CRITICAL PEDAGOGY WITH THE OPPRESSED AND THE OPPRESSORS
Middle School Students Discuss Racism and White Privilege

Jill Ewing Flynn
University of Delaware

This article examines what can happen when teachers and students work to create a critical dialogic space, taking up issues of race, culture, and privilege in classroom discussions. The study focuses on middle school students of culturally and economically diverse backgrounds as well as their 2 White teachers. In English and social studies classes, eighth graders studied cultural conflict and resolution, including a unit on racism and White privilege; the article discusses how both White students and students of color responded to this curriculum. This study has implications for how critical multicultural pedagogy can be enacted in this type of setting: where students identified with groups traditionally considered oppressed learn with students whose racial and cultural backgrounds are identified with the oppressors.

INTRODUCTION

> "I'm going to know and remember that my life is better because I'm White, and that I need to show others that this is wrong."
>
> —Al (eighth-grade student)

Many teachers recognize the need for critical multicultural education in today's diverse schools. Yet some educators have struggled to teach about race, culture, and power in a meaningful way. This article explores what can happen when middle school students take up issues of racism and White privilege in classroom discussions. Eighth-grade students of varied racial, cultural, and socioeconomic backgrounds are the focus of the research, a study of English and social studies classes led by two early-career, White, male teachers. The research questions that guided this study are as follows: How do individuals in a diverse middle school classroom react to discussions of race, culture, and White privilege? What new

• **Jill Ewing Flynn,** University of Delaware, Department of English, 219 Memorial Hall, Newark, DE 19716. E-mail: jeflynn@udel.edu

Middle Grades Research Journal, Volume 7(2), 2012, pp. 95–110 ISSN 1937-0814

problems and possibilities can emerge in this dialogic space?

Banks and Banks (2004) explain that the chief aim of multicultural education is to achieve educational equity, ensuring that all students can attain academic success. In addition, effective multicultural pedagogy helps students cultivate the knowledge, dispositions, and attitudes needed to join with one another "to create a civic and moral community that works for the common good" (p. xi). Al (all names are pseudonyms) showed in his response above that he was able to learn from and with his classmates of color and felt prepared to do antiracist work.

However, the phrase "multicultural education" has been coopted and used to describe approaches and activities that do not align with the field's original intent. As a result, researchers have applied critical theories to multicultural education, giving rise to the term "critical multiculturalism." According to May and Sleeter (2010), critical multiculturalism focuses on "structural analysis of unequal power relationships, analyzing the role of institutionalized inequities, including *but not necessarily limited to* racism" (p. 10, emphasis in original).

The title of Paolo Friere's (1970/2000) seminal book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, reveals an inherent problem with enacting critical pedagogy in American classrooms: their diversity. We need to examine how White students and teachers can work with students of color to disrupt systems of White privilege and racism in their classroom, school, and society at large. The classroom in this study, therefore, helps us envision how an alliance between the oppressed and the oppressors can form in a dialogic space, embodying critical multicultural practice.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Talking about race and racism is not easy. Research shows that it can be particularly challenging for people from White, middle class backgrounds (Cross, 2005; Huerta & Flemmer, 2005). Many White students and teachers struggle to see how Whiteness is normalized, how race is relevant to their own lives (Greene & Abt-Perkins, 2003). Yet it is important to recognize that this phenomenon is not only due to the individual, power-seeking resistance of White people (Flynn, Lensmire, & Lewis, 2009). Having not been taught to question institutional forces themselves, many Whites struggle to recognize the racism inherent in institutions such as schools (LeCompte & McCray, 2002). Instead, they see racism as a series of individual acts (McIntosh, 1990; Greene & Abt-Perkins, 2003). Unfortunately, though, defining racism "as an individual, ethical act shuts down discussions about racism—especially among White people or in mixed-race groups—because people do not want to be put in the position of being judged" (Greene & Abt-Perkins, 2003, p. 7). As a result, the teachers in this study had to make careful choices about how to engage their White students in discussions of race and racism.

The response of students of color is similarly complex. Beach, Thein, and Parks (2008) found that it is important for the teacher to recognize that non-White students may fear being perceived as "defensive victims of White privilege" and therefore loath to contribute to conversations about racism when they are in the minority in the classroom (p. 281). In contrast, other research has documented how some students of color feel great relief when issues of race and racism are discussed openly. Subsequently, they participate readily in classroom discussions of these topics (Glazier & Seo, 2005; Fine, Weis, & Powell, 1997). Teachers must consider how they can use critical multicultural pedagogy to engage all students in discussions of racism and White privilege.

For the last 15 years, crucial research and theorizing on inclusive multicultural pedagogies have emerged, from culturally relevant or responsive pedagogy (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1995) to a "funds of knowledge" approach (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005). However, much of this work focuses on groups

of students who share one or more identity markers. This emphasis reflects a larger (perhaps unintended) trend in multicultural education: it is often perceived as pedagogy only for students of color. As American classrooms grow more diverse, we need research that examines classrooms with multiracial students working together.

In addition, while there has been research on the reaction of teachers, teacher candidates, and university students to multicultural education, there is not as much on the responses of adolescent students (Beach et al., 2008; Fine et al., 1997; Greene & Abt-Perkins, 2003). In particular, there is less research on the type of curriculum that addresses racism and White privilege in an explicit way as the teachers in this study do. The responses of these students can therefore help teachers and teacher educators think through the possibilities as well as the difficulties of critical multicultural curriculum.

METHODOLOGY

Research Site

The researcher chose to study Metro Arts School, a public magnet school for Grades 4 through 8, because of its commitment to desegregation and diversity. An "integration district" with two schools, including Metro Arts School, was created in 2000 in an attempt to address the issue of White flight from the Midwestern city where this research took place. The student population is drawn from the urban center, accounting for approximately 40% of the school population in 2007-2008 (the year the study took place), as well as the surrounding suburbs. As a result, the school is socioeconomically diverse. There are students who live in million-dollar homes as well as students whose families qualify for public assistance; 18% of student families were defined as low income in 2007-2008, as reported by a local newspaper.

Though here and elsewhere in this article racial identity markers are used, the researcher acknowledges that race is a socially and culturally constructed term. Despite the fluid and hybrid nature of identity categories, it is still nonetheless useful to use such designations to describe the study participants, including the researcher. Later in the article, terms that the participants themselves chose (i.e., some students preferred "Black" while others describe themselves as "African American") are used. The eighth-grade classes studied were approximately 60% White, 35% African American, and 5% Latino or Asian American (field notes, 10-15-07). All staff members attend training programs run by the National Urban Alliance and the Pacific Educational Group that address issues of race and educational equity. As a result, school personnel are strongly encouraged to reflect on their own racial identities. Administrators at the school support the work of the teachers who address issues of race and culture in the classroom.

Participants

Teachers

Two eighth-grade teachers participated in the study: the English teacher and the social studies teacher. The researcher interviewed the two teachers formally twice and informally multiple times. They are both White, married, able-bodied males who were in their late 20s at the time of the study.

Students

Thirty-eight eighth-grade students participated in the study throughout the school year. In the spring, the researcher requested interviews with 16 students. In choosing focal students for interviews, the researcher sought diversity in terms of race, class, and gender, also selecting students who seemed to have experienced the critical multicultural curriculum in different ways. Shenton (2004) explains how random sampling of informants can help provide the fullest picture of the phenomenon under study. While this study instead

employed purposive sampling, the researcher was nonetheless able to achieve the "multiple voices, exhibiting characteristics of similarity, dissimilarity, redundancy and variety" (p. 65) that Shenton advocates. Eleven students were interviewed: 1 African American boy, 2 African American girls, 1 Latina/African American girl, 3 White boys, 3 White girls, and 1 Asian American/White girl. The researcher conducted in-depth interviews only with these 11 students, but observed, spoke informally with, and collected written artifacts from all students over the course of the school year.

Researcher Identity and Power

The researcher is a White, middle class, heterosexual, and able-bodied female as well as a former secondary teacher. All of these aspects of identity impacted work on this study as, for 9 months, the researcher was a participant observer in eighth-grade English and social studies classes at Metro Arts School.

Data collection, analysis, and write-up are all influenced by power relations, particularly in studies that center on race and culture. In this study, the researcher held considerable power. As the academic authority, she determined much of how interviews and observations played out, establishing the length of the research, the questions to be asked and answered, the intended audience for the work, the theoretical framework that shaped the study, the ways the results were presented, and so on. While feminist researchers have problematized the amount of power held by the researcher and sought to make the researcher-participant relationship into one of friendship to address this imbalance, this supposedly more egalitarian relationship can sometimes be disingenuous and artificial (Wolf, 1996). Throughout the study, the researcher tried to carry out "acts of reciprocity," identified by feminist researchers as a way to address the power imbalance (Wolf, 1996; also see Tillman, 2002). During the year at Metro Arts School, the researcher chaperoned field trips, ran errands, and worked one-on-one with students when appropriate. She also hoped that debriefing what was going on in the classroom could potentially help the teachers reflect further on their own practice.

Qualitative researchers must continually reflect on their positions within a study and consider how those changing and multiple positions impact their work. The researcher worked to build credibility by developing "an early familiarity with the culture" (Shenton, 2004, p. 65) of the school, conducting a pilot study in the previous school year as well as spending many hours at the site. Relationships between the researcher and the participants grew and changed over the nine-month study. The researcher shared racial, gender, class, and/or sexuality identity markers with some, and she worked to position herself as a fellow learner. However, the researcher was more than 20 years older than the students and a former middle school teacher. As a result, participants viewed her in a role closer to that of teacher/colleague. As the year progressed, some students came to be less fearful of breaking (minor) rules in the researcher's presence, such as chewing gum and using profanity, and she was sometimes a confidant for students. In this way, the researcher occupied an in-between position.

Throughout this study, the researcher practiced reflexivity in a section of a journal, writing impressions, comments, and questions about the role she was playing in the classroom and the ways in which her relationships with students and teachers evolved. Shenton (2004) notes the importance of "monitoring the researcher's own developing constructions" in order to establish credibility. A reflective journal helped the researcher consider the effectiveness of the research approach as well as think about the data being collected. In the journal as well as in subsequent writing, the researcher has worked to be open about her "values, commitments, and theoretical frameworks" (Young, 2000, p. 642) and therefore "accountable" for how she has "participated in research and produced knowledge" (Subedi, 2006, p. 575).

Data Collection and Analysis

Because of the personal and sometimes provocative associations with topics related to race and culture, the study used qualitative methods to answer the research questions, utilizing tools that other qualitative researchers studying classroom discussions have employed. Data sources included field notes, audio recordings of class discussions and interviews, student work samples, and copies of curriculum resources. The researcher took notes and audio recorded class during each visit. As noted previously, the researcher interviewed both the teachers and a number of focal students. The researcher made copies of homework assignments, tests, quizzes, papers, and other projects completed by the students that related to the research questions. The researcher also collected course materials (handouts, worksheets, assignment descriptions) created by the teachers. Using multiple data sources was important, as it "compensates for [each source's] individual limitations and exploits their respective benefits" (Shenton, 2004, p. 65).

As Miles and Huberman (1994) describe, qualitative data analysis is an ongoing process; focusing data, organizing it, and drawing and verifying conclusions are procedures that are "interwoven before, during, and after data collection in parallel form" (pp. 11-12). Morse, Barrett, Mayan, Olson, and Spiers (2002) point out that ongoing analysis contributes to the reliability and validity of a study. They observe that "it is essential that the investigator remain open, use sensitivity, creativity and insight, and be willing to relinquish ideas that are poorly supported regardless of the excitement and the potential that they first appear to provide" (Morse et al., 2002, p. 18). Thus continual reflection on and recreation of themes and codes contribute to the study's validity.

After each week at Metro Arts School, the researcher looked back over field notes and transcribed sections of discussion that related to the research questions, writing tentative observations. To begin formal data analysis, the researcher created a log: for each piece of data gathered, the researcher entered the date it was collected and the type of source (audio file, field notes, student work sample, school document, interview, etc.), then making notes about its significance, if any. The researcher progressed chronologically throughout the school year, rereading all text and listening to all audio files again, adding to the class discussion transcriptions created. Producing this 55-page log helped the researcher generate themes and patterns in the data, which evolved throughout the study. The researcher developed categories corresponding to the repeated topics and ideas that emerged. This process resulted in findings that were confirmed across data sources through triangulation of data. As Harper and Kuh (2007) point out, qualitative triangulation, participant-researcher reciprocity, and critical examination of the researcher's position in the study contribute to "high-quality qualitative findings" (p. 7).

CLASSROOM OBSERVATIONS

Examining Culture and Building Community

The eighth-grade teachers at Metro Arts School structured the curriculum around race and culture issues. In the social studies course, called "World Cultures," Mr. Evans developed thematic units for the four quarters of the school year: defining culture, cultural collision, cultural conflict, and cultural resolution. The English teacher, Mr. Ramsey, also chose to center issues of culture and identity in the reading and writing activities he designed.

In the beginning of the school year, students defined culture and examined the relationships between cultural identities and individual identities in both classrooms. In social studies, students spent almost 3 weeks on a "culture collage" unit. To present their collages, which represented the relationships between students' cultural and individual identities, students gathered in a circle of chairs in the classroom. The sharing structure of "circle" used for the culture

collage presentations was important. Mr. Evans gave explicit instruction about the behaviors and practices expected during this time: students must focus on the speaker; one person should speak at a time; all students must participate through talking and active listening. Mr. Evans employed "circle" for serious academic topics as well as "check-in" time: how each classmate was feeling that day and why. This structure facilitated community building. Mr. Evans and his students typically used "circle" once or more per week throughout the school year. Instructional activities and materials in the first two quarters laid the groundwork for the challenging discussions to follow in quarter three (for more on the scaffolding of the curriculum, see Flynn, 2010).

Difficult Conversations: Racism and White Privilege

The heart of this study was the week of "race discussions," a unit cotaught by Mr. Evans and Mr. Ramsey. The teachers' stated goals for this unit were as follows:

- have students test out talking about race and racism inside and outside of a classroom;
- give students of color a voice and forum for sharing their experiences with racism;
- facilitate students' understanding of White privilege—particularly, but not solely, White students; and
- help students develop the language and skills of antiracism (Interview, 12-18-07).

These goals reflected the ways Mr. Evans and Mr. Ramsey believed discussions about race should happen. They valued student voices as a testimony to the pervasiveness of racism in our society. They recognized the difficulty students have, especially White students, in talking about matters of race, and sought to provide a safe space for such discussions. They also had an explicit goal of having students understand and ultimately work to combat sociocultural forces such as institutional racism. These objectives showed a careful consideration of how students identified with groups traditionally considered oppressed and students whose racial and cultural backgrounds are identified with the oppressors could learn together.

For this unit, students read and discussed "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack" (McIntosh, 1990). Using materials from Pacific Educational Group staff development sessions, Mr. Evans and Mr. Ramsey went over "Four Agreements" (Singleton, 2006) that guided class discussion:

1. stay engaged;
2. experience discomfort;
3. speak your truth; and
4. expect and accept nonclosure (Singleton, 2006, p. 58).

By working through these agreements—talking about what they mean and what they look like in a classroom—the two teachers prepared students for the difficult work ahead. The teachers used "circle" check-in and reminded students of these agreements before diving into discussions each class (Field notes, 2-5-08, 2-6-08). While these agreements were not perfect, they did provide important guiding principles, as Mr. Evans explained:

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

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

Next, students examined their own skin color privilege by completing the "Because of my Race or Color" chart. This chart asked students to assign a score to their racial experiences (see Table 1). Students and adults in the room—the teachers; the researcher; the principal, who sat in on part of class; and educational

TABLE 1
"Because of My Race or Color" Chart[1]

White Privilege

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

Because of My Race or Color …	*My Score*
1. I can easily choose to be in the company of people of my race most of the time (in school, shopping, in a park or other public place).	
2. If my family needs to move, we can be pretty sure of hassle-free renting or buying in a safe, desirable neighborhood where we would want to live.	
3. I can be pretty sure that my neighbors in such a location will be neutral or pleasant to me.	
4. I can go shopping by myself most of the time without being followed or harassed.	
5. I can turn on the television or open the front page of the paper and see many people of my race represented in a positive way.	
6. When I learn about our national heritage or about "civilization," in school and in the media, I am shown that people of my race made it what it is.	
7. I can go into most supermarkets and find the staple foods which fit with my racial/ethnic traditions; I can go into any hairdresser's shop and find someone who can cut my hair.	
8. I can count on my skin color not to work against me when I shop, whether I use checks, credit cards, or cash; store clerks assume that I have enough money to pay for my purchases.	
9. I can swear, or dress in secondhand clothes, or not answer letters, without having people say that these choices are due to the bad morals, or the poverty, or the illiteracy of my race.	
10. I can do well in a challenging situation without being called a credit to my race. (For example, if I earn a school award, I am not identified as especially good or talented for a person of my race.)	
11. I can be oblivious to the language and customs of persons of color without feeling any penalty for such ignorance from the people of my race. (In other words, people of my race are not angry, disappointed, or frustrated if I don't know about the cultural traditions of people of color.)	
12. I can criticize our government or talk about fearing or opposing its policies without being seen as a racial outsider.	
13. I can be pretty sure that if I ask to talk to the "person in charge" in a school, business, restaurant, or other location, I will be facing a person of my race.	
14. I can conveniently buy posters, postcards, picture books, greeting cards, and magazines featuring people of my race.	
15. I can go home from most meetings of the clubs or organizations that I participate in feeling tied-in, not isolated, out-of-place, outnumbered, unheard, feared, or hated.	
16. I can take a scholarship without having others suspect I got it because of my race.	
17. If my family goes on vacation, we can choose a hotel without fearing that people of my race cannot get in or will be mistreated or mistrusted there.	
18. I can be sure that if I need legal or medical help, my race will not work against me.	
19. If my day, week, or year is going badly, I don't need to wonder if each negative situation is due somewhat to my race.	
20. I can comfortably avoid, ignore, or minimize the impact of racism on my life.	
21. I can speak in public to a powerful group without my race being an issue.	
22. Most dolls, crayons, band-aids, makeup, and any other item that comes in "flesh" color is more or less a match for my skin.	

(Table continues on next page)

TABLE 1
(Continued)

23. If a substitute teacher disciplines me, I can be sure I haven't been singled out because of my race.	
TOTAL	

Source: Adapted from McIntosh (1990) and Pacific Educational Group.
Note: [1]This version of the chart is one that the researcher helped the teachers to revise in order to make a few of the items more directly applicable to students. The one used during the class the researcher observed was much the same, but aimed at teachers/adults.

assistants—sat in a circle according to their scores, which ranged from 115 (those with the most skin color privilege, which should be the score for almost all Whites) to the low 30s (those with the least).

Mr. Evans and Mr. Ramsey opened the race discussions by asking students to respond to what they saw in the circle: the "color line" that was formed as a result of the survey, with White students and adults around one part of the circle, Latino and Asian students following, and African American students and the principal on the other side. During the week's conversations, students delved into personal stories of bias, the notion of reverse racism, the role of institutions in perpetuating racial injustice, the Black-White dichotomy, feelings of guilt and responsibility, and other weighty topics. The teachers ended the week of race discussions by having students discuss antiracism and write in their journals. On the last day, students publicly stated to the class one antiracist commitment they could make. Concluding the unit in this way appeared to help students envision how they could work for social justice, no matter what their identity markers and experiences were.

ANALYSIS OF STUDENTS' RESPONSES TO RACE DISCUSSIONS

Students displayed a range of reactions to this curriculum. Many identified the race discussions as an influential experience, with 16 out of 38 students indicating it was their favorite activity of the year, calling the week "eye opening," "real," and "powerful" (Student work samples, 6-1-08). One girl noted that she "loved" the experience: "I felt like I finaly [sic] got to say what I have been wanting to say for years! I feel very proud of myself" (Student work sample, 6-1-08). At the end of the year, 23 students identified their newfound knowledge of racism and White privilege as one of the most important ideas that they would take away from the class (Student work samples, 6-1-08). Patterns across racial groups emerged, revealing differences in the reactions of African American, Latino, Asian, and White students.

Opportunity to Educate Others

In general, as evidenced in their class participation, interviews, and work samples, Black (including bi- and multiracial students with African American heritage) tended to respond positively, valuing the chance to discuss race and racism with their White peers and share personal stories of discrimination. Nicole, a Black-Puerto Rican-White girl, conveyed this perspective in her interview:

> I think we all should have felt honored, like all the African American kids … well, for them to hear us … what we go through and kind of how we felt about it, and you know for us to even hear what they had to say about how they felt, which we had like no idea, I thought that was a privilege to both—for both of us. So we got to hear each other out … at this young of an age. (Interview, 3-18-08)

Nicole went on to say that although there were many cross-race friendships at Metro Arts

School, she and her friends rarely talked about racism, so it was important for students to talk about it in the dialogic space of the classroom. She commented that, "for my White friends to actually, like, understand and hear, like, what I knew and what I felt inside, was, was important" (Interview, 3-18-08).

Mack, an African American boy, agreed with Nicole's comment, explaining that his White friends often did not realize the things that happen to him as a result of his skin color. He shared the example of being more closely watched while shopping:

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

Experiences like this were common among students of color. Several of them, including Manhattan (a Black girl), told about personal experiences with racism even at this school. These stories were vital for students to tell and for their classmates to hear. As Mack said, "it brought us closer as friends. And um, it helps us understand each other more" (Interview, 4-26-08). As will be seen later, stories were powerful vehicles for facilitating understanding of institutional racism. But it was not only sharing their own stories that was significant; Nicole also pointed out that it was important for her to hear that White students often felt guilty about the racial history of the United States. Students like Nicole, Mack, and Manhattan responded positively to the race discussions.

Discussion in a Dialogic Space

When asked about how often they discuss race with friends and family, White students tended to say not much, while students of color noted that they did talk about it often. However, both Mack and Sheree (an African American girl) said the race discussions expanded their conversations with their families, helping them to see that racism still does exist in a systematic way and that there was a need to get it out into the open. Manhattan noted that she and two other friends now made an effort to talk about race at their diverse lunch table: "we talk about it way way a lot" (Interview, 4-15-08). When asked if she could see herself participating in these conversations next year in high school, Manhattan said she hoped to continue talking with friends about racism. But she also pointed out that she would prefer to have the discussions with people she knows and trusts, highlighting the importance of the dialogic space.

Manhattan's comment underscored a significant facet of the race discussions shown in African American students' responses: that there needs to be a strong sense of trust and support for them to occur. Sheree pointed out the importance of the teacher-student relationship, noting that these discussions could not take place unless students had a strong rapport with their teachers. Mack agreed, explaining,

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

Mack believed this classroom space was the most productive he had experienced. He sensed that if he expressed a differing opinion, he would not be silenced, but that the teachers and students would work with him to help him understand the views of others. The fact that Mack felt this was a space where he could speak *and* truly learn from other's perspectives was remarkable. Mack trusted that the discussions provided a forum for educating others

about his experiences as well as listening to and learning from his classmates. The environment provided him not only the opportunity to change his mind, but also the freedom to honor and maintain his own beliefs. Despite their position as a part of the oppressor's racial group, Mr. Evans and Mr. Ramsey therefore empowered students of color to reflect, working toward praxis. For at least some students, the teachers managed to create an environment that facilitated critical dialogue.

Manhattan made a related point in her interview, one that should be carefully noted by teachers and teacher educators: that White teachers should not be afraid to talk about race with their students, including students of color. She declared, "If you're just bringing it up and trying to clarify on it, then I'm completely fine. I'm *glad* that you're trying to figure [it] out" (Interview, 4-15-08). While many White teachers express doubt and fear over raising matters of racial privilege with students, particularly 'young' students like those in middle school, Manhattan's words are reassuring. She did not take offense when teachers noted race; she appreciated when teachers tried to work through these issues themselves. Teachers do not have to have all the answers, but they do need to have positive, caring, and respectful relationships with their students—and they need to work to create a safe climate among students in their classrooms, a place where praxis can begin.

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

Racial Awakening and Feeling Excluded

The discussions were significant to Rachelle, a girl with a Japanese mother and a White American father. Rachelle struggled to reconcile the fact that she was raised primarily in White culture, yet her most noticeable physical features were Asian. The week of race discussions helped Rachelle consider the ways that race influenced and shaped her identity. She noted that this unit also facilitated her ability to identify racism around her:

> I just went to Disney World, and we went on "It's a Small World." And, I—I couldn't enjoy the ride … they had everything, like, separated. … In the last room, all the people are dancing around … it was all just like the White couple, the Black couple, the Asian couple. And they had … almost like a pyramid with people standing on it and all the White people were up top, and like Black and Asian people were on the bottom. (Interview, 4-17-08)

Unlike many African American students, Rachelle said she had not often talked about race with her parents. When she mentioned her "Small World" observation to her mother and father, they downplayed the racial pyramid she saw. Rachelle's pledge at the end of the race discussions was to "recognize it more often … realize it's there, and to, *tell* … people about it so that, you know, just get more people to consciously think about it, versus just pushing it back" (Interview, 4-17-08). Rachelle said several times that the race discussions unit was the most important thing she had done in school.

Not all students responded as positively as Rachelle, however. Claudia, a girl of Mexican heritage, expressed frustration that the complexity of her situation was not being addressed in the race discussions. Not Black and not White, Claudia faced challenges related to racism and anti-immigrant backlash that were not taken up in the week's conversations. Later in the school year, Claudia felt empowered to question this issue further, engaging her class in a lengthy discussion of why they studied primarily Europe, the United States, and Africa in their social studies curriculum (Field notes, 5-13-08). She also chose to do her research paper on immigration. Yet during the race discussions, she felt excluded.

Claudia and Rachelle displayed some of the different ways that Latino and Asian students responded to the race discussions.

Resistance and Guilt

White students also reacted to the unit in complex ways. Some expressed resistance to filling out the "Because of my Race or Color" chart. In the class documented in this study, White students' scores ranged from 115 down to the 80s, indicating that students failed to acknowledge the privileges they earned solely based on skin color (in another class observed, almost all White student scores were above 100). During class, White students posed questions that showed that they were often thinking about age, gender, or other identity markers and not just race. Frances, a White girl, told me in her interview that she found it difficult to score herself according to skin color and not how she perceived herself as "a personal person" (Interview, 5-10-08).

Several White students said both during the race discussions and in interviews that they found it difficult to separate their minority religions (being Jewish or a Jehovah's Witness) from their race. Luke said, "it *was* hard for me. Because I'm Jewish. It was *hard* for me to fill out a question and say, this is not an area where I feel I am put down just because of race.… I wanted … to think about the *Jewish* side" (Interview, 5-3-08). When Luke made a comment to that effect during the race discussions, the principal (an African American man) challenged him, asking if he believed it was easy for Black people to separate religion from their racial identity. As Luke repeated to me later, "And I was like, 'No, but it's special for Jewish people,' and it's special, for *any*one, who has something like that, like a minority religion, or, you know, sexuality, whatever" (Interview, 5-3-08). Mr. Evans and Mr. Ramsey noted that, in this and other years of the unit, many Jewish students struggled with the way their religious identities intersected with race. Here we see a challenge of conducting critical pedagogy with students who have conflicting identity markers—which is the case for many of our students.

In addition to resistance, White students grappled with feelings of guilt, as Nicole alluded to earlier. Al also explained this in his interview:

> I just wish that we *all* could have been made equal and everything.… That, um, there just didn't *have* to be differences. And, and I feel guilty that, that I, not doing anything, was just *given*, the opportunity to, um, probably pass by other kids that won't get some of the opportunities that I might have the chances to get. (Interview, 4-30-08)

Al said he believed that this guilt may have influenced the scoring of White students' charts, explaining why there was such a range of scores among them. As Trainor (2005) observes, sometimes White students' resistance to talking about race does not stem from a desire to maintain their own privilege, but out of a genuine desire to see racial equality in the world—a wish that things were more just. Like Al, Kacie embodied this idea, saying, "I don't think race should ever be an aspect at all. I wish the idea of it never really existed and, because I think it's just kinda stupid" (Interview, 4-8-08). Whether out of a genuine desire for fairness and justice, or an inability or unwillingness to acknowledge modern racism, some White students were not able to move past their guilt and resistance.

While some students felt overwhelmed by guilt, for others the race discussions met the teachers' articulated goals. Tyler, a White boy, noted the importance of hearing stories from his classmates, saying

> you can't understand it [White privilege], unless you're on the other side [of the conflict]. 'Cause … you don't see a White person walk in and get privilege and a Black guy walk and not get it. You have to be, Black or Asian or something, you have to be the other group, to see what's going on. (Interview, 3-20-08)

Tyler felt his peers' personal accounts helped him understand the ways racism persists in American society. He said he perceived examples of racism more frequently now, including an African American classmate's unfair treatment in the lunch line. "I wouldn't have noticed it before, no. But after going to Metro Arts School and like, learning about racism and stuff, I was like, 'I see that'" (Interview, 3-20-08). Other White students agreed; Al wrote that

> One of the things I learned is that even though so many people have fought and died to stop racism it still exsists [sic] today. It might not be as obvious or right in front of everyone's face but it's still there. (Student work sample, 6-1-08)

For many White students, then, hearing their classmates' stories convinced them of the prevalence of modern racism.

Building Antiracist Leaders

It is significant that a number of White students took away from the week the need to take action. Al noted that, like some of the other students, he used the week's discussions as a springboard for discussing race more with his classmates. Al declared that it would be important for him to continue to cultivate cross-racial friendships in order to help him recognize and understand institutional racism better. Similarly, Luke noted that the week of race discussions gave students a foundation for carrying on the conversation. He said that the unit made it "*way* easier for us not to like *hate* each other for what we say about it … if someone says something I disagree with, it's *easier* to disagree, I think" (Interview, 5-3-08). Olga agreed, saying that before the week, "I was like, *really* afraid to talk about it, with *friends* at least. Because I didn't know if I was going to say the wrong thing" (Interview, 5-15-08). After this experience, she was at least a little more comfortable discussing race.

A number of White students also demonstrated an understanding of the need to take action as an antiracist leader, using the forums that they had to work for social justice. As Al wrote, "I'm going to know and remember that my life is better because I'm White, and that I need to show others that this is wrong" (Student work sample, 6-1-08). Luke concurred; he wrote, "I think I'll see (as I've started to see) racism more and more in America. I think I'll be vocal about Racism, Ethnocentrism, and othering—because the idea of talking about racism (and the like) as the only way to get rid of it has really stuck" (Student work sample, 6-1-08). These students were on the road to developing the language and skills of antiracism, as the teachers wished.

DISCUSSION: CHALLENGES OF THE RACE DISCUSSIONS

Teachers Leading Discussion

It is clear from the discussion above that this work is not easy, that there were a number of trouble spots that emerged. One of the earliest conversations in the circle revealed tensions that persisted throughout the week. The "speak your truth" agreement proved problematic: since the teachers explained that students' truths cannot be right or wrong, when students expressed ideas based on their past experiences, they felt judged when the teachers or fellow students questioned their statements. During a "circle" check-in on the third day of the race discussions, Kacie and Gordon, two White students, remarked that they felt "shut down" (Field notes, 2-6-08). Kacie announced,

> sometimes there are some things we really want to say but we feel we'd get attacked for them, and that we really couldn't say them, or that like these teachers would be like, "No, you're wrong." (Field notes, 2-6-08)

Mr. Evans responded by assuring Kacie that the fear of offending someone should not silence her. However, he did not address Kacie's concern that her teachers would dis-

agree with her or work to change her mind, an issue that she repeated in her next turn.

Gordon echoed Kacie's statement, his clenched fist and emphatic gesturing showing his anger:

> Well, it says on #3 "speak your truth," but I agree with Kacie that some of us have tried to speak our truth, and we get called out on it. We get—we say that we're wrong. We say that our viewpoints are wrong. And that they're, like, screwed up in some sort of way. (Field notes, 2-6-08)

We see that not all students felt, like Mack had, that this was a truly open and dialogic space. After Gordon's statement, students struggled to identify ways that they could respectfully disagree with one another and continue the conversation. It may be that the "speak your truth" agreement should be eliminated, or at least explained or unpacked differently. The word "truth" implied an absolute, something that could not be altered. But the teachers (and some students) were in fact working for change—working to change the "truths" that some students believed up to that point.

Indeed, this tension brought up the issue of what the teachers' role should be in this process: the leader, the facilitator, the mediator? Some students felt that the teachers imposed their viewpoints too much; Luke said that, "*Generally* it is kind of hard to like, state an opposition in the class" (Interview, 5-3-08). Tyler felt that "Mr. E cut everybody off. 'Cause everybody kept trying to prove the point and he'd be like 'No, it's this this this, let's move on.'" (Interview, 3-20-08). Tyler went on to say that the teachers should have encouraged more participation, particularly from students of color. On the other hand, Kacie remarked that, "putting it *very* frankly, it seemed like the teachers … were siding with the students of color more" (Interview, 4-8-08). Still others, like Frances, felt that the teachers were "too gentle" (Interview, 5-10-08). Clearly there is no easy answer to this dilemma. The role of the teacher in these discussions—and in critical multicultural pedagogy in general—is one that we need to continue to think about.

Identity Markers

As discussed earlier, students' religious identities, particularly for Jewish students, revealed another trouble spot. Several White Jewish students, such as Luke, struggled to separate oppression they had experienced due to their religion from the privilege they earned due to their skin color. It could be productive for the teachers to address this conflict more directly, emphasizing that there is no hierarchy of oppression and acknowledging that there are many other forms of bias and prejudice in the world. While there is no question that it was important to focus on racism in this curriculum, it was also necessary to work to include all students, making sure that they did not feel alienated and therefore resist the unit's objectives. The complex ways that we can belong simultaneously to both oppressor and oppressed groups make this kind of work difficult.

A final difficulty was how the class' discussion of race got caught up in what scholars have identified as "the Black-White paradigm," the binary of racial discourse in the United States (Alcoff, 2003; Delgado, 1998). This dichotomy is problematic, for as Alcoff (2003) notes, "to understand race in this way is to assume that racial discrimination operates exclusively through anti-Black racism" (p. 8). It is true that the majority of students of color in the class were African American, and they were the ones who shared the greatest number of stories of discrimination. But as a result, Latino and Asian American students expressed feelings of exclusion. Both White and Black students noticed this trend as well, calling attention to the fact that Asian, Arab, Middle Eastern, and other groups were not discussed much during the week (Frances interview, 5-10-08; Audio files, 2-3-08, 2-4-08).

Alcoff (2003) explains how this Black-White binary dominates much of the dominant American discourse around race and "inhibits

an understanding of how racism operates *vis-à-vis* Latino/as and Asian Americans" (p. 6) as well as other people of color. Such an emphasis prevents the formation of potentially productive alliances. It also thwarts the meaningful examination of related problems, such as nativism, xenophobia, and worker exploitation—issues that relate to racism and White privilege that were not taken up in the unit, revealed in Claudia's response to the race discussions discussed earlier. Teachers and students need to be aware of how this historical racial paradigm can dominate and work to incorporate a more nuanced concept of race.

The "speak your truth" agreement, the role of the teacher, the complex ways that Judaism intersects with Whiteness, and the emergence of a Black-White dichotomy all were challenges confronted by teachers and students during the week of race discussions.

Despite these difficulties, there were a great many successes. Even a student like Gordon—at times angry, resistant, and frustrated—still gained much from the week of race discussions. Gordon's tense, angry body language relaxed over the course of the week (Field notes, 2-7-08), and he identified the race discussions as one of the year's most important experiences (Student work samples, 6-1-08). Chosen by his peers to speak at eighth-grade graduation, Gordon declared in his speech, "Maybe over the years we can teach some other people too … like Mr. E says, you guys are going to change the world and we will. That's a promise" (Field notes, 6-5-08).

Limitations of the Study

There are several potential limitations to this study. The context of the research site is one. The willingness of students to grapple with issues of race could be related to the magnet school setting, since students (and/or their families) choose to attend this school. Because of the unique context as well as the qualitative nature of this study, the findings may not be generalized to all adolescent students. However, it important to recognize that any type of critical multicultural work is contextual. The discussions of racism and White privilege that these teachers and students participated in cannot simply be duplicated. Nevertheless, by exploring and analyzing how students reacted to critical multicultural pedagogy, this study can help illuminate potential problems and possibilities that emerge when issues of race and culture are meaningfully taken up in a dialogic classroom space.

MOVING FORWARD: IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATORS

Manhattan revealed that teachers should not be afraid to bring up race in the classroom; most students—even middle school students—can and do want to talk about racism. Yet merely discussing individual acts of skin color discrimination is not enough. Educators must address sociocultural forces, helping students to see that racism does not occur only in isolated, individual acts. Students can study the ways that skin color privilege has been entrenched in our social institutions. Lipsitz (1995), for example, shows how lending practices, housing policies, and the "dis-investment in America's cities, factories, and schools" has created a "possessive investment in Whiteness" (p. 379). Teachers should also acknowledge the powerful role that students' own stories can play and tap into that power in order to facilitate understanding of these institutional systems, including schools themselves. Teachers working in schools less diverse than the one in this study may need to work harder to make cross-cultural connections with and for their students. But there are many instructional materials and strategies—using literature, nonfiction, primary historical sources, media, and technology—that can help connect students to those racially different from them.

In addition, the careful structuring of this curriculum and this classroom space cannot be underestimated. One of the key elements of the work done by Mr. Evans and Mr. Ramsey was

the deliberate scaffolding of the year: teachers and students worked with culture and race throughout the eighth-grade curriculum. Further, the deliberate creation of the dialogic space, a place where many students felt safe to share and change their minds about often-taboo topics, was essential to the learning that took place in this middle school classroom. Teachers seeking to implement multicultural education need to integrate it in an intentional way. Because other attempts at multiculturalism are often isolated—reading a few texts by people of color, or studying issues in a detached unit—they do not necessarily achieve the goals of interrogating power and privilege or empowering students to work for social justice. It is important to recognize the structure that makes these discussions possible. Included in the planning should be a consideration of the teacher's role in such work. Teachers need to position themselves as fellow learners, reflecting and debriefing, just as they ask their students to do.

Studying the stages of racial identity development may also help students. In her book on multicultural teaching, Dilg (2003) discusses how her own secondary students often found examining racial identity theory instructive as they read multicultural texts and talked about racism. For students like Mr. Evans' and Mr. Ramsey's, knowing the psychological stages (Helms, 1990, is one potential source) could be helpful. For example, White students could see that they are not alone in feeling denial and guilt. Teachers who seek to implement critical multicultural pedagogy may wish to share racial identity theory with their students, while acknowledging that it has been critiqued and is only one possible way of looking at race. In addition, teachers and students could explore the ways that race is complicated by other identity markers. Many students belong simultaneously to identity categories that come into conflict in terms of power; they may be part of an oppressor group in one area, part of an oppressed group in another. Teachers need to acknowledge the ways that critical multicultural pedagogy can be challenging.

Another important feature of this work is the emphasis on taking action. By having students reflect on what they could personally do as antiracist leaders and state their commitment publicly, Mr. Evans and Mr. Ramsey worked to empower their students. Many young adolescents are naturally attuned to injustice; critical multicultural work can tap into that proclivity. To help avoid feelings of paralysis or guilt, students must have role models (including White allies, like these teachers) and suggestions of actions they can take to work for social justice.

Banks and Banks (2004) show that the skills and attitudes fostered by effective multicultural education are essential for all students, White and non-White, to "function effectively in a pluralistic democratic society" (p. xiv). Yet multicultural education is hard work. We must be honest about the failures of critical multicultural pedagogy, about the places where things get complicated and students can be alienated. At the same time, we cannot be paralyzed by the difficulties. Some may claim that middle school students are too young to study racism and privilege. The students in Mr. Evans and Mr. Ramsey's class show, though, that with the right dialogic space, students are ready to take on this work.

REFERENCES

Alcoff, L. M. (2003). Latino/as, Asians Americans, and the Black-White binary. *The Journal of Ethics, 7*(1), 5-27.

Banks, J., & Banks, C. (Eds.). (2004). Introduction. In *Handbook of research on multicultural education* (pp. xi-xiv). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Beach, R., Thein, A., & Parks, D. (2008). *High school students' competing social worlds: Negotiating identities and allegiances in response to multicultural literature.* Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

Cross, B. (2005, December). New racism, reformed teacher education, and the same ole' oppression. *Educational Studies*, *38*(3), 263-274.

Delgado, R. (1998). The Black/White binary: How does it work? In R. Delgado & J. Stefancic

(Eds.), *The Latino condition* (pp. 369-375). New York, NY: New York University Press.

Dilg, M. (2003). *Thriving in the multicultural classroom*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

Fine, M., Weis, L., & Powell, L. (1997). Communities of difference: A critical look at desegregated spaces created for and by youth. *Harvard Educational Review, 67*(2), 247-284.

Flynn, J. E. (2010). Discussing race and culture in the middle school classroom: Scaffolding critical multiculturalism. In S. May & C. Sleeter (Eds.), *Critical multiculturalism: Theory and praxis* (pp. 165-175). New York, NY: Routledge.

Flynn, J. E., Lensmire, T. J., & Lewis, C. (2009). A critical pedagogy of race in teacher education: Response and responsibility. In S. Groenke & A. Hatch (Eds.), *Critical pedagogy in teacher education in the neoliberal era: Small openings* (pp. 85-98). New York, NY: Springer.

Friere, P. (1970/2000). *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (30th anniversary ed.). New York, NY: Continuum.

Gay, G. (2000). *Culturally responsive teaching*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

Glazier, J., & Seo, J. (2005). Multicultural literature and discussion as mirror and window? *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy, 48*(8), 686-700.

González, N., Moll, L., & Amanti, C. (2005). *Funds of knowledge: Theorizing practices in households, communities, and classrooms.* Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

Greene, S., & Abt-Perkins, D. (Eds.). (2003). Introduction: How can literacy research contribute to racial understanding? In *Making race visible: Literacy research for cultural understanding* (pp. 1-31). New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

Harper, S. R., & Kuh, G. D. (2007). Myths and misconceptions about using qualitative methods in assessment. *New Directions for Institutional Research, 136,* 5-14. doi:100.1002/ir.227

Helms, J. (1990). *Black and White racial identity: Theory and practice.* New York, NY: Greenwood Press.

Huerta, G., & Flemmer, L. (2005, March). Identity, beliefs, and community: LDS (Mormon) preservice secondary teacher views about diversity. *Intercultural Education*, *16*(1), 1-14.

Ladson-Billings, G. (1995). Toward a theory of culturally relevant pedagogy. *American Educational Research Journal*, *32*(3), 465-491.

LeCompte, K., & McCray, A. (2002). Complex conversations with teacher candidates: Perspectives of Whiteness and culturally responsive teaching. *Curriculum and Teaching Dialogue*, *4*(1), 25-35.

Lipsitz, G. (1995). The possessive investment in Whiteness: Racialized social democracy and the "White" problem in American studies. *American Quarterly, 47*(3), 369-387.

May, S., & Sleeter, C. (Eds.). (2010). Introduction. In *Critical multiculturalism: Theory and praxis* (pp. 1-16). New York, NY: Routledge.

McIntosh, P. (1990, Winter). White privilege: Unpacking the invisible knapsack. *Independent School, 49*(2), 31-36.

Miles, M., & Huberman, A. B. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

Morse, J. M., Barrett, M., Mayan, M., Olson, K., & Spiers, J. (2002). Verification strategies for establishing reliability and validity in qualitative research. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods, 1*(2), 13-22.

Shenton, A. K. (2004). Strategies for ensuring trustworthiness in qualitative research projects. *Education for Information, 22,* 63-75.

Singleton, G. (2006). *Courageous conversations about race: A field guide for achieving equity in schools.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Subedi, B. (2006). Theorizing a "halfie" researcher's identity in transnational fieldwork. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education, 19*(5), 573-593.

Tillman, L.C. (2002). Culturally sensitive research approaches: An African-American perspective. *Educational Researcher, 31*(9), 3-12.

Trainor, J. (2005). "My ancestors didn't own slaves": Understanding White talk about race. *Research in the teaching of English, 40*(2), 140-167.

Wolf, D. (1996). Situating feminist dilemmas in research. In D. L. Wolf (Ed.), *Feminist dilemmas in fieldwork* (pp. 1-55). Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

Young, M. (2000). Considering (irreconcilable?) contradictions in cross-group feminist research.*Qualitative Studies in Education, 13*(6), 629-660.