participating.

5. A University of Minnesota bookmark as thank you.

I then met with teachers at faculty meetings or team meetings to introduce myself and my study, explained the criteria for participating (must be white, and must have had the experience of discussing race or race issue with students), answered questions, and hoped they would contact me. I was pleased to receive five response cards in the mail within days of my meetings with schools, but was surprised and disappointed that only five more trickled in beyond that. While at one of the site schools, I had an opportunity to individually approach two male teachers who had not responded, and asked them to participate, and they agreed (circumstances of which are discussed in Chapter 3). There were two teachers from whom I received response cards, but they did not return my phone calls/emails, so I eliminated them from my potential list of participants. In the end, I handed out 125 participant packages and interviewed a total of 10 participants, seven women and three men.

Using the method of contact chosen by the participant, I set up interviews at a location of their choosing. This ended up being primarily in teacher's classrooms after school or during planning time, but also included coffee shops and study rooms in local libraries. Interviews began with an introduction and set up of a digital recording device. In setting up interviews I mentioned that they had the option to choose their own pseudonym, or I could later assign one. I asked each if they had a name they wanted to use (half of them did), then I read over the consent form with each participant and asked if there were any questions. I did end up altering one of the names chosen by a participant

because it was distracting and confusing in the written summary. When all questions (if any) were answered, I had the participant sign two consent forms, which I then signed as well, giving one copy to the participant and keeping one for my records. I conducted interviews that lasted between 33 minutes and 80 minutes. Each digital recording was assigned a code for identification purposes.

In the interviews I asked participants to think of a time in the classroom in which they engaged in a discussion about race or racial issues with students and to describe the setting. As they began to place themselves in the experience I would ask questions such as, "Could you tell me what that was like when you…?" When the participant began to drift away from the phenomenon, I would gauge their comfort level and carefully guide them back into the moment they were reliving with redirecting comments such as "Let's go back to…" Some participants took a long time to get to the experience, but I found that this was usually because they were hesitant to talk about the experience, and giving them the time they needed was important. When the interview concluded I reiterated that they could contact me or my advisor or the university if they had any questions or concerns. I followed up each interview with a note expressing my appreciation and included a gift card for a book at an online bookseller.

Following my interviews I would sit and take notes, describing each participant, making comments about body language and expression that I thought might be helpful as I later analyzed that data. I also followed the advice of Mark Vagle, to journal throughout the process. I wish I had been more conscientious about this, as it proved to be extremely

helpful in keeping me in the moment of the interview. When my interviews were completed, I had them transcribed using pseudonyms.

Analysis

My participants shared experiences with me that, for some, were deeply personal and I was conscious of the deep responsibility I had to share these in a way that was both accurate and respectful. At the same time, whenever I started "analyzing" the words of others, a passage I read from Hemmingway when I was in high school always came to mind. He was speaking to analysis of his book, *The Old Man and the Sea*, when he said:

> The sea is the sea. The old man is an old man. The boy is a boy and the fish is a fish. The shark are all sharks no better no worse. All the symbolism people say is shit. What goes beyond is what you see beyond when you know. (1952, p. 4)

For me, this was especially poignant in phenomenological analysis for three reasons. First, this was a reminder to bracket, that what my participants experienced, was what they experienced. In my writing I must "transform the lived experience into a textual expression of its essence" (Van Manen, 1990, p. 36). Second, scholarship in race and racism, and experience in teacher education, allowed me to see beyond. Third, what goes beyond spoke to my purpose of better preparing teachers to have discussions about race. I heard Hemmingway speaking for my participants at every turn. It was helpful because it kept me in check as a reminder to be open so that I could fully enter the world of my participants.

Analysis of the data would lead me to meanings of my participant's lived experience of the phenomenon (having a discussion about race or race issues with students). I used the guidelines offered by Hycner (1985) to get started and attempted to

heed his caution that phenomenological analysis must break from any standard form in order that the researcher remains "responsive to the phenomenon" (p. 280). Hycner outlined the following steps, which gave me the initial support I needed to begin:

1. Transcription.

2. Bracketing and the phenomenological reduction.

3. Listening to the interview for a sense of the whole.

4. Delineating units of meaning.

5. Delineating units of meaning relevant to the research question.

6. Training independent judges to verify the units of relative meaning.

7. Eliminating redundancies.

8. Clustering units of relevant meaning.

9. Determining themes from clusters of meaning.

10. Write a summary for each individual interview.

11. Return to the participant with the summary and themes: Conducting a second interview.

12. Modifying themes and summary.

13. Identifying general and unique themes for all the interviews.

14. Contextualization of themes.

15. Composite summary. (pp. 280-294)

I listened to each recording as soon as I could, but I would have to wait for the transcriptions. I listened carefully, usually closing my eyes so that I could be in the moment of the interview once again. Next I did as Hycner suggested and made a list of

my bracketed meanings and interpretations. Thankfully, through conversations with Mark

Vagle, I was introduced more closely to Dalhberg's concept of bridling (Vagle, 2009;

Vagle, Hughes, & Durbin, 2009) as a means of constantly exploring how I am bringing

meaning to the lived experience. This proved to be essential for me as I was developing

units of meaning and clusters of meaning. Vagle writes:

> The act of bridling opens up possible spaces for a constant reflection on one's
> seeing. My bridling did not assume that I could set my understanding aside,
> rather it attempted to interrogate my own understanding as meaning was
> produced. (Vagle, 2009, p. 603)

Bridling offered me the space to use my understanding of teaching and working with

middle level students to move in and out of the experience as sought meaning. I found

that I relied on bracketing as a check on my openness to my participants' lived

experience.

Reading through my transcripts was slow work and I had to step away at times

when I could not give them my full attention. Readings of the whole, followed by line-

by-line readings allowed me to place myself back in the moment of the interview and

visualized the participant, which allowed me more accuracy in making meaning. For

example, one of my participants was very animated in his telling of the lived experience.

His body language, facial expressions, and hesitancies at times were all part of how I

came to making meaning. Sometimes participants became very emotional and other times

so much meaning came from how their words sounded. As I began to make notations of

meanings I was so connected with the transcriptions that I could hear the interview

without the recording. There were times though when I struggled with meaning clusters

and had to return yet again to the moment in the transcription to understand how meanings were connected. I have defined themes from meaning clusters, illustrated in Table 1 of Chapter 3 where I began to uncover what it was like for white teachers to talk about race. Throughout my discussion in Chapters 3 and 4, I described methodological considerations as I made meaning of the lived experiences of my participants in my study.

Chapter 3: Silence, Fear, and Discomfort

"Education is a social process. Education is growth.
Education is, not a preparation for life; education is life itself."

John Dewey

The teachers interviewed in this study exemplified how educators participate in the social process of education. Schools from which I solicited participants had mission statements suggesting they existed to either: "support students as life-long learners in society" or "prepare responsible citizens/all citizens to contribute to a democratic society/global society/changing world." When schools mentioned a democratic/global society/changing world, I looked up social studies standards for schools across the Midwest, to understand it to mean a culturally diverse, interdependent world. In predominantly white rural communities, supporting such a mission can be a challenge.

Diversity refers to "the presence of human beings with perceived or actual differences based on a variety of human characteristics," according Koppelman (2008 p. 13). Most teachers in my study volunteered that there was limited engagement with diversity where they lived and worked, though some pointed out diversity found in these rural areas existed largely in two spheres. First, socioeconomic diversity was in evidence by the between 36% - 58% students who were receiving free/reduced school lunches in site schools. Second, from statistics available regarding religion, it appeared that the communities where I conducted my research are Christian, with approximately 55% of the residents identifying as Lutheran, 20% Catholic, and 25% distributed between 19 Mainline Protestant Denominations (Association of Religious Data Archives, 2000).

More obvious during the holiday season, a range of Northern European ethnicities

were evident with cultural and family traditions celebrated. The racial makeup of students in the schools where I sought participants was mostly white (92% - 98%). In predominantly white communities, it is easy to ignore race, intentionally or otherwise (Lewis, 2007; Sullivan, 2006; Trepagnier, 2006; Willis, 2003). In response to general racial discourse in the schools serving as sites for this study, many teachers said, "It just never came up." But for my participants, race did come up in their classrooms, planned and unplanned, and when it did, they found themselves mostly learning on their own how to respond to issues of race with their students. They are isolated in developing a pedagogy that addressed racial discourse. And as learners they experienced *silence, fear, discomfort, uncertainty,* and *paralysis* as they connected a history of racial inequality to the present reality of an inconspicuous system of privileges that can easily be ignored in a predominantly white setting.

In his *Pedagogic Creed*, Dewey summarizes the importance of addressing historical influences:

> I believe once more that history is of educative value in so far as it presents phases of social life and growth. It must be controlled by reference to social life. When taken simply as history it is thrown into the distant past and becomes dead and inert. Taken as the record of man's social life and progress it becomes full of meaning. I believe, however, that it cannot be so taken excepting as the child is also introduced directly into social life. (1897)

Only if teachers allowed themselves to continue as learners could they effectively guide their students in the mission statements of their schools. In this study teachers gave me access to the learning process, as they experienced it, in their classrooms. Using phenomenological interviews, I was afforded an opportunity to see how a history of racial

dominance in America makes meaning in predominantly white rural Midwest classrooms. Van Manen (1990) described one aspect of phenomenological research as a "search for what it means to be human," and ultimately, "to become more fully who we are" (p. 12). As Van Manen ascribes how we live in the world to sociocultural and historical influences, I think of ways in which those influences have guided how race is lived in the rural Midwest. In this study, what it meant to be human was articulated by the participants specifically in what it meant to live as a white person among other white people in a racially diverse world. Being white in the world in which these participants lived was especially meaningful because social and historical influences were what allowed them to live without thinking about what it meant to be white. Additionally, these people were teachers, licensed to guide our children in how they would learn and live in our society. In describing what it was like to talk about race, participants give meaning to their whiteness and did indeed become more fully who they were as humans - humans who, simply by chance, were born white.

Silence in Rural America

One of the key findings of my research was not rooted in the phenomenological analysis that follows, but rather emerged before the first interview could be conducted. In a study focused on discussions about race, my initial finding centered on silence. This was significant in that it situated both the strengths and the limitations of this study. Armed with an approved thesis proposal and IRB approval, I set out with great enthusiasm to gather participants, only to collect instead a bit of empirical data supporting literature that noted a silence when it came to white people and racial

discourse. As I wandered purposefully on the meandering country roads of the Midwest I was even more aware of the peace and the quiet nature of rural America. I wondered if the silence of racial discourse was deliberate, as if discussions of race would somehow disrupt this tranquil landscape. Perhaps this was the color-blind approach that defines race as a forbidden subject of conversation (Doane & Bonilla-Silva, 2003), an ideology present in the experiences of some of my participants. I take this up in Chapter 4.

Conducting this study in rural communities meant seeking participants from a wide geographic area, traveling sometimes 20-30 miles between schools, up to 168 miles in one day of visits to schools that may have had only 6-8 middle-level teachers in a K-8 or 5-12 building. But of the 125 teachers I asked to participate, there were only 12 teachers who indicated a willingness to participate in my study. And of those 12, only 10 responded to my request to schedule an interview. The criteria for responding were, 1) they must be a white teacher in a predominantly white rural middle school, and 2) they must have had the experience of discussing race or race issues with students in their classroom. Was it because the topic of the study was race and no one wanted to talk about race? While I know there are many variables to be considered, I don't have an indication of why there were so few teachers willing to participate in this particular study – and that might be an interesting study. I fantasized about inviting teachers to participate in a placebo study that included interviews focused on, for example, literacy circles, lunch menus, or cooperative learning. Certainly there are other reasons I considered: time (teachers are busy), not knowing /trusting me (fear of anonymity), or simply not wanting to participate in a study of any sort. Or the obvious, that they did not meet the criteria to

respond. While most teachers appeared to be white, I couldn't be sure of their racial identity. I wondered if it was really a possibility that only 10 % of the teachers I approached had actually had the experience of discussing race issues with students. I'm still curious about that.

Of particular note in beginning this study was that principals were very welcoming and in some cases eager to have me include their school in my study. Most encouraged me to attend the next faculty meeting, and placed me on the agenda or arranged for me to meet with teachers during common team planning time. One principal took participant packages to distribute individually to teachers, following an email that s/he wrote that encouraged teachers to participate. One left packets in mailboxes following an email and morning announcement. What was especially interesting was that at one particular school, the principal became very serious as I explained my research and expressed hope that many teachers would respond. The principal indicated that the school had experienced several racial incidents and he was very concerned about how they could better address conflict between white students and the small number of students of color in the school. And like all other principals I spoke with, he was eager to see the results of my study. Unfortunately, in this particular school, there were no respondents.

Still, I had this sense that if I spoke personally to people, it might be different. But I was fearful of pressing schools and teachers, because I wanted their experience with university research to be positive, and I respected the many demands placed on teachers and administrators. Also, I was not very good at being persistent. But I was getting desperate for participants and seized a couple of opportunities to speak with teachers who

had initially indicated they were not interested in participating (this was in a school where teachers has returned packets to a box in the office if they were not interested in participating). From my journal:

> Today I returned to the first school where I had sought participants. I had an opportunity to talk individually with two teachers on an unrelated subject. My curiosity, fortified by the uneasiness I was feeling that males would be underrepresented in my study, gave me the courage to ask each, "So, have you ever had the experience of discussing race or race issues with students in class?" From each, the answer was an abrupt "No." And to each I replied quizzically, "Really? *Never*?" The first one replied, "This is about your study, right? Yeah, I don't think there is anything I could contribute to that." I decided to persist because first, I didn't believe it, and second, he just looked like he had something he wanted to say, and third, my curiosity had to test this feeling I had that if you pressed individuals ever so slightly, they *would* have something to say. Even so, I had to hide my astonishment when his response was, "Well, there was this one thing that happened, but I don't know how interesting it would be to you, but yeah, I could talk to you." Same with the second - a similar reaction, "Well, I guess I could talk about a book we read in my class, but I don't know if it would be helpful to you." (Journal, 11-11-10)

Bordering on silence, this hesitance to talk about race became significant as I began to extract general units of meaning from transcripts of interviews. This hesitance is so interesting to me. Hesitance to participate, and also hesitance in the way my participants talked during interviews. Again, from my journal entries:

> The strangest thing about my interview today was how again, I heard this hesitation at times during the interview. I didn't journal about this last time because I thought I might be seeing or hearing something that wasn't there (remember I am being really careful about bracketing). But, it is real. It happened again today and when I play it back I am not imagining it. It feels like everyone has a secret they are hiding. It's weird!! Or like they are making sure no one can hear them. They lower their voices, and no kidding, today my participant actually looked around before speaking… in an empty room…but certainly aware that I am telling their stories… I mean there is a recording device on the table between us… But, this is frustrating in a phenomenological interview. I have them "in the moment" where they are reliving this experience and it is coming out so true and honest as they remember and then… this silence before they continue in a halting, cautious way. (Journal, 10-4-10)

In both my field notes and journal entries, and also in analysis notes it was fascinating to me how often participants would use terms such as "I think I…" or "I probably…" or "I might have…" preceding parts of descriptions of how they experienced an event. This was in such stark contrast to how clear and committed the relived dialogue surrounding those comments appeared. This happened to some extent in nearly all of my interviews, but the following example illustrates what I mean.

In this interview a participant was telling me about a particular student, describing the difficult behavior of this student and how it wasn't the student's race that was at issue, but the behavior. However, about 8 minutes earlier in the interview, when this same teacher summarized the racial makeup of the class, she had said, "I don't know. I don't remember. There may have been one black student." Bonilla-Silva (2006) noticed the same sort of hesitation in his interviews with white subjects. He attributed this to colorblindness, an ideology I will take up in detail in Chapter 4:

> Digressions, long pauses, repetition, and self-corrections were the order of the day. This incoherent talk is the result of talking about race in a world that insists that race does not matter, rather than being a tool of colorblindness. However, since it is so preeminent in whites' race talk, it must be included in the linguistic modalities of colorblind racism. (p. 71)

Each time I saw this when reviewing transcripts, I initially placed this in the same category of responses where teachers questioned me as to the correct way to respond or the "politically correct" terminology, which I eventually named uncertainty. But really, it was a category that also spoke to a move away from silence to take those first tentative steps toward talking about race. I found this was typical of a newness to discussing race,

the naivety and uncertainty expressed when approaching this new frontier (Tatum, 1997; Williams, 2000).

Participants expressed a sense of isolation in schools when they had questions or wanted to tell someone about an incident. For example, Ruth, a math teacher, described her first attempt at bringing up race with teachers. She had one student in her class who did not interact with the rest of the class. He was the one student of color in her classroom, an African-American boy. His isolation was very apparent, and that he was also racially isolated made it all the more obvious. She had made several attempts to help him join in activities. She wanted to ask other teachers about what to do, so she brought it up during a grade level team meeting:

> *Ruth:* Well, it was weird because I was the new person and it was like do you not see this happening? What can we do? And I sort of thought that I would be given some guidance, because I thought, well, maybe they would know if they'd been teaching a while and they didn't. So it was really hard for me.

> *Mary:* So how did they respond to this? Can you remember how you approached the teachers?

> *Ruth:* It was a team meeting and I remember I was nervous. I was nervous about asking about it, because we were just talking about curricular things. And I remember I thought about it a long time before, because I thought, well, how am I going to approach this? And I thought of combining it with talking about another student that I had that was very academically high, and something needed to be done about that, too… It was, but I just didn't want to make it seem like – well, okay, this is a better way to describe it. I didn't want to make it seem like, *"why am I noticing something that you guys aren't noticing?"*

As Ruth described this meeting, her facial expressions and her intonation emphasized how she found this incredulous, that this situation that she was so concerned about was not their top priority. She brought up her concerns about the student, along

with those of the high achieving student, so her concerns did not stand out as racial

concerns. They talked about the student, but not in racial terms. She talked about how,

years later, this hasn't changed:

> *Ruth:* But we don't talk about race issues at all.
>
> *Mary:* As teachers?
>
> *Ruth:* Hm-mmm, no.
>
> *Mary:* It just never comes up?
>
> *Ruth:* Never comes up. I don't know. I don't know. That's a good question. And maybe it's because some people just don't think about it.

This was echoed by Al who was had difficulty deciding how to approach using a

particular book that contained the "n" word:

> We never have discussions like that.

And when he felt he needed to discuss using said book with the administration, his

experience meeting with the principal did not result in the kind of dialogue he was

seeking. He was frustrated with the principal's response:

> She said, "Really, it's up to you, Al. It's up to you. If you feel comfortable with it, then you should use it." I asked, "Well, should I call the parents or what should I do?" "Well, you should, if you feel like you want to, you can." So I didn't really get a whole lot out of that. (He comes back to this later in the interview) Yeah, I've never gotten a response that made me stop and look closer or harder or anything. I've always got – like with the principal, "Do what you want with the mom." It's like, "Okay," this or that. I've never had somebody say, "Okay, but think about this. Consider this. You might not be thinking about this." I've never gotten any sort of – and that doesn't make me any more comfortable at all. That makes me almost more uncomfortable, like, "Don't you know this is probably a big deal?"

The silence I experienced when searching for participants to talk about lived experiences discussing race, and the silence about race that existed among teachers and administrators in rural schools – this silence is somewhat deafening. That the teachers participating in my study opened up to me, spoke volumes about their desire to talk. Their hesitance at times during the interviews was a reminder that this was not a natural conversation. My own lived experience in these interviews was one of feeling like I was watching someone enter a huge empty building, like how a school feels at night or on a weekend, and because you are not sure if you are alone, you call out hesitantly, and because the building is so empty your voice sounds extra loud and you are hyper-aware that someone might be watching your every move. I felt like I had to be careful in how I let them know I was there, that they could trust me - but even then, speaking in that space sounded too loud. I often felt as if teachers were confiding in me, some telling me secrets they thought were important for me to share, others just wanting to talk about the right way to bring up issues of race.

Al's experience was an example of this, reaching out for support, only to find his isolation reinforced with his principal's response, "It's up to you." Also reinforced is the notion that as a leader, "I don't know how to help you - you are on your own." And it was difficult to find allies, because no one seemed to be the one to make the first move, and so you remained in your classroom, alone in the silence.

Fractures in the Silence

Breaking the pervasive silence, participants in my study revealed what it was like to talk about issues of race with their students. How these teachers experienced those

discussions are represented as units of meanings outlined in Table 1. In my analysis I then clustered relevant units of meaning. These emerged into the seven themes identified, which expressed the essences of the phenomenon of teachers discussing race with students. I combined the themes of fear and discomfort because, although they were present individually, they interacted with each other throughout. This became more evident as it was illustrated in discussion throughout this chapter. I defined emergent themes as they made sense for me, but then checked for agreement with a more universal understanding using an online dictionary. Themes and their definitions are identified in Table 2.

In the following section, I described the dominant themes of fear and discomfort, which appeared as central to the lived experience by the majority of my participants. In Chapter 4, I continued to describe the phenomenon as experienced through uncertainty, anger, frustration, experience, and paralysis.

Table 1

Themes and Units of Meaning

THEMES

Fear & Discomfort	Uncertainty	Anger	Frustration	Experience	Paralysis
		Units of Meaning			
Fear: Making a child feel bad Racist Discomfort Talking around the experience Nervousness Unprepared Letting a sudden down	Lack of knowledge about what you are teaching Politically correct Colorblind Newness	Defending yourself Being labeled a racist Injustice	That things are the way they are People just don't get it Unprepared Don't know what I'm doing	Longevity in teaching It gets easier Cultural experiences Experience	Guilt and shame Bad experiences Too scary Never again

Table 2

Themes Defined

Themes	Definitions

Fear & Discomfort	Fear: An unpleasant emotion caused by the belief that someone or something is dangerous, likely to cause pain, or a threat.
	    http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/fear?region=us
	
	Discomfort: A state of mental unease; worry or embarrassment.
	    http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/discomfort?region=us

Uncertainty	The state of being uncertain - not completely confident or sure of something. http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/uncertain?region=us
Anger	A strong feeling of annoyance, displeasure, or hostility http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/anger?region=us
Frustration	The strong feeling of being upset or annoyed, especially because of inability to change or achieve something http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/frustration?region=us
Experience	Practical contact with and observation of facts or events; the knowledge or skill acquired by experience over a period of time, especially that gained in a particular profession by someone at work http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/experience?region=us
Paralysis	Inability to act or function in a person, organization, or place http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/paralysis?region=us

Fear and Discomfort

In teachers' lived experiences, the themes of fear and discomfort dominated the

interviews and subsequent analysis. It became clear, however, that the themes of fear,

discomfort, uncertainty, and paralysis were inexorably linked together. As participants

described their experiences as discomfort, the complex layers articulated as uneasiness

teased apart to appear within several essences. There is a fear associated with discomfort

- the unknown (doing something for the first time), fear associated with not being

knowledgeable enough about what I am talking about (about race, about being

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"politically correct"), fear of how students will respond, especially when there is a student of color in the class. There is also a fear of repercussions following a lesson, both from principals and parents, and students too.

These intertwined associations are further complicated when I considered how to organize my findings into a cohesive report. Rather than writing a composite summary discussing the lived experience of each participant individually, I made the decision to write about participants' experience within themes. I then allowed the themes to be illuminated by the lived experiences of the teachers.

Fear

From my journal:

One of the first thoughts I had as I began this study was fear – fear of what I might find out about teachers. Being a teacher is a large part of my own identity. And a part of that identity is constantly striving to be a good teacher. Amidst a stream of negative media reports about teachers… as ineffective, as cheaters, as pedophiles, I don't want to contribute research that reinforces what the general public thinks they know about teaching. I want my study to be a strong and positive, viable account that proves the tenacity and commitment of teachers to equity and equality in education. Fortunately, for this study, my interest in validity, and in reporting with great accuracy the experiences of teachers as they discuss race supersedes the biases I bring to this study. Bracketing all this stuff may be HARD when I get to the analysis phase. So in the interest of full disclosure: I approached each and every interview with fear – it was present in each interview as a conflict between my appreciation that a teacher has the courage and willingness to talk about their experiences with race and this dread that they might say something so awful that I will wish I hadn't chosen race as the focus of my study. (Journal, 1-25-11)

In a separate entry:

And there is another thing I have to get out (bracket Mary, bracket!). It is sometimes absolutely painful to watch and listen to these teachers talk about experiences that were so difficult for them to get through, and painful again to listen to the recordings. And I am overcome with fear right now, because here is a difficult thing for me to say. But, here goes... As I was thinking about this tonight

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I froze… and was like, wait a second, we are talking about race, right? And as I am sitting here thinking about how hard it is for these teachers to talk about race it occurs to me that these are WHITE people. Egad! Will I end up portraying my participants as victims??? Like white people as victims of racism… Aaacckkkk! Wages of whiteness aside, I am afraid this study is going in a dangerous direction and this idea of "bracketing" is going to make me nuts. I am remembering Tim's caution about my methodology and about research in general… Yes Tim, this is what I signed up for, so as they say, let the chips fall where they may… (Journal, 1-6-11)

This was Al's experience. Al was a language arts teacher who introduced his students to the mystery genre in literature. He planned his units thoughtfully so that they were engaging. As I looked around his classroom and listened to him talk about teaching, it was clear that his was a student-centered learning environment. But to hear this story accurately, you need to know him, or a little bit about him, because when I read through the transcripts and my description of his experiences, I had an image of a more nervous, timid fellow, not the person I interviewed.

Al was tall, athletic, like a runner. His voice was loud, commanding, and confident, but in a friendly way. He is energetic and funny, in a smart way, and he uses a lot of hand gestures and great facial expressions – he is very likeable. In the unit he described to me, he had chosen to use *The Gold Bug,* by Edgar Allen Poe. He explained it as, "kind of a treasure-hunting, puzzle-solving story," and he was excited to use it. I was not familiar with the story, and Al told me about the main characters, William Legrand, "the super-genius kind of guy that figures everything out," and Jupiter, whom he described as the feeble-minded African-American servant to Legrand, though in the relationship, Legrand also served as caretaker to Jupiter. But Al saw a potential problem:

Al: So the issue of race comes in here, because – or in the story, William Legrand will chastise Jupiter every once in a while, and Jupiter speaks, in the story, with quite a dialect that you would expect that – I don't know how to say it – is African American of that time and it's fairly stereotypical. That Jupiter is fairly feeble-minded, also leads to some of the stereotypes that can be brought out.

But Jupiter is totally fine with this and he'll say stuff like, "Come on now. Don't be getting after a poor nigger," in the story. It's kind of the background. That's what's going on and what happens in the story. So as a teacher, I have to address that before we get to it, in the class, and talk about how that's not appropriate or relevant in how we talk to people today or whatever.

Al needed his students, all white students, to understand that the language they would hear in the story was not appropriate when used today. He was clearly troubled at the prospect of discussing this:

Al: It's uncomfortable for me, because it's not a topic that I talk a lot about in class. It's not a topic – my curriculum and the stuff that I teach, in my history as a teacher, I haven't taught a lot of race relation stuff. I haven't taught a lot about cultural stuff. So for me, personally, it was a stepping outside my comfort zone.

This is how it played out that day:

Al: I'm thinking, "I need to be firm. I need to be very authoritative here, so that there is no wiggle room. One, I want to let them know what's coming, so it's not a surprise. I want to say the word and get it out of the way and sort of desensitize the issue a little bit and be very clear and be very firm and make sure that everybody is getting this message loud and clear.

Mary: So what was it like to use the word to students?

Al: Yeah. It's uncomfortable. I don't know how else to put it. It's just – yeah, it's very uncomfortable.

Mary: So when you say it, what's going on? What are you feeling?

Al: I'm feeling *(he groans and a long pause follows)*. I don't know what the word would be, but it's a repulsive type of feeling – and I try not to think

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> about too much. I'm moving on. My main issue here is that they understand that it's inappropriate.

> *Mary:* So you get the word out and what's the response?

> *Al:* Okay, first, there's an initial response of shock.

> *Mary:* As evidenced by?

> *Al:* Facial expressions, kids looking at each other, kind of a, "Did he really say that? CAN he say that?" Yeah, it's fairly quiet, because I'm on my high horse. I'm not allowing – I begin the discussion – this isn't a discussion. We're not going to talk about this, initially.

Al talked about how he needed to feel like he was in control and setting the stage. He said, "I want most eyes on me. I don't want them really looking at each other and having a chance to respond inappropriately." According to Al, this is different from how he normally teaches. Usually he invited discussion, he wanted students to think critically about the texts they read, but not this time, not when it came to race. The effect was that he sent a strong message about the use of the 'n' word, and another more subtle message about how we do not talk about race. But for me it is easy to understand what it is like in a middle level classroom. Al mentioned a fear that someone will snicker, the way they did when they read *Treasure Island*, whenever the word "seaman" came up and it was funny, but there is no room for humor here. So there it was, he did it, and moved on. Sort of. What followed, and the way he told it, kind of acting it out, suggested to me that he was aware that it might sound silly:

> *Mary:* So it's the end of the school day and, when you reflect on the day, what are you thinking?

> *Al:* Well, I'm thinking back to, "Did I hear anything in the hall?" That's one of the first things that I always listen for after class. The class happens – it doesn't matter what class it is or what we're teaching, the class will

happen and then they'll leave. And then I'll hear, out in the hall, "This is what we do today in Language Art. This is what happened in Language Art today." So I'm listening for – because if this was a big deal, I'm going to hear it. I'll probably hear it, or maybe I won't, but I'm going to listen for it. So that's what I'm thinking about, "Did I hear anything in the hall?"

You look for the other channels of information, like, Miss --- did you hear anything about me? My radar is very much more heightened and it always will be. And I'll be very clandestine about how I listen. I don't want them to see me. If they see me, they're not going to say anything. But, yeah, I haven't ever gone out of my way to say, "Okay, teachers, I'm teaching this. Look out. Just be ready." I haven't done that or anything, but I always try to keep my ear to the ground, even more so after that.

I felt his apprehension as he had just stepped into new territory and was still fearful of the fallout. His fear was focused on the outcome – what he said, and how he said it would impact the outcome, which he defined as understanding it is not okay to use the term "nigger." Al also described his inexperience with issues surrounding race, but his actions spoke to a fear in reinforcing racism if he was not clear about Poe's use of the word. He emphasized the need to make sure students understood the context in which it was used. Yet, Al may not have considered how stressing the context may send a message that context made this word okay for usage then, but not now.

But, why not now? Situating racism in the past might suggest to students that we don't use the term "nigger" today because we are now an anti-racist society, negating the reality that racism does exist. With limited engagement with diversity in this community, using examples of how racism continued, and was fueled by the use of pejoratives, he could give students an even stronger message about why these were forbidden words.

Al also provided an example of the difference between discomfort and fear. He might feel uneasy or embarrassed when he hears students joking about "seamen" in the

hallways when they are reading *Treasure Island*, but he fears the consequences should he

hear students joking about "niggers." This time, Al's covert assessment strategies told

him that he met his learning goals, and so, the following year he uses the unit again, and

again takes his authoritarian stance on the use of the 'n' word in the story. This time it is

easier:

> It's better. It's been rehearsed once and so I can gauge for – I've got that
> experience. So I have an idea about what I might expect from the students. Yeah,
> that was the scariest thing for me, because I wasn't exactly sure what I would
> expect, or what to expect from the students. What are they going to – what's their
> reaction going to be. Yeah. And having seen the first reaction, I kind of had an
> idea about what I might get as a second reaction. And everything is just kind of
> built off of that.

But the following year it was different. It was the year he had a student of color in

his class. The student identified as African-American. She was an adoptee whose parents

were white. For Al, this changed everything. He was wondering if he even wanted to use

this unit that year. He agonized about this for weeks. He tried to discuss his concerns with

the principal, but she did not offer any advice, or really any discussion, she just told him

it was up to him. He had met the girl's mother earlier in the year and decided to call her.

She seemed to be okay with it, but Al was still uncomfortable. He found a private

moment to speak to the student the day before he began the unit:

> *Al:* Yeah. I let her know, "I just want to let you know," and I wanted her to be
> comfortable. I didn't want to make a big deal out of it. I don't want to
> treat her differently than anybody else. I don't know. I had a heightened
> sensitivity to the whole issue. I wasn't sure, I wasn't comfortable and I
> didn't know what I was doing. I wasn't sure if I was doing the right thing
> or how to do it, but I just, in my gut, I just felt like the best thing to do is
> just to be honest about everything.

> *Mary:* And what was it like bringing that up with her?

Al: For me, again, it was uncomfortable. The whole thing is uncomfortable and I'm surprised that I actually do it. And every time, it's uncomfortable.

Mary: What was her response?

Al: "Okay, whatever."

Mary: Wow.

Al: Yeah, it was just basically, "It's not a big deal."

Mary: So now then, let's go to the next day when you –

Al: When I actually have to do it. Yeah, it's even more uncomfortable.

Mary: So class has started. Describe what it was like that day.

Al: My feelings of uncomfortable-ness were muted, because I'd already gotten it out with the girl. There's not going to be – she's not going to be surprised by it. For everybody else, this is new. So now I'm looking for people looking at her, or two things. I guess one is I'm looking for, I don't know, I'm looking for – I don't know if "discrimination" is the word I'm looking for, but I'm looking for something on the negative spectrum. But I'm also looking for students that might be looking to her for clarification or –

Mary: Do you mean, like, "Is this okay for you?"

Al: Yeah, "Is this okay for you," or "How should we really be thinking about this?" So there are almost – I've seen them sort of look to her for, like, I'm the authority, but this can bring in – do you know what I mean? It's sort of like – and this is all non-verbal type of reactions, but a sense that, "Well, we recognize this and her. We get it." And then, "Yeah, is that okay with you?"

Mary: Describe what it was like to use that word this time.

Al: Again. Well, again, yeah, it's just very uncomfortable. It's just, yeah, it's even just magnified. I don't – yeah, it is. I do this thing in my mind, though. I try to – it's like these are all my students and they're all equal and we're all learning and this is – so it's somewhat, like I say, I always buffer it.

Mary: Once you got the students' reaction and people are looking at the girl, what was that like?

Al: It might be just that I'll be standing up and I'll look and I might just see a couple glances, like people just glance at her really quick and then look back up at me. And she'll be looking at me the whole time or she might glance around a little bit, but I've never sensed that, "I'm going to sink down in my chair." I've never sensed that the individual is feeling like they're being singled out.

I'm trying just to be the same, look at everybody the same. Yeah, I'm very conscious of what I'm doing and how I'm presenting. I'm conscious of what I'm looking at, how many times I'm looking, where I'm looking. It's important for me to appear comfortable, and not nervous, and confident. Yeah. Yeah, so that they could feel that they could trust what I'm saying and that I'm speaking with integrity. I don't want them to see any cracks or perceive any weakness in what I'm saying or any doubt in what I'm saying.

Mary: So just as years before, you get over this and at the end of this class, what are you feeling?

Al: Concern. Yeah.

Mary: Concern for?

Al: Yeah, the student. Like I said, initially, I've got my ear to the ground and I've got it even more to the ground this time, so I'm looking for reaction or any kind of stuff. Yeah.

Mary: And did you have any?

Al: Never.

For Al, fear and discomfort were somewhat intertwined. When he first decided to use *The Gold Bug*, he recognized that he was going to have to take the risk of being uncomfortable so that he could use the text he was excited to share with his students. He was making a choice about curriculum, but it was not based on race – the race discussion was just something he had to get through to get to the story. Initially, as he explained, he was "out of his comfort zone," meaning, he was new at this, and it was

an area in which he was inexperienced and lacking knowledge. But I think these expressions were rooted in fear. Al was fearful of negative responses, especially negative racial responses, and to address that fear, he enacted the very silence that he has experienced.

This cycle of silence continued as his students received the message that we don't talk about race. The greatest fear, evidenced by weeks of grappling with the issue, was talking about use of the 'n' word with the lone student of color in the class. For Al, the easiest option was to use a different book that year. His discomfort was not about him, rather it was about his student. The discomfort was clearly rooted in a fear that his actions would cause a student to feel bad, and to him this, and possibly the comments or actions from other students, made the consequences of a misstep all the greater. Associated with fear was a responsibility, as a teacher, to protect students. Afraid of making someone feel bad, teachers limited or avoided the discussion to protect students in the short-term but at great consequence for both white students in misconceptions about racism, and students of color who will continue to be victimized in a cycle that is sustained by silence. Even when the student and her mother did not appear to have a problem with the unit, Al did not recognize this as more than permission, but possibly as an invitation to join in a conversation that black people are more comfortable having (Lewis, 2007; Pollock, 2004; Tatum, 1997).

There were so many missed opportunities to explore race in this school and classroom. The administration had an opportunity to pick up on the needs of a teacher when approached with concerns about curriculum. Supporting teachers in approaching

dialogue about race is essential. This led to a missed opportunity in class offering support to talk about race, which then eliminated the potential use of Poe's story to talk about stereotypes and explore Poe's use of the character Jupiter. In the interview I saw many opportunities to talk about the text in a way that Al might discuss other literary works. This was an opportunity for Al to use his planning time proactively, engaging in anti-racist pedagogy by exploring with his class *why* we don't use the 'n' word, a discussion that would empower his students (both students of color and white) to critically examine the meaning behind the language. Asim (2007) described how the self-image of African-Americans today was influenced by "the majority's capacity and willingness to evolve beyond its hallucinatory and crippling prejudices" (p. 233). For Asim, it was important for white Americans to know what the image of a "nigger" meant to him:

> I for one, can still visualize the "nigger," and perhaps because I am a man, I usually see him as a man, odious and shiftless, violent and stupid, contemptuous of black women and obsessed with white ones – a self-hating, devilish phantom whose footsteps can still be heard as we tread through the tentative years of the twenty-first century. (p. 233)

Al's students needed to know why he was on his "high horse" about this and why there was no "wiggle room" when it came to banning use of the term "nigger." Al described his discomfort when it came to talk about race and culture. But, he intuitively knew the power of this word. Following the interview we discussed this and Al welcomed the opportunity to learn more about race. Al said it never got easier, but I think he has a sense that what was missing was experience and knowledge, along with a supportive environment that invites teacher learning.

Al wasn't alone in approaching racial issues with fear. For some teachers, like

Dora, experience and a comfort level she had discussing race were not enough to prepare

her when a student suggested that her practices were racist. Dora taught middle-level

Spanish using activities that immersed students in language acquisition in a fun and

engaging way. Dora was very energetic and outgoing. As I accompanied her in the

hallways before our interview, she made personal connections with both students and

staff, suggesting to me that she made a point of getting to know people individually. She

was very comfortable with racial diversity as a white woman in a multiracial family. She

had travelled globally and liked to share her experiences with students, bringing back

games, food, and artifacts, especially those from Spanish speaking cultures. For years she

had used a game in class that she purchased in Mexico called La Loteria. According to

Dora, it is a game that she herself played as a child and it is played today in Mexico much

like a bingo game here. But three years ago, she was stopped short by a comment from

the one student of color in her class when she introduced the game:

> *Dora:* "Why are we playing this? You know, this game is racist," were his
> comments.
>
> *Mary:* Okay and do you remember your response?
>
> *Dora:* It was the first time that I had ever heard it, and I've been playing the
> game, I mean, even as a child, I had played it. So I was just surprised, but
> I think it was because I wasn't seeing through his eyes. I felt kind of
> attacked a little bit, in what I was doing, because I hope that I'm not a
> racist. So to be accused of that, you know, hurt me. But, at the same time,
> I was kind of like, "Oh, I can understand why he would feel this way."

This experience caused Dora to reconsider the game from the African-American

perspective of the student. She described the cards used in the game as pictures depicting

all sorts of items and characters, including a drunk, and a mermaid with no top on (so she

used a Sharpie marker to draw one on!). The card that prompted the response was called

El Negrito, known in Mexico as "The Little Black Man." Dora claimed it had no other

meaning and was not stereotypical or considered offensive in the Mexican culture.

Because I had never heard of this game, I looked it up and found it to be just as she had

described. In an Internet search using the terms "La Loteria" and "racism," I found only a

blog discussing the use of the El Negrito card in craft projects, in which the very few

posts responded they didn't use it just in case it might be considered offensive. Dora had

never considered it to be potentially so until that day. She explained this to the class with

a level of comfort, "Yes, the kids are watching, but to me, it was just a teaching

experience. I mean, it wasn't a big deal, just because I knew that it wasn't something that

was racially motivated." She also spoke with the student individually after class, and he

expressed that he was fine and Dora felt everything was okay. In spite of her comfort

with how things were handled, there was another response:

> Well, whenever a kid says something is I think there's just a natural fear amongst teachers, "Am I going to get in trouble with this?" You know, is this going to be reported to my principal that I'm doing something that's hurtful, or is this child going to go home and say that I did something? And that would be, for me, horrible.
>
> But I think there's just that natural fear of getting in trouble, so I remember thinking, "Oh my goodness, he's going home and telling his parents that I'm doing racist things," and that wasn't it. I mean, I just wanted to smooth it over. I wanted to educate him, but, at the same time, I wanted to smooth over the situation. I just hoped that it wouldn't go any further, that we would be done. I mean, I would just hate to see something that is truly not a racist thing that the kids love have to be taken away, because of someone's fight.

Dora continued to use the game, but described the tenseness and caution she felt

when she had to call out the El Negrito card the next time she played the game:

> Yeah, it was just kind of still that lingering fear is he going to go home
> and say something to his parents, that I was being a racist. I mean, it's
> kind of like being slapped or something and then you're careful to not get
> slapped again.

Dora, trying to bring cultural experiences to her students through language and

glimpses of what it was like to live in another country, experienced fear that made her

more cautious in what she did in her classroom. While it was a learning experience for

her to look at things from multiple perspectives, the thought of being called a racist may

make her more reluctant to approach discussions surrounding race and culture.

Ben, a middle-level language arts teacher also experienced, as Dora did, what it

was like to fear messages that might go home to parents. And similar to Al, Ben's

experiences included what it was like to talk about race with an all-white classroom

compared to the year he had a student of color in his class. Ben is somewhat soft-spoken,

but as I watched him interacting with students as we finished our interview, it was clear

that students listened to him with respect. Ben was one of the participants I sought

individually when I was in his school earlier in the year. At that time he mentioned how

race came up in a book he used in his fifth grade class. The book, *The Cay*, was a story

that addressed issues of racism, prejudice, and survival. Ben described how the racial

makeup of the class mattered in discussions with students. In the six years he taught in

this community, he only had two Black students in his class.

With the classroom majority white it was very easy because I knew that even if I misspoke I wouldn't feel a chance of offending as if I had a classroom that was fully diverse.

I found this somewhat troubling during the interview and wanted to explore this further, but I was trying to get Ben to tell me what it was like for him as he spoke to the class. He was talking about misspeaking as it relates to offending students of color, but he was not addressing how misspeaking impacts the white students and as such, can harm both races. I addressed this again in Chapter 4 when I described how political correctness came up in interviews. As Ben continued, he related how he experienced a discussion when there was a student of color in the class. It was interesting that he described eye contact in almost the same way as Al:

The eye contact was kind of a goofy thing because you wanted to pay attention to all students. You didn't want to focus on how an African American student was reacting to what you're saying, but you still want to pay attention to see if he or she was getting shy or embarrassed about the discussion but not staring at the person to draw attention to it.

Later, Ben spoke of the same kind of fear as Dora, in the messages that students of color might take home to their parents, and how he gauged the success of discussions:

I'd probably have to watch my words a little bit better and I think I did it the right way, but you just have to be more careful sometimes. Yeah. I guess I was more tentative. I think I chose words even more carefully and tried to fully put it in a past thing and not a now, just tried to be real careful with it knowing that both parents were Black and didn't want to say something that would be misinterpreted by a kid and then be brought home and something said back and an issue that needs to be dealt with. Just trying to handle it the right way. I wouldn't say it was like a huge relief, but it felt good that I chose the right words and thought that I presented it the best way that I could so that it was fair to everyone. If something were to be taken by the student in a way that was offensive, maybe the student would say something to me or would mention to a parent and the parent would contact me and make me aware of some

> things that I've said that were taken the wrong way. I just thought that I did a nice job with it.

Ben feared offending someone, or feared that they had misunderstood his words and were offended. He feared the repercussions. Ben assessed his effectiveness thusly: if he has not offended anyone, he had done a nice job. But he relied on feedback that he had not solicited, instead he relied on students and parents to correct him if he was wrong. Yet, students and parents were relying on him to choose the right words, regardless of the color of their children. Ben was also not taking ownership of what he said, placing it instead on the student or parent because words he said were taken the wrong way. A further issue that needed to be addressed was how students' understanding of racism was assessed. *Is* that understanding being assessed? And what happens if our students leave classrooms with a misunderstanding of racism?

Some teachers had little moments, when they expressed fear as uncomfortable, brief encounters with race in the classroom, but then the experience ended up being positive. Both Ruth, the math teacher we met earlier, and Lucy, a language arts teacher, have experienced this. For both, at the center of their discomfort was the potential for a student to feel badly, and for both, their initial reaction was an inward gasp. First Ruth:

> I remember the feeling of being, you know, just kind of… *gasp*, not gasping but just, oh, where's this going go to and my mind is racing thinking how am I going to divert if I need to… Every time it comes up I'm aware. Every time it comes up I'm aware because I just don't want anybody to feel uncomfortable.

Ruth described a particular incident that took place when students were working on projects in small groups in her math class:

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Okay, so here I've got this little girl that's black. She was talking about it just right out. I mean, she just thinks it was funny talking about how when she came to this school, she was in kindergarten and she said, "None of the kids had seen hair like mine." She didn't say black hair. She just said, "Nobody had seen hair like mine, so everybody wanted to touch my hair." It was part of a small group, but it became part of a large group, then, talking about that. And she said, "Yeah, everybody came over and was touching my hair and wanted to touch my hair." Oh, see, then, the kids here wanted to touch her hair (*Ruth laughs*).

Mary: So what was that like for you having this come up in your math class?

Ruth: It was good. You know, I was monitoring it to make sure that nothing went awry. I was happy to see that she was comfortable with it.

Mary: Yeah, yeah. Well, what were your feelings about what might go awry?

Ruth: I was afraid that this girl would feel bad or funny or uncomfortable, and I just didn't want that. I wanted her to feel comfortable and proud, and it seems like she is.

Mary: So describe for me what it was like for you to listen to, you know, her bring up this?

Ruth: I was excited for her. I was happy. I was like, "This is what it's supposed to be. This is what it's supposed to be." You know, she's a little fashion diva and the girls, I watch how the girls respond to her and she's got that hair. You know, the other one's got straight red hair. It's just, I don't know…

Mary: Right, right. So when other students started responding with – and how did students respond?

Ruth: They thought it was funny, cool. It's like that I just thought, you know, this is good. This is how it should be. You know, so how do you instill that? I don't know. How do you instill that with kids? But, you know, it's really important for teachers to be aware of how their students are interacting with each other. There's just so much going on right now, and, I mean, it's not just with racial things. It's with perceived differences.

Ruth was one of those teachers that was really organized, her room was neat and she always looked nice (well the few times I saw her anyway). She teaches math, but in a

middle school way. Her room is decorated with student projects. She was somewhat in the quiet side, but engaging and friendly.

Listening to Ruth tell this story, as she saw how the student of color and white students responded, it felt to me that she was saying, "Phew! Disaster averted!" Ruth's discomfort did an about-face and the incident turned into a pleasant experience. This was what she hoped will always be the case, and wonders how you make that happen, but until then, as she initially said, she will be aware, her mind racing so as to be prepared to intervene and spare a student discomfort.

Lucy's experience was similar. Lucy was very quiet and reserved throughout our interview, but as students began filtering into her classroom when we finished, I could see her eyes light up. She volunteered that this was her thirtieth year of teaching, and it was obvious to me she enjoyed being around middle-level students. Lucy was using the text, *Letters from Rifka*, with her sixth graders as she had for several years. This was the story of a Russian family's emigration to America to escape the hardships they experienced as Jews during World War I. As Lucy introduced the story in this particular year, a student identified that he was Jewish:

Mary: What was that like?

Lucy: I guess that – I don't know – I guess we were excited.

Mary: Okay.

Lucy: Because then we – that was – exciting to have someone to share with us what it was like – what the Jewish terms meant and what being Jewish was.

But there is also a sense of fear, and in Lucy's case, it was mixed with uncertainty. It was because the book used the term "Jew" and she considered this an inappropriate term. So she is outwardly excited, "Great!" and inwardly it is more like, "Oh dear…"

Lucy: And they say, "Rifka's a Jew from dah, dah, dah." You know? And to me, when I was growing up, you didn't call people a Jew.

Mary: Because?

Lucy: Because that had a bad connotation.

Mary: Yeah.

Lucy: And so it offends me to have people referred to as a Jew. And I guess they refer – I guess I don't see that they feel that it's offensive anymore.

Mary: You're talking about being called a Jew versus Jewish.

Lucy: Uh-huh.

Lucy's response was to students was actually a lot like Al's, but it was a response she came up with right on the spot, "No. We're not using that term." And much to her surprise, the class discussion continued without skipping a beat when she added her preference to use the term "Jewish" instead. She said that the class enjoyed hearing about the student's experiences in the Jewish faith, and his perspective on the story – and that he appeared quite comfortable and enjoyed adding to the class discussions. The moment of fear was over, and just as in Al's class there was no discussion surrounding it. She was relieved that the student felt good about sharing his Jewish identity with the class, and that the class carried on without incident.

But not every story ended that way. The following is what happens when the great fear that my participants talk about was realized.

Ryan, who was initially reluctant to talk, agreed to share his experiences only after I spoke individually to him. This was a difficult story to hear, and just like with Al, the written transcripts did not portray an accurate account of what it was like to be in his classroom, listening to Ryan describe his experience. Ryan sort of reminded me of a smart, savvy All-American college or professional ball player. He was friendly and funny, and at ease with middle-schoolers, joking with them in the hallway before our interview. He was a science teacher and a coach. It was clear that students liked him, and that he connected individually with them. But in this interview he was struggling. At times he laughed nervously as he told me what it was like to have a conversation with the only student of color in the class, and have it go horribly wrong. At times, his eyes welled with tears. Mine did too.

Ryan talked about an incident that took place two years ago. It was before class started and he was talking and joking with students as they filtered in. He and the student of color were talking about the state university's basketball game the night before, and the amazing shots that one of the players had been making, but he made a comment he has regretted since:

Ryan: The way I said it, I don't know. I was just thinking about a big – in my eyes I was thinking, wow, this towering kid shooting 3-pointers instead of doing lay-ups and being on the post and stuff, and I don't know why I said it "That big white kid out shooting 3-pointers", but that's the way it came out. Right when I said it I was pretty much looking at this particular student, talking to him when I said it, and as soon as I said it his eyes kind of looked at me kind of funny and I knew, okay, he didn't take that the same way that I meant it.

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Mary:	So what happened then?

| Ryan: | I guess I was disappointed in myself. I just felt that, okay, now I've just let this student down. I've created an idea in his head that I'm not who I really am, that I do have racial tensions and backgrounds and that's not the way I wanted it. It wasn't what I was thinking at the time. It had nothing to do with race. |

It was just if it would've been a 6'10'' Black guy I might've said the same thing, but at the time when I said it I was thinking wow, he's a really big guy to be out on the edge shooting 3-pointers, and for some reason I just threw the word "white" in there and that put me on the spot basically. I felt really uneasy and uncomfortable because I knew I just made this kid feel uncomfortable and uneasy too.

Mary:	And what was the reaction of other students?

| Ryan: | Most of the students weren't really paying attention, so it was mainly me and him at the time. His reaction was I mean we were both pretty excited and energetic about it and as soon as I said that, that's when I knew I said something wrong, he just kind of clammed up and just kind of "Hmm, okay", and backed off a little bit and didn't really continue the conversation much. I had to get class started so I started class and the whole time during class I was feeling bad and everything, so I pulled him aside afterwards and kind of talked to him about the fact that I didn't mean it that way and how did he feel about that. |

Mary:	Okay, so during the class as you're teaching, what was it like trying to continue on teaching class as normal with this sort of thing hanging there?

| Ryan: | It was difficult. It was a little awkward because after that point I was watching every single word I said. I was trying to make sure that I didn't say anything else that was going to put any more attention in the air, and I was trying at the same time thinking okay, how am I going to explain this to this student and make him feel reassured that I didn't mean it the way I said it? So it was very difficult and I'm sure I was probably three or four different shades of red the entire class time and he could tell. *(Laughs nervously)*. |

Mary:	And what was your interaction with him during the class time?

| Ryan: | Probably avoidance. I probably walked around him and avoided him as much as possible and I think he probably avoided me. He didn't raise his |

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hand much, didn't talk much, didn't say a whole lot during that class time that I can remember. I think I tried to make eye contact with him more than he did with me. I can feel that he was probably a little angry with me, a little perturbed at the time. I don't think that he wanted to have a lot to do with me for a little bit after that until after I talked to him and tried to clear the air. Even after that it took a little while.

Most of the kids didn't realize what I had said, so most of them were unaware of what was going on and the tension in the air between him and I, so it wasn't that big of a deal. It was mainly him and I. There were a couple of people around but they had already got up and left anyway. As he was usually one that was towards the end walking out, on this particular day I remember he tried to get up and get out early but I had just called his name and, "I'd like to speak to you for a second", and he came back in and he stayed.

Mary: What was that like?

Ryan: Yeah. I tried to take care of it as fast as I could so that it wouldn't embarrass him more. I'm not exactly sure how I said it but I just basically after everybody left a couple people always want to linger around after you call somebody's name like, "Oh, I got to see what he's going to say to this person. He's in trouble for something." I shoo 'em out the door. I basically just walked up to him and said, "I apologize for the way I said that. I know it sounded kind of bad when I put out the 'big white guy' thing. I really didn't mean it as a racial type of thing but I saw it in your eyes that you were a little nervous and a little concerned about that and I hope that I didn't offend you because it wasn't meant to offend. I just said something dumb at the time and I realized it was wrong."

And he kind of said, "Oh, okay" and I said, "So I hope you feel I'm still somebody you can talk to and discuss things with", and he kind of explained he was a little – didn't really take it seriously but was kind of a little shocked too at the same time. I think as he walked out he said, "No, that's fine. It's all right." Something like that. It took a little while. He was unsure a couple days or so he was still thinking about it and stuff, but after that it kind of wore off and now we see each other in the halls and talk and say stuff.

Mary: Did it ever come up again?

Ryan: Nope, never has. Matter of fact he walked out the door and never even heard another word about it and I haven't brought it up either.

Mary: Can you talk about what was going through your head as you're starting that conversation with him?

Ryan: It was nerve wracking. I mean I always hate that. My biggest fear is hurting somebody's feelings and I've always been that way… I can feel myself turning red and embarrassed and I think he can sense that I am generally not just trying to smooth things over so I don't get in trouble with it with somebody… I have to take care of it. I just can't let it go.

             I think it's really tough as a teacher because you deal with these kids on a daily basis all the time and it's not something that just comes and goes. They're always here.

Mary: Okay, so that night later on did you ever think about it?

Ryan: I think about it all the time. I do. I don't know if he does, but I do. I think about it all the time like oh, don't say stuff like that. That just isn't right. I can sit back every once in a while and think wow, I was dumb. I just felt so bad at that time.

And he still feels bad. Thandeka (1999) identified this as white shame, an unresolved internal conflict within a racial context. This shame, she defines as, "self‑exposures that lower one's own sense of personal esteem and respect. They are private snapshots of embarrassing features of the self" (p.13). Most participants enacted a silence to avoid situations that might hurt a student. This was one of those moments that he could not have predicted, but unlike that of Ruth, it was a moment he created. Fortunately, Ryan addressed it as quickly, quietly, and effectively as he could, and he has been able to maintain a relationship with the student to this day. But the shame is something he carries with him. Ryan felt that the comment he made stereotyped African-Americans as basketball players by intimating white players don't have the natural skills that black players do. His sense that he had offended the student was affirmed by the

student's quizzical look, his subsequent silence, and how he avoided looking at him in class.

In schools, teachers needed a supportive space to have conversations to move through conflicts such as these. But instead, the silence persists, because as teachers have stated, "we don't talk about race." I understood the security that silence offered, but these participants illuminated how challenging our fears, and breaking a silence surrounding racial discourse is a move toward having that conversation.

Discomfort

The discomfort my participants experienced screamed out at me as I listened to their stories. Some form of the word (discomfort, uncomfortable, out of my comfort zone) came up fifty-five times in my transcripts. In my phenomenological analysis this emotion came through even stronger when I listened to how discomfort was lived when race came up in the classroom. bell hooks (2003) suggested that discomfort is linked to a denial that racism has continued since passage of Civil Rights Laws, contradicting evidence that we see before us.

Why *are* teachers so uncomfortable? My participants gave me a glimpse into a relationship between the discomfort they felt and the reality that hooks suggested, a reality that it was easier to deny the existence of racism in a predominantly white rural area. Because my study was centered on the experiences of teachers in the classroom, I wasn't asking about experiences outside of the school. Yet one participant, Ben, talked about the tension he felt in discussing race with students in the classroom because of his relationship with parents outside of school. He was troubled by the inconsistencies:

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Ben: Yeah. I guess I phrased it in the past in that people were treated disrespectfully for whatever reasons and now we don't do that, and I got this feeling of yes, we know that we don't do this. The hard part is when there's people outside the school that are speaking differently on how to treat minorities and if the students get influence from someone else in the community or their relatives…

Mary: Oh, you mean negatively? Does that come up?

Ben: No. Officially in the classroom no, but I mean I'm aware of some of the parents and some of the relatives of students that I've taught and their comments are sometimes not as polite as they should be.

Ben was being kind. On the drive to his school earlier in the year I passed a parked pick-up truck that had two large confederate flags mounted on either side of the truck-bed (Appendix D), and a farmhouse garden that had a lawn ornament statue of a black boy fishing. The high school in one of my sites had not questioned a student performance in black-face at an assembly a few years earlier. I believed that many people did not see racism in examples like these. The argument that favored the confederate flag, for example, is that it only represented rebellion, nothing more, just *Dukes of Hazard* kinds of hijinx. The lawn ornament can be purchased on eBay. I'm not sure, but I don't think there was a warning label attached to either of these items stating that by purchasing and displaying these items you have perpetuated racism.

These images of racism in the rural Midwest reminded me of a conversation I had about my interest in race with Minneapolis photographer Wing Young Huie at his gallery. He showed me a photograph that he thought would be of interest to me. It was a photo of an older white couple posed with the same lawn ornament that I saw on my drive to Ben's school (Appendix E). But it was the story behind the photo that was perhaps more uncomfortable than the photo itself. Huie was photographing racist

memorabilia for a project he was working on with a local playwright. As he was driving around a neighborhood in a small Midwest town, he saw the lawn ornament and asked the owners if he could photograph them with it. They obliged, telling him its history: The woman's sister had one like it in front of her trailer in a neighboring state, and she had always admired it. She was thrilled to have received her own as a birthday present from her sister. It was especially nice, they said, because they were the adoptive parents of an African-American child, and this was a nice way of having black culture in his life. In the book, *How Black Adolescents Socially Construct Reality* (Brunious, 2000), this memorabilia is described as having:

> spawned negative images and dehumanizing stereotypes of blacks in America that refuse to be dislodged even today… These images have contributed to a, subconscious acceptance of inferiority and the stubborn persistence of racism today. (p. 22)

As black adolescents construct identity, so too do white adolescents gain a subconscious image of white superiority.

If there isn't a universal warning, how are rural residents (or anyone) supposed to know what racism looks like? I think schools can provide a deep-rooted understanding for students, and later as adults, to think critically about items, words, actions, and events that discriminate, disadvantage, and oppress. What I found interesting was that teacher licensures in most Midwest states, specifically in those of my site schools, require a course in human relations or multiculturalism, which makes me wonder about the efficacy of such courses.

Using strategies outlined in their book, *Courageous Conversations*, Singleton and Linton (2006) invited educators to come to terms with discomfort as a means to commit to honest, open, and authentic discussions of race. Texts like this, centered on conversations about race to address disparity in achievement between white and minority students, should be used to inform teachers in predominantly white rural schools as well. These teachers need to understand how our educational system worked to advantage some students while disadvantaging others. Understanding the contradictions in what teachers believe and in what they see, or need to see, may help to make sense of this disconnect, and they may find comfort in new knowledge.

In this chapter I have described how, for over half of my participants, the lived experience of discussing race in the classroom evokes feelings of fear and discomfort. Fear and discomfort will surface again in Chapter 4 as I further describe how teachers experience uncertainty, struggle with anger and frustration, consider the influence of experience, and edge toward a paralysis that threatened to silence discussion of race.

Chapter 4: Race and Uncertainty in Rural America

In the last chapter I discussed a silence that permeates the racial landscape of the predominantly white rural America where my study took place. There is an odd sense of tranquility in that silence. However, as certain teachers opened up to me about their experiences they began to fracture that silence. For me, this had the effect of someone tiptoeing around a sleeping monster, fearing that it might lash out. Teachers experienced great unease approaching the monster, afraid that someone would get hurt. For the teachers in my study, their greatest fear was that students of color might be injured in the process. These teachers were trying to figure out the right things to say to make peace with the monster.

In this chapter I continue to describe the lived experiences of teachers as they struggled to find the right words, the correct responses, and the appropriate materials to use as they navigated issues of race in the classroom. As I read through my participants' stories, I am reminded over and over that their struggles took place in isolation. They were navigating this territory alone.

To illuminate this lonely struggle to make meaning of race, in this chapter I focus on uncertainty. This is first described in the ambiguity expressed when teachers do not know if they should recognize the color of their students. Second, I explore their uncertainty about how to talk about diversity, specifically in teachers' desire to use language that is "politically correct." Third, I relate a teacher's experience in which she became unsure about how to handle the racial messages that might have been hidden in what she was teaching.

Next, I discuss episodes of anger and frustration as teachers navigated race in the classroom, including discussion of how a range in years of classroom experience shaped the phenomenon. Continuing, I explore how fear, discomfort, uncertainty, anger, and frustration can move teachers toward a state of paralysis that threatened to silence discussions centered on race. Throughout this discussion I touch on the phenomenological moments I found in interviews where teachers moved past their fears to begin discussions involving race.

Uncertainty

In the following section I describe how uncertainty is revealed in colorblindess, political correctness, and white supremacy. In his book *Troubling Education* (2002), Kevin Kumashiro asked, "What could it mean to teach in ways that put to use more complex understandings of oppression? And what could it mean to read/teach/learn in ways that put to use the discomforting notions of desire, resistance, uncertainty, and crisis in education?" (p. 132). He asserted that it was only through entering uncomfortable spaces and experiencing crisis that real learning takes place. Teachers in my study gained an understanding of watershed moments as they stepped into these uncomfortable spaces. I relied on Kumashiro's notion of uncertainty to help me wade through and organize the teachers' lived experiences.

For Example, Eleanor, a fifth grade social studies teacher who retired at the end of the year, described the uncertainty she experienced entering that space, discussing race for the first time:

You are nervous just like when you're merging into traffic on a major freeway. You're nervous that some car might come speeding up that you don't see. You're afraid that something might happen that you don't see that you can't react to quickly enough in that sense.

Eleanor also described how her years of experience in teaching made navigating the road easier, but how she always felt an uncertainty in what lay ahead.

Colorblindness

What to do about color, seemed to be at the forefront of uncertainty as it related to discussions of race with students. Was it right to bring up race or not? To notice race or not? In her book, *Other People's Children* (1995), Lisa Delpit first introduced me to the notion of celebrating differences. She changed the way I looked at students of color, and in a broader sense, taught me to see every student as an individual with the rich history that each brings to the classroom. As Delpit suggested, "to not see race, is to not see children" (2007, p. 159). Seeing my students as racial beings also required me to see myself racially, as a white person in a position of privilege.

Delpit's notion of seeing race would cause me to challenge the ways in which my participants' expressed colorblind discourse. In fact, I found two of their stories, shared below, to be almost unbelievable.

In interviews with Ruth and Lauren, I encountered colorblindness in a way I still have difficulty understanding. They claimed that they *literally* did not see race. I heard this first from Ruth, the math teacher we met earlier:

Ruth: So anyway, now back here, in [name of town] I have black students. And what I notice is that kids are more – I mean, it's they're ambivalent to

race.

Mary: As being different?

Ruth: In the classroom, yeah, in the classroom, and I have found that I am, too. Last year, I had an issue. I guess one of the girls was having a personal issue and our guidance counselor was talking to me about her. And I said, "I just," – it was after like the second day of school and I couldn't remember all the kid's names. And I said, "I just can't place that girl," and she said, "Well, she's black." And I said, "I don't think I have any black students."

Mary: Really?

Ruth: Really, then the next day I said, "Well, I've got to check," and I did and then I did. But that's kind of the attitude I've seen with kids and they're much more open.

I found this so interesting and confusing. Ruth began by saying she had black students, but then gave me an example of not being aware that she had a black student in her class. She then aligned herself with her white students to emphasize an attitude of openness regarding race. This open attitude manifested in an articulation of how color had become invisible. When I responded with, "Really?" I hoped that I wasn't expressing the disbelief I felt – this was a moment when bracketing became exceedingly difficult for me. I was so stunned that I forgot to delve deeper into that moment, and realized in my analysis what a great misstep that was. Reading through her transcript I saw too late, that I should have had Ruth go back to that moment of discovering that she had a student who was black. I think now that this could have defined this experience with greater clarity. I described a similar situation in the next interview.

Lauren, a classroom guidance teacher and counselor for grades five through eight described a similar situation. Lauren was generous, enthusiastic, outgoing, and friendly.

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She eagerly approached me and became my first participant in this study. She entered

into discussions of race with the same energy, but also with great uncertainty. What

follows is an experience, much like Ruth's, that took place while Lauren was coaching at

a gymnastics meet:

> But I remember back when I was coaching – I tend to think I'm color blind. And I guess here's an example. This must have been about 1992. I was coaching, and I had a gymnast on my team. And I love her dearly – still do – good gymnast of mine. And she came from – she was adopted into a white family. But that didn't even cross my mind – whether she was in a white family or a black family. So anyway, I remember a coach coming up to me and saying, "Wow. That black gymnast of yours is such a good vaulter. Wow." And I'm like, "What do you mean black gymnast? I don't have a black gymnast on my team." And he said, "Well, yes. You do have a black gymnast on your team." I said, "No. I do not. I have 12 girls on my team. I do not have a black gymnast." I mean I argued with him probably three or four times. And all of a sudden, he pointed her out, and I'm like, "Oh wow. I do have a black gymnast." I didn't even realize it. So in the back of my mind, with this incident, I began to think that I'm colorblind. Because I was taught to treat everybody the same by my parents – that I maybe didn't notice teaching or coaching people of a different race. In fact, sometimes when we do surveys here at school – we have to – you know for putting down our population – I have to really, really, really, really, really go through the list, or even look at a student, to notice that they're maybe Native American or maybe Asian-American. Yeah.

I made many attempts to bring Lauren back into the moment when she realized

one of her students was black, but was unsuccessful. Lauren, in the present, continued to

insist that she did not see the student as black until it was pointed out to her. Following

our interview, Lauren reflected on her experience and made the comment, "Now that I

think about it, was I trying to prove my point? I was angry that he classified her – that he

identified her because of her race." I didn't tell her that I had the same thought. In

analyzing this I bracketed this information and focused on the moment. Lauren used the

word colorblind to introduce her experience and then reinforced her stance in her exchange with the coach.

Winans (2005) suggested that a colorblind stance might be enacted to show that you are not racist. Winans used an example from a discussion in her university classroom in which a white student posed this question, "'Was I really afraid of hurting the only black person's feelings or was I afraid of being perceived a racist?'" (p. 263). Winans suggested acting colorblind was a way to counter speculation that if you see color, you are stereotyping. Another student of Winans' described how I thought the teachers in my study generally experienced, colorblindness, "as a sort of cover for 'hesitant and confused feelings concerning race'" (p. 262).

Hesitation and confusion were best illustrated by June, a language arts teacher. She explained how she doesn't see color:

> *June:* I don't know. I really can't remember. There may have been one black student… You know, if there's one kid of a different color skin, that kid pretty much blends in with the rest of students. So it's kind of interesting … that, in some ways, maybe people are – you know, this is going out on a limb, too, to say that they're almost a little bit blind to color.

In her book, *White Teacher*, Vivian Paley (1979) recounted a conference with the parent of a student of color, in which she challenged white teachers' claims to colorblindness:

> "What rot," said Mrs. Hawkins. "My children are black. They don't look like your children. They know they're black, and we want it recognized. It's a positive difference, an interesting difference, and a comfortable natural difference. At least it could be so, if you teachers learned to value differences more. What you value, you talk about. (p. 12)

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hooks (2003) believed that white people claim not to see color to deny the existence of racism. She asserted that while most people actually know that America is still racist, many act as if it is not "to claim their superiority that they are beyond thinking about race" (p. 26). It could be that the teachers in my study would like to believe that there was no racism in their schools. Perhaps the most likely way to make it so was to be blind to noticing race.

Being Politically Correct

Just as often as colorblindness appeared in interviews, so did discomfort and uncertainty surrounding a language used to talk about race. This surfaced as a great concern with teachers who hoped to use terms considered to be "politically correct," especially (perhaps) in interviews with me. I sensed that they were nervous about saying something I might think was offensive. But I also understood that generally they wanted to make sure they were using the appropriate language because it was important not to offend anyone. This brought to mind how Ben (teaching *The Cay*) talked about not being as guarded about what he said in an all-white class, in contrast to a class with the one or two students of color. It was possible that the teachers might have tried to be careful around me, perhaps thinking that I had expertise in a "politically correct lexicon" similar to the importance they felt in using inoffensive language with students of color. I also felt that Ben brought up an important point in that it is just easier for teachers not to worry about that when the class is all white. But, as I discussed in the previous chapter, this too

can be harmful. Misspeaking to white students posed a risk too: those students could end up using incorrect language around race.

What follows are four brief examples of teachers' awareness of political correctness. The first illustration is from Lauren, whose questions were indicative of how it came up in interviews:

Mary: And she was African-American?

Lauren: Black? African-American? Okay? What's the politically correct word?

Next, Ben's talk illustrated his uncertainty around language:

I was probably more nervous and more sensitive just making sure that I was proper and then even the choice of is it "African American"? Is it "Black"? At that time it was referred to as Black, now it's African American, and you have someone who moves here from London who grew up in London who was Black and they moved to the United States. Are they African American or are they European? There's so many different things. So back then they were referred to as Black. The story never gave the history of that person came from Africa, so it was referred to as Black. I've noticed you've said African-American.

And third, Lucy demonstrated how a concern with politically correct language was not only reserved for African-American people:

And I would use the term Jewish. I guess now, this year – and some more things that I brought in for it, Jew was used several times. And I guess I didn't feel that – I guess I felt like that we could go with that, if we felt that that was an okay thing to do. Do you feel – do you use that term?

And finally, from Ryan, who suggested it was easiest to simply avoid any terms in question:

My main thing is what is politically correct at the time. I worry about how I say it so that I don't offend somebody in my classroom. I know for a while "Hmong" was fine and now I don't know if "Hmong" is all right anymore. We're getting more and more Hmongs around here so it's like okay, what do I say, how do I say

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it? So I really – I guess in a way as a teacher I try to avoid the names as much as possible.

I noticed that after talking with Lauren, Ben, Lucy, and Ryan, the teachers wanted to continue our conversation although the phenomenological interview had ended. They asked further questions about the language surrounding race and wanted to know how they might better address race with their students. However, with each teacher I was able to talk, only a little, of how their instincts to question language were correct, that it does change. I alluded to Nieto's (2003) notion of culture as more amoeba-like, ever changing as a result of context and human interaction. I felt that teachers were reaching out to me as someone who could be a resource to help them address issues of language and race. I was eager to return to my sites to continue these conversations and work with teachers as I had promised the principals I would.

Am I Teaching White Supremacy?

Uncertainty also emerged as a theme for June, a teacher who described how uncomfortable she became, mid-lesson, when it occurred to her that there might be a hidden curriculum within the materials she was using. I think of June as having a runner's physique, a lithe shape that matched her energetic and almost impatient personality. She listened and spoke carefully and with intensity: she has a quick wit and had a great sense of humor. What follows is June's experience when she encountered uncertainty in her fifth grade classroom.

Our interview began as June immediately jumped into her lived experience as abruptly as she encountered her in-class revelation - that she might be reinforcing a kind

of white supremacy, or promoting whites as saviors to the oppressed. It became clear to her, as she continued teaching, that the lesson had everything to do about what it meant to be white and middle-class. June suddenly withdrew from the moment to further explore this mid-interview. I had to allow her to move in and out of the moment throughout the interview. I understood how this interview allowed her to consider in-depth what had taken place, away from the isolation of the classroom.

June was using a *Weekly Reader* article about an African village where girls were receiving support from an organization focused on improving the lives of women through education. She explained why she had chosen this particular article in the weekly magazine to discuss as a class:

> Yeah, first of all, I'm always interested in helping kids to understand more about diversity. Living in a rural area, living in a very homogeneous area, this is just something that kids don't get a lot of experience with. There's just nothing outside the evening news or the *Weekly Reader* that can give them some exposure. And I also think, I mean, a large part of choosing that article was just the fact that it was centered around girls, and, again, this is another way to open minds. The structure that we live is maybe not the – it doesn't have to be that way. You know, there are many different ways of improving our lives and making us all people on an equal basis.

June began the lesson by eliciting prior knowledge about the continent of Africa and asked about the photos that accompanied the article. The photos depicted Africa as they imagined it to be, and it occurred to her that the image was consistent with what she knew about Africa as well. Nothing in particular was brought up:

> You know, to think about it, I don't even know that the topic of race was really pointed out. Nobody said, "This girl has brown skin," or anything like that. I mean, it just seemed like, well, this makes sense. This is the type of people who live in Africa.

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As June began describing the lesson to me, she was in the moment, back in the classroom, but she then began questioning a photo in the story, in a way she had not considered at the time:

> Well, you know, it is kind of funny that I bring all this stuff up, because it is just kind of out of my head. You know, as I describe it to you just now, it just seems like it's such a stock photo, you know what I mean, just kind of like, well, this is what we expect to see in a story about an African village…You know, but she was smiling, so she was obviously – you know, why was she smiling, smiling for the camera, smiling because she was satisfied and content? You know, why wasn't she miserable? I mean, she should have been miserable, because her standard of living needed to be improved, according to the article.

June took a moment and considered this idea, and continued to question the motives of the writers and editors:

> So it does kind of create kind of a weird – it's not very consistent, not a very consistent message in terms of what the article was trying to say, I guess. Now that I think about it, it's just kind of a, you know, really, I mean, would she be smiling. Is she just happy? You know, what it makes me wonder about are the editors of the paper. Now that I think about it is: "Why did you choose that photo? I mean, really, are you just trying to gloss over this? Are you trying to just make us be more drawn to a happy picture versus a miserable picture?" I don't know. I'm not sure how much thought was even put into it. But I think there probably were some choices made and some decisions made along the way, whether they were gigantic or not.

I was excited that June was interrogating these issues because I hoped it would strengthen future discussions like this with her students. But I needed to move June back into the moment as she lived it in the classroom. She returned to her discussion with students:

> Then, as we got into the article, we started kind of comparing what they know about their lives and comparing to the life of this village, just to kind of point out the differences, I suppose, you know, kind of to help understand a little bit where this article was leading… There were differences in, say, the way they collected

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water, the way they cooked, what access they had to information and knowledge and to ways that they could improve their lives.

June had the students compare their experiences, how similar and different they were and she became uncomfortable in the comparisons. She had a range of students, including about one-third living in poverty. This made her uncertain about comparisons when it came to talk about standards of living. She suddenly became aware that she might have been making assumptions about not only the people in Africa, but her own students as well. So in mid-lesson June began struggling with this complex issue, and felt like she was "opening a can of worms." She reiterated that she chose the article to show that everyone was equally deserving of an education and a certain standard of living, and how there was something that needed to be fixed in this village, which was being addressed by this outside organization. But as she looked at her students, who were from a broad socio-economic spectrum, and thought of the African girl in the photo smiling, she became uncomfortable with how the discussion was proceeding:

> *June:* The can of worms comes from me wanting to be able to represent people for who they are no matter who they are. And I don't have enough knowledge behind that to really do it, but yet I go out on a limb, because I don't want to gloss over it. I mean, I think it's even worse to make it seem like it's this happy little African village. I mean, I just want to strip it down to: here is a group of people and here's an individual who is deserving of their rights as a human being, I guess. And this girl in this village who's not getting an education and not making the most of her potential deserves it… But when we're sitting in our classroom reading it, it's like we're looking at that particular piece of the world with individuals in it, as if it's some sort of a sitcom or something that we're viewing. And that here we are in our place that's just fine… *We're* all right and we're looking at them and analyzing their situation, as if *they're* some sort of specimen or something. So *we're* the analyzers. *They're* the people that need help or need changing. *We* don't need any changing, but *they* need

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some modification of their life.

Mary: Okay, so what's it like to talk about that with students? I mean, what are you feeling?

June: Yeah, it was uncomfortable because I just don't feel like I – I don't want to be that person who thinks that I'm better than anyone else, and I don't want them to think that, either. I don't know how to say it. You know, I feel *fraudish*. I feel like I don't have the tools to completely bring this whole idea together for them.

Mary: About feeling fraudish - can you talk about that a little bit?

June: Well, it's because I'm a person who cares, but I don't know a lot about this group of people that I'm looking at in the article… I don't know a lot about their problems, but I do have some sort of an idea. So the kids and what I want them to learn from this is that there are differences worldwide among people, but I can only talk in generalities because they're fifth grades and also because I don't have enough time and I don't have the facts handy enough… So it's an important topic and I'm giving them just enough for us to get through the article and get through the lesson and then call that their – you know, hope that they have learned something by the end of the day about this really important topic.

As we concluded the interview and left the conference room where we had met, June began to analyze her own interview. She expressed how much she learned about herself during the interview and how it highlighted the importance of learning more about race and her need to talk about her lack of confidence in discussing these kind of issues. She said she hadn't realized how much she needed to talk to someone about what happened to her in class that day – and there was no one to talk to. I think June articulated what I extracted from so many interviews, a need to learn from our experiences, and a need to talk about our fears, our discomfort, and our uncertainties. And, as suggested in the following sections, our anger and frustration.

Anger

In this section I further explore the lived experiences of a teacher discussed in

Chapter 3. Earlier, this teacher experienced fear and discomfort when a student suggested

an activity in her class was racist. Dora, the Spanish teacher, found that experience left

her somewhat uncertain about how she chose materials for class. However, she viewed

that discomfort and uncertainty positively, as a reminder to have multiple perspectives in

planning lessons. In this section, I describe how anger surfaced when this same teacher

experienced a second accusation of racism, but this time it was directed at her.

Dora hesitated before telling me about this other experience that took place the

year following the *La Loteria* incident. She described it as one of the lowest points in her

teaching career. This involved a second student of color making an accusation of racism,

but this time it was directed at her. A student called her racist:

Mary: So when he made this comment, what was he doing?

Dora: It was because I moved him, because he just kept goofing around and not staying on task in what the project that we were working on was. And I moved him. He says, "Oh, you're just a racist," and I said, "Don't go there." I said, "Don't you dare go there." And I have a picture back here of my daughter and her boyfriend, who's African-American. I said, "This is my daughter. This is her boyfriend," I said, "Don't you dare go there." I said, "This has nothing to do with racism. This has everything to do with your behavior."

Mary: Okay, what was that like having a kid call you racist?

Dora: It makes me a little bit angry, because it's a quick judgment. And if he knew me, then he wouldn't say that – he just wouldn't be able to say that… So it was just a quick judgment to try and get me to loosen up on what the discipline that I was using, and I just wasn't going to fall for it. Well, I just moved him, and I said, "First of all, that's not true. Then, secondly, your behavior is what we're dealing with right now. And you're going to move up here and you're going to work on what we're working

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on. And we'll discuss this later." So what I did was I was angry, because he just wasn't taking responsibility for his own stuff. Then he was also causing other students to be distracted and in a disrespectful way. Just laughing at me and mocking me, you know, thinking that I'm not looking and just being disrespectful. You know, like, "Oh, this is a stupid assignment," or, "Why do we have to do this?" But the thing that gets me is when he looks at me and laughs and it just drives me nuts.

Dora met with another teacher after class who had issues with this student's behavior as well. They called in the student's uncle, his legal guardian, and it appeared that the uncle's influence had an impact because the student's behavior improved. When Dora returned to the moment and continued to relive the experience she fluctuated between hurt and anger:

Dora: I was hurt. I was more hurt than angry. I think later I felt angry, but I was hurt, because I thought he just jumped to judgment.

Mary: And what's that like, in front of every kid in class and a student of color calls you racist? What's that like for you?

Dora: It's horrible. It's demeaning. It's demeaning. But, you know what, the kids that know me know that it's not true. They just wanted to see how I was going to react, what I was going to do, and I wasn't going to lose it. That was one decision. I was not going to lose it. If he thought that he's going to get a rise out of me, I wasn't going to give it to him. I mean, I'll cry after school or cry in between classes, but I'm not going to lose it. I hate when teachers yell at kids.

As this was Dora's second experience where the word racism was used in the context of her teaching, it was interesting how she compared the two as completely different. In the first case, the student called the games she used in class racist because of the *El Nigrito* card. She did not perceive that to be an attack on her character, even though the choice to use the game in class was hers. She used that experience to help her

learn from that student, who assisted her in looking at the choices she made from multiple

perspectives. Being called a racist here was different and she felt wrongly attacked.

> *Dora:* You know what, it was totally different. It was totally different than the
> other situation, because the other little boy saw it truly as a racist issue.
> This boy was calling the race card just to try and manipulate me. So the
> way I dealt with both of them were totally different, yeah, I mean, totally
> different situations. Now this one I wasn't hurt. I was angry that he would
> use something – because it's degrading. It's like a white person calling
> someone African-American, calling them a racial slur. I mean, to me, it's
> almost like a racial slur only the opposite. So it is, it's a demeaning thing,
> because it attacks your being, the core, your core, and it's just an ugly
> thing.

Dora brought up the notion of a race card. I found that interesting, as I had never

really explored the idea of a race card before. According to Caliendo & McIlwain (2010),

the race card is used as a form of silencing when used by the dominant culture:

> The whole idea of dismissing claims of the racially minoritized as merely playing
> the race card can be a way for the dominant to avoid discussions of their
> complicities and privileges which have helped sustain a racist moment, encounter,
> or practice. (p. 209)

The use of "the race card" here was complicated because the context was not related to

race, yet it involved a student of color. In a predominantly white classroom, especially

when this is the only student of color, the classroom itself becomes a racial context,

complicating the way teachers respond to behaviors of students of color. I bridled my

experience working with middle-level learners to understand the exchange between

teacher and student. As I considered Dora's anger, I could not help but think of how she

might have responded to another behavioral incident as equally exasperating, but without

race being involved. As a principal I had to mediate incidents when students cursed at

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teachers in class, experiences that allowed me to gauge Dora's reaction as significantly more upsetting.

Exchanges like this, a white teacher called a racist by a student of color, presented the possibility that teachers would be less likely to take up issues of race in the classroom. Dora intentionally brought in cultural experiences into her classroom, wanting her students to see beyond the white rural experiences of the community. After welcoming an earlier reminder that she needed to use multiple perspectives in choosing materials, I worry about how this incident will impact her teaching. For Dora, this experience was distressing, and she was glad when the year ended.

Dora recalled this experience as one of the lowest points in her teaching career, because being called a racist was traumatic. Trepagnier (2006) claims that to some extent, all white people are racist. She asserted that white people should be less concerned about being called a racist, and instead concentrate on becoming racially aware. Trepagnier's work can be helpful in positioning teacher's racial awareness on a continuum. She suggested that an assessment of awareness be offered in institutions to support the personal and group work necessary to decrease unintentional participation in institutionalized racism. While Sleeter (1993) discussed the resistance of teachers to address racism through in-service, the participants in my study demonstrated a desire to talk about their experiences, perhaps as personal work.

Frustration

It was easy to see the sheer frustration June expressed as she shook both her fists in the air saying, "I'm just not equipped!" June's uncertainty in using the *Weekly Reader*

story discussed earlier turned to frustration with her lack of experience and knowledge as

she sought to better understand what she was teaching. Here she talked about the point in

her lesson when she was assessed her students' understanding of the article about

educating girls in Africa:

> *June:* It would be just awesome if they could understand that she's a person with potential and that her brain has just as much potential to think and to produce as their brains do. But I'm afraid that, in our discussion, that we didn't get past the, "Well, I feel sorry for her," point. And the conclusion of the article, of course, is a happy ending, because there's this organization that has gone into this village to do the right thing by making it possible, setting up whatever system needed to be setup so that these girls can get educated. Well, great, that is wonderful. It's going to improve their lives. It's going to make their babies live and have better – grow crops for themselves and make their lives more sustainable there. But, in reading the article, due to time, due to complexity, due to lack of understanding of background knowledge even, you can barely scratch the surface and then the scratch is one of pity, you know what I mean. It's like, ah, well, you know.

> *Mary:* So, at the end of the class period, you transitioned to something else?

> *June:* Yeah, we had to end. And in order to give everyone the chance, really, to speak what was on their mind, whatever it was, I gave them an opportunity to write just to kind of – you know. But I was disappointed. You know, there was really nothing that was very profound at all.
> Well, it kind of frustrates me a little bit [her body language reads a LOT as she tenses and clenches her fists]. It kind of makes me feel like, "Oh darn it, I wish I could have done better." You know, I don't think that I handled it as right as I could. You know, if I'd have a better understanding of how I should approach this, so that I can watch out for those things that make me feel uncomfortable or just to have a little bit better insight before loading this big complex – you know, complex maybe to me, you know, bunch of thoughts onto the kids. It makes me feel like a little disheartened, I guess, like is this the right thing to talk about. But, truly, in my heart, I believe it should be mentioned. It should be discussed as a part of almost everything we do. So I don't shy away from it, but, at the same time, I feel a little regretful because I don't feel like I have given the topic the justice that it's due. I don't know. I wish I could do better in that way.

June voiced a frustration that was a result of the uncertainty she felt in not having

a clear understanding of the issues she was discussing. But how is this different from

"teaching with uncertainty" (Kumashiro, 2002)? Or about any subject matter beyond our

expertise? The difference here goes back to the underlying theme of fear discussed in

Chapter 3. For June, her frustration was connected to a fear of reinforcing white

supremacy in her mostly white class, which she understands to be potentially harmful to

students of color, or at the very least, the girls in Africa that were the subject of her

lesson.

Experience

At the conclusion of my interview with Al (the language arts teacher from

Chapter 3), he summarized how his lack of experience with "this stuff" was at the heart

of his discomfort:

> Al: I think that my level of insecurity or whatever about this whole issue is
> that this is the one time that we talk about race and stereotypes and stuff
> like that in my class, all year. So if I taught more of this stuff, I'd be a lot
> more comfortable, because there would be a lot more context and there
> would be a lot of different ways to look at this issue, or perspectives. So I
> guess the more times and the more ways I can shine light onto the issue,
> the easier it is for me, although I've never gotten to the point where it's a
> breeze. It's never easy.
>
> *Mary:* Sure. So as you think back to the first time through and then years later,
> the first time with a student of color, is there anything else that you want
> add to this?
>
> *Al:*   It never gets easier.

"It never gets easier." I heard Al's words over and over as I wrote, and it brought me

back to my purpose in conducting this study. If I knew what it was like for teachers to

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have these conversations, then I could figure out how to better prepare teachers to talk

about race. And contrary to Al's assertion that it never gets easier, he suggested that he

would indeed be more comfortable if he included more about race in his teaching. This

was how other teachers felt as well. Lucy, who expressed fear in using the term "Jew" to

refer to Jewish people, experienced that kind of discomfort when she recently had a

student who identified as being Jewish in her class. She related that experience to the first

time she had an African-American student in her class:

> *Lucy:* I guess the first time that I had an African-American student in my
> classroom, it was harder for me. But it was so hard. I mean I just
> remember thinking, "I have to be careful. I have to be careful." It was
> just so hard. Because you had to be careful about things you said – not
> that I talked in a way that was offensive to people, I'm sure.
> But you just had to be careful about how you addressed everything, at that
> point, I think. It was harder for me, at that point. Now it's just – you
> know it's just a matter of – you're just another student. It used to be – I
> mean this was a very redneck area of the country. There weren't any
> black families that lived in our area. There weren't any families that had
> adopted children who were from Africa. But yet once in a while, a student
> moved in. And how hard that must have been for that student. And so as a
> teacher, I wanted to make everything easier.

> *Mary:* Right.

> *Lucy:* You almost get to the point where you're making it worse. Because
> you're too careful, and you're not treating them just like every other
> student.

> *Mary:* Right.

> *Lucy:* But it didn't take long for that to go away – I don't feel like I've ever been
> prejudiced. But it wasn't that I was prejudiced. I just wanted to be so
> careful.

For the participants in this study, experience added to their level of comfort, as

did having positive experiences. Over time, Lucy felt more comfortable about having

discussions where students can talk about their experiences with bias and hate. This was influenced to a great degree by an open discussion about discrimination against Jews and having a Jewish student in that class:

> *Lucy:* It's such a teaching moment. I just think it's great. And I think that the kids enjoy talking about it. It's something that they really want to know. And I think it helps them develop how they feel about things too. I mean their hands just fly. They want to talk about it. And they want to discuss it. You know how they feel about things.

For Al, motivated initially only to get past the 'n' word to read a mystery with his class, found that the experience of stepping outside of his comfort zone had opened up possibilities to explore race issues. At one point while talking with Al, I had to give myself permission to step outside of the phenomenological interview and point out something I thought was important for him to consider:

> *Al:* I don't bring this up, but never in the story do the white characters refer to the black character as a nigger. He refers to himself that way.
>
> *Mary:* But it's written by a white person.
>
> *Al:* Right. It's written by a white person. Right.

I wanted Al to see that he had placed blame on the Jupiter character for calling himself a nigger. I wanted him to consider that the white author made the decision for Jupiter. I hoped he would critically examine the text in ways he claimed he would for other works in his class. This example, and other aspects of our interview, opened up a discussion I continued to have with Al as our paths cross. What began in his class as an introduction the literary genre of mystery had the potential to include a critical examination of racism, integrated into his language arts curriculum.

Sylvia brought experience in issues of diversity with her to the rural community.

Prior to her current life as a teacher and dairy farmer, Sylvia received her education at a

large university in a diverse urban setting and taught at what she described as an "inner-

city" school. Teaching now in a predominantly white community had been an eye-opener

for her. She was alarmed during her first year, when the only African-American student

(adopted by white parents), was okay with being called "nigger" by his white friends:

> *Sylvia:* I was really shocked and disturbed… my first reaction was yelling and screaming and then later I sat down and talked to them and said, "You know…" Once they explained this whole deal to me. And it also gave me, ah, you know, kind of a red flag that we have an issue with students here – they really don't get it.

> *Mary:* Can you tell me what it – can you talk about what it was like when you talked to the students individually?

> *Sylvia:* You know, mostly just kind of they didn't really understand what I was saying. You know, more of a quizzical, not really an angry – I think they were somewhat embarrassed that I was so upset about it. But they didn't really understand why I was upset because that – to them I – I truly believe that was his nickname.

This exchange marked the end of the phenomenological moment about race. For the

remainder of our interview Sylvia discussed how that moment caused her to take action

and to seek opportunities to talk about race. Rather than discussing what it was like to

talk about race, Sylvia spoke with me of her fears. She knew that unless she made the

effort, students would *not* be talking about race issues. She made a commitment that first

year to include social justice issues throughout her eighth grade science curriculum. She

said:

> We're a rural school, it's a wonderful place, and it's safe, but it also doesn't give kids the perspective of the world. This town still has little black boy's – the

ceramic black boys that they put at the end of their driveways. There used to be about five or six of them…

She was speaking of the lawn ornaments mentioned in Chapter 3 (Appendixes D, E), and contrasted the wonderful and safe aspects of rural life to the disturbing images of racist memorabilia that are normalized in the town.

This year Sylvia's students worked on digital projects that connected them with students around the world to problem solve together. She introduced them to cultures outside of their own within her science curriculum. But Sylvia has worked in isolation since coming to this school. She began to talk about the work that needed to be done within the faculty but she stopped, and instead spoke to the critical need to recruit teachers from colleges and universities where students experience racial, or at least cultural diversity:

> I think that's one of the huge reasons why we should look for teachers that don't all come from ------. I think ----- has an incredible education school, but the fact is that you need perspective. You need people with – like especially in a school where there are – the kids are so alike – you don't need to have teachers that are all alike that too. That they need to have perspective to have some teachers from other races, to have teachers that come from other countries or that have come from other worlds, even if it is just Texas or Florida or Alabama – but so that you get some perspective of the world. It's just – and nowadays it's even more so – more important to do that because I see – I think my eyes have been opened with this global project of what the world looks like coming up and it's going to be exciting for kids, and probably real stressful for a lot of teachers.

Syliva brought up what statistics indicated, that 60 % of teachers received degrees within 150 miles of their home (NCEI, 2005). She mentioned the predominantly white university located 50 miles away, and claimed that most teachers in her school received their licensure from that university. Sylvia credited her urban experiences in recognizing

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that issues of race needed to be discussed in her predominantly white classroom. But, for or Eleanor, who did not share Sylvia's urban education, it was experience related to years of service, which made all the difference to her as described in the following interview.

Eleanor, nearing retirement, who earlier in this chapter discussed the uncertainty she still feels in discussing issues of race, related how experience has played a role in her teaching. Eleanor took great care to make history and literature come alive for her students. She planned her vacations around historic sites to bring back artifacts from around our country and the world to students in her rural community. Eleanor was energetic and fun, and her love of teaching was apparent.

She described what it was like to replicate Jane Elliot's famous "blue-eyed/brown eyed" lesson on segregation. In response to the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Elliot, came up with an activity to demonstrate to her white third graders what it was like to feel discrimination. For two days, her students were either given or denied privileges based on the color of their eyes. Eleanor included a similar activity in her classroom in the late 1970's so that her students could better understand racism as they read the book, *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*. She felt it would be kinder to her students to assign them into groups more randomly, by placing a piece of tape, or not, on their shoulders to separate them. The discomfort and uncertainty that she felt as she planned the activity were replaced by her passion for equality, and she gained conviction as colleagues supported her. It was the effectiveness of the activity in helping white students understand racism that gave her the confidence to continue bringing up race in her classroom:

The comments from students were serious. What I got out of it was they really learned what I wanted them to learn, that this would be a terrible, unspeakable way to live, and I think they got more out of the rest of the book… they had an understanding that they never would've had as a white student who had no black classmates at the time.

Eleanor included discussions of race and race issues in her classes throughout her teaching career. Interestingly, she spoke of how that feeling of uncertainty and discomfort she experienced planning the "taped shoulder" activity remained as she approached each discussion of race, but she continued to draw on the success of her first and subsequent units to keep her focused on the importance of doing this right:

You're on heightened awareness. When you merge into traffic you can't be texting. You really need to be looking all ways, trying to figure out how you can do this safely, and that's what it's like. You just know that you have to get certain key concepts out there right… not leaving something out, or having somebody's feelings hurt before I have a chance to explain in context what this is about or in any way putting that minority student on the spot.

As I read through transcripts and considered the tremendous influence experience had on teachers, I couldn't help but think about how powerful it would be to get all of my participants together to share their experiences with each other, to see that they are not alone, and to become support for one another as they struggle with issues of race. I also imagined these teachers sitting down with members of their own faculty to discuss how they have taken the steps to talk about race – and I stopped dreaming and faced a reality of how difficult it had been for these teachers to get to where they are now. When I considered the work of Sylvia and Eleanor, the significance of experience highlighted the

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differences in levels of fear and discomfort among participants. And I saw how easy it

could be to have the momentum silenced, as happened in the section that follows.

Paralysis

I worried about how teachers experienced conversations about race with their

students. I worried that they will be so overcome with fear, discomfort, and uncertainty

that they would succumb to a state of paralysis, unable to move forward. What I found

was a bit different, but I have to remember that these are the teachers who have willingly

opened up about their experiences. By bracketing my worries, I saw the paralysis I feared

redefined. For many of these teachers, paralysis was limited to a temporary "deer in the

headlights" moment, and a kind of resignation that although this was uncomfortable and I

wish I knew more, I need to move ahead anyway. In Al's experience, in a classroom of

all white students he felt the discomfort, but his desire to use a particular piece of

literature, and his responsibility as a teacher to preempt the acceptance of stereotypes in

the story, moved him forward. However, his discomfort using *The Gold Bug* when he had

a student of color in his class for the first time moved him closer to paralysis:

> *Al:* Yeah, I'm really nervous, even before – at this point, I'm like, "Do I even
> want to do this, because I don't have to. I don't have to do this." But I
> feel so, I feel almost attached to the story, because it's so good for the unit.
> So I – even before, this is weeks before –
>
> *Mary:* Weeks before?
>
> *Al:* Yeah, weeks. I'm getting ready, because this is one of the first things we
> do in the unit, so weeks before, I'm thinking about this.

As he talked about that experience, earlier in this chapter, Al noted how the unit actually changed because of the presence of a student of color in the room:

> I might spend even less time on this particular story than I would –normally, just because of my levels of how I'm uncomfortable. I might move more quickly through certain parts of the story, try to move through – okay, we all know this is humorous device, just be clear about what that is, but I don't want to pick at it too much… I feel almost uncomfortable thinking that's funny… and I have to remind the students and myself that it's his feeble-mindedness that's funny and not the stereotype that's funny.

As Al reflected on this discomfort he hesitated as he talked. When he said, "I feel almost uncomfortable thinking that's funny," he reminded himself that it isn't the stereotype that is funny. This had always given him permission to laugh, but now as he questioned Poe's use of humor as a literary device, he stopped with a sudden understanding of the connection between the feeble-mindedness and the stereotype. This was a moment of clarity that reminded him again of how easy it would be to drop this text. But, he moved forward.

I wondered about other teachers, especially the missed opportunity that I refer to in my mind as, "the one that got away." From my journal:

> I am so frustrated. I think today I made the last attempt to contact this would-be participant, and he isn't biting. What I know about this potential subject is that he had an experience that turned bad. He took me aside after a team meeting where I had introduced myself to teachers and discussed my study. When everyone was gone he told me about how he planned a unit where much of the focus would be on race issues. He was a social studies teacher. He said that somehow during the course of the unit, things got horribly turned around and suddenly *he* was accused of being racist. I remember distinctly his words, "That was it. I'll never do that again." I talked to him about how sharing these experiences would help us prepare future teachers for situations like his. He took a packet and I was looking forward to hearing his story. I am kicking myself for not pressing him to set up an interview right away (I'll never do that again), but as was my initial procedure, I gave teachers these packets that contained response cards and stamped envelopes

so they could get back to me with contact information. I did receive a positive response, but my email messages kept kicking back. I also left a rather cryptic voice mail messages on two numbers, but I still haven't heard from him. I can't believe how hard it is to find participants. (Journal, 12-10-11)

This might be what researchers described as the kind of paralysis that keeps us from moving forward. Perhaps that was true of some the 115 teachers that I did not talk to – perhaps they did have an experience like the one I heard about and said, "That was it. I'll never do that again."

Throughout this chapter I described how feelings of uncertainty, anger and frustration, and paralysis framed the experiences of teachers as they approached race and race issues with their mostly white students. Teachers in this study illuminated how they challenged their fears and worked within their uncertainty to find a starting point for the conversation where they gained access to the monster they perceived. In doing so, teachers acquired experience, thus breaking a silence surrounding racial discourse.

Conclusion

Whites folks who talk race, however, are often represented as patrons, as superior civilized beings. Yet their actions are just another indication of white-supremacist power, as in 'we are so much more civilized and intelligent than black folks/people of color that we know better than they do all that can be understood about race.' bell hooks

I carried this quote from bell hooks (2003) through each step of my research. I thought about it all the time, and at times I have teetered on the edge of paralysis, so filled with the experiences of discomfort and fear that my participants have identified. First, the discomfort that a black person/person of color will read this and say "Here, let me give you a little nudge off that precipice, because you had it all wrong." Second, the fear that if I had this all wrong, I was doing great harm to an understanding of race. When I was a middle and high school student all I knew about race was that we were all born equal, but some of us grew up to be better than other people. Inherently I saw flaws in that way of thinking. It did not make sense. But it is what I heard and what I saw and no one explained it any differently. As a teacher I became part of the cycle that perpetuated that way of thinking. I am not the same person I was when I entered Tim Lensmire's classroom years ago. West (2008) explains why:

> White brothers and sisters have been shaped by 244 years of white supremacist slavery, 87 years of white supremacist Jim and Jane Crow, and then another 40 years in which significant progress has been made. The stereotypes still cut deep [change in font]. Any white brother or sister who deeply revels in the

humanity of black, brown, yellow, and red brothers and sisters must undergo a

kind of conversion, metamorphosis, and transformation. (p. 45)

I was honored by the deep faith that Cornell West had in me as a white sister. His

hope, and his affirmation that change was possible for white people like me, locates the

beginning of my dissertation study. I drew from my own experiences as a white student

in a predominantly white community, educated in predominantly white schools from K-

12 through college, and back into the classroom as white teacher. By pure chance, I took

a graduate class that made me aware of an institutionalized system of racism that I had

unknowingly been a contributing member of all my life. This shocking realization begged

the question, "Why was this the first time I was hearing about this?" In graduate classes I

taught, white students were asking me the same question. Those experiences provided the

questions that guided me to this study: Are most white teachers like me? Do they talk

about race? If so, what is that like for them?

To prepare for this study I explored phenomenology, a methodology that allowed

me to focus on the lived experiences of teachers. I chose this methodology because of its

potential to bring me "into the moment" with teachers as they relived a time when they

discussed race with students. I came to understand what it was like for them in that

moment. In a review of the literature I discovered an exceptional lack of research

studying race in predominantly white schools. This was an indication that my dissertation

study had the potential to contribute significantly to the literature. Understanding what it

was like for white teachers to discuss race in predominantly white classrooms would also

support research that addressed race in teacher education programs.

The first thing I noticed as I began my study was the silence surrounding discussion of race in rural communities. This was noted both in the lack of respondents and in comments from teachers interviewed. Out of 125 requests, I interviewed the ten who agreed to participate in the study. In one school, the principal expressed hope that teachers would participate. He wanted to address racial incidents that had surfaced during the year. No teachers from that school responded. It seemed like this was the kind of silence that was alluded to by participants. Several teachers commented that race was simply not discussed in their schools, by teachers or administrators.

Phenomenological interviews were sometimes highly emotional for the participants as they shared with me what it was like to talk about race. I used a descriptive phenomenological analysis to make meaning of teachers' lived experiences. I grouped units of meaning to form seven themes that represented the experience for teachers in my study. Their experiences were characterized by fear and discomfort, uncertainty, anger, frustration, experience, and paralysis.

Fear and Discomfort. These dominant themes were present both individually and intertwined as the two were inexorably linked to one another. Teachers experienced discomfort as they entered discussions feeling unprepared because they lacked knowledge about the subject of race. Mostly, however, the discomfort was linked to fear. Teachers described how their discomfort was heightened when they had a student of color in their class. Many teachers had only experienced all-white classes until recently. At my research sites, white students made up between 92% to 98 % of the student population, so at each grade level teachers might only have one or two students of color.

For most teachers in my study this was significant. Teachers described discussions of race as uncomfortable, but that discomfort elevated to fear that they might make the lone student of color feel bad in some way as a result of discussions involving race. This was especially significant because teachers found they would limit discussion in an attempt to avoid making the student feel bad. Two teachers, in separate incidents, described gasping inwardly when race was introduced into a discussion. First, by an African-American, and second, by a Jewish student, and as if each teacher was talking about the same situation, they both expressed being "on alert" in case something might be said to make the student feel bad.

Uncertainty. The theme of uncertainty was prevalent in three ways. First teachers adopted a colorblind stance as they struggled to figure out whether or not they should see race. The literature suggested that some whites claimed not to see race, fearing they would appear racist (hooks, 2003; Winans, 2005). Second, teachers were unsure of the language they should use around race. Most wanted to use "politically correct" terms so that they were not using offensive language or offending students of color. Third, there was uncertainty about curriculum when one teacher realized a lesson she was teaching might be reinforcing messages of white supremacy or whites as saviors to the oppressed. For these teachers, the feeling of uncertainty was uncomfortable as well.

Anger and Frustration. While not dominant themes among most teachers, these were quite significant for those teachers experiencing these emotions. For the teacher who was called a racist, it was "horrible and demeaning." Another teacher, feeling

helpless and unprepared to discuss race was visibly upset reliving the experience. Both experiences were lived as highly emotional and distressing.

Experience. Two teachers found that experience was helpful in having discussions of race. For one teacher retiring at the end of the year, it was cumulative experience initiated by a passion for social justice beginning in the 1970's. For another, it was the experience of attending college in a diverse urban setting combined with an understanding of issues of equity and equality. For both teachers, race issues were included in class discussions throughout the year.

Paralysis. Moments of paralysis surfaced for some participants as they questioned whether or not to go forward with discussions that included the subject of race. Fear, discomfort, uncertainty, anger, and frustration contributed to these moments when teachers considered the obvious: they had no obligation to bring up race.

In sum, the experiences of participants in this study demonstrated how difficult it is for teachers to comfortably discuss race in their classrooms. For most of these teachers the uneasiness they felt was rooted in fear of 1) making the minority student(s) in the class feel bad, or 2) harming students' understanding of race by reinforcing stereotypes, white supremacy, or creating opportunities for students to be mean.

Having established relationships with more diverse populations made a significant difference in how teachers approached conversations about race. These relationships, whether as students in more diverse college/university/urban settings, or in personal or family relationships, emphasized to teachers the impact of racial awareness and offered a better understanding of race from the perspective of marginalized groups. Also important

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were opportunities to reflect critically on curriculum and teaching practices as race became central to the class discussions.

There was one final theme that was not explicit in the lived experiences of teachers, but like silence, it surfaced in a quiet way. This was a kind of courage I saw in teachers. My participants were the white people who came forward to talk about how, intentionally or not, they have taken up discussions of race with students. Just as my participants felt discomfort around discussions of race, so do I in describing white people talking about race as courageous acts. Framed against a history of brutality and an institutionalized system of racism in which people of color live, it is almost obscene to call the singular event of a white teacher discussing race as courageous. But, against the backdrop of a community where colorblind racism silences such discussions, these are the small but courageous steps necessary to move forward.

As Al articulated, he doesn't have to do this; it *is* easier to not take this on. The uncertainty, fear, anger, and frustration are all uncomfortable moments people would rather not have. But for my participants, this was what teaching demanded, that they move forward in spite of the fear and discomfort that loomed in the background. As I read through transcripts, courage emerged as a unit of meaning in such small, but powerful ways that illustrated the moments teachers decided to confront their fears.

For Ryan, it was the moment he asked a student to talk after class, and the moment he apologized to the student. For Al, it was standing in front of his class, telling students they were going to read a text that used the 'n' word. This was followed by his openness in working toward a critical examination of the text he was using with students.

Dora displayed courage the moment she took the perspective of the student who suggested her game was racist, and talked about it with her class. Eleanor was still looking over her shoulder each time she merged into a discussion about race. For Ruth and Lucy, it was providing opportunities for students to discuss race, even as they held their breath.

In his book, *Hope on a Tightrope* (2008), Cornell West writes, "it takes courage to interrogate yourself… It takes courage to ask – *how did I become so well adjusted to injustice?"* (p. 9). When I think of West asking this question of white people, I am ashamed. And when I think of him asking blacks the same question, I just want to cry.

We need to ask this question in teacher education programs. The lived experiences of my participants suggested that the current model of requisite human relations/multiculturalism coursework did not adequately prepare teachers to engage in effective anti-racist work in the classroom. To move forward, West (2008) urged whites to go beyond a notion of white privilege, to "look squarely at the brutality and tragedy of the American past and present" and "acknowledge the sheer absurdity that a person of African descent confronts in this country – the incessant assaults on black intelligence, beauty, character, and possibility" (pp. 167-168). There is a great body of knowledge that needs to be shared. We need to make that knowledge accessible to teachers. West continues:

> As crucial and precious as the intellect is, it can become a refuge that hides and conceals emotional underdevelopment, and diminishes your ability to think critically. What we need at this particular moment is to bring together those who are willing to think critically, look at the basic assumptions of public discourse, and critique the way our history is told. (p. 11)

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In rural white communities, support is needed for people like the teachers in my study to

have these conversations with each other, without fear. Even with hooks (2003) assertion

of white people who talk about race as an indicator of supremacist views, I think of how I

looked at schools' mission statements before beginning my interviews, and saw her truth.

While schools declared a commitment to supporting a democratic society, I did not see

evidence of discussions of issues of racial inequalities toward that mission. But hooks

(1995) also spoke of the hope I see as potential in the classrooms where I conducted this

study:

> To live in anti-racist society we must collectively renew our commitment to a
> democratic vision of racial justice and equality. Pursuing that vision we create a
> culture where beloved community flourishes and is sustained. Those of us who
> know the joy of being with folks from all walks of life, all races, who are
> fundamentally anti-racist in their habits of being, need to give public testimony.
> We need to share not only what we have experienced but the conditions of change
> that make such an experience possible." (p. 271)

White teachers must cease practices that serve to perpetuate racism and white

notions of superiority. In creating a community of support in our schools, teachers can

work together as change agents. Stovall (2006) suggested that "the social justice project

in education will require the recognition of the interplay of race and class to access a

political, social, racial, and economic dynamic… because we exist in a society that is

systematically racist, the challenge becomes to forge community with the purpose of

producing change" (p. 257).

This challenge begins in teacher education programs within a course of studies

focused on the needs of diverse populations, not only in diverse settings, but in a diverse

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range of settings. A program that challenges students to think beyond the often narrow perspectives of a dominant culture that has disadvantaged students of color should be the starting place. Issues of inequity and inequality need to be confronted early in teacher education programs. Nieto (2009) has extracted five qualities that she believes are essential to teaching: "a sense of mission; solidarity with, and empathy for, students; the courage to challenge mainstream knowledge; improvisation; and a passion for social justice" (p. 204). For Nieto (2005) this also means:

> Encouraging prospective and practicing teachers to reflect deeply on their beliefs and attitudes so that a shift can take place. Taking part in an isolated workshop, attending a yearly conference, or taking one university course a year is not enough. Teachers need to give sustained attention to these questions, and this implies that schools need to provide them with the resources and support they need for doing this kind of difficult but, in the long run, empowering work. (p. 218)

Within predominantly white communities, I believe we can interrupt a cycle of oppressive behaviors that will give rise to a generation of anti-racist teachers. I continue to believe that teachers are some of the most caring and dedicated people in our communities. I believe that they would likely have the same response I had in a graduate course that taught me what it meant to be white. Teachers need to be provided with that kind of opportunity. The experiences of participants in this study demonstrated a need for:

1. Teacher education programs that examine human relations/multiculturalism courses to include a course of study that confronts racism through a deep understanding of the history and horror that created the racial divide.

2. White preservice teachers to have opportunities to explore whiteness.

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3. Multiple perspectives considered and integrated into every course within a licensure program, not as a separate unit or lesson, but as habit that creates an inclusive, anti-racist pedagogy.

4. Preservice teachers to have experience in talking about race in small groups, in class discussions, and in front of a class.

5. Schools to recognize their complicity in a system that advantages whiteness, and to support practicing teachers in ways that allow them to learn through engagement with scholarship and with each other.

Teachers in this study challenged their fears and worked within their uncertainty. This allowed them to start the conversation: they gained access to the monster they had perceived. In doing so, teachers acquired experience, and began to break a silence surrounding racial discourse.

Limitations of this study included the low number of respondents resulting in a limited number of interviews with teachers. I would be interested to find out why I had so few. In my discussion in Chapter 3, I suggested several factors, which included teachers not having had the phenomenon of discussing race, or wanting to talk about an experience, or not knowing/trusting me to talk about it - or knowing me and not wanting to talk. Also, by methodological design and descriptive analysis, I limited the study to include a focus on only the lived experiences of my participants. I did not ask about contextual information that could have given me more information about the school, the teachers, or the students. Outside of phenomenology, there was room for additional inquiry.

At its inception, I thought of this as a foundational study that provided a base for research that further explored how white teachers discuss race in predominantly white classrooms. Future work includes ethnographic studies I would like to conduct in classrooms of teachers, such as those in my study. I would like to engage in this research as participant-observer, learning with classroom teachers as we figure out practice related to theory in multiethnic and anti-racist pedagogy.

Freire (2003) has said that oppressors, as an oppressive class, can free neither others nor themselves. It is only when the oppressed free themselves, can they free their oppressors. I've come to understand this more clearly as I scrutinized my own position as an oppressor, and through this self-examination realized that my role in reversing the ugly effects of racism lies in research and work with and among oppressors like me, in the very classrooms where I learned it myself.

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Appendix A

Interview Cover Letter

Dear Educators:

I am a doctoral student at the University of Minnesota, exploring how white elementary/middle school teachers in predominantly white rural schools in the Midwest experience discussions involving race or race issues with students. This is a research study for my doctoral dissertation in which I am specifically interested in how teachers experience discussions of race and race issues to better understand how to prepare future teachers for these discussions.

I am looking for teachers interested in participating in this study. The only requirements are that you are a white teacher in a predominantly white rural elementary/middle school, and that you have had the experience of discussing race or race issues with your students.

For the purposes of the study, I will ask you to participate in one interview, lasting approximately 45-60 minutes. This interview will be conversational and will be conducted at your school or another location of your choosing. The interview will be entirely confidential. You are free to decline to respond at any time during the interview. The interview will be audio recorded to insure a more accurate representation of your perspective than note taking. Your name will not appear on the audio file or on the transcription. I will be the only person with access to the files and transcriptions. You may choose to drop out of the study at any time without any negative effects. Your name and the name of the school will not be used in any publications or report of the study findings.

Please consider this opportunity to participate in this research that will impact how we better prepare teachers for these important discussions. If you are interested in participating, please mail the response card to me as soon as possible and I will contact you to schedule an interview. I very much appreciate your willingness to participate in this study. If you have any questions about the research project, please contact me at 715-483-5288 (715-296-6243 cell) or by email at leen0010@umn.edu.

Sincerely,

Mary E. Lee-Nichols
Ph.D. Candidate, Culture & Teaching
University of Minnesota
Department of Curriculum & Instruction
125 Peik Hall - 159 Pillsbury Drive S.E.
Minneapolis, MN 55455

leen0010@umn.edu

IRB Code# **0912P75592**

Appendix B

CONSENT FORM

Racial Discourse in Predominantly White Classrooms:
A Phenomenological Study of Teachers' Lived Experiences Discussing Race

You are invited to be in a research study exploring how white elementary/middle school teachers' in predominantly white rural schools in the Midwest experience discussions involving race or race issues with students. You were selected as a possible participant because you are a white teacher in a predominantly white rural elementary/middle school, and you have had the experience of discussing race or race issues with your students. I ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

This study is being conducted by: Mary E. Lee-Nichols
                                     Department of Curriculum and Instruction
                                     University of Minnesota

Background Information

The purpose of this study is to discover what it is like for teachers as they experience discussions of race and race issues in the classroom as a means to better understand how to prepare future teachers for these discussions.

Procedures:

If you agree to be in this study, I would ask you to do the following things:

Participate in one interview, lasting approximately 45-60 minutes. This interview will be conversational and will be conducted at a location of your choosing. Questions will focus on the experience of discussing race issues with students, such as, "Could you tell me about a time during class when the topic of discussion was related to race, or when race issues came up in a class discussion?" A further prompt might be, "I'd like to hear about that experience and what it was like for you to talk to your students during that time." Additionally, you may be asked questions that direct/redirect the focus of the interview to how the experience was lived, for example, "Tell me more about… describe… let's go back to when…"

Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study

The likelihood of psychological and social risks of this study are minimal: First, the interview may touch on sensitive issues as the experience of discussing race is conveyed; Second, discussion of past experiences may be emotional.

There are no direct benefits to participation in this study.

Compensation:

There is no payment associated with participation in this study.

Confidentiality:

The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report I might publish, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely and only the researcher will have access to the records. The interview will be audio recorded to insure a more accurate representation of your perspective than note taking. Your name will not appear on the audio file or on the transcription. I will be the only person with access to the files and transcriptions. Sections of the transcript will be used in the written report of this research along with excerpts of 12-20 transcripts from other participants. These will be erased at the conclusion of this study, by May, 2011.

Voluntary Nature of the Study:

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with the University of Minnesota. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

Contacts and Questions:

The researcher conducting this study is: Mary E. Lee-Nichols, a doctoral student at the University of Minnesota. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact me at work, (cell phone) 715-296-6443, or leen0010@umn.edu. You may also contact my faculty advisor at any time with questions or concerns. His name is Dr. Timothy J. Lensmire, Ph.D. and can be reached at 612-625-2092, or lensmire@umn.edu.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher(s), **you are encouraged** to contact the Research Subjects' Advocate Line, D528 Mayo, 420 Delaware St. Southeast, Minneapolis, Minnesota 55455; (612) 625-1650.

You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.

Statement of Consent:

I have read the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

Signature:_____ Date: _____

Signature of Investigator:_____ Date: _____

IRB Code# **0912P75592**

Appendix C

Response Card

Thank you for your willingness to participate in this research study investigating the experiences of white teachers' discussing race issues in predominantly white elementary/rural middle schools. Please include the following contact information so that I can reach you to schedule a 45-60 minute interview.

Name _____   **School** _____

Please indicate how you would prefer to be contacted to schedule an interview:

E-mail _____
Phone _____   I will review the Consent Form with you at
                                                     the time of the interview.

Best time to call _____

Thank you so much – I will be contacting you soon!

IRB Code# **0912P75592**

Appendix D

Racist Images in Rural America

Truck Displaying Confederate Flag

Appendix E

Racist Memorabilia In Rural America

Photograph by Wing Young Huie Used with Permission.

Lawn Ornament