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ABSTRACT

This paper presents the cases of four preservice teachers enrolled in a critical multicultural education course during Spring 2000, showing how the readings, cross-racial dialogues, and journal reflections that were part of the course helped students, for the first time and irrespective of race and gender, discuss their experiences and question personal views on race, class, gender, and sexuality. Throughout the semester, student teachers read and discussed topics that challenged their thinking about race, class, gender, and sexuality. Each responded differently, but each delved deep into his or her consciousness in an attempt to understand the readings and one another. Analysis of data from the student teachers' portfolios highlighted four patterns: questioning race, class, gender, and sexuality; validating their previous experiences; resisting critique; and understanding the role of inspirational narratives. The readings helped the aspiring teachers become aware of connections between their own views and social issues that plague the United States. The paper concludes that teacher education programs must provide aspiring teachers with opportunities to understand their beliefs and experiences within social, political, cultural, and historical contexts. Teacher educators must also recognize and rethink their own experiences with race, class, sex, and gender bias. (Contains 20 references.) (SM)

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“More than I Bargained For”: Confronting Biases in Teacher Preparation

by

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I entered this class prepared to learn about other cultures and how to teach people from [these cultures]... Over the course of the semester, I began to realize the truth, that things are not fine and that it is not overdoing it to criticize the American beliefs of assimilation in society. I found myself noticing prejudice, stereotypes, and covert racism everywhere... My new outlook is a burden, but one that I would never give back. Now I have become an active critic of racism, prejudice, and stereotyping in American life (John, 5/3/00).

John's "burden" lies in his newfound commitment to struggle and challenge his own beliefs and the inequalities that pervade in society. This paper presents the cases of four undergraduate students enrolled in a critical Multicultural Education (ME) course at an East Coast Catholic University (ECCU) during the Spring Semester of 2000. These four students illustrate the ideals and struggles that the other 19 students who enrolled in this class faced. Not all students accepted the challenge to analyze personal biases and structural inequalities. Yet, while each student's experience was unique, the data show that the readings, cross-racial dialogues, and journal reflections that were part of the course, helped the students, for the first time, irrespective of race or gender, to discuss their experiences and question personal views on race, class, gender, and sexuality. In some discussions, students felt validated when the readings spoke to their own oppression. At other times, the cross-racial and cross-gender discussions helped students rethink some of the assumptions and power relationships they took for granted.

This ME course differed from the many ME courses where students are given textbooks and multicultural "skills" to use in their classrooms. Rather than empowering teachers by helping them develop a critical understanding of their role as educators, some programs foster dependency on predefined curricula, outdated classroom strategies, and

stereotypes about different ethnic and cultural groups (Darder, 1991). These traditional approaches to teacher education tend to position the students and teachers into physically and intellectually oppressive situations:

[Dependency] occurs to such a degree that few public school teachers are able to envision their practice outside the scope of barren classroom settings, lifeless instruction packages, bland textbooks, standardized tests, and the use of a meritocratic systems for student performance evaluation (Darder, 1991, p. 100).

The literature on critical multicultural education argues that there is another way to prepare teachers to bring justice and humanity into their classrooms (Sleeter & McLaren, 1995; Oakes & Lipton, 2000; Nieto 2000). Influenced by this critical literature that demands that teachers learn to identify and question the status quo (Darder, 1991; Freire 1998), the students in this ME class read books and articles that challenge commonly held beliefs about history, culture, and society. They read first-hand accounts of individuals who struggle to bring democracy to public education, including the theories of John Dewey and Paulo Freire, as well as the work of Leonardo Covello, Herbert Kohl, Geneva Gay, Lisa Delpit, and Ben Jelloun. They wrote reflection journals about the readings, interviewed community activists, created poems, and critiqued children's books. This paper explores the experiences of four aspiring teachers and how this critical multicultural education class effected their personal and professional development.

The following section presents a theoretical framework based on Dewey and Freire that guides my analysis of the data. This framework is useful in understanding the impact that this critical multicultural education class had on four aspiring teachers as they engaged in a process of "conscientization" (Freire, 1970).

Theoretical Framework

One way in which we can conceptualize critical multicultural education is through John Dewey's and Paulo Freire's socially progressive and reconstructionist work in the 1900s. Dewey (1933, 1938) and Freire (1960; 1998) propose that teachers should be social critics and advocates for social justice. Within these paradigms, teachers come to view themselves as social justice advocates as they confront personal beliefs and biases and as they understand the social, political, and historical context in which they work.

Dewey's theories of experience shed light on the internal process of confronting personal beliefs and biases. He argues that learning and personal experiences are interconnected; one cannot exist without the other (Dewey, 1938). Thus, reflecting upon teachers' previous life experiences has the potential to help them understand how their beliefs and values are shaped and how these guide their actions. However, Dewey did not believe that all experiences are conducive to growth. He notes that "any given experience may increase a person's automatic skill in a particular direction and yet tend to land him in a groove or a rut" (Dewey, 1938, p. 26). Dewey contends that experiences in education need to have a social component in which the learner understands his or her personal experience within a social context. Further, as the learner understands himself or herself within a social context, he or she goes through a problematic situation that causes transformation or personal change, leading the learner to seek interactions to clarify and expand on new experiences.

Critical multicultural classes could provide "problematic situations" when they present readings that challenge commonly held views on teaching and learning. Through

readings, writing, and ongoing discussions that connect the teachers' personal experiences to their beliefs, transformation occurs and teachers act upon new understandings of experience by seeking further venues for growth. As Dewey (1938) explains, these new understandings provoke the learner to seek further interactions and understandings about critical questions and to act upon new knowledge.

Freire's praxis with critical literacy in Brazil is relevant to America today and can help us understand the critical questions in which we all must engage. Freire (1970) initiated a humanizing literacy campaign with campesinos that sought to help them recognize the causes for their situation within a social, political, historical, and economic context. Much like in Brazil, many of our central cities in the United States resemble the shantytowns of South America with high levels of poverty, violence, illiteracy, human exploitation, homelessness, and human misery (Macedo in Freire, 1985). Freire's critique emphasizes that men's and women's actions are limited by societal constraints (Freire, 1985). Like Dewey, Freire believed that teachers must understand their relationship to the world and gain a critical awareness of the obstacles that society poses for those who do not conform to the status quo (Freire, 1998). This process of "conscientization" comes about when teachers dialogue and learn how to confront their differences with the underlying assumption that "all discrimination is immoral" (Freire, 1998, p. 60). Teachers engage in these dialogues only when they are given the opportunity to hear multiple perspectives, either through the readings or by the interaction with their peers.

In order to engage openly in dialogue, all participants must recognize their own "unfinishedness." Freire argued: "The possibility of true dialogue, in which subjects in

dialogue learn and grow by confronting their differences, become a coherent demand required by an assumed unfinishedness that reveals itself as ethical” (1998, p. 59). Freire believed that we must encourage curiosity and freedom and that this process might lead to conflicting perspectives about the world. However, he warned that it is our duty to struggle against any “transgression of our essential humanity” (1998, p. 60). Thus, while Freire encouraged exploration and growth through dialogue, he also challenged people to recognize the “historicity of his/her own knowledge” (1998, p.62). Thus, one might recognize the social, historical, and political dimensions that guide our thinking.

Freire believed that when people become conscious of their social and historical realities, they develop a vocabulary with which to intellectually challenge the status quo. According to Freire (1998) if teachers are given the vocabulary and tools to understand the obstacles in their environment, they might see themselves as active agents in their own futures. He reminded us that this critique and conscientization must be accompanied with the hope that we can improve society. Thus, a critical multicultural education class must also provide learners with stories of inspirational struggles of those who have challenged an unjust social order.

The four case studies that follow will show what happened in this critical multicultural education class when aspiring teachers from diverse races, socioeconomic classes, and gender engaged in critical readings and discussions of self and society.

The Setting and the Participants

The first session of the ME class was held in January 2000 and it continued until May 2000. The aspiring teachers met twice a week for 14 weeks. The readings for the

course included *Should We Burn Babar?* by Herbert Kohl, *Teacher with a Heart: Reflections on Leonardo Covello* by Vito Perrone, *Racism Explained to My Daughter* edited by Tahar Ben Jalloun, *Moral panic, schooling, and gay identity* by Peter McLaren, and *Building Cultural Bridges* by Geneva Gay. The students read poetry written by diverse authors: European, African, Latino, Islamic, among others. They interviewed community activists about their work and wrote about how they might become change agents and culturally responsive teachers. The students visited three classrooms and observed, recorded, and analyzed the teacher-student relationships.

There were 23 students enrolled in this ME class. The class demographics included students who were in all stages of their undergraduate careers: two Freshmen, seven Sophomores, ten Juniors, and four Seniors. Of the 23 students, 20 are Catholic and 3 are Muslim. All the students were born in the United States, but could trace their ancestral roots to the following ethnic and religious categories: four Catholic Hispanic students (three women and one man); one Catholic Black woman; three Muslim Pakistani (one woman, two men); four Catholic Irish (three women, one man); ten Catholic Italian (9 women, 1 man); and one female student was Catholic and Jewish of Italian and German ethnicity. All of the students stated that they were heterosexual.

The four students selected for this action research project illustrate the demographics and the different opinions and ideas presented by the other students in the class. Like many of their peers, these four students are second-, third-, or fourth-generation Americans and they are the first or second in their families to attend a four-year university. During the first week of class, the students presented a written narrative

about their family history and explained how they identify themselves: **John**, a 22 year-old male was a Senior at the ECCU. He is a fourth-generation Irish and Italian Catholic, although he did not identify himself as Italian until later in the semester. He is a second-generation college-goer; **Elisa** is a 20 year-old female Junior at the ECCU whose heritage is both Italian and Jewish. Like John, she did not write about her Jewish heritage until later in the semester. She practices the Catholic faith. She is a first-generation college-goer and third generation immigrant; **Michelle**, a 19 year-old female is a Sophomore at the ECCU. She is a second-generation college-goer and third generation Black American from the Caribbean; **Ahmed**, a 21 year-old male was a Junior at the ECCU. He is a second-generation Pakistani Muslim and is first-generation of college-goer in America. Arabic is Ahmed's first language. (See Table 1)

Name	Gender	Race/ Ethnicity	Religion	College- Going	Age/Year in College
John	Male	Irish	Catholic	Second	22/Senior
Ahmed	Male	Pakistani	Muslim	First	21/Junior
Michelle	Female	Black	Catholic	Second	19/Soph.
Elisa	Female	Italian/Jew	Catholic	First	20/Junior

Table 1: Participants' Demographics by gender, race/ethnicity, religion, college-going, age, and year in undergraduate program.

The four participants were pre-service teachers. None of them was student-teaching yet. However, as part of this course, they visited schools where they conducted observations and worked with students. To avoid confusion hereafter, when referring to the participants as a group, I will refer to them as aspiring teachers.

Data and Coding

The data were collected from January 2000 to May 2000. The four aspiring teachers' portfolios are the main source of data. In these portfolios, the students collected their written assignments. Their work included classroom assignments such as journal reflections on the assigned readings, opinion pieces on newspaper articles they chose about education issues, midterm and final papers, and classroom observations. In addition, participant observations were recorded after class and personal communications between instructor and students were documented.

For this paper, I chose to code the aspiring teachers' journal reading reflections and ethnographic field notes. The data were coded in terms of beliefs and change in beliefs about race, gender, class, and sexuality. It was also coded for indications of thinking about or acting upon social activism. The data does not show linear growth, nor did everyone grow toward a prefixed goal. The aspiring teachers wrestled with very complex ideas throughout the semester. Four patterns emerged throughout the data:

- 1) Questioning race, class, gender, and sexuality
- 2) Validated experiences
- 3) Resistance to critique
- 4) Role of inspirational narratives

Study Limitations

This study will not suggest that the findings are applicable to all undergraduate students or aspiring teachers enrolled in ME courses that engage in critical inquiry about

race, class, gender, and sexuality. Firestone (1993) suggests that the most useful generalizations from qualitative studies are analytic, not sample-to-population. Sirotnik and Oakes (1986) assert that the main purpose of exploratory analysis is to generate rather than test or confirm hypotheses of relationships between two or more constructs. Due to the small primary sample size and non-random selection for this action research study, results should be generalized to theory rather than to populations.

Power issues between professor and aspiring teachers are part of the subjective nature of this action research. The class assignments that are used as data were used to assess them. Their final grades were calculated on the basis of aspiring teachers' attendance, completed assignments, and thorough understanding of the readings as determined by the class assignments and their participation. While I made conscious efforts to grade on how well the aspiring teachers supported and evidenced their arguments, and not on their opinions, I am conscious of my subjectivity and that it is the lens through which I examine my experiences. However, while power issues may bias the aspiring teachers' responses, their writings and discussions suggest that they were not overly concerned with "pleasing the instructor."

The aspiring teachers were told that I would use their work to write about how aspiring teachers learn and that their voices are important as they are seldom heard in academic research. In addition, all of the aspiring teachers were assured that their grade did not depend upon participation in this project. To make sure that the research project was in compliance with the Human Subjects Review Board (HSRB) at the ECCU, I

submitted a proposal of this research to them. It was approved. Moreover, all the aspiring teachers agreed to participate and signed release forms approved by the HSRB.

The following section of this paper describes the cases of the four aspiring teachers, John, Elisa, Michelle, and Ahmed, as they engaged in the readings for the ME class.

John: Becoming a Critical Change Agent or “How can I ever go back?”

John self-identified as an Irish American male and was 22 years old at the time of this study. He entered into this multicultural education class with the belief that he had “no racist thoughts of my own” (5/3/00). As he read books that critique the status quo, such as Herbert Kohl’s *Should We Burn Babar?* John did not think it was necessary to question children’s literature depicting racist or sexist views. He wrote in an early reflection, “Perhaps these stories should be taken as stories... just other worlds that we visit, realities other than our own” (1.24.00). John did not relate to the stories in which characters find themselves in positions of subordination, as he had never been forced to consider these topics. However, he considered discussing racism and sexism with his future students, but did not find it “necessary to be as analytical in his own home because his children would be less likely to be offended” (1/24/00). John’s position of power, and the one he believes his children will have, lead him to believe that these conversations and critiques were not relevant to his situation.

As John read stories about immigrants, he began to wrestle with his ideas about success and meritocracy in America. On the one hand, he rationalized that it is difficult for immigrants who “may not even speak English” and who “realize that there is not

much opportunity for immigrants” (1/31/00). On the other hand, he believed that if the immigrants are to achieve “they must work hard” (1/31/00). John recognized some of the obstacles that immigrants face; yet, he also believed that in the American Dream everyone who works hard will succeed: “I believe a person can do anything if he puts even 90% of their whole self into achieving his goal” (1/24/00). This struggle between opposing ideas of opportunity and success pushed him to rethink some of his basic notions about himself and society.

One turning point for John came when he wrote a critique about his favorite children’s book when he was growing up. John revisited *The Adventures of Super Pickle*, the story about Dilbert, a pickle, who cannot get a girl to like him because he is not “tall and strong.” It turns out that Dilbert is really Super Pickle, a super hero who saves the day, and the girl falls in love with him. John wrote: “Did this book have an effect on me? I was skinny when I was a child. Never did I feel so good about myself until I became bigger from weightlifting... Could I have been trying to be Super Pickle?... I cannot tell for sure but there is a possibility” (2/7/01). John felt that *Super Pickle* reinforced the stereotype that men have to be strong and women need to be saved by them. He felt that children must be taught that “stereotypes are wrong and they are not fair to men or women... We should use them as a tool to illustrate what is wrong with these attitudes and help the children grow from them” (2/7/01). Not until he related to the readings on a personal level, did John feel the need to teach children about stereotypes; not just other people’s children.

After reading Ben Jelloun's book, *Racism Explained to My Daughter*, John notes a change in his own thinking about racism: "I [believed] thinking about race made the problem worse, but I have been converted... Racism must be discussed and exposed for its hideousness" (3.13.00). In two months, he had changed his thoughts and believed that racism is a problem that concerns everyone, not just those who are oppressed. Later when John conducted an observation at a school in a poor, minority community where 82% of the students live below the poverty level, he noted: "I had my impression of what the children would be like: not interested, wild, disrespectful... but fortunately, I was wrong... I guess I still have my own stereotypes to work on, but being around these children is helping" (3.29.00). John discovered the "unfinishedness" that Freire argues makes us responsible and ethical beings.

Having uncovered inequalities of which he was previously unaware, John found inspiration in the life of Leonard Covello. Covello dedicated his life to New York City public education drawing the wealth of uncovered resources from his community and forging close relationships with his students. John exulted in Covello: "[He] is amazing to me. When I think of how I want to be as a teacher, I think of him and the connection he had with his students" (4/3/00). During his last visit at the school in the impoverished community, John decided to write inspirational letters to all the students in the classroom he had been observing. He was "thinking of Covello... I tried to make an impact on them" (4/3/00). Not only did Covello inspire John's immediate experiences, but also impacted some of the decisions he would take in the future: "The struggle Covello started has affected my choice to learn Spanish... If I can talk to parents in their language they

won't feel threatened and might open up to me" (4.3.00). Determined to make a connection with his future students and their parents, John would enroll in Spanish classes.

As John prepared to leave this M.E. class, he reflected about his own change as he read and discussed issues of racism.

I entered this class prepared to learn about other cultures and how to teach people from [these cultures]... Over the course of the semester, I began to realize the truth, that things are not fine and that it is not overdoing it to criticize the American beliefs of assimilation in society. I found myself noticing prejudice, stereotypes, and covert racism everywhere... My new outlook is a burden, but one that I would never give back. Now I have become an active critique of racism, prejudice, and stereotyping in American life (5/3/00).

Growth did not occur overnight, it did not occur linearly, and it will never end. Rather, John thought about his own life and questioned some of the basic conceptions of America that he held. During the final weeks of the class, he had begun to read Antonia Darder's *Culture and Power in the Classroom* and stated that "we as educators have to free students by giving them the skills needed to critique society" (4/3/00). He acknowledged that his journey toward activism has just begun. The readings, observations, and discussions helped him begin a path toward a critical social justice.

Elisa: Becoming Aware or "Lets Sing Kumbaya"

Elisa self-identified as an Italian female and was 20 years old at the time of the study. Not until the final weeks of the semester did she explain that her mother is Jewish and her father Italian. Elisa was raised Catholic in a family that she describes as very religious, where "Jesus is the center of our lives" (1/24/00). Upon reading Kohl's essay *Should We Burn Babar?* Elisa felt similar to many students in the class, "Kohl reads into

the story a bit too much” (1/24/00), she noted. She did not think it necessary to discuss issues of racism, sexism, or colonialism with children, although she would read *Babar* to children “because it is part of our culture” (1/24/00). Elisa believed that “children wouldn’t pick up on these biases” (1/24/00). Elisa could not relate her personal experience to the colonialism, among other biases, that Babar’s character represents.

After reading Kohl’s chapter on sexism, *Wicked Boys*, Elisa began to make personal connections to the readings. In *Wicked Boys*, Kohl tells three different versions of Pinocchio, including the Italian version. These stories present the hardships that many immigrants faced when they came to the United States and they depict a male-dominated world in which it is socially acceptable for boys to be “wicked.” It is Elisa’s Italian heritage that helped her relate to Kohl’s analysis of Pinocchio. She noted that “children can learn more about Italian culture through the [original version of] Pinocchio” and she could see why “each nationality lived together... like little Italy in NY... because they wanted to feel like a real community with the same beliefs and common language” (2/2/00). Elisa understood why oftentimes communities choose to segregate—namely, the feeling of acceptance by others who have similar beliefs.

Elisa’s affinity to gender bias helped her rethink her previous stance about children’s capacity to understand and internalize biases in children’s literature. In *Wicked Boys*, Kohl writes about how his kindergarten students refused to answer a question on a standardized test where the correct answer was “she likes to mop.” Elisa questioned the intentions of the test makers: “How come women are depicted in roles like that?” She exclaimed, “I guess I underestimated young children because I never thought

kindergarteners and first graders would be able to pick up on aspects of Pinocchio that I did... Children should be told the truth when it comes to history or anything else for that matter so they can develop their own views and speak their own minds” (2/2/00). When the writings related to her personal experiences, Elisa was able to understand the damaging effects that children’s literature may have if they go unexamined by adults and children.

As Elisa began to think about herself in relationship to her own culture and struggle, she tried to sympathize with another group which has been a victim of bias: “Some of the prejudice that go on today between blacks and whites, for example, is because we are ignorant of other people’s cultures. I don’t know what it is like to be a slave, but maybe we should be aware of, and respect other people and their culture” (2/2/00). She believed that misunderstandings among groups are based on the lack of communication and the power differences that are evident when these groups attempt to dialogue. Elisa had become “aware” that racism exists. While she now felt that children “have to face the harsh realities of life like prejudice and sexism” (2/7/00), her own biases still went uncovered. Her reference point to African Americans, like that of many people in this country, is one that thinks of blacks as slaves or descendents of slaves.

By March, Elisa was still struggling with the issue of racism and whether or not it is appropriate to discuss it with children. In a journal entry, she reflected on a letter by Lisa Delpit to her daughter Maya written in Jelloun’s *Racism Explained to My Daughter*, “Racism is a very tough subject to teach children. They are so innocent... Is it fair to teach them about racism?” (3/15/00). While Elisa found it more “natural” to confront

sexism, she struggled to define her role as a teacher who confronts all biases. In the same paper, she writes, “it (racism) should be taught as early in life as possible because when children are young that is when they best absorb information” (3/15/00). Elisa’s writing gives us a glimpse of the internal conflict that arose from confronting multiple social conditions of power inequalities. Elisa’s paper ends with a contradicting thought. “When children are at a young age, sometimes race is not too much of an issue... Race is such a harsh topic to talk about because you will never please everyone” (3/15/00). While aware that racism is a danger to social harmony, she still struggled to understand the extent to which she was ready to have conversations about race.

Elisa’s experiences at home and school shaped much of her current thinking on schools and equity. Her immigrant parents had worked very hard to achieve economic solvency and success. She was the first in her family to go to college. As the readings discussed the implications of racism in our public schools, Elisa’s belief in meritocracy and in the American Dream was evident in her comments about who should go to school and who should not. She noted, “I think it is great for standards to be raised, but school is not for everyone... The honors track would be for students who excel in school, the regents track should be for those who are “normal” students, and the non-regents track for those students who might have a little difficulty in certain topics” (4/19/00). Given her own experiences, she did not understand how tracking could not afford equal opportunities for all, given their interests and capabilities. Elisa understood racism only as personal acts based on color of the skin, not as an institutionalized practice in our schools and society that perpetuate the status quo. She held fast to her beliefs that “racism

is when people don't say the N word in front of black people, but say it when they turn their heads" (3/15/00). For Elisa, racism was a deep-seated hatred against people of color, but without consequence to social policies. Elisa focused on understanding difference and seeing color: "Equal opportunity should be for all... individually we come from different cultures. We must understand the differences in our backgrounds and learn from each other's experiences" (4/3/00). Elisa felt that the inequalities that existed resulted from people's misunderstandings of one another. She was becoming aware of difference and the beauty in diversity.

For Elisa, this critical multicultural education class planted the seed for social critique. For the first time she became aware of how society favors some over others, even though she fervently believed in a meritocracy where everyone can achieve the American Dream. She wrote in her final essay: "The readings, papers, and activities have caused me to become more aware of the different cultures around me... I have become more aware of how people treat each other based on race, religion, and gender... I hope to instill in my students that we are all human beings... and aware of the harsh world we live in" (5/3/00). Elisa's growth consists of an awakening to the multiple cultures that live around her and in her conscious of the "harshness" of society.

Michelle: Being Validated or "I Still Don't Trust White People"

Michelle is an African American female and a third-generation immigrant. Her grandfather came to America from the St. Vincent Islands and became a lawyer. She is the third generation in her family to go to college. As she was growing up, her parents told her "not to truly believe in white people or what they have to say" (2/10/00). Her

parents' warnings were reinforced when she attended a predominately white high school and was not accepted by the other students: "I was called a n_ _ _ _ and dirty. This resulted in many arguments. Finally, I was transferred to a high school in Manhattan" (1/22/00). In Michelle's case, class status did not erase the prejudice that accompanies race. Her experiences exacerbated her distrust of white people, and at the ECCU Michelle kept mostly to her African American friends.

Michelle's experiences with racism did not make her suspect structural and systematic inequities for people of color; rather she blamed parents and teachers for social ills. For example, after reading Kohl's essay *Should We Burn Babar?* Michelle felt that "parents and teachers should be held responsible" for children's perceptions of race, class, and gender, and "not the media" (1/25/00). She did not understand how some of the images we see everyday continue to depict women, among others, in stereotypical roles. At first, Michelle denied that stereotypes and biases are reproduced throughout multiple aspects of schooling. After reading Kohl's story about how his students reacted to a woman mopping on a standardized test, she reflected: "She likes to mop has absolutely no harm intent and also as a woman I don't feel offended. In fact, I love to mop" (1/31/00). Despite her own plight with racism, Michelle did not make a connection between sexist innuendoes and everyday negative messages reinforced in legitimate forms of instruction.

A couple of months into the semester, Michelle had been most impacted by the readings that exposed racism and critiqued society. In reading Lisa Delpit's letter to her daughter, Michelle felt validated: "As an African American and a woman I have

experienced racism and discrimination on both sides... Some people may feel that race, social status or demography play an insignificant role, but these inequalities are common to me” (3/20/00). Michelle shared examples about how she had encountered racism all her life. She agreed with Delpit in that African Americans must understand their history because as Michelle put it, “If people don’t understand who she/he is, he or she can never know what direction they are going in the future” (3/20/00).

Leonard Covello’s and Vito Perrone’s biographies in *Teacher with a Heart* introduced Michelle to inspirational white Italian males who struggled for social change and for the rights of immigrants. In class, she commented that at first she wondered, “how does this white Italian man relate to me and my situation?” However, as she continued to read, Michelle decided that she wanted to establish strong relationships with all her students by “integrating cultural diversity into the curriculum and classroom” (4/4/00). Michelle wrote: “Even though I never had the opportunity to meet Covello, I can honestly call him a role model for teachers, community, and society (4/4/00). Covello inspired Michelle to “get to know the students’ and the parents’ racial and ethnic background and to find out what parents want for their children” (4/29/00).

While Covello’s inspirational work impacted Michelle, she held close to her heart her parents’ advice about trusting white people. She suspected the white aspiring teachers in our multicultural education class: “Many of my classmates would not accept me as a true friend based on my skin color” (4/17/00). She felt that even though her classmates may be nice to her in class, that they would never want to really get to know her because of her race.

Michelle hoped that she would continue her growth by investigating areas she had never learned. After a heated conversation in class about *McLaren's Moral panic, schooling, and gay identity*, Michelle decided to learn more about gay and lesbian youth. As part of a class assignment, Michelle drafted a lesson plan in which she would introduce her own students to gay and lesbian issues. In her plan, she would show a film entitled *Gay Youth*. She reflected on her decision to focus on gay and lesbian issues: "In high school, homosexuality was a topic that was not discussed and unfortunately, my knowledge is limited" (4/29/00). Her plan included a series of discussions and write-ups that would challenge her students to understand their own biases. For Michelle, a multicultural education is one in which she could build a "community of inclusion by having respect for all and by playing an active role in the community and working together to move forward" (4/29/00).

Ahmed: Being Validated or "It Is Hard to Change My Ways"

Ahmed is a 21 year-old male of Pakistani descent born in Brooklyn, New York. He grew up in a neighborhood where people often got into fights. Early on, he decided that he would not be one of the kids getting in trouble: "My neighborhood was the reason why I did want to go to school. All the drugs and violence just motivated me to get out" (2/10/01). Like Michelle, Ahmed grew up surrounded by racist messages. Often he was called a "PLO rock thrower," or a "sand nigger" (1/26/00). These messages were loud, clear, and reinforced by a teacher who called him a terrorist after one of the many Palestine and Jewish violent wars.

Ahmed was very aware of his duty to his family and Muslim community. His parents held high expectations for him: "All they [parents] ask is that I go to school and graduate. Coming from an Arabic family means that one important thing I must do after I graduate is to get a job and get married" (1/21/00). Unlike the other three students, Ahmed planned to become a school speech therapist. He had learned that there are many Arabic children in New York who need speech therapy services and no Arabic speech therapists: "It is my duty to become a speech therapist so I can help Arabic kids" (1/26/00). Ahmed's personal experiences with racism and his tight relationship to his Arabic roots drove him to seek to improve social conditions for Arab Americans.

After reading one of Kohl's essays in *Should We Burn Babar?* Ahmed was one of the few aspiring teachers who agreed with Kohl that we must be careful what we read to children and how we teach them to think about stereotypes. Ahmed also critiqued Kohl because in the chapter Kohl does not explain that in some cultures relatives can marry one another. Ahmed pointed out that "as a Muslim, I know it is okay for cousins to get married." Then he wrote: "Let's say you had a few Muslim students in your 3rd grade class and you explained to them and the rest of the class that marriage between cousins isn't accepted. One thing you would be telling them is that their religion is not real" (1/24/00). Ahmed's observation shows the importance of having a diverse class of students and getting to know them and their cultures very well. Unlike Erica who distrusted her peers, as Ahmed shared more about himself with the class, he felt validated by his peers for the first time: "At first, I didn't say anything because I feared everyone would laugh at me. It was actually the opposite. I saw how everyone was interested in my

religion... Students came up to me after class to ask me questions. It really made me feel more comfortable and it allowed me to open up and talk” (2/10/00). Ahmed's experiences were not only validated by the readings, but by the rest of the class.

Ahmed's strong commitment to his family, religion, and community did not extend to other groups that are often marginalized by society. Upon reading Kohl's *Wicked Boys*, he agreed with Kohl that men are held to a different standard than women: “From my experience, I know that I have gotten away with plenty of wrong doings... I think this will never change because there are plenty of people who will always be sexist... I don't worry much about it maybe because I am male” (1/31/00). While Ahmed understood the nature of sexism, he did not see why he should be concerned since, after all, “boys are the ones who are going to carry the family name” (1/31/00). As he is of the favored group, Ahmed dismissed any responsibility that he may have for changing a patriarchic society.

Another instance in which Ahmed's beliefs influenced his thinking about equity issues was when we discussed gay and lesbian issues. In March, the students read McLaren's *Moral panic, schooling, and gay identity* in class. We used this article for two purposes, one to show students how we could teach literacy skills through critical pedagogy (as the aspiring teachers themselves needed the reading comprehension strategies to understand the article); and two, to confront bias and discrimination against the gay and lesbian community. None of the students had ever addressed gay or lesbian issues before, as it is not encouraged at this ECCU. Ahmed was very upset by this conversation. In class, he got very excited and said, “If I had a gay in front of me I would

shoot him.” The class was silent. While I did not want to impose my beliefs on Ahmed or any of the students, as Kohl (1980) reminds us we must make a stance against prejudice of any kind against any group. I told Ahmed that what he had said was a terrible thing and that he should think about why he reacted so violently. Ahmed reflected on his comment and tried to justify his feelings. He said that when he is at the gym many gay men try to “hit on” him and this made him angry: “They are perverts,” he continued. I told him that being a pervert had nothing to do with being a gay man and that at the gym many people “hit on” each other. I asked him to note the difference between the love people feel toward one another and the inappropriate sexual conduct that makes many people uncomfortable. Other students in the class shared stories about the prejudice that some of their gay and lesbian relatives and friends face, even by their own families. Many of these stories had gone untold.

That evening, Ahmed called me at home and apologized for his outburst. I asked him why he thought he needed to apologize. He said that he did not hate gay or lesbian people and did not want to “shoot them”, but that he felt very uncomfortable with the entire topic and that he was willing to keep talking. Through the course of the next few weeks in class, Ahmed re-read Peter McLaren’s *Moral panic, schooling, and gay identity*, and he listened to his peers confront their beliefs and question their ideologies underlying some of their assumptions about gay and lesbian people. Ahmed listened attentively and asked many questions.

Despite the differences of opinion that students in the class held, Ahmed felt safe to explore his beliefs and biases. He noted: “In this class, I feel like I can say anything

and be heard. I usually don't feel that way in my other classes. In the other classes where the professor is white and all the students are white, I feel dumb and hardly ever speak" (4/21/00). Ahmed's comments show how he felt free to explore his own biases because he had found a forum where he could express the discrimination stories he had encountered. By the end of the semester, Ahmed noted: "I don't understand why this country would say [for example] "freedom of religion" and try to... make all people act and talk the same way... America should rethink the melting pot metaphor" (4/26/00). At the core of Ahmed's growth is not whether he will ever changes his personal biases, but that we had begun the process of examining issues which he had never examined before.

What We Learned, How We Learned It, and What Else Do We Need to Know?

Throughout the semester, the aspiring-teachers read and discussed topics that challenged their thinking about race, class, gender, and sexuality. Each of them responded differently, but each delved deep into his or her consciousness in an attempt to understand the readings and one another. Reading Kohl's essays in his book *Should we Burn Babar?* helped the students confront issues that they had never faced. On one end of the spectrum, John transcended his own experiences as a member of the dominant group and sought to understand how he might become a change agent in the effort to advance social justice. Michelle, who did not feel that she could trust members of the dominant group, still challenged herself to learn more about gay and lesbian youth. While she had not, at first, held accountable the media or children's books with stereotypical messages; she slowly learned to question. At the other end of the spectrum, Elisa, who understood sexism and had "made it" to college, envisioned America as the land of opportunity for

all, but where people were racist against each other. Ahmed became keenly aware of his own beliefs about gay and lesbians while continued his need to be critical of racism. Overall, the readings helped the aspiring teachers become aware of the connections between their own views and the social issues that plague our nation.

The four cases show how important it is for teacher educators to provide aspiring teachers with avenues to understand inequity and to connect these to their own life experiences. These experiences shaped the aspiring teachers' beliefs and biases. In each case, the aspiring teachers drew from their experiences with race, class, gender, and sexuality to make sense of the readings and dialogue with their peers. For example, John reflected about reading his favorite childhood book, *Super Pickle* and how this reinforced male stereotypes about having to be physically strong. His critique helped him understand how books, and other media, influence people's thinking about who they are and who they should be. Critiquing stereotypes that influenced them helped the aspiring teachers be open to hearing others' concerns with their relationship to sexism and racism.

Just as social injustice must be uncovered, we must also provide students with positive role models of caring and just individuals who struggle and have struggled for social change. In reading about Vito Perrone's and Leonardo Covello's work, the teachers were inspired. All the students, regardless of race and gender, saw Covello as a model educator. They too wanted to forge strong connections with their students and hear what the community wanted for their children. John wanted to learn to speak Spanish to better communicate with parents and children in the community where he planned to teach. While at first doubtful about reading a book about a "white man," Michelle found

the relevancy in Covello's work to her own life. She wanted to inspire students. When Elisa conducted classroom observations, she wrote approvingly about senior teachers who reminded her of Covello and the way in which he built strong relationships with teachers. Covello was a breath of fresh air amidst the overwhelming realities about which they had been learning.

Teacher education programs must provide aspiring teachers with opportunities to understand their beliefs and experiences within social, political, cultural, and historical contexts. During critical multicultural education courses, teacher educators have the opportunity to meet continuously with teachers and develop a sphere for intellectual growth. Ideas are discussed in such a personal manner that people seek more experiences to help them expand their own thinking. Our ME class became a community where everyone's voice was respected; where students and teachers, for the most part, trusted one another; where decision-making was a democratic process. The students in this ME course, used their voices, verbally and in writing, to "read the world/read the word" (Freire, 1998, p. 17).

Likewise, it is important for teacher educators to recognize and rethink their own experiences with race, class, sexism, and gender. In revisiting Ahmed's class outburst, in which he threatened to shoot a gay or lesbian, a colleague and I reflected on my gut reaction to denounce Ahmed's statement as "terrible." Indeed, my judgmental reaction may have alienated Ahmed from any further dialogue. I needed to rethink my approach: "How else may I have handled the situation?" "How did Ahmed hear what I say?" "What could I have said to help Ahmed rethink his own thoughts?" It is the conversation with a

colleague that helped me question my own actions. We must have these conversations among teacher education faculty in order to foster our own growth processes.

For me, teaching a critical multicultural education class is a social interactional activity that is shaped by its participants, including the teacher educator. It takes place during a structured time and place where members of the class or setting are asked to question their beliefs and practices in light of liberatory readings and pressing issues of self and society. It is a place where growth occurs if teachers can dare to challenge their personal histories and beliefs and question the status quo. This paper described the interaction between the word and the world, but did not elaborate on the importance of peer dialogue. We must study the nature of peer interactions and the role that peer conversations have in furthering growth. New research strategies must be developed to understand the process of dialogue in developing a community of practice.

Given the theoretical underpinnings of critical multicultural education, it is time we conduct research on critical multicultural education in places where critique, experience and interaction are valued, where social justice and democracy exist as the common core of learning, and where all the participants are willing to critique their beliefs and values. It is from the voices of the teachers who undertake these initial struggles that we must learn. Moreover, we must carve a space in our daily experiences to continue our reading, dialogue, and research about what it means to be a social justice educator. This action research project gives us a small glimpse of the struggles and possibilities for equity-minded teacher education programs. It suggests that research from

the trenches is an invaluable way to hear the multiple voices involved in the process of becoming social justice educators.

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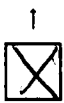
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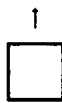
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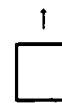
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