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Reading In-Between the Lines: Exploring the Experience of Cultivating Cultural Awareness with White Teacher Candidates in a Liberal Arts University in Georgia

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READING IN-BETWEEN THE LINES: EXPLORING THE EXPERIENCE OF
CULTIVATING CULTURAL AWARENESS WITH WHITE TEACHER
CANDIDATES IN A LIBERAL ARTS UNIVERSITY IN GEORGIA

by
HOLLEY MORRIS ROBERTS

(Under the direction of Ming Fang He)

ABSTRACT

This study was to explore the use of critical literacy (Freire, 1998) to assist predominately White teacher candidates in their preparation to teach diverse groups of students. Seven White females, who were born and reared in Georgia, participated in the study. These participants were encouraged to critically examine their personal, racial, and cultural roots through autobiographical papers, literature circles using African American children's books, critical reflective papers responding to the literature circles, conversations, and interviews.

Three bodies of research provided the theoretical framework for the study: White identity theory (Kunjufu, 2002, McIntyre, 1997, Wise, 2008), critical literacy theory (Freire, 1974, Freire & Macedo, 1987, Macedo & Steinberg, 2007, Vasquez, 2003, 2004), and culturally relevant pedagogy (Ayers, 2004, Delpit, 1995, Gay, 2000, hooks, 1994, Howard, 2006, Ladson-Billings, 1994).

The study was conducted using two distinct strands of inquiry, narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) and personal~passionate~participatory inquiry (He & Phillion, 2008). Engaging in research that is personal~passionate~participatory creates possibilities for positive change in the researcher, participants, and ultimately in society.

This form of inquiry allows researchers “to connect the practical with the theoretical, and the personal with the political, through passionate participation in, and critical reflection upon inquiry and life” (p. 3).

Part of the challenge for this study was to confront the resistance to challenging Whiteness, to use literature circles to create a space for the hearts and minds to develop critical consciousness and cultural awareness, to transgress White supremacy, and to embrace multitudes of differences, contradictions, and complexities in schools, neighborhoods, and communities.

This study has awakened me intellectually as I continue to live my life as a member of a racist society and a teacher educator in a predominately White College of Education. As the public school populations become increasingly diversified, the number of White teacher candidates continues to increase. As education within the South and beyond still perpetuates White privilege, relinquishing White supremacy and status quo is the prelude to cultivating cultural awareness in White teacher candidates. Teacher educators need to work with learners, teachers, parents, community workers, administrators, and policy makers to support and encourage a culturally relevant pedagogy and to create culturally responsive and inspiring learning environments to engage all learners in an increasingly diversified world.

Index words: Teacher education, White Privilege, Cultural Awareness, Critical Literacy, Narrative Inquiry, African American Children’s Literature, Literature Circles

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A Dissertation Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of Georgia Southern University in
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DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

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DEDICATION

To my wonderful husband and best friend,

Cliff,

For your constant love, encouragement, and rational thinking

For your willingness to take on extra responsibilities in our already hectic home

For believing in me and pushing me when it would have been easier to give up

For sacrificing financially for anything I needed to accomplish my goal

For your unwavering love

Thank you

I love you.

To my amazing children

Ansley and Ford

For understanding and encouraging me

For providing needed distractions like dance recitals, football games, basketball games

and school projects that helped me remember the important moments in life

Always remember that you too can accomplish your dreams

I love you so much

To my Heavenly Father

For giving me peace and grace

For walking with me

I love you

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I also extend expressions of gratitude to my committee members. I would like to recognize Dr. John Weaver who challenged me to rethink my perspectives and has played a large part in my “awakening;” Dr. Dan Chapman whose advice and guidance have inspired me to always push rigid terms and constructs; Dr. Lyndall Muschell who without her support, encouragement, dialogue, and many hours of pouring over my work would I even be here today. This study was possible because of her guidance.

Sincere appreciation is extended to the faculty of the John H. Lounsbury College of Education. This group of colleagues and friends helped me in so many ways to achieve my goal. Without their encouragement, guidance, and support I would not be where I am today.

I especially want to thank my parents. They gave so willingly of their time to drive me to Statesboro to prepare for classes and meetings, unlimited babysitting of my children, prayers, and continuous encouragement along the way to accomplish my goal. A special thank you is extended to my family and friends who always asked about my progress and encouraged me along the way.

My warmest thoughts and appreciation for the teacher candidates who were willing to participate in my study during their summer break. Your willingness to be disturbed allowed this study to occur. Many thanks!

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of the study was to explore the use of critical literacy theory as described by Paulo Freire to assist predominately White teacher candidates in their preparation to teach diverse groups of students. While the increasingly diverse public school population within the state of Georgia challenges teacher educators to support, encourage, and model culturally responsive teaching practices, the number of White middle class teacher candidates who are enrolled in the Early Childhood Education Program at Georgia College & State University has continued to increase, having now reached 100%. In her book, *Making Meaning of Whiteness*, Alice McIntyre (1997) concluded, “[g]iven these ever changing demographics, it is essential for students in teacher preparation programs, specifically white students, to be well prepared to teach and interact effectively with diverse student populations” (p. 5). In order for undergraduate teacher candidates to become well prepared to serve the needs of public school students, they must develop an awareness and understanding not only of themselves but also of others. The intent of this study was to explore the experiences of White teacher candidates in a small liberal arts university in middle Georgia to inform the work of teacher educators who cultivate cultural awareness. This purpose was established by utilizing critical literacy theory to promote critical consciousness and cultural awareness in White teacher candidates.

Context of the Study

The Bracelet, by Yoshiko Uchida (1976) is a children's book that tells a story of a young Japanese American girl, Emi, whose father has been required to leave his family and report to a Japanese internment camp. Soon after, an American soldier visits her home and demands that she, her sister, and their mother leave their home in Berkeley, California to take up residence in an internment camp separate from her father. The title comes from a gift given to Emi by her blond hair, blue-eyed, White best friend. The bracelet is eventually lost in the move to the camp, and Emi realizes that she will always have her friend in her memories, even if she no longer has the treasured bracelet. The story is vivid in its descriptions and illustrations of the knee jerk reaction against Japanese Americans by the United States government. It depicts signs placed in the windows of Japanese American businesses that say, "We are loyal Americans." It also illustrates people tagged with numbers designating the camp to which they would be shipped. These groups of Japanese Americans were herded at gunpoint onto buses as if they were cattle. It also portrays a sharp contrast between Emi and her White best friend who can remain in her comfortable home and attend her same school, unlike Emi.

As I share this text with fifth graders, undergraduate education majors, and most recently at the Georgia Association on Young Children Conference, the reactions never cease to amaze me. The light seems to come on for those who listen to the message implied in the book that the ideological teaching they have received through American schools rarely uncovers such events, ones that cast a dark shadow on our government. Also, an awareness of the need for multicultural literature in the classroom is brought to the surface. As I urge the listeners to apply critical literacy strategies, we dissect the

illustrations and innuendos provided by the author and illustrator. In *Black Holes*, Miller (1999) states, “In any case, the melting pot is no longer hot enough or capacious enough to melt all this difference down” (p. 41). As educators, how do we grapple with the rapidly changing student body we educate and the overwhelming Whiteness represented in the teaching force? Many of the beliefs, strategies, and knowledge teachers hold are very traditional and unmindful of the diverse needs of the students of the 21st century. This activity, where I encourage listeners to break down barriers, kept returning to me as I thought of John D. Caputo’s (1997) discussion of Derrida’s concept of deconstruction and Lyotard’s (1979) discussion of metanarratives and the need for a counter narrative. In this study I discuss the connection between critical literacy and the need to fight against the Eurocentric paradigms that perpetuate status quo. Can critical literacy strategies increase the opportunity for teacher candidates to acquire open mindedness and the ability to critically evaluate situations and circumstances as they relate to race, class, and gender?

Critical Literacy is based on Paulo Freire’s (1998) theory of critical pedagogy. Critical pedagogy challenges teachers and students to ask fundamental questions concerning knowledge, justice, and equity. Using literature as a springboard for critical literacy discussions, as I did with *The Bracelet*, teachers and students are prompted to analyze and evaluate their perspectives and their schooling experiences. Teaching students to view a text by analyzing the social, political, cultural, and historical context allows them to examine their own beliefs and possibly rethink stereotypical or unfounded ideas concerning a controversial issue. Planning purposeful activities creates opportunities for students to challenge their beliefs which might evoke changes as they

interpret their actions in a diverse world, much like Caputo's (1997) idea of deconstruction as "cracking nutshells" (p. 32). Critical literacy theory enables students to "crack" through status quo as they look at the system of democracy, institution of schools, and core philosophical beliefs. Caputo (1997) states the idea of deconstructive thinking.

For deconstructive thinking is acutely sensitive to the contingency of our constructions, to the deeply historical, social, and linguistic "constructedness" of our beliefs and practices. But that is not because it has appointed itself the supreme arbiter of what is true and false. On the contrary, it is because it confesses that it does not "know" the "secret" that sits in the middle and smiles at our ignorance. (p. 52)

Providing students with the opportunity to explore this type of thinking through the use of critical literacy promotes deconstructive thinking in other areas of their lives.

Personally, this awakening to societal ills has come to me over the course of this program through the readings of Takaki (1993), Spring (2005), Watkins (2005), Delpit (1995), Ladson-Billings (1994), hooks (1994), Freire & Macedo (1987), Ayers (2004), Vasquez (2003), Grumet (1988), Kincheloe (1998), and others. I have never been more aware of my Whiteness and the privilege that comes with it. Through the reading of texts and my experiences, I have also been made more aware of my oppression as a female. These traits, with which I had no choice to possess, bring about feelings of guilt, anger, awareness, and agency. These texts have equipped me with a lens through which I view all other situations and circumstances in my life. For example, on the popular television game show "Deal or No Deal," I no longer just see a banker, but the shadow of a White

male with the ultimate power seated above everyone else; and, at a recent conference I attended in Pine Mountain, Georgia, I saw a room full of predominately White college professors who were being served by an all African American wait staff and I felt uneasy. I find myself wondering, pondering, and perplexed. I feel a burden that I only felt occasionally before entering this program. I see myself as part of society as a giver and taker, and I find myself wanting others to critically, but not cynically, look at society as well. I also know that there is no turning back to the closed world in which I once lived and that within the conservative South my awakening may be viewed as more of a contamination.

The study's participants were teacher candidates who had completed their second semester as they were engaged in the initial coursework as a part of the undergraduate Early Childhood Education Program at a small university located in middle Georgia. The demographics of teacher candidates admitted to the program were and still are predominately White females, very much in line with national statistics. At Georgia College & State University, Georgia's only Public Liberal Arts University, between 2005-2008 the Early Childhood cohorts' statistics in regard to race and gender are 98% White and 97% female. These future teachers will serve a diverse student body in Georgia with 47% Caucasian, 38% African American, 3% Asian, 9% Hispanic, 3% multi-racial (Georgia Department of Education, 2008). According to Howard (2006), "In the United States the population of students of color reached 30% in 1990, 34% in 1994, 40% in 2002, and will continue to increase throughout the twenty first century. At the same time, Whites represent 90% of public school teachers, a figure that will remain high or possibly grow in the next few decades" (p. 4). Understanding the impact of the

disparity in cultural connections between the growing number of White teachers and diverse students is imperative for teacher educators.

According to the National Center for Educational Statistics, the student body in Baldwin County, the local county in which many teacher candidates enrolled at GCSU will engage in field experiences, has a majority Black population in kindergarten through fifth grade with sixty-eight percent. The surrounding counties, Jones County and Wilkinson County, where many education students are also placed for field experiences, have twenty-two percent and fifty-seven percent Black student populations for the 2007-2008 school year. The statistics of the counties surrounding GCSU are very indicative of the State of Georgia statistics.

The study takes place with teacher candidates who were at the conclusion of their junior year of coursework and field experiences as they have interacted with me as the researcher, each other, and public school students in grades pre-kindergarten through fifth grade over the previous year. These teacher candidates were engaged in conversations, initiated by the use of critically evaluating multicultural children's trade books and discussed White privilege and the implicit and explicit stereotypes and constructions of race within the United States. The teacher candidates were introduced to critical literacy through a course text in their first literacy methods course, and culturally relevant teaching through the reading of *Dreamkeepers* by Gloria Ladson-Billings. They were also exposed to multicultural children's literature in their children's literature course and White privilege through the course, Culture and Language. The stories of the participants were collected through conversations in literature circles, their autobiographical papers with a particular focus on reflections of their cultural roots, critical reflection papers

responding to the readings and conversations in the literature circles, and a structured interview with me, the researcher. My focus was primarily on the use of critical literacy strategies, the teacher candidates' perspectives on and recognitions of White privilege and racism, and the influence of these experiences on their development of cultural awareness. The key research question for this study was: Does a variety of experiences with White teacher candidates cultivate cultural awareness in a predominantly White college of education?

Autobiographical Roots

In order to establish my positionality as a researcher who possesses White privilege, it is important to explore my autobiographical roots in relation to how my perspectives about race were formed within my own life. I examine these perspectives through the framework of prominent structures of the South, such as place, family, schooling, and religion. This look inward has great implications on my identity, the way I teach, the part I play in creating social change, and the lens through which I perceive this study. By challenging these perspectives, I have found that acknowledging racism is crucial in attempting to become culturally responsive in an ever changing society.

Confronting Whiteness

One afternoon about a year ago, a colleague and I went to eat lunch at a local favorite lunch spot called the Country Buffet. They serve the best southern "home cookin'" meals you can find. Fried chicken, vegetables, biscuits, cornbread, homemade cakes, and fresh lemonade all await customers who long for a "heavy" lunch. The restaurant is on the south side of town, and all of the people who work there are Black.

The Black owner remains at the cash register at the end of the line, while the ladies in the buffet line welcome you as you walk in the door, then serve individual menu selections. My colleague and I went through the line anticipating a great meal. After choosing my favorite foods for my meal, I made my drink selection of fresh squeezed lemonade and waited for the cost of my lunch. While talking to my colleague, the owner gave me a total, and I placed the money for my lunch on the counter and waited for the owner to take the money. She refused to pick up the cash and just stared intensely at me. We looked at each other for a long moment until I realized that I had offended her by placing the money on the counter rather than placing it in her hand. I quickly picked it up and handed it to her. I received my change and turned to sit down at a nearby table in the restaurant. I was furious, almost to the point of leaving the restaurant. I could not believe the owner would dare think that I would not physically hand her the money for any reason other than being distracted. Furthermore, I did not appreciate her assumption that I intended to be disrespectful.

Now as I reflect upon this incident, I see things much differently. I was angry that I was the representation of Whiteness. How could she know me or my motives? I now realize it was not about me or the money. The situation represented the way time, place, and history play a part in our racial interpretations and perspectives. To me this was a simple interaction during which I was distracted and simply placed the money on the counter; I think for her it was about a lack of respect and my privilege as a White middle class female. This particular incident and many readings in my doctoral program have forced me to contemplate my understanding of Whiteness and the stereotypical notions of race in the South and my attempt to understand a variety of racial perspectives.

I have realized that in order to understand the “other,” we must first attempt to understand ourselves and the many influences on our lives. For this reason, this account represents a critical exploration of my autobiographical roots and how these experiences have molded my ideas and perspectives about race. Howard (2006) asserts, “[b]ecause European dominance has been so broadly and effectively established, it is important to ask ourselves as White educators how our own social positionality and history of dominance might be implicated in the disproportionate distribution of privilege and penalty in contemporary educational systems” (p. 38). In order to do this, I must be honest with myself to explore my growth as a White Southern female with White privilege. As a part of this examination, I turn to works of Southern literature and events in history which support the notion that place, time, and position play an integral part in the creation of cultural perspectives while growing up in the South. These traditional White Southern values and perspectives are ones that I have developed and now attempt to question.

My research interests directly connect to the autobiographical examination of one’s self. Specifically, these lie in supporting cultural awareness as well as sensitivity to and understanding of diversity among White teacher candidates. I believe that without delving into my own cultural perspectives and where they originated, it would be impossible for me as a researcher to engage in such an endeavor. Through this exploration of self, I hope to also gain awareness and understanding of the “other” and begin to advocate for those whose voices are traditionally silenced. These, too, are the expectations I hold for teacher candidates. At the 2008 American Educational Research Association Annual Meeting, Geneva Gay made the comment, “[b]eing aware and

appreciating others does not generate action.” By this she emphasized that recognition and appreciation of others is no longer enough. Therefore, having examined my life experiences through the lens of major themes in Southern society: family, place, religion, and schooling, this autobiographical account is focused on uncovering the influences of hidden prejudices and stereotypes on my Southern identity.

I realize that by attempting to “understand” the “other,” it may appear that I am attempting to name the “other”, thereby defining the “other”. Nelson Rodriguez (1998) discusses this dilemma of Whiteness in the book, *White Reign*. He states that “[t]hey are the centered and silent eyes that have the power to represent and name the Other. They comprise the yardstick with which others are compared and with which we compare ourselves” (p. 44). I certainly do not support labeling “others,” rather, I would like to consider the complexity of “otherness” as I reflect upon my own perspectives and look toward future possibilities. I hope to gain an understanding of the perspectives of others and how these viewpoints were also influenced by Southern history and traditions by looking outside of my own perspectives that are coated in Whiteness. I will focus on my experiences and interactions with people of color and how these interactions play a role in the dominant perspective of my White culture. I realize there is more to consider than racial differences in the Southern society and in my own experience as a woman, however, within the context of my research interests, critically assessing Whiteness and Blackness in the South plays a key role in establishing my positionality as a researcher, but most importantly for myself. Therefore, I acquiesce to Williamson (1984) who states in his book, *The Crucible of Race*, “Race, in brief, is a problem of the mind and not the

body” (p. 318). This is my attempt to understand how place, family, religion, and schooling in the South has influenced the way I see and respond to others.

Place

I was born in 1970 in the small town of Milledgeville. Located in middle Georgia, Milledgeville is rich in Southern history, specifically as it relates to the Civil War. It was the capital of Georgia from 1804 to 1868 and is the place where the decision was made for Georgia to secede from the Union. It proudly carries the name of the Antebellum Capital. Stories are told of how Union General William Tecumseh Sherman marched into Milledgeville, stabled his horses in a local church, and then left Milledgeville to complete the historical “March to the Sea.” Thankfully, the city was spared from destruction.

Milledgeville is also well known as the home of the State’s mental institution, Central State Hospital. Until I arrived at Georgia Southern University as an undergraduate, I had no idea that Milledgeville was the punch line of many jokes. When I was asked the question, “Where are you from?” people would laugh at my answer and would say, “Did they let you out for the weekend?” I did not know what they were talking about. Central State Hospital was just another part of the community to me, but to others outside of Milledgeville the stigma of the famous insane asylum was something well known. This idea is reflected in Lillian Smith’s (1972) book, *Strange Fruit*, with the main character, Tracy, who reflects on his mother’s recent senseless behavior, “[s]ome women lost their minds at menopause, he’d heard of it. Gus Rainey’s mother lost hers – in Milledgeville now” (Smith, p. 187). Today, the “State,” as the hospital is called, is seen as a major source of jobs for our community and is often threatened by the lack of

continued funding from the State of Georgia, causing much concern for the economy of Milledgeville and Baldwin County.

Milledgeville is also the home of the state prison that housed the first electric chair in Georgia to carry out the death penalty. The prison in Milledgeville also was the place Leo Frank was incarcerated, a Jewish man accused of murdering young Mary Phagan who worked in the Marietta, Georgia factory he oversaw. Frank's ultimate life sentence, rather than the death penalty, granted by then Governor John Slaton due to the lack of evidence against Frank, was very tumultuous amid anti-Semitic people of Georgia who became vigilantes for the death of Mary Phagan. In his book, *Dixie Rising*, Peter Applebome (1996) writes an account of what happened the night Leo Frank was kidnapped from the prison in Milledgeville.

They set out by different routes so as not to draw undue attention, and cut telephone and telegraph wires leading to the prison. When they arrived, they overpowered guards sleeping on the porch, carried Frank, still in his nightclothes, to the backseat of one of the cars, and drove him back to Marietta, with the intention of carrying out the sentence the state had failed to. (p. 32)

Frank was taken back to Marietta and lynched. I question the resistance that was made by the guards at the prison and wonder how vigilant they were in protecting Leo Frank from the angry mob.

Flannery O'Connor, a famous, Southern Catholic writer whose works were often framed with the issue of race in the South made her home in Milledgeville. O'Connor lived on a farm, Andelusia, in the northern part of Baldwin County where she raised a variety of birds, her favorite being the peacock. O'Connor died from lupus in the same

hospital in which I was born, Baldwin County Hospital. When discussing the south, Applebome (1996) quotes O'Connor, "It is not made from what passes, but from those qualities that endure" (p. 25). O'Connor's legacy endures in Milledgeville as well as many silences of Southern tradition.

As I think about my hometown and its historical significance, it is a mirror of many towns within Georgia and the Southern states of the United States. In his book, *The Burden of Southern History*, Woodward (1993) discusses the remnants of Southern history.

One by one, in astonishingly rapid succession, many landmarks of racial discrimination and segregation have disappeared, and old barriers have been breached. Many remain, of course – perhaps more than have been breached- and distinctively Southern racial attitudes will linger for a long time. (p. 11)

Many people in Milledgeville are very proud of its historical roots and encourage visitors to share this heritage. However, I wonder which parts of this history are not shared and discussed.

Slave labor was utilized in Baldwin County and the surrounding area. This is evident in Memory Hill Cemetery, for on the opposite side of the cemetery from Flannery O'Connor's grave is found, there are several slave graves identified only by rusty chain links that hang above a marker. As a child I was taught about these graves and the potentially mythical meanings of the links. One link, the person was born a slave and later released; two links, born and lived a slave but died free; and the three links, born, lived, and died in slavery. Living in Milledgeville allows me to gain a sense of the historical South while encouraging me to address contradictions within me concerning

my hometown. “Some of the things I don’t like at all, but I was born there and that’s my home, and I will defend it even if I hate it” (Cobb, 2005, p. 139). Like Willie Morris, whose autobiography is synthesized in relation to place, “Kincheloe concludes that without autobiographical self-remembrance, Morris might not have understood how Mississippi remained in his soul” (Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery, & Tubman, 2000, p. 534). Is Milledgeville a part of my soul? Yes, I can easily concur that my hometown, to which I chose to return upon graduation from college, is a large part of who I am.

Family

I was the first in my family to graduate from college, even with two older siblings. My mother and father attended college but never graduated. My father’s parents were hard workers and retired with pensions from General Telephone Company and Robins Air Force Base. My maternal grandfather was a farmer and my grandmother a homemaker. My mother grew up in a very patriarchal family. Her brothers were given preferential treatment, and her father always had the last word in all family affairs. My mother married my father after her first year of college and began a family soon after.

I have many memories of my grandparents’ farm. As I think about my interactions with people who were “other” than me, I think of Big John and Lewis. These men were identified as ‘farmhands’ on my grandfather’s farm. My grandfather bought the land during the Depression and grew cotton and soybeans to sell. He also raised cattle. Big John was an older Black man, and Lewis was a teenager when his father “gave him” to my grandfather to raise or have him work for him the rest of his life. The two men were always on the farm and at my grandfather’s disposal each day. They lived in cinder block homes on a smaller patch of land away from the main farm, away from

where my grandparents' house was located. Big John's wife, Shorty, worked with my grandmother each day, cleaning or washing. I remember my grandmother going to check on Shorty when she was sick or when Big John had gotten drunk and fought with her.

Each day at lunch my Papa, uncles, Big John and Lewis, would come in from tending the fields and cattle. My two uncles and my grandfather would eat a large meal prepared by my grandmother. I vividly remember my grandmother sweating over the gas stove, making handmade biscuits, plenty of fresh vegetables, and fried pork chops or chicken. Big John and Lewis would not join my grandfather and uncles for lunch at the kitchen table with my family. My grandmother would send them each a plate to eat outside. Shorty would eat, after we had eaten, then return to the ironing or washing.

I remember being scared of Big John but not Lewis. Lewis was kind and funny and would make us laugh. He was strong and seemed to work the hardest. My grandmother would say that Big John was lazy. Many times Big John, Lewis, Shorty, and others on the farm would ask my grandparents to borrow money before it was payday. I remember when asked for a loan while my grandfather was out in the field my grandmother would give her line, "I'll have to ask Mr. A. E. before I can give you any money." The summers with my grandparents on their farm in Houston County, Georgia were wonderful times for me. However, I did not see at the time the oppression with which the farmhands were treated. The patriarchal way my grandfather treated others seemed kind and supportive to me as a child, and when I discuss these times with my mother, she says he treated everyone very well. However, the sense of dominance is now very evident, and the one with the power was the White male, my Papa.

When I was in preschool, my parents hired a Black woman to care for my brother, sister, and me. Again, I was placed in an environment where a Black woman cared for the house and children for pay, like Shorty at my grandparents' home in Perry. Carrie was a large woman and always wore a wig. I remembered inquiring about her hair. I thought it was strange that she wore a wig, because she had hair. This was always amazing to me. Carrie was a large woman who wore Avon perfume. I fondly remember her holding me during an asthma attack or when I had fallen. To this day I can still smell her perfume and feel the warmth of her lap. My mother would pick Carrie up each morning from her cinderblock home near the town "projects." At night, when she babysat, my father would take her home, not allowing my mother to drive into the neighborhood where Carrie lived after dark. Many mornings, when I was too sick to attend school and my mother could not miss work, Carrie took care of me. She cooked dinner, washed clothes, cleaned the house, and even spanked us when necessary. She was "an-other" mother in my home. I loved her.

Frequently, we gave Carrie items that we did not want anymore. We would clean out closets and pantries and give everything to Carrie to use or distribute in her neighborhood. I thought that we were doing a "good" thing, but now I wonder how Carrie and her family felt when she came home with our castoffs. Eventually, the need for childcare dissipated after my brother and sister became old enough to care for us and Carrie was no longer a part of our lives. I have often wondered what happened to her. Like Tracy in Smith's (1972) *Strange Fruit*, who missed his Mamie, "[y]es, the colored nurse you've loved so passionately goes away – to another job maybe or to another child. And you're supposed to forget all about her" (p. 247). We never went and visited Carrie

later in life. We did not invite her to dinner. We did not share Christmas cards with her like we did with minor acquaintances. We no longer needed her services, and she was gone. Today, as I think about Carrie's influence on me and the care she gave me, I feel a sense of pain. The relationship we had was over when she left, and as a child, I was not able to continue the relationship without the help of my parents. I miss her.

My parents always taught me to respect others and treat others the way I wanted to be treated. Yet in contradiction to that teaching, I knew there were racial boundaries that were not to be crossed. Smith (1978), names this contradiction in her book, *Killers of the Dream*, the "haunted childhood" for many White children, where mothers and fathers who teach their White children tenderness and compassion, while sharing "the bleak ritual of keeping the Negroes in their place" (Cobb, 2005, p. 194). The line was drawn by the silence. Any personal access or association with Black people was very limited in our home. The relationship was service driven and provided the only interactions I had.

Schooling

As I document my educational experiences and the lack of interaction with those other than me, I find this limited interaction to have been purposeful. This realization is hurtful, but based on the decisions made early in my education, my parents chose to send me to a small private school in Milledgeville. Like many parents during this time, my parents felt that my siblings and I would be better educated in a private school. But, was this decision really about where we would receive the best education? In his book, *Dixie Rising*, Peter Applebome (1996) discusses the consequences of desegregation of public schools, "[m]ost of the schools are still segregated; the old white public schools are virtually all black and the whites are now in private academies" (p. 61). The school was

founded in 1971 when many independent private schools opened due to integration. Parents donated the land and built the school on its current site. I began school at four years of age and continued in this small private school until my parents divorced when I was eight years old. Due to financial problems, my mother moved my sister and me to public school, my brother, who was in high school at the time, continued to attend the private school. In addition to adjusting to my parents' separation, I was placed in a school environment that was nothing like what I had grown accustomed. This was my first exposure to Black children. The only Black people I knew were the workers on my grandfather's farm or my nanny, Carrie. Not only was I placed in a classroom that looked much different than the one in the small private school from which I came, I also had a Black teacher. I worked hard to like my new school because I knew my mother could not afford to send me back to the private school, but I cried a lot and was soon referred to the counselor. She became a great resource for both my mom and me. I eventually made a few White friends. I never felt comfortable talking to Black children. For some reason I was scared. As a matter of fact, the only argument I can recall I ever had as a child, other than with my sister or brother, was with a Black boy named Joe, who always called my friend ugly names and made her cry. As I think back to my reaction to Joe, it was an issue of power and one of negotiating roles in the public school classroom and playground. To me, Joe represented fear, and I "had" to stand up for myself. I wonder what I represented to Joe?

In my second year at public school, I had a teacher who immersed us in the game of chess. We had tournaments within our class and would play each of our classmates. Having the opportunity to play against everyone, or being forced to play with everyone,

was a good experience for me. I realized that many of the students in the class shared this common love of the game of chess. Encouraged by our male teacher, this commonality that developed tended to open the door for conversations about chess and later to other conversations on the playground. I began to feel more comfortable with all of my classmates and more comfortable in my school; however, I longed to go back to the private school. My private school represented a reality to me that was safe and secure in much the same way that Peter Applebome (1996) described his trip to the Lewis Grizzard Storytelling Barbeque. “Like all Southern nostalgia it took a selective memory to buy in too far – Grizzard’s Moreland was the segregated South and his whole vision rested in the notion of a homogeneous community that never really was and never will be” (p. 338). Eventually, my mother remarried and was financially able to again send my sister and me back to the small independent school, where we later graduated. We went back to our White environment where we felt more comfortable.

My choice to participate in an all White environment continued in college while I was an undergraduate. I joined an all White sorority and socialized with only people who were White. I had the opportunity to be immersed into a diverse student body, but I chose to remain within the world in which I was accustomed. Later, in my graduate studies, very little diversity was represented in my classes, and my interactions with Black students were limited. Today in my classes which are a part of the doctoral program, where race is at the center of many discussions, the only Black students in my cohort sit together as do my White colleagues.

In reflecting upon my educational experience I see the need to look both forward and back, to utilize the concept of *currere* which “seeks to understand the contribution

academic studies make to one's understanding of his or her life" (Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery, Tubman, 2000, p. 520). In the regressive stage, one returns to the past to observe and record. As I look to the past, I see very little academic experience, I mostly see and can record a tumultuous time in my life, longing to be back in an environment that represented security. As I think about the second stage of currere, the progressive, I ponder how this experience has affected my interactions today and the safe space I crave. often resisting new experiences.

Religion

My religious growth was very limited as a child. My parents attended a Methodist church prior to their divorce, and I vaguely remember attending. It was a time for my parents to socialize with friends, and to be seen at church. My father owned a car dealership, and I am sure his acquaintances at church supported his car business transactions. W.J. Cash (1991) in *The Mind of the South* illustrates this type of southern religiosity, "Terms like 'salvation' and 'grace' and 'soul-winning' occupied their grave lips on Sundays and Wednesday nights as absolutely as talk of making money occupied them for the rest of the week" (p. 222). Church was an hour to shake hands and see those in our community. I do not recall my parents leading me spiritually as a child.

During my time of attending public school, I made a friend who attended the First Baptist Church of Milledgeville. I would go with her on Wednesday nights to Girls in Action and children's choir. I liked to participate in the activities, but I still do not remember any spiritual growth. My mother's reason for not investing in my religious or spiritual growth was that she wanted me to choose my religious preference when I was older. She stated that she did not want to make the choice for her children. I believe this

was a matter of convenience, for she herself was unwilling to invest in a church or become committed spiritually.

At the age of nineteen, I became involved in a small Baptist church in Milledgeville. This is the church I continue to attend. I accepted Jesus as my Savior and was baptized with my mother at the age of nineteen. Before entering this program, I did not critically assess the notion of a savior nor did I contemplate my association with conservatism or fundamentalism; “[c]onservatism always began and ended with the idea that Negroes were inferior to whites in every major way” (Williamson, 1984, p. 108). My personal belief continues to be that I am saved and will go to heaven but not by my merit. I have been taught about the Great Commission, to go and make disciples of all men. However, I now have this contradiction with the “savior mentality” or “missionary mindset” that brought oppression and silence to many throughout the history of the world, the United States, and the South. Giving money and hand-me-downs to others, like we did for Carrie, seemed to me to be the “right” thing to do. However, I now know that with that act of giving there was also a sense of aloofness, as if what I have to discard is “longed for” by others. I have financially supported foreign and domestic missions without question, until now. I have a new sense of doubt rising in my belief system, and I am not sure how to reconcile this confusion.

Coming to Terms, Contemplating, Celebrating

Reflecting on the place, time, and position of the life we live and the greater United States society that we call home is crucial in interpreting perspectives of ourselves and others. The past is a vital part of one’s identity. In his book, *Still Fighting the Civil War*, David Goldfield (2002) asserts, “If the past is essential for one’s identity, then

renouncing, forgetting, or ignoring that past shatters the self” (p.3). This autobiography has provided a place for me to acknowledge the past while searching for its influences and how they shape and create my identity. I realize as I assess my perspectives that they are no longer bound within the dichotomies of Black or White, good or bad, or other rigid categorizations. Rather my emerging perspectives are more of an attempt to deliberately conceptualize the past and its connections to attitudes, interactions, and relationships. I now respect the owner of the restaurant who refused to pick up my money from the counter because I have a greater understanding for how she interpreted the situation. Now and in the future, I hope to be more purposeful in my thinking and actions as I relate to others.

Through this exploration, I have questioned my sense of appreciation for my Southern heritage. I have felt guilt, frustration, and confusion as I have considered the racism and discrimination that has existed in my own community, my family, and within me. On the other hand, I love the South and would not want to live anywhere else. The memories on my grandparents’ farm of playing in the mud, watching a calf being born, riding a tractor with my grandfather, and eating ice cream with the family while watching television after dinner also have instilled a deep love for place and family. Therefore, I continue my attempts to resolve these contradictory feelings but have come to the realization that there is no need for resolution. Cobb (2005) describes this inner contradiction.

Despite their dissatisfaction with certain aspects of the status quo, intellectuals in “Developing” regions are often ambivalent about sweeping, externally induced social and economic changes that may destroy some of the best of their society’s

traditions along with the worst. Forced to consider both its strengths and its weaknesses simultaneously, they often develop a somewhat schizophrenic, “love-hate” relationship with their native culture. (p. 139)

The love-hate relationship Cobb describes is intriguing to me and one to which I can relate. I wonder how I can love and hate something at the same time. Then I remember my tendency to accept many things from the binary oppositional stance and reflect on the importance of resisting this notion in order to understand multiple perspectives.

Appreciating my Southern heritage and its influences, while critically evaluating these same perspectives prevents me from attempting to “sweep” away the influences that place and past have had on who I am today.

Confronting my Whiteness and what it represents in my society is extremely important for fostering social change within my own life, my Southern community, and in my research. Acknowledging that racism exists and that I represent racism to others because of the color of my skin, regardless of my intention, is a difficult identity to embrace. I now thank the owner of Country Buffet for opening my eyes to this difficult fact and helping the millstone stop for me. Similarly in her book, *Praying for Sheetrock*, Melissa Faye Greene (1991) describes how interactions and circumstances such as these can stop one in his tracks and force one to see the need to acknowledge others.

It was as if previously they had seen themselves and the whites as harnessed to the same millstone, as two races treading the same circle of days on opposite sides of the wheel: they believed that the whites had no more asked to be born to their particular status than the blacks had to theirs, that all fulfilled the roles God gave them. Suddenly with Finch’s shooting, it was as if the millstone stopped and

turned on end and the two races looked at each other over its pocked rim: What is going on over there? the black people had to ask. (p. 138)

This illustration depicts so well how many still live today. The center of the millstone provides enough space for each to feel comfortable only occasionally looking over to ask questions. In looking at my life through this autobiographical lens of place, time and position, I long to ask more questions and to eliminate the space of protection I have created. As Gary Howard (2006) asserts, “[i]f we do not face dominance, we may be predisposed to perpetuate it” (p. 30). I hope that as a researcher, but more importantly as a member of society, this “owning up” will not only prevent the perpetuation of dominance but also become a catalyst for social justice.

Summary of the Study

This study, *Reading In-Between the Lines: Exploring the Experience of Cultivating Cultural Awareness with White Teacher Candidates in a Liberal Arts University in Georgia*, represents the effort to challenge teacher candidates to relinquish the status quo and become agents of social change through the use of critical literacy and the development of cultural awareness. Critical literacy theory encourages one to look beyond the implicit meaning and function of the texts and to critique the social and cultural implications in regard to gender, race, and class. Learning to be critical of texts is important for teacher candidates, so in turn they will become aware of not only the explicit but also the implicit forms of oppression. Due, in large part, to the overrepresentation of White female teachers in the United States, Eurocentric ideologies and values are perpetuated in American schools even though the student body is becoming more and more diverse.

In order for all students to participate in a democratic society, teacher candidates must acknowledge and respect the various perspectives that difference can afford. Critical literacy theory provides a space for critiquing societal prejudices and oppressions in regard to race, class, religion, and gender within a particular text. Freire and Macedo (1987) assert, “[t]he prime role of critical pedagogy is to lead students to recognize various tensions and enable them to deal effectively with them” (p. 49). There are many benefits for students to understand “otherness” represented in texts as well as within their classrooms and the world. Some of these benefits include preparing for meaningful participation in society, learning to cooperate within local and global communities, and communicating with persons who hold varying perspectives.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

To develop a study which I believe will accomplish the goal of challenging teacher candidates to relinquish status quo and become agents of social change, I drew upon three major bodies of research, White privilege (Kunjufu, 2002; McIntyre, 1997; McLaren, 1999; Tatum, 1999; Wise 2008; Yancy, 2004), critical literacy (Comber 2001; Dozier, Johnston, & Rogers, 2006; Freire, 1973; Freire & Macedo, 1987; Macedo & Steinberg, 2007; Vasquez, 2003, 2004) and culturally relevant pedagogy (Ayers, 2004; Delpit, 1995; Freire, 1998; Gay, 2000; hooks, 1994; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Palmer, 1998; West, 2004,). In order for critical literacy to truly impact society, the theory must “grow feet” and lead to agency and action. Synthesizing research on White privilege, critical literacy, and culturally relevant pedagogy leads to opportunities for “teaching against the grain.” As Paulo Freire (1998) states in *Pedagogy of Freedom*, “[t]o act in front of students as if the truth belongs only to the teacher is not only preposterous but also false” (p. 39). This research combines critical literacy with dialogic pedagogy in an effort to support a democratic society that transcends beyond the classroom.

White Privilege

White privilege is a construct from which I have benefited all of my life. Therefore, to examine and actually become aware of this privilege for the first time in my late thirties is a shame. Much like Peggy McIntosh (1997) who writes, “I have come to see white privilege as an invisible package of unearned assets which I can count on cashing in each day, but about which I was ‘meant’ to remain oblivious” (p. 291), I now

understand my lack of awareness was purposeful. I know it to be true that the Whiteness of my skin carries significance in many realms of society, but attempting to grasp the magnitude of Whiteness and White privilege has become a personal journey.

By engaging in conversations with Black colleagues, I have realized that they tend to be much more attuned to race and how it continues to shape their lived experiences, than I. In a recent conversation, a colleague mentioned that she is constantly followed around by store clerks when she is shopping in the mall. She feels their gaze, watching for any indication of shoplifting. I, on the other hand, have no recollections of ever feeling as if I was being watched while in a store. Many times I have even been told to take merchandise home on approval without paying for it first. This was followed by a wink and a comment by the clerk suggesting that I could be trusted. This is one very simple example, but the notion that I have the option of acknowledging race, while my Black friend does not, is evidence of White privilege. Tim Wise (2008) in his book, *White Like Me*, confirms my experience, “Black people understand race long before white people do” (p. 23). The understanding of race is essential for Black people to negotiate systems within society, but not for White people. In his book, *What White Looks Like: African American Philosophers on the Whiteness Question*, Yancy (2004) describes how White students, when confronted with racist actions in historical texts regarding slavery, tend to separate the “good white” from the “bad white.” Yancy (2004) goes on to illustrate the reaction of the White students as well as the repercussions of their position.

They saw themselves as “good whites,” whites incapable of such acts of racial brutality. Through this process of subterfuge, however, they failed to locate their

own center of power, a center that enabled them to make such a distinction without any recognition of their own whiteness as a species of white racism, particularly given the historical accruing value of whiteness and the implications of this accrual upon non white people. (p. 4)

White students finding ways of releasing themselves as accountable through the “good white” versus the “bad white” argument only perpetuates White dominance and privilege.

McIntyre (1997) defines Whiteness as “a system and ideology of white dominance that marginalizes and oppresses people of color, ensuring existing privileges for white people in this country” (p. 3). In addition, Wildman and Davis (1997) note that race should be, “described as a power system that creates privileges in some people as well as disadvantages in others” (p. 315). In other words, not only does Whiteness possess dominance but systematically seeks to maintain this dominance through the oppression of others. McLaren (1999) describes a system that seeks to snub those who do not fit the socially constructed norms of Whiteness.

Procedural, difference-neutral democracy does little to challenge the taken-for-granted White privilege that undergirds it. The non-European American world produced by discourses or ‘regimes of truth’ (that include multiform texts, linguistic practices, and representations) is an ethnocentric projection and the result of assigning to the Other values married to the narcissism and arrogance of the colonial mind. (p. 21)

How does this system work? Who does it seek to protect? Who does it seek to marginalize? Who benefits? These are questions that have become a focus of the way I

view texts, media, curriculum, school, and life. How do we move to “denormalizing whiteness” (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1998, p. 18)?

I think it is imperative that we examine the institution of school and the notion that White supremacy and dominance are so embedded in the institution that it becomes the silent norm to those who benefit from it. Alice McIntyre (1997) concurs that “[o]ne needs to also examine the discourse of Whiteness that profoundly influences our educational institutions” (p. 6). Wise (2008) describes the evidence of his tainted school experience in that White privilege was “ingrained” and treatment of others was “obvious.” It seems that it was ingrained in all who participated in school, but not so obvious to the ones who could have played or can play a large part in advocating for social change.

White privilege was so ingrained in my school experience that hardly a single thing about my education was untainted by it. Whether it was the racialized placement of students into advanced or remedial tracks irrespective of actual ability (which data suggests happens, still today, all over the country) or the way in which extracurricular opportunities like drama or debate were such ‘white spaces,’ with very little opportunity in practical terms for nonwhites to participate, the trend was obvious and persistent. (Wise, 2008, p. 19)

It is my hope that this study will lead White teacher candidates to challenge this systematic discrimination rather than perpetuating it.

Engaging in the process of White identity recognition is fundamental before one can take a critical stance on issues of the disproportionate amounts of power, control, and dominance allocated by and for Whites in American society. The recognition of White

privilege may not occur automatically. In my experience, White privilege was something I knew I possessed, but I had no name for the opportunities I enjoyed strictly because of my color. I believe that I was what Janine Jones (2004) would term a “goodwill white” (p. 66). Jones (2004) describes the “goodwill white” as a White person who “defines racism simply as racial prejudice” (p. 69). To me, racist was such a harsh term that I associated closely with hate. Reading, thinking, and reflecting on texts during my doctoral study, engaging in conversations with White and Black colleagues, listening to and being disturbed by professors who would challenge my perspectives have played an integral part in my recognizing and claiming White privilege. My identity development continues and has personally sparked my passion to recognize and extinguish the marginalization of Others. Understanding my identity as a White female is crucial in the work I do as a teacher educator and is equally as important for the teacher candidates I teach. Beverly Tatum (1999) asserts, “[e]ducators, especially, need to be able to do this, because it is only when we have affirmed our own identities that we are truly able to affirm those of our students, both White and of color” (p. 61). White teachers, at all levels, must take responsibility for the identity they possess.

Jawanza Kunjufu (2002) describes a categorization of White identity orientations with three distinct sections which transition based on certain characteristics exhibited. These three orientations are Fundamentalist, Integrationist, and Transformationist. He assesses this continuum based on Modalities of Growth through the areas of thinking, feeling, and action. The Fundamentalist tends to be literal with one perspective that is perceived to be “right.” The Fundamentalist also is defensive in matters of racism and claims to teach all children in the same manner. The Integrationist is beyond the

Fundamentalist on the continuum and tends to be interested in broader ideas of truth. There is a beginning awareness and a curiosity of difference. A White person in this stage may see themselves as a victim and assess racism as a personal issue rather than one that is rampantly institutionalized. The optimum orientation within the categorization is the Transformationist. A Transformationist sees the truth as dynamic and is self reflective regarding the construction of Whiteness. In this stage honesty about racism is important with the reaction being one of responsibility rather than guilt.

Another, prominent racial identity development model was created by Janet Helms (1995). She identified six statuses to “characterize a White individual’s pattern of responding to racial situations in his or her environment” (Tatum, 1999, p. 57). The first status, Contact is described as viewing White as “normal.” The statuses that follow are: Disintegration, Reintegration, Pseudoindependence, Immersion/Emersion, and lastly Autonomy. The Autonomy status represents a lived commitment to antiracist activity and continuous self reflection on matters concerning race (Tatum, 1999).

As with any continuum the process of progressing through the orientations or statuses of White identity is not stagnant. Personally, I find myself moving continuously among the stages of the continuum. Resisting dominance that is so ingrained is cyclical and incessant. In a matter of any situation, I could find myself at any orientation. Again, I contend that moving through the process of racial identity is a luxury only afforded for Whites. When considering Whiteness and White privilege it is important to focus on the marginalized created through White privilege rather than idolize the term. Peter McLaren (1999) clarifies the need to claim Whiteness but to avoid glorifying its existence. “I argue for a self-consciousness about one’s whiteness in terms of

recognizing the danger of its transparency but do not advocate celebrating whiteness in any form” (p. 43). This causes me to question, how do I go about this research and share with others without glorifying my experience of living in Whiteness?

There are many advantages to claiming Whiteness and White privilege for teachers and teacher candidates. McIntyre (1997) warns that ignoring the position can have repercussions on students. She states that for “white educators, in particular, this invisibility to one’s own racial being has implications in one’s teaching practice – which includes such things as the choice of curriculum materials, student expectations, grading procedures, and assessment techniques – just to name a few” (p. 15). Due to the many influences White teachers have on students, they need to question White dominance and the marginalization of Others in their teaching practices. McIntyre (1997) goes on to insist that “[o]ne way to avoid the tendency to reproduce those practices is to commit ourselves to interrogating whiteness within the framework of multicultural antiracist education (p. 12).

Advantages to understanding Whiteness can and should transcend beyond the classroom walls. Knowing that Whiteness is a system of dominance that seeks to marginalize Others is a call to action for those who embrace the notion or have technically “moved up” in the White identity stages or statuses. This call to action is heard by the “White ally” (McIntyre, 1997, p. 61) who is an “actively antiracist White person who is intentional in his or her ongoing efforts to interrupt the cycle of racism” (McIntyre, 1997, p. 61). This person is keenly aware of racial inequalities and seeks to counter the master narrative through unequivocal means.

It must be mentioned that the system of Whiteness is also critiqued. Several of the issues considered harmful from the identification of Whiteness include: the White victimization and arrogant resentment of forced racial conversations (McIntyre, 1997), the idea of considering “Whiteness as a property of status” (McLaren, 1999, p.32) which “continues to assist in the reproduction of the existing system of racial classification and stratification” (McLaren, 1999, p.32), and the notion that Whiteness racializes the Other (McLaren, 1999). Therefore, one must make a choice of how to respond to the recognition of Whiteness. McIntyre (1997) reminds us of her study with White teachers as she sought to break the silence of the oppressor.

This was not about liberating the marginalized but about prying open self-criticism among those who occupy the center in ways that would challenge us to think about what life is like in the margins and how we, as the center, can alter existing inequitable structures. (p. 23)

Therefore, as I apply the recognition of White Privilege and Whiteness to this study, with all White female participants, I must seek to break the silence, to open conversations in a way that persuades them to look inward and beyond their White identity and perhaps consider how they may modify inequalities within their lives, school, community, and world. Alice McIntyre (1997) eloquently characterizes this experience.

This move from acknowledging our white racial identities to locating ourselves within the system of whiteness to teaching multicultural antiracist education was—and continues to be – a profoundly challenging experience. One needs a set of tools that allow white teachers to not only reflect on, but to reinvent, their notions about their racial identities. What has emerged for me in thinking through these

issues is the notion that we, as white educators, need to examine our racial identity in hopes that such an examination will contribute new ways of teaching and learning that disrupt racist educational practices. (p. 14)

Another important critique that must be mentioned is the necessary and often disregarded inclusion of nonwhite voices in the deconstruction of Whiteness. George Yancy (2004) challenges the exclusive study of Whiteness by White theorists. He insists that White theorists must continue in the discourse, “but it is black people who must live the reality of whiteness expressed in the form of black unemployment, inferior health care, inferior education, police brutality, ontological criminalization and driving while black, lower wages, higher incarceration rates, and so on”(p. 16). Remembering the notion that every identity names the other cautions White theorists to construct, critique, and deconstruct Whiteness.

It is my hope that critically assessing texts using critical literacy strategies will provide a “tool” to “construct” racial identity and “demolish” discrimination, oppression, and stereotypical views of the Other.

Critical Literacy

Reading Texts

Reading: Is it an act, an art, a craft, a performance, a skill, an exercise, an activity, a passion, or a disposition? What does it mean to read? Is reading limited to decoding and comprehending the written word or does it encompass understanding of other forms of text such as the arts, visual media, conversations, websites, cyber communities, motion pictures, cell phone texting, and other forms of technology? According to McDaniel (2006) text is “anything that can be ‘read’ or interpreted” (p. 22). Morgan (1997) extends

this definition of texts by stating that texts are “whatever in our social environment can be read as a text: whatever constructs a meaning through shared codes and conventions, signs and icons” (p. 28). In addition to these questions Dennis Sumara (1996) asks in his text, *Private Readings in Public*, “What is the experience of living a life that includes the practice of reading?”(p. 1). Could reading be a way of life?

For me reading is all of these things. It is an act, an art, a craft, a performance, a skill, an exercise, an activity, a passion, and a disposition. I am always reading, whether it be a conversation, billboard, commercial, website, book, article, artwork, text message, or newspaper. Reading creates relationships with texts. Reading many forms of texts provides me the opportunity to participate in society. Reading has been and continues to be a significant influence on my development as an individual. Sumara (1996) concurs that reading influences one’s identity. He states “that the relationships we develop with literacy fictions become collecting places for various experiences we have had (including our imaginative experiences) and, therefore, become important narrative and conceptual reference points for our evolving sense of self-identity” (p. 85). Reading serves many purposes on a daily basis in my life. I read for pleasure, to relax, for necessity, for information, and to increase my awareness or understanding. I am inundated with texts, as the world is filled with text, and I must attempt to contemplate my own choices of what to read, or what not to read. I also know that reading is not a neutral act; that it influences my ideas and perspectives. So, as I ponder what it means to read and the impact of reading in a cultural sense, I surmise that reading can be all of the above and can influence those who consume the reading as well as the society in which one lives.

With advances in technology and communications we must look at texts in a broader sense. In his book, *The Language of New Media*, Lev Manovich (2001) discusses this progression of technology in relation to the evolution of the HTML.

With this development, a long process of gradual “virtualization” of the page reached a new stage. Messages written in clay tablets, which were almost indestructible, were replaced by ink on paper. Ink, in its turn, was replaced by bits of computer memory, making characters on an electronic screen. Now, with HTML, which allows parts of a single page to be located on different computers, the page becomes even more fluid and unstable. (p. 75)

This high-speed progression has created a more fluid and certainly unstable situation in our society. Martin Hiedegger, according to Lovitt (1977), warns us of the relationship one can have with technology.

Everywhere we remain unfree and chained to technology, whether we passionately affirm or deny it. But we are delivered over to it in the worst possible way when we regard it as something neutral; for this conception of it, to which today we particularly like to do homage, makes us utterly blind to the essence of technology. (p. 4)

Various media are no longer at the command of the user. With the use of new media, individuals must critically examine the identity of his/her being, recognize the cultural impact of technology, and attempt to discern the difference between reality and perception.

New media can inspire the need for original thinking and increases the necessity of critical decision making. The use of technology can have a profound effect on culture.

In a cultural sense, technology can create moral anxiety and propagate social reforms, indoctrination, and ideology. Manovich (2001) terms this interaction, “cultural interface, to describe the human-computer-culture interface- the ways in which computers present and allow us to interact with cultural data” (p. 70). We are bombarded on a daily basis with images that influence our relationships with others and perceptions of ourselves.

One example of such a problematic issue surrounding moral anxiety is the exploitation of the human body. “The cultural technologies of an industrial society – cinema and fashion – asked us to identify with someone else’s bodily image” (Manovich, 2001, p. 61). Successful and desirable women are presented in media as thin youthful women with blemish free skin. Men are muscular, wealthy, and powerful. Through the images of media, young women, men, and even children often regard themselves as unable to measure up to this façade. In her article, *Life Goes On*, Maudlin (2007) discusses her own reactions and perceptions of her body in the wake of the media’s construction of the disabled, “[t]his compelling fiction of normalcy has clearly had a profound effect on both my perceptions of bodies and my physical body itself”(p. 114). This contradiction between the images presented through media and one’s reality may lead to anxiety, depression, and other health related conditions.

Another example of how the media can impact social construction is examined in Joel Spring’s (2005) book, *The American School 1642-2004*. Spring (2005) addresses the use of mass media in respect to social contexts, particularly the Civil Rights movement. “The evolution of the mass media in the 1950s was an important factor in the civil rights movement because it became possible to turn local problems into national issues” (p. 408). No longer could society or the American government deny the racism and hatred

that was brought into American homes via the television. The images of humans being beaten and mistreated during demonstrations for equal rights forced citizens to consider the need for radical change.

This inability to deny that racism continues to exist today was strongly impacted by the media reports and images from the recent Hurricane Katrina disaster in Louisiana and Mississippi. Henry Giroux (2006) in his eye-opening book, *Stormy Weather: Katrina and the Politics of Disposability*, implores that the use of media images of the catastrophe instigated the conversations concerning the massive governmental faux pas surrounding Katrina's rescue efforts. Giroux (2006) states, "[b]ut like the incessant beating of Poe's tell-tale heart, cadavers have a way of insinuating themselves on consciousness, demanding answers to questions that aren't often asked" (p. 9). Because of the images offered to the American society by the media, accountability for such malpractice has been summoned. On the other hand, Giroux (2006) warns readers of the ramifications of images, "[n]on stop images coupled with a manufactured culture of fear strip citizens of their visual agency and potential to act as engaged social participants" (p. 26). Hence, the need for children as well as adults to learn to critique the images they see from a narrow camera lens or lines of text and assess the media for personal and social implications.

It is possible for texts to be a tool of indoctrination and ideology. In a comparison to science fiction, which carries few features of reality, Manovich (2001) discusses the influence of Socialist Realism in the Soviet Union. This use of art to depict a "perfect world" (p. 203) could be easily created by images from the past and the anticipated future with the assistance of "communist ideology" (p. 203). Having the ability to create reality

to formulate change is extremely powerful. Who should have this power? Can this power be questioned through the use of critical literacy?

When attempting to understand reality in technology, one is forced to discern between what is real and what is perceived as real through media. Perception and representation are integral to making meaning of information. Manovich (2001) discusses the juxtaposition of the computer and cultural layer of new media.

In summary, the computer layer and the culture layer influence each other. To use another concept from new media, we can say that they are being composited together. The result of this composite is a new computer culture – a blend of human and computer meanings, of traditional ways in which human culture modeled the world and the computer’s own means of representing it. (p. 46)

Can reality be discerned once manipulated by media? I believe the line between representation and reality is becoming more and more blurred, particularly for children. An example is found in the television program *Sesame Street* where the reality portrayed to children “created a tension between the projected image of the world and reality” (Spring, 2005, p. 402) as the program presented “the world as harmonious and good” (Spring, 2005, p. 402). In Julie Webber’s (2003) book, *Failure to Hold*, which discusses prominent cases of school violence, she states, “While we may think that we walk away from television and understand the critical difference between its ramblings and our own practices, we are wrong, because there are none to discern in a world where all social roles are scripted”(p. 39). Today’s scripted curriculum in which students are rarely asked to critique perpetuates this notion. Various forms of media not only distort reality but play a large part in creating it.

As media imposes perceptions of reality onto society, awareness of this deception is beneficial. As a society, we are continually forced to make decisions between the need to cling to our being and allow ourselves to embrace the essence of ourselves and the influence of lifeless but sophisticated digital images of new media. Because the culture of technology is intermingled into our society and has the potential to instigate social reform and efficiency, educators must attempt to interpret the representative voices of media, and teach their students to critically examine the versions of reality presented through new media.

This predicament is an example of what Max Weber (2003) discussed in his book, *The Protestant Work Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. He describes this phenomenon as the loss of the spirit of capitalism. “Unlimited greed for gain is not in the least identical with capitalism, and is still less its spirit” (p. 17). No longer is the focus on the common good, but a fetish for profit. Because the focus of profit and consumerism dominates our schools, students are more inclined to focus on literal meanings of texts, memorization of discrete facts, and the prize of the “right” answer, thus removing the power of critical thinking. Weber (2003) warns against the idea of individualistic gratification, “[w]ealth is thus bad ethically only in so far as it is a temptation to idleness and sinful enjoyment of life, and its acquisition is bad only when it is with the purpose of later living merrily and without care”(p. 163). According to Weber, wealth without controls or ascetic ideals is corrupt, and this lack of asceticism has caused a nation of children and adults who demand instant gratification. This need to be constantly stimulated and affirmed for emulating the dominant perspective has severe ramifications for students, schools, and societies.

For this reason, reading is not merely an interaction with text; the act of reading involves more than the reader, the text, and the meaning. It is “the experience of reading as it becomes part of our remembered, lived, and projected lives” (Sumara, 1996, p. 5). Sumara (1996) argues that reading is not distinct parts that can be separated, examined, and organized. He states that “this is an illusion created in order to help us to believe that we can actually subtract ourselves from our own lives” (p. 5). The act of reading is embedded not only in our personal lives but in the larger society as it affects political, social, religious, and philosophical issues.

Reading from the Cultural Eye

Examining reading within the context of cultural studies, establishes the foundation for the necessity of critically assessing texts. J. Hillis Miller’s (1992) description of cultural studies is helpful in situating the act of reading in society. In his book, *Illustration*, he states that

[c]ultural studies tend to assume that a work of art, popular culture, literature or philosophy can best be understood if accompanied by an attempt to understand the work’s historical context, including the political elements of that history: the material, social, class, economic, technological and gender circumstances in which the work was produced and consumed. (p. 13)

Therefore, underscoring the context in which one reads and what is read is connected to the cultural means in which it is to be created, read, and understood. Sumara (1996) concurs, “literary fiction is culturally defined and ranked” (p. 21). Which causes one to ask whose understanding and what understanding does reading set in motion? The act of reading leads to interpretations and associations based on individual life experiences as

well as the historical implications within the work. In his book, *The Crafty Reader*, Robert Scholes (2001) agrees that the context of the reading must be considered and reading cannot take place disconnected from the cultural milieu in which it exists.

Reading begins with situating the text: asking what kind of poem is this, where it comes from, who is speaking, who is being addressed, what the situation is in which these words are uttered or about which they have been spoken. (p. 44)

Louise Rosenblatt (1978) takes into account not only the historical and social situation of the text, but broadens the reading to include the experiences and situatedness of the reader. Rosenblatt (1978), in her book *The Reader, the Text, the Poem*, implores the importance of the reader in the reading of the text.

The reading of a text is an event occurring at a particular time in a particular environment at a particular moment in the life history of the reader. The transaction will involve not only the past experience but also the present state and present interests or preoccupations of the reader. This suggests the possibility that printed marks on a page may even become different linguistic symbols by virtue of transactions with different readers. (p. 20)

Likewise, Dennis Sumara (1996) writes, “Derrida suggests that the meaning can only occur when the reader becomes purposefully engaged with the text” (p. 32). He implies that there is an interdependence between the reader and the text, “[f]or Derrida, the reader does not exist before the work, but is invented by the work through her or his engagement with the work” (Sumara, 1996, p. 33). Therefore, as the landscapes of the reader and the historical and social contexts change, so does the reading. Jacques Derrida (1992) in *Acts of Literature* describes the cultural impact of reading.

To pick up your terms of your question, I would say that the “best” reading would consist in *giving oneself up* to the most idiomatic aspects of the work while also *taking account* of the historical context, of what is *shared* (in the sense of both participation and division, of continuity and the cut of separation), of what belongs to genre and type according to that clause or enclave of non-belonging which I analyzed in “The Law of Genre.” (p. 68)

Does one understand that he or she is “giving oneself up” and “taking account” when one reads? In his book, *Textual Power*, Robert Scholes (1985) implies that the reader may not realize that this form of exchange is taking place; he states “[r]eading is a largely unconscious activity”(p. 21). Scholes (1985) goes on to describe the process of reading, interpreting, and criticizing texts, “[i]n *reading* we produce *text within text*; in *interpretation* we produce *text upon text*; and in *criticizing* we produce *text against text*” (p. 24). Consequently, as one reads he or she produces meaning within the text as the codes of the author are processed by the reader. These codes should be processed without confusion, and the ability to understand is based on the stories the reader has been exposed to prior to the reading. Readers make their own meaning of the reading of texts, consequently, meaning is not static, but influenced by the cultural context in which it is written and read. John Caputo (1997), in his book *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*, implores

[t]he very meaning and mission of deconstruction is to show that things – texts, institutions, traditions, societies, beliefs, and practices of whatever size and sort you need – do not have to definable meanings and determinable missions, that

they are already more than any mission would impose, that they exceed the boundaries they currently occupy. (p. 31)

This acknowledgement substantiates the need for teaching which is culturally relevant in which students' experiences, traditions, and perspectives are brought into classroom instruction by teachers who are critical readers.

Reading: Its Dualistic Power

Reading is many things to many people, but in simple terms, reading is power. Texts can perpetuate status quo and instill power structures that are constructed within society or they can lead to positive social change through liberation, emancipation, and justice. The powerful members of any society often exert their own distinct voices, unknowingly and knowingly silencing the "other." On the other hand, agency becomes possible through language and reading. Agency is a process of "exorcising" and challenging the power of the dominant culture. Kalbach and Forrester (2006) assert that "[e]xploited peoples of the world must master the principle language to gain entrance to the dominant culture in an effort to transform or reinvent the world to promote hope for all peoples" (p. 72). According to Henry Giroux in the introduction of *Literacy: Reading the Word and the World*, "[l]anguage and power are inextricably intertwined and provide a fundamental dimension of human agency and social transformation" (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 8). Therefore, one can assume that reading would provide the same relation to power. According to Freire and Macedo (1987), understanding how to critically evaluate all forms of text for oppression ignites the ability to be an agent of social change.

Therefore, acknowledging that text is not neutral and contains explicit and implicit messages of the dominant Eurocentric ideologies is crucial. Texts in schools are

also laden with political and social constructions. Freire and Macedo (1987) state, “manipulation is debilitating and, like-wise, irresponsible. What we as educators have to do, then, is to clarify the fact that education is political, and to be consistent with it in practice” (p. 39). Lankshear and McLaren (1993) agree.

What remains constant, however, is the *reality* of politics: the reality that human beings live, and endure the shaping effects on their *being* of so living, within social relations and practices in which opportunities to claim power for the end of achieving personal and collective fulfillment are structured unequally. (p. 3)

Thacker (2003) reemphasizes this as he draws on the work of Marshall McLuhan in his representation of technology, “as Marshall McLuhan long ago argued, the most dangerous position vis-à-vis technology is to assume its neutrality” (p. 77). Similar to technology, it can be argued that the reading of texts has been and continues to be oppressive.

Historically, texts have contained messages of oppression for those not of the dominant culture, specifically, cultural minorities and women. Scholes (2001) documents the absence of women and minorities in the instructional text, *Understanding Poetry*.

Altogether, however, there are only eight poems by women out of a list of nearly three hundred, which I make out to be a bit more than 2 percent of the total. And poets who spoke for racial and ethnic minorities, like Countee Cullen and Langston Hughes, just don’t appear at all. It is no doubt reasonable to speak of racism and sexism in connection with this selection of poems, but for our

purposes, it is even more important to note that this selection works to eliminate voices articulating political thoughts and feelings of all sorts. (p. 34)

In addition, in many instances women are portrayed as caregivers and helpers. Females are perpetually represented in texts and other sources of media as teachers, nurses, fair maidens, clerks, bank tellers, secretaries, and stay-at-home moms. This role continues in pedagogical practices today, as has historically been the case. In *The American School 1642-2004*, Spring (2005) notes the essentializing of women in historical texts; “Johann Pestalozzi’s methods provided further justification for the subordinate role of women in teaching. In the most popular text used during the development period of the common school, the McGuffey Readers, females are depicted as models of charity”(p. 135). This textbook supported the servitude role of female teachers, which I believe current literature continues to do today.

Assigning confining gender roles to women is not the only discriminatory message in text, dehumanization takes place in reference to the cultural other as well. Chinua Achebe (1977) argues that racism is a central theme in the common high school or post secondary novel, Joseph Conrad’s (1902) *Heart of Darkness*. Achebe (1977) argues that the subtle and implied racism demonstrated in the text contaminates and perpetuates historical and ever present forms of racism. As Marlow, the main character, makes his way up a cliff he encounters a native Haitian with black skin.

The black bones reclined at full length with one shoulder against the tree, and slowly the eyelids rose and the sunken eyes looked up at me, enormous and vacant, a kind of blind, white flicker in the depths of the orbs, which died out

slowly. The man seemed young – almost a boy- but you know with *them*
(emphasis added) it's hard to tell. (p. 19)

Through this explicitly racist remark it can be argued that students will be taught to conform to Eurocentric oppressive ideological beliefs dehumanizing those that embody dark skin. Part of Achebe's argument is that students who read this text will not be privy to the thoughts of the natives Marlow encounters. Conrad silences the voice of the "other" giving the natives only a few lines of text. This action represents one other aspect of the text that Achebe argues is racist and dehumanizing.

While in this example the racism and dehumanizing effects are explicit, this is not the case in all texts. Many times messages are quite subtle, to the point of seeming to be absent. In discussing the need for a counter narrative, J. Hillis Miller (1999) asserts, "Ideology is by definition unconscious" (p. 59). When reading literature that accentuates racial relations such as *Heart of Darkness*, ideas of oppression can be perpetuated, but it is important not to dismiss all readings as influential. Lankshear and McLaren (1993) argue that

[b]anking pedagogy and the literacy it fosters encourages passive acceptance of the way things are: at the very least to the extent that it undermines conceptions and capacities conducive to a more active orientation. This has obvious import for preserving established structures and routines and the hierarchies of interests and satisfactions they ordain. (p.7)

While reading texts can perpetuate the established hegemony and dominant power structures within society, it can also lead to social agency and liberatory action in one's

own life. J. Hillis Miller (1999) contends that “[t]he study of literature will allow readers to intervene successfully in society and to deflect the course of history” (p. 9).

Many times texts can seem either oppressive or liberating. For this transition to occur the reader must shift the way in which he or she reads. Taking into account one’s own experiences and the acknowledgement of the historical and social contexts of the reading challenges one to consider various perspectives and possibilities.

An example of this duality is found in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*. Even though obvious examples of racism, oppression, and discrimination are evident within the text, banning literature such as this would be a disservice to students. J. Hillis Miller (2001) urges that “the obligation to render justice is then passed to Conrad’s primary narrator to any reader, each one of whom nowadays is Conrad’s survivor” (p. 107). His argument is based on the framework that to “perform a reading” (Miller, 2001, p. 104) of the text is crucial for one to decide whether or not it should be read. Readings such as this are imperative in establishing dialogue surrounding these critical issues within society, not only for those who are oppressed but also for the oppressors.

Miller’s (2001) supporting argument in *Others* is that writers who utilize literary characters to represent narrow, racist perspectives may not be indicative of the author’s personal beliefs. Although this may be true, texts in their many forms are political. In his book, *Black Holes*, J. Hillis Miller (1999) contends that “[l]iterature, for the most part, deals with imaginary characters. It usually approaches larger political, social, religious, or philosophical issues only through these characters’ stories” (p. 5). The characters then provide a space in which readers can explore and examine the power structures inherent in many social and cultural contexts. Through this experience the reader gains awareness

and power to make informed choices which can then lead to personal advocacy or change within the larger society.

Critical Literacy: A Lens for Reading

“Language is the means to critical consciousness, which, in turn, is the means of conceiving of change and of making choices to bring about further transformations” (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p.xv). Authors and readers bring biases into social environments that perpetuate the status quo – limiting opportunities for thinking from multiple perspectives. Therefore, critical literacy provides possibilities to examine, challenge, and potentially transform dominant perspectives.

Human language acquisition occurs as if by magic by young children. One moment infants are babbling, next they are identifying objects with names, then they are making sentences; and before you know it, your ten year old daughter is text messaging you. My daughter and son have taken me through this journey of language acquisition, and as a mother and educator, it has really been quite enlightening in its progression. The many technological advances of today have had a great impact on this process, for society has been inundated with language in all forms. For example, verbal conversations, texts, computers, cell phones, and now, iPods are part of the ever-developing forms of communication; this leads me to wonder if students are equipped to effectively decipher the many forms of information and conversation. In the world today because of the vast amount of information available it is even more critical than ever that both “reading the word” and “reading the world” is necessary. “Reading the word is essentially decoding, practicing literacy in the narrowest sense, whereas reading the

world involves investigation of power structures as well as our roles within these processes” (McDaniel, 2006, p. 33).

Language is the means through which culture is both communicated and constructed; thereby, all readers of texts are participants in cultural constructions. Readers engage with texts for efferent and aesthetic purposes (Rosenblatt, 1994). The purposes for reading and discussing particular texts, whether efferent, aesthetic, or both, influence the experiences of the readers, and lead to the establishment of their identities and perspectives. Subtle messages of oppression in relation to race, class, and gender are often embedded in texts. Critical literacy provides the tools to expose and critique these oppressive messages through teaching children to read and think beyond a literal level (McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004). Lankshear and McLaren (1993) discuss the relationship between language and power and continuously beg the question as to what are the “implications for whose interests were served (and whose were not), which interests were served, and how they were served” (p. 6).

There are many factors that shape the identities of students, teachers, and all of society including but certainly not limited to: homes, families, texts, new technologies, religious affiliations, and schools. I would assert that reading from all of these contexts is necessary for becoming an engaged member of any society. Freire and Macedo (1987) describe these influences, “[p]art of the context of my immediate world was also the language universe of my elders, expressing their beliefs, tastes, fears, and values which linked my world to a wider one whose existence I could not even suspect” (p. 31).

Although these personal beliefs and ideals have value, all too often children tend to

experience a single personal or world perspective. Thus, language through reading one's own "world" can become an instigator of isolation.

Literature contains oppressive messages that are waiting to be uncovered through critical evaluation of texts for discrimination of race, class, and gender. Freire and Macedo (1987) discuss this "battleground" (p. 20) that necessitates the theory of critical literacy, "[w]hat this suggests for a theory of critical literacy and pedagogy is that curriculum in the most fundamental sense is a battleground over whose forms of knowledge, history, visions, language, culture, and authority will prevail as a legitimate object of learning and analysis" (p. 20). Throughout history theorists have argued over the central purpose of education, and current trends lean toward the memorization of a specific body of knowledge, rather than the development of critical thinking processes.

Acknowledging that readings of texts in the formal educational setting are not neutral and contain explicit and implicit messages of the dominant Eurocentric ideologies is crucial. In his book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire (2000) contends that "[a]ny situation in which 'A' objectively exploits 'B' or hinders his or her pursuit of self-affirmation as a responsible person is one of oppression" (p. 55). Therefore, the notion of being for something and against something else is evident in society as well as the reading of texts in the educational setting. Ayers (2004) asserts this point.

Education cannot be neutral – it is always put to use *in favor* of something and *in opposition* to something else. It is urgent then, that we teachers, especially, struggle to open our eyes, to shake off our blindness and work hard to see the world as clearly as we can through the fogs of mystification and alienation. (p. 31)

Likewise teacher education is not neutral. “Without explicit guidance and modeling, unreflective future teachers are not likely to recognize their lack of awareness regarding social issues, such as ‘White privilege’” (McDaniel, 2006, p. 28).

An example of this absence of neutrality is found in the omission of controversial topics that defame the United States and its global reputation from history textbooks. In my experience, it is difficult to find information on topics such as Japanese internment camps and immigration restrictions during World War II in a textbook. Therefore, reading texts, or failing to, can persuade and characterize perceptions of being an American for young students. Education and its related resources are far from neutral; therefore, the key to transformation may be critical literacy.

When contemplating critical literacy, one tends to think of open mindedness and freedom critically working against the banking system of education. Freire (1998) contends that “to teach is not to transfer knowledge but to create the possibilities for the production or construction of knowledge” (p. 30). In other words, the purpose of education may be to uncover information rather than to cover it, to break down ideological codes rather than perpetuate them. J. Hillis Miller (1999) points to the difficulty in uncovering implied but very influential messages within texts, “Reading the political import of literature is like decoding a parable or an allegory” (p. 5). Due to the difficulty of interpreting and decoding political themes within text, gaining critical consciousness during the act of reading is crucial for having the ability to read between the lines.

Freire’s (1998) basis for educative practice favors the autonomy of the student supporting curiosity which in turn inspires creativity. This construction of knowledge

comes from literacy through a “dialectical relationship between human beings and the world, on the one hand, and language and transformative agency, on the other” (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 7). This knowledge, which Freire and Macedo (1987) refer to as consciousness, is constructed through our social interactions. “I think consciousness is generated through the social practice in which we participate” (p. 47). Therefore, subjectivities of individuals are very important, and are necessary for one to examine the perspectives of others. McDaniel (2006) emphasizes the need for critical consciousness. “Additionally, critical literacy certainly has the component of transformation, which is very important. However, inherent in the theory is the notion that an individual’s consciousness must change before he or she can affect any apparent transformation upon the world” (p. 24).

Freire and Macedo (1987) argue that there is a significant difference between functional literacy skills “tied to a deficit theory of learning” (p. 4) and literacy as reading the world. Literacy in this dichotomy is much like a double-edged sword. Freire and Macedo (1987) explain:

Literacy becomes a form of privileged cultural capital, and subordinate groups, it is argued, deserve their distributional share of such cultural currency. The pedagogies that often accompany this view of literacy stress the need for working-class kids to learn the reading and writing skills they will need to succeed in schools; moreover, their own cultures and experience are often seen as strengths rather than deficits to be used in developing a critical pedagogy of literacy. (p. 4)

Again, literacy viewed in this assumption, “is as disempowering as it is oppressive” (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 5). In other words, the focus on literacy as a tool for

sustaining the working class narrows the ability for one to look for forms of “political and ideological ignorance” (p. 5). In addition, by focusing on and perpetuating one’s own culture and experience, one limits the opportunity to acknowledge and value others. Freire (1970) suggests that those in the dominant culture tend to see things only from their perspective of entitlement; “[t]his behavior, this way of understanding the world and people (which necessarily makes the oppressors resist a new regime) is explained by their experience as a dominant class” (p. 58). Rather, critical literacy is “both a narrative for agency as well as a referent for critique” (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 10). Freire and Macedo (1987) go on to assert:

As a referent for critique, literacy provides an essential precondition for organizing and understanding the socially constructed nature of subjectivity and experience and for assessing how knowledge, power, and social practice can be collectively forged in the service of making decisions instrumental to a democratic society rather than merely consenting to the wishes of the rich and the powerful. (p. 11)

Much of Freire’s discussion centers on the relationship between objectivity and subjectivity. Understanding social constructions and assessing these subjectivities permits one to partake in rational decision making for supporting a democratic society. In *Textual Power*, Scholes (1985) discusses the purposeful critique of a fictional text’s codes and themes from the perspective of a group who shares a common system of values. He highlights the literary criticism by feminists. “For our purposes, a more consequential sort of criticism involves a critique of the themes developed in a given fictional text, or a critique of the codes themselves, out of which a given text has been

constructed”(Scholes, 1985, p. 23). Rather, assessing readings from a focused stance or perspective situates the reader to focus on discriminatory implications within the text.

Therefore, learning to read with a critical eye is a crucial part of reading.

What might this look like in schools today? Freire & Macedo (1987) would argue that schools do not create subjectivity but that it functions there. “Schools can and do repress the development of subjectivity, as in the case of creativity” (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 57). In *Teaching Toward Freedom*, Ayers (2004) confers the consequence of the authoritarian approach and its affect on subjectivity. “From the perspective of a humane or democratic society, the authoritarian approach is always backward, always wrong- it undermines the participatory spirit of democratic living, it disrupts community, it aims to destroy independent and critical thought” (Ayers, 2004, p. 9). Freire and Macedo (1987) encourage teachers to battle against this authoritarian approach.

Instead of suffocating this curious impetus, educators should stimulate risk taking, without which there is no creativity. Instead of reinforcing the purely mechanical repetitions of phrases and lists, educators should stimulate students to doubt.

Schools should never impose absolute certainties on students. They should stimulate the certainty of never being too certain, a method vital to critical pedagogy. (p. 57)

Critical pedagogy promotes the notion of being certainty-less which deemphasizes today’s individualistic tendencies. On the other hand, Louise Rosenblatt (1978) cautions critical theorists and those who practice critical pedagogy against interrupting the relationship between the reader and what is being read. She asserts, “[c]ritical theory and practice both suffer from failure to recognize that the reader carries on a dynamic,

personal, and unique activity” (p. 15). Therefore, as teachers call forth students to analyze a work in a subjective way, it is yet an analysis which again has the opportunity to influence the reader and his or her interpretation of the work.

Implications for Schools Today

In schools today, student voices are often silenced, forcing them to ultimately relinquish much of their power and identity, specifically those students who are considered the “other.” The culprit that has accentuated this silence is the scripted curriculum that has infected all of our classrooms in the wake of the many mandates. Unfortunately, some schools tend to perpetuate the individualistic focus of students who embark upon a quest for the highest grades and tests scores leading to a successful academic experience in an Ivy League institution, followed by a stellar career in capitalist America. In the pursuit of conformity, students rarely look at society from the perspective of a social cause; rather, their focus is on their individual role in a capitalistic society.

Accountability for school performance, especially in math and reading, has increased. Skill driven interactions with basal texts, focusing on phonetic decoding, fluency, and comprehension take up much of the time in a normal day in elementary schools. “Cookie cutter” reading programs engulf adopted school curricula. Rarely are students asked to contemplate interpretations and respond to the reading of texts in a reflective way. Robert Scholes (2001) in his book, *The Crafty Reader*, discusses the current state of the reading of poetry in schools.

That is instead of asking what a text had to do with us, its readers, we began asking about the role played by tone, irony, paradox, or symbolism in this or that

poem. This is one place where we can make a clear distinction between reading as a craft and reading as an art. (p. 20)

Simply stated, focusing on specific skills interrupts the reading of texts. Reading efferently only for answer to skill type questions tends to marginalize the texts.

According to Lankshear and McLaren (1993), reading in structured ways ruled by the “banking system” of education strips the reading of its true possibilities; “[t]he “acts” of reading and writing are effectively robbed of their transformative potential” (p. 6).

Scholes (2001) goes on to discuss the motivation for the reading of poetry in schools into distinct parts and rigid categories. He proposes that the need for reading to be quantified and measured is necessary in maintaining the accountability crazed environment of schools today. I wonder what will be the long term ramifications of teaching reading through narrow characteristics. Nevertheless, we must consider the creation of a balance between the teaching of skills and promoting the real purposes for reading.

Freire and Macedo (1987) state that “since education models souls and re-creates hearts, it is the fulcrum of social change” (p. 41), it is the catalyst for agency on the part of the teacher and student. Although this is the optimum goal for education, I argue that many students rarely experience this type of transformation. The ability to view text and societal situations critically involves curiosity, experience, and ethics (Freire, 1998, Ayers, 2004). Teachers must choose to fight against their own conformity, reflect on their own experiences, analyze their own perceptions, and then attempt to challenge students to do the same. A critical stance is crucial for educators today because teachers hold a significant amount of power in the reading choices of their students. Lankshear and McLaren (1993) reiterate the power of educators and those beyond the classroom

doors on the readings of others. They assert that “power structures and dominant ideologies effectively determine what literacy will be for others” (p. 4). They go on to discuss the traditional state of affairs regarding reading in schools. “School literacy is submerged in ruling bourgeois, patriarchal, and ethnic majority views and values, with accordant implications for inequality, discrimination, and disadvantage”(Lankshear & McLaren, 1993, p. 8). Freire and Macedo (1987) confirm the power of the teacher. “The face and voice of the teacher can confirm their domination or can reflect enabling possibilities” (p. 24). School literacy tends to be a mirror to the society beyond the school walls. Therefore, reading the world and texts within the school context become integrated and meshed together to perpetuate inequality.

According to Dewey (1916) in his famous text, *Democracy and Education*, the knowledge students bring to school through the reading of their world must be acknowledged, then built upon. He remarks,

[w]hen children go to school, they already have “minds’ – they have knowledge and dispositions of judgment which may be appealed to through the use of language. But these “minds” are the organized habits of intelligent response which they have previously acquired by putting things to use in connection with the way other persons use things. The control is inescapable; it saturates disposition. (p. 32)

It is important for teachers to resist the teaching of static realities to students based on their own acquisition of language and culture, rather they should focus on challenging themselves and students to acquire a critical consciousness to become positive agents within society.

In contrast to the separation of reading in distinct themes and titles, Scholes (2001) illustrates how the reading of poems, and I would assert other genres within texts and within our world, should be done.

We develop our craft as readers of poetry by reading poems, thinking about them, talking about them. That is why a textbook can carry so much weight. A good curator in an art gallery can often teach viewers something important simply by putting together two pictures for them to consider in relation to each other. (p. 5)

Interactions with texts created by society, especially teachers, is what reading becomes for many. Therefore, educators who are able to create experiences similar to the curator Scholes (2001) mentions are important to the reading, language development, and education of students today. How does this transition look in classrooms today?

There are varying degrees and levels of power exhibited in the classroom and beyond. Hargreaves and Jacka (1995) exert that “[s]chools are not just places of teaching and learning. They are places of politics, too. There are differences of power between teachers and students, between teachers and administrators, and among teachers themselves” (p. 45). The political must be addressed rather than being purposefully ignored or supporting the claim that it does not exist. Freire and Macedo (1987) discuss this “battleground” (p. 20) that necessitates the theory of critical literacy, “[w]hat this suggests for a theory of critical literacy and pedagogy is that curriculum in the most fundamental sense is a battleground over whose forms of knowledge, history, visions, language, culture, and authority will prevail as a legitimate object of learning and analysis” (p. 20). Realizing that all readings are political can be very liberating for those

who partake of the reading. Chris Searle (1993) explains how teachers can complement skills acquisition and confront the political.

Children can never be too young to use their skills-in-acquisition of literacy to confront, criticize, or question, as well as to form their own rational attitudes to issues arising from their own world, whether it be the state of their school or street, the taxes or rents paid by their parents, the suffering or struggles of other human beings or life anywhere on their planet, or current questions of peace, war, consent, or resistance. In all of these areas and contexts of learning and teaching, skills and consciousness go hand in hand. (p. 171)

The opportunity to reinforce reading skills as well as support critical reasoning enables students to acquire the knowledge to become potential agents of social change rather than individualized members of a capitalist society. For that reason, we must work against the “culture of silence” (Shor & Freire, 1987, p. 122) and move toward praxis.

The massive amounts of information with which society is inundated will only increase in time and continually change the reading of the world for everyone. New forms of communication are being invented constantly. Language as a means of communication, the construction of culture, and the perpetuation of power must be analyzed and critiqued, and always questioned. Implementing critical literacy in a classroom does not happen without risk. In her article, *Critical Literacy: A Questioning Stance and the Possibility of Change*, McDaniel (2004) notes one important obstacle. “Teachers often face rejection and ostracism when they criticize the ‘system’, as well as disapproval from parents for ‘subversive’ teaching that uses inappropriate texts to undermine adult authority” (p. 480). This “subversive” teaching significantly contrasts

today's accountability crazed school environment. In an effort to engage in dialogic pedagogy with students, teachers must create opportunities for perspective sharing. Teachers should also expect students to be uncomfortable when discussing issues of race, class, and gender oppression. These are not issues with right or wrong, true or false answers, and they will require both the teacher and the student to become vulnerable in the conversation.

It is, however, important to remember that we must read a variety of texts and that this reading involves risks. It is imperative to acquire skills to read as well as the critical stance to argue for one's own or the advocacy of others. In our reading and evaluation of texts it behooves us to allow ourselves the opportunity to unlock preconceived cultural notions. In doing so Caputo (1997) advises that:

“We” all require “culture”, but let us *cultivate* a culture of self-differentiation, of differing with itself, where “identity” is an *effect* of difference, rather than cultivating “colonies” of the same in a culture of identity which gathers itself to itself in common defense against the other. (p. 115)

To read then may be a way to value self and others, as members of a culture of difference, questioning and asking one's role in society to potentially generate social change.

Critical Literacy: Awakening the Minds of Early Learners

First and foremost teachers and teacher candidates must be aware of and able to identify the implicit and explicit messages in texts. They must also be willing to engage in a questioning stance to view all sorts of texts that perpetuate the status quo. Once they are willing to undertake the questioning of texts and challenge the dominance and

oppression perpetuated in some texts, then they may begin to invite conversations in the classroom and allow children to question dominance and search for equity. Helping students move beyond the functionality of texts to recognition of biases and stereotypes represented within texts is difficult but necessary in helping students shape their lives in a diverse, democratic society.

Young children tend to focus on choosing correct answers that are followed by positive comments from a teacher; therefore, asking children to question understandings they have formed concerning ideologies inherit in their formal and lived curriculum can lead to confusion. This confusion is also increased by the idea of how students feel they need to behave in school to be successful. Hall and Piazza (2008) assert that young students “may be uncomfortable moving beyond their views of the world and may express disinterest in reading and discussing texts that challenge their ideas” (p. 32). For that reason, “[r]eading then becomes about taking an active involvement with texts in ways that allow for multiple interpretations of texts and that reject the view that meaning is fixed and neutral” (Hall & Piazza, 2008, p.33). Finding a way to engage students in critical discussions and maintaining their attention throughout the process of implementing a critical literacy curriculum requires a transition from traditional teaching practices.

In her book, *Negotiating Critical Literacies with Young Children*, Vivian Vasquez (2004) discusses the use of various artifacts that are placed on an “audit trail” (Vasquez, p.9) to ignite conversations in her early childhood classroom. The particular audit trail she implemented contained, “curriculum topics including rainforests, the environment, gender, fairness, the media, and a range of questions concerned with power and

control”(Vasquez, 2004, p. 5). Vasquez (2004) described the conversations derived from these artifacts as pleasurable even though they addressed heavy-handed issues. The issues were “socially significant” (Vasquez, 2004, p. 31); therefore, the students felt personal connections that inspired them to engage in the dialogue.

In a study of how teachers might select books for use in implementing critical literacy strategies with young children, Hall & Piazza (2008) identified four ideas that teachers can use to help students engage in critical literacy practices: “1) Understanding their own beliefs and biases; 2) Understanding their students’ views on reading and the world; 3) Making issues of power a central focus; 4) Moving beyond cultural snippets” (p. 37). Teachers who sought to gain self awareness of their perspectives and where they originated tended to have more confidence in applying critical literacy strategies with young children. The need for teachers to understand the views of their students is vital in an environment of such disparity between the prevalence of White teachers who teach in very diverse classrooms. Gomez (1992) discusses the ramifications of teachers who choose not to make these personal connections with students with whom they are unfamiliar.

Unfamiliarity and discomfort with others, such as that which our new teachers experienced, can breed a terrible silence, one based on the belief that there is something wrong with students that prevents their success and precludes their story-making, effectively denying their learning. (p. 169)

Hall and Piazza (2008) go on to explore the way teachers can model critical literacy practices with their students by choosing a thought-provoking book to be read aloud to students, discussing with the students what is valued or ignored in the text, and

examining the use of language in the text to illustrate how language positions people both positively and negatively within society. Eventually, the hope is that students recognize that texts “do more than contain a neutral set of facts and ideas”(Hall & Piazza, 2008, p. 40), and they have the potential to shape their beliefs from a perspective of equity.

In a recent article in *Young Children* the Journal of the National Association of the Education of Young Children, teachers and researchers, Lee, Ramsey, and Sweeney (2008) explored ways to engage children in conversations concerning race and class issues. They note that preschoolers can identify that some people are rich and poor and have a basic concept of the construction of race. The researchers provided activities such as art activities, book discussions, puzzles, games, and role playing to spark conversations concerning race and class. This study found that “anti-bias and multicultural activities do have the potential to raise questions and stimulate meaningful conversations among children and teachers and that specific materials and teaching practices evoke different types of inquiry” (Lee, Ramsey, & Sweeney, 2008, p. 75).

Teachers who are critically conscious themselves will likely be more successful in implementing critical literacy strategies within the early childhood classroom. Students as young as preschool have already accepted culturally constructed norms and idealistic views of the dominant perspective. When questioned about the overabundance of White faces in books one African American student commented, “it’s okay”, “books don’t need to be changed”, “that’s just the way books are supposed to be” (Hall & Piazza, 2008, p.36). This acceptance of social norms and power structures must be disrupted as teachers begin to put critical literacy strategies into action.

Culturally Relevant Teaching: A Praxis to Critical Consciousness

Culturally relevant teaching explicitly seeks to include the voices of those who are traditionally silenced or oppressed, in short the “other.”

A hallmark of the culturally relevant notion of knowledge is that it is something that each student brings to the classroom. Students are not seen as empty vessels to be filled by all knowing teachers. What they know is acknowledged, valued, and incorporated into the classroom. (Ladson-Billings, 1994, p. 87)

In culturally relevant classrooms, teachers and students engage in building acceptance and classroom community while learning together. Despite oppositional perspectives, a culturally relevant classroom allows for the blurring of lines of difference while respecting uniqueness. “Culturally relevant teaching is about questioning (and preparing students to question) the structural inequality, the racism, and the injustice that exists in society” (Ladson-Billings, 1994, p. 128). In addition, “[t]eachers who practice culturally relevant methods can be identified by the way they see themselves and others (Ladson-Billings, 1994, p. 25).

Ways with Words by Shirley Brice Heath (1983) is a seminal ethnography exploring language development in two distinct communities within the Piedmont of the Carolinas where Heath engaged in research for nearly ten years. A distinct advantage of ethnography is its ability to value cultural relativity as it is “rooted in a perspective of viewing others through their lenses, not in ethnocentric ways” (Quimby, 2006, p. 862). From the constructivist perspective it is important to understand that cultures are a valuable and distinct part of social and educational issues. Working with teachers, Heath

encouraged pedagogical practices that welcomed students and the range of ways they used language for meaningful purposes.

To value the gifts that students bring to the classroom may be the most important thing that a teacher can do (hooks, 1994).

Students burst into classrooms with energy and desire and intention. Each brings a voice, a set of experiences and knowledge and know-how, a way of seeing and thinking and being. Each, again, is an unruly spark of meaning-making energy on a voyage of discovery. (Ayers, 2004, p. 41)

Changes in the current educational process are necessary to make culturally relevant teaching a reality for students. What could be more exciting than to shift from the current political hold on classrooms to communities of meaningful learning? Freire and Macedo (1987) argue, “for radical literacy to come about, the pedagogical should be made more political and the political made more pedagogical” (p.6). This urgency comes in the form of teaching for social justice, supported by culturally relevant pedagogy (Gay 2000, Ladson-Billings 1994).

Gloria Ladson-Billings (1994) stresses that “[p]rospective teachers do not easily relinquish beliefs and attitudes about themselves or others” (p. 131). For this reason teacher candidates need opportunities through which they can explore their own autobiographical roots, examine texts through the lens of critical literacy, and become more familiar with culturally relevant teaching practices. Through these experiences future teachers may become more aware of their responsibility for moving towards classrooms which promote equity, equality, and social justice.

Summary of the Literature

The works of many scholars have been reviewed in an effort to ground this research inquiry. Bodies of research include those exploring White privilege (Kunjufu, 2002; McIntyre, 1997; McLaren, 1999; Tatum, 1999; Wise 2008; Yancy 2004), critical literacy (Comber 2001; Dozier, Johnston, & Rogers, 2006; Freire, 1973; Freire & Macedo, 1987; Macedo & Steinberg, 2007; Vasquez, 2003, 2004) and culturally relevant pedagogy (Ayers, 2004; Delpit, 1995; Freire, 1998; Gay, 2000; hooks 1994; Howard, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 1994; West, 2004, Palmer, 1998). Connections derived from this literature review provide support for the need for White teacher candidates to acknowledge and understand White privilege before engaging in a questioning stance through critical literacy. This questioning stance and recognition of institutionalized racism equips one to strive to become a part of the counter narrative to promote social justice through culturally relevant pedagogy.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Theoretical Framework

This qualitative study regarding the use of critical literacy theory to promote cultural awareness in teacher candidates is grounded in humanism which forms the foundation for democracy. Every human being is worthy of respect and equality. In the article, *Trudge toward Freedom*, William Ayers (2006) describes humanism.

Humanism is built on the idea that human life is indeterminate, expansive, and interconnected that there exists a special human capacity for knowledge of who and what we are in the world. Humanism embraces all the things we make through our own labor, including history as an ongoing human construction, and all other forms of expression as well: research and language and every manner of goods and works and products....Because humanism invites the input and engagement of all, there is no obvious conflict between the practice of humanism and the pursuit of democracy – humanism, like democracy, unleashes an energy toward enlightenment and freedom. (p. 83)

Two distinct strands of inquiry were utilized to support this study. Narrative Inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) and Personal~Passionate~Participatory Inquiry (He & Phillion, 2008) were used to guide my exploration.

Narrative Inquiry

Narrative inquiry is grounded in experience, both personal and social, and the notion that experiences are temporal and continual. In their book, *Narrative Inquiry: Experience and Story in Qualitative Research*, Clandinin & Connelly (2000) define narrative as “the best way of representing and understanding experience” (p. 18). This approach is based on the understanding that societal roles, such as race, class, and gender are socially constructed. These roles intersect and converge in the identity construction and experiences of individuals and communities. “Experience happens narratively. Narrative inquiry is a form of narrative experience. Therefore, educational experience should be studied narratively” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 19). In addition, Glesne (2006) asserts that, “[a] life as told is a re-presentation of that life; the life and the telling are not the same thing. Rather the narrative – the telling or the writing – is always an interpretation of other peoples’ lives, an interpretation that qualitative researchers struggle with representing” (p. 196). Bochner (2003) addresses this dilemma.

So the question is not, ‘Does my story reflect my past accurately?’ as if I were holding a mirror to my past. Rather I must ask, ‘What are the consequences my story produces? What kind of person does it shape me into? What new possibilities does it introduce for living my life?’ The critical issues are what narratives do, what consequences they have, to what uses they can be put. (p. 221)

Within this study, the writing of autobiographies and narratives by teacher candidates’ and the researcher allowed both parties to explore experiences concerning the construction of race in Southern society through their lived perspectives. In addition,

narrative inquiry assists teacher candidates to think beyond their own perspectives through the use of writing and critically reading texts.

A text that functions as an agent of self-discovery or self-creation, for the author as well as for those who read and engage the text, is only threatening under a narrow definition of social inquiry, one that eschews a social science with a moral center and a heart. (Bochner, 2003, p. 221)

Employing one's life experience to make connections to texts is crucial in engaging in critical literacy theory.

Narrative inquiry also acknowledges and supports what one offers in their own experience in relation to place. The South, as previously discussed, holds many unique positions based on place, education, religion, and family. Understanding that place is a part of one's identity is foundational to narrative inquiry. He (2003) asserts, "We cannot identify ourselves without locating ourselves in our landscapes" (p. 20). Celebrating the place from which one comes is vital for one to attempt to understand another's place or landscape.

Bochner (2003) proposes that "[l]ife and narrative are inextricably connected. Life both anticipates telling and draws meaning from it. Narrative is both about living and part of it" (p. 220). Exploring life experiences offers the promise for the researcher and teacher candidates to develop an understanding for lives without rigid categories that can potentially essentialize cultural experience. He (2003) explains the benefits of utilizing experience in one's life to develop compassion and empathy for others.

Such inquiry helps develop understanding of evolving cross-cultural life experience situated in historical, temporal, and physical contexts, but does not

categorize such experience according to fixed preexisting theoretical typologies. Such inquiry enables researchers to develop understanding, compassion, and empathy toward immigrants' cross-cultural lives as experienced in their families, schools, and communities. (p. 146)

Narrative inquiry honors experience, place, and the relationship between life and educational experience, serves as a superior lens in which to frame this study. Through this form of inquiry, the participants and the researcher are invited to explore their own stories to better understand the cultural stories of others. One can only hope to make a positive step towards social justice through this experience of attempting to understand others through compassion and empathy. This expectation is supported by the following stance.

The narrative rises or falls in its capacity to provoke readers to broaden their horizons, reflect critically on their own experience, enter empathetically into worlds of experience different from their own, and actively engage in dialogue regarding the social and moral implications of the different perspectives and standpoints encountered. (Bochner, 2003, p. 225)

Personal~Passionate~Participatory Inquiry

This study utilized a specific form of inquiry grounded in narrative inquiry, Personal~Passionate~Participatory Inquiry (He & Phillion, 2008). Engaging in research that is personal~passionate~participatory can potentially create positive change in the researcher and ultimately in the society. Acknowledging the personal values and experiences of the researcher coincides well with the notion of culturally relevant teaching, which is a primary focus of this study.

This form of inquiry provided a space to engage in meaningful research that promotes social justice. I have become passionate about my research because it was derived from personal experiences and lessons learned. As a practitioner committed to life long learning, I appreciate the value of participatory research. “Shared ownership of research projects, community-based analysis of social problems, and an orientation toward community action” (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2003, p. 337) characterize participatory research and distinguish it from conventional research.

Participatory action research (not always by that name) frequently emerges in situations where people want to make changes thoughtfully- that is, after critical reflection. It emerges when people want to think ‘realistically’ about where they are now, how things came to be that way, and, from these starting points, how, in practice, things might be changed. (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2003, p. 346)

Through this work, there was a possibility that both the researcher and the participants might be transformed. The process of developing my own research had a positive impact on both my perspectives and actions as I considered issues of equity, equality and social justice. This form of inquiry served as a fitting methodological foundation for this study as White teacher candidates were encouraged to build bridges outward from their potentially limited monocultural experiences. Utilizing critical literacy theory as a catalyst for multicultural conversations and experiences gave White teacher candidates in the South a space to explore a variety of perspectives. It was my desire that my research would have the potential to positively impact the actions and perspectives of others. In addition, it was my hope that awareness of and efforts to strive towards social justice would be cultivated within the teacher candidates with whom I worked.

Personal~Passionate~Participatory Inquiry as defined by He & Phillion (2008) stems from action research, teacher research, self study, life history, teacher lore, participatory inquiry, narrative inquiry, and cross-cultural and multicultural narrative inquiry. Thus it allows inquirers “to connect the practical with the theoretical, and the personal with the political, through passionate participation in, and critical reflection upon inquiry and life” (2008, p. 3). They further describe this form of inquiry as having three interconnected qualities: personal, passionate, participatory. It is “personal, compelled by value and experience, ...passionate, grounded in a commitment to social justice concerns of people, ...participatory, built on long term, heart-felt engagement, and shared efforts” (p. 2). Through this form of inquiry, “[s]elf, others, and inquiry become interrelated in complex and dialogical relationships over time and place as researchers develop and refine questions, perspectives, and methods by drawing upon passions and commitments” (He & Phillion, 2008, p. 2).

Confronting issues of social justice and initiating or promoting societal change requires the researcher to be personal, passionate, participatory. Embracing these qualities allows researchers to respond to the sixth moment, to question whose knowledge is valid, to focus on experience as in integral part of the inquiry process.

Collecting Stories

The following methods were used to collect stories from participants’ autobiographical explorations of the roots of personal cultural perspectives, participation in literature circles utilizing a variety of multicultural children’s texts, structured interviews, writings of critical reflections in response to dialogues and experiences, and a

field journal containing informal notes and reflections of voiced perspectives by the participants.

Participants Profiles

The participants for the proposed study included seven teacher candidates enrolled in the Early Childhood Teacher Education Program at Georgia College & State University. Because as the researcher, I was an instructor, the students knew me, but I did not teach nor supervise these teacher candidates during the duration of the study. All participants were White females who were born and reared in Georgia. The ages of the participants ranged from 20-25. I asked for volunteers from the participant pool which included all early childhood students who were completing the first year of the program. From the volunteers only those who were reared in Georgia were considered; nine participants were eligible. The number of participants was chosen based on the premise that this study is the pilot for future work and the data will be analyzed through an in depth qualitative narrative on all of the participants. In addition, research suggests that the ideal number of participants in a literature circle is four to eight (Chia-Hui, 2004). Initially, nine teacher candidates were selected in the event that one or more could not continue the study; seven were able to participate fully in the experiences of the study. In order to address the national statistics of the overwhelming number of White teachers who teach in classrooms that are increasingly diverse, it was crucial that the participants be from the Caucasian race. Furthermore, there were only White females in the participant pool. Prior to participating in the study, the group engaged in orientation activities such as literature circles, teambuilding, group counseling sessions, and group

projects. Their class schedule was such that they attended all classes as a group to build a sense of community, trust, and respect.

The participants were engaged in coursework on Monday through Friday of each week in the first summer session at GCSU. The students were not engaged in field placements during the study; however, three of the participants were employed by Georgia College & State University's Kid's University Program during the study. This program is an enrichment program for children ages six to twelve. Each of the participants, however, had been placed in a variety of grade levels within the public schools in surrounding counties for the entire academic year prior to this study. The participants are members of a cohort of students who began the program in fall 2008.

Although the participants and I were White women who examined the voices of those who have been traditionally marginalized, I envisioned my work to emulate the participatory action research project of Alice McIntyre (1997). Breaking the silence of the oppressor was the primary focus of this study. McIntyre (1997) found that critical pedagogy provided a framework for reconciling the oppressor/oppressed contradiction.

One of the contradictions in this effort was working with the oppressors, rather than the oppressed....Notwithstanding the contradictions, I believe that Freire's work offered me a framework for engaging in a PAR project that put the focus on the oppressor and broke the silence about what it means to be white in our society. By breaking that silence, we, as a group of whites, were able to engage in dialogue about our racial identities, the meaning of whiteness, and our positionalities as teachers, thereby fostering the development of critical consciousness" (p. 20).

Autobiographical Accounts

Autobiographical accounts from teacher candidates and myself as the researcher provided the foundation for the data collection process. Lisa Delpit (1995) explains “we live in a society that nurtures and maintains stereotypes” (p. xiii), knowing this, it is crucial to acknowledge our own subjectivities. However, it is difficult “to perceive those different from themselves except through their own culturally clouded vision” (Delpit, 1995, p. xiv). Writing the autobiographies helped the participants to be reflective regarding their personal biases, ideologies, and assumptions about others. McIntyre (1997) discusses the importance of reflection for teacher candidates, “[r]eflection on their attitudes, beliefs, and life experiences, and an examination of how these forces can oftentimes work to limit their understanding of the multiple forms of discriminatory educational practices that exist in our schools, is an important first step”(p. 5).

I attempted to expose the privileges I take for granted through exploring my own autobiographical roots. These positionality assertions needed to be recognized, acknowledged, and better understood through the examination of my own life experiences. The reflexive autobiography enabled me, the researcher, to attempt to uncover my perceptions that could hinder the qualitative research process. My position as a White middle class woman perpetuated my White privilege. I had to be diligent about my own taken-for-grantedness in order to be an effective researcher.

Literature Circles

In order to establish a dialogue with teacher candidates concerning White privilege and the implicit and explicit messages in texts regarding race, I implemented literature circles using strategically chosen multicultural children’s texts. The texts

included were primarily multicultural texts representing the African American culture; this decision was purposeful due to the demographics of the study and as an effort to address the current pressing issues of teacher candidates from this particular university. As the researcher, I realized this could be a limitation, but specific texts were utilized in order to maintain the focus of the study. In the literature circles, seven teacher candidates and I discussed lived experiences as well as various forms of racism that are explicitly or implicitly suggested in texts. As a part of this dialogue, as the researcher, I served as the facilitator to promote conversations among the participants within the literature circles based on the participants' choices of texts concerning White dominance and privilege, the existence of stereotypical notions of race perpetuated by the texts, how these texts are considered political in that they contribute to the establishment of social norms, and to emphasize what is valued or ignored. This is supported by Alice McIntyre (1997) as she discusses the importance of sharing lived experience in her research with White female student teachers.

The first characteristic included the development of critical consciousness and the importance of the participants' lived experiences within the project. This consciousness-raising experience was created when the participants were given opportunities to share their experiences, beliefs, assumptions, and confusions during group sessions. (p. 21)

The literature circles met for four sessions during the course of the study. The participants were asked to read two articles for the first session. For sessions two through four, the participants chose one book from a given selection. I provided copies of all readings and books for each session. In an effort to facilitate discussions with

participants that could potentially elicit a variety of responses such as entrenchment, anger, and/or guilt, I attempted to share from personal experiences as a White teacher who has encountered these same emotions in response to racial discussions, as well as refer to research from Kunjufu (2002) and Helms (1995) that addresses the nature of this discourse. During the first session of the literature circles, the participants and I established conversational norms for the group that valued all of the voices represented in the group. In order to do this, I pulled from my experiences with a monthly professional development program, Critical Friends, in which conversational norms are utilized to discuss and/or offer constructive feedback for colleagues' work and dilemmas related to the teaching profession.

The discussions in subsequent literature circles were facilitated based on the characters and conflicts specific to the children's texts which were selected from the Literature Circle Agenda/Timeline for each session by the participants. The participants were asked to respond to questions that fellow participants or I posed. The objective of the literature circle was to invite dialogue which allowed the participants and me as the researcher to learn from and with each other. In an effort to minimize personal bias I reminded all participants that the literature circles provided a safe forum to express their viewpoints rather than to produce an expected response and that the overall purpose of the discussions was to glean a sense of group insights rather than to judge the perspectives of any individual participant. Following the literature circles, I conducted a follow up audio taped structured interview with each participant to discuss connections which she made with the texts as well as noted any information regarding racial

perspectives. In addition, each literature circle session was video taped. Table 1 provides a detailed description of the Literature Circle activities.

Participants chose from the following children's books as part of their participation in the Literature Circles:

- Bunting, E. (1994). *Smoky night*. San Diego: Voyager Books.
- Bunting, E. (1998). *Your move*. San Diego: Harcourt
- Coleman, E. (1996). *White socks only*. Morton Grove, IL.: Albert Whitman & Company
- Cooper, M. (1998). *Getting through Thursday*. New York: Lee & Low Books, Inc.
- Gunning, M. (2004). *A shelter in our car*. San Francisco: Children's Book Press.
- Herron, C. (1997). *Nappy hair*. New York: Dragonfly Books.
- Hooks, b. (2004). *Skin again*. New York: Hyperion Books.
- Hooks, b. (2003). *Homemade love*. New York: Hyperion Books.
- Hooks, b. (1999). *Happy to be nappy*. New York: Hyperion Books.
- Keats, E.J. (1998). *Goggles*. New York: Scholastic.
- Lester, J. (2005). *Let's talk about race*. New York: Harper Collins.
- Lorbeiki, M. (1998). *Sister Anne's hands*. New York: Puffin Books.
- Pinkney, J. (2001). *Goin' someplace special*. New York: Atheneum.
- Pinkney, A. (2003). *Fishing day*. New York: Hyperion Books.
- Ringold, F. (1997). *Dinner at Aunt Connie's house*. New York: Scholastic.
- Smalls, I. (2003). *Don't say ain't*. Watertown, MA: Talewinds Books.
- Taylor, M. (1990). *The Mississippi bridge*. New York: Puffin Books.
- Taylor, M. (1998). *The well: David's story*. New York: Puffin.
- Wiles, D. (2001). *Freedom summer*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Woodson, J. (2002). *Visiting day*. New York: Scholastic.
- Woodson, J. (2001). *The other side*. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons.
- Wyeth, S. D. (1998). *Something beautiful*. New York: Doubleday Books for Young Children.

All participants read the following articles:

- DeLeon, A. (2006). Beware of "black" the Ripper! Racism, Representation, and Building Antiracist Pedagogy. *The Social Studies*, 97 (6), 263-267.
- Hall, L. & Piazza, S. (2008). Critically Reading Texts: What Students Do and How teachers can help. *The Reading Teacher*, 62 (1), 32-41.

Table 1: Literature Circle Agenda/Timeline

Literature Circle Session	Readings	Guiding Questions (these questions will be used as necessary to stimulate or facilitate the discussion/conversation among participants)
Session 1	<p>DeLeon, A. (2006). Beware of “black” the Ripper! Racism, Representation, and Building Antiracist Pedagogy. <i>The Social Studies</i>, 97(6), 263-267.</p> <p>Hall, L. & Piazza, S. (2008). Critically Reading Texts: What Students Do and How Teachers can help. <i>The Reading Teacher</i>, 62(1), 32-41.</p>	<p>*Establish conversational norms</p> <p>What experiences have you had that connect to these readings?</p> <p>What do you see as the main points of the articles?</p> <p>How do they compare/contrast?</p> <p>How might these articles inform your practice?</p>
<p>Session 2</p> <p>Participants will choose 1 book per session</p>	<p>Bunting, E. (1994). <i>Smoky night</i>. San Diego: Voyager Books.</p> <p>Coleman, E. (1996). <i>White socks only</i>. Morton Grove, IL.: Albert Whitman & Company.</p> <p>Pinkney, J. (2001). <i>Goin’ someplace special</i>. New York: Atheneum.</p> <p>Ringold, F.(1997). <i>Dinner at aunt Connie’s house</i>. New York: Scholastic.</p> <p>Taylor, M. (1990). <i>The Mississippi bridge</i>. New York: Puffin Books.</p> <p>Taylor, M. (1998). <i>The well: David’s story</i>. New York: Puffin.</p> <p>Wiles, D. (2001). <i>Freedom summer</i>. New York: Simon & Schuster.</p>	<p>What questions do you have about the texts?</p> <p>How might historical events affect societal roles today?</p> <p>Can you relate to any of the characters in the texts?</p> <p>Can you understand their actions?</p> <p>Did your feelings toward the characters change?</p> <p>Are these experiences in the texts new to you?</p> <p>What feelings did reading these texts evoke?</p> <p>What is the central tension in these texts?</p> <p>How might you respond to this tension?</p>

Literature Circle Session	Readings	Guiding Questions (these questions were used as necessary to stimulate or facilitate the discussion/conversation among participants)
<p>Session 3</p> <p>Participants will choose 1 book per session</p>	<p>Herron, C. (1997). <i>Nappy hair</i>. New York: Dragonfly Books.</p> <p>Hooks, B. (2004). <i>Skin again</i>. New York: Hyperion Books.</p> <p>Hooks, b. (1999). <i>Happy to be nappy</i>. New York: Hyperion Books.</p> <p>Lester, J. (2005). <i>Let's talk about race</i>. New York: Harper Collins.</p> <p>Lorbeiki, M. (1998). <i>Sister Anne's hands</i>. New York: Puffin Books.</p> <p>Woodson, L. (2001). <i>The other side</i>. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons.</p>	<p>How does the past influence the mood of the texts?</p> <p>What implicit or explicit messages may be derived from these texts?</p> <p>Can you identify stereotypical implications in these texts?</p> <p>What implicit or explicit messages may be represented in the illustrations?</p>
<p>Session 4</p> <p>Participants will choose 1 book per session</p>	<p>Bunting, E. (1998). <i>Your move</i>. San Diego: Harcourt.</p> <p>Cooper, M. (1998). <i>Getting through Thursday</i>. New York: Lee & Low Books, Inc.</p> <p>Gunning, M. (2004). <i>A shelter in our car</i>. San Francisco: Children's Book Press.</p> <p>Hooks, b. (2003). <i>Homemade love</i>. New York: Hyperion Books.</p> <p>Keats, E.J. (1998). <i>Goggles</i>. New York: Scholastic.</p> <p>Pinkney, A. (2003). <i>Fishing day</i>. New York: Hyperion</p>	<p>How does the past influence the mood of the texts?</p> <p>Are there correlations implied between socioeconomic status and race? Are there other correlations?</p> <p>What text(s) was most compelling to you? Why?</p>

	<p>Books.</p> <p>Smalls, I. (2003). <i>Don't say ain't</i>. Watertown, MA: Talewinds Books.</p> <p>Woodson, J. (2002). <i>Visiting day</i>. New York: Scholastic.</p> <p>Wyeth, S. D. (1998). <i>Something beautiful</i>. New York: Doubleday Books for Young Children.</p>	
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Critical Reflections

In addition to the conversations based on African American multicultural children's books, the participants were asked to write a critical reflection of their engagement with the texts. These critical reflections enabled the participants to revisit their thoughts in a less public way, therefore, reducing vulnerability. In addition, encouraging the participant to de-brief in written form after the literature circle discussion provided documentation to both me and the participants of a potential change in perspectives.

Field Notebook/Journal

I utilized a field notebook to document teacher candidate reactions as they critically examined texts and the influences of the texts on the planning and implementation of lessons with young learners. In addition, my field notebook/journal included reflections upon my own attitudes and insights gained from the study.

Challenges of the Study

Encouraging the teacher candidates to question what they believe to be "truth" by critically examining their own autobiographical roots as well as texts to acknowledge their role in perpetuating stereotypes and ultimately the oppression of "others" had the potential to affect change. However, there were several challenges to this research that had to be acknowledged. These challenges were not only personal but institutional as well.

The first challenge relates to the ability of the teacher candidates, who were participants in the study, to allow themselves to relinquish their dominant role as White women and become aware of White privilege. It was important that the participants were

engaged and honest in the discussions implemented through critical literacy strategies within the literature circles. Using critical literacy to expand race discussions within texts and lived experience required trust and a risk free space to share. The teacher candidates had to be willing to engage in conversations that brought to light oppressive messages in texts and within their own lived experiences. It was my responsibility as the researcher to provide this space. According to Freire & Macedo (1987), the teacher must be willing to assert his/her own voice. “This points to how important it is for teachers to develop pedagogies that allow them to assert their own voices while still being able to encourage students to affirm, tell, and retell their personal narratives by exercising their own voices” (p. 23). Not only must the teacher candidate have the freedom and courage to assert her voice, but she must also respect the vulnerability of the students in their field experiences as they plan and implement lessons. Freire & Macedo (1987) go on to say, “[t]his suggests being critically attentive not only to the immediacy of one’s voice as part of the established apparatus of power, but also to the fears, resistance, and skepticism that students from subordinate groups bring with them to the school setting” (p. 23). This presented a risk that had to be taken, for there was no scripted approach to critical literacy.

Another challenge involved my positionality as a researcher. I had to be reflective regarding my positionality through continually determining personal biases, ideologies, and assumptions about others. Through an investigation of my autobiographical roots I had reflected on the origin of my racial perspectives. As the researcher, I needed to attempt to continually expose what I take for granted. These positionality assertions need to be recognized, acknowledged, and better understood

through the reoccurring examination of my own autobiography. This reflexive piece of writing enabled me, the researcher, to attempt to uncover my perceptions that could have hindered the qualitative research process. My position as a White middle class woman perpetuates my White privilege. Therefore, I needed to be diligent about my own taken-for-grantedness in order to be an effective researcher.

Also, I must mention, that although I did not teach the teacher candidates at the time of the study, all participants have been former students and advisees. A certain challenge with this role of authority was to acknowledge the “pleasing” stance of the participants. While facilitating the conversations it was my responsibility to also become an active member of the conversation, thereby, slowly relinquishing the authority. In other words, I had to strive to be a participant researcher.

I had to consider that dominant ideologies are ever present in today’s potential and current teaching force. It was expected that the close examination through critical literacy of the oppressive situations of the other, at the hands of the dominant class, would bring about resistance. This resistance could come in the form of guilt or resentment. Freire and Macedo (1987) discuss this limitation. “The importance of developing a politics of difference in this view is seldom a positive virtue and attribute to public life; in fact, difference is often constituted as deficiency and is part of the same logic that defines the other within the discourse of cultural deprivation” (p. 3). Acknowledging the oppressive nature of social institutions enables one to become socially and professionally vulnerable. The participants would need to be open and willing to confront this type of vulnerability. As the researcher, I needed to be diligent

about focusing on those who are oppressed rather than continually remaining focused on the oppressor. It was the voice of the marginalized I wished to confirm.

Lastly, the biases of the participants were expected, thus confirming the need for this type of study. However, through critical literacy theory strong emotional biases can be brought to the surface. Using texts to confront the exposure of these prejudices might be quite painful for teacher candidates. As the researcher, I needed to be keenly aware of the needs of the teacher candidates by building community, trust, and respect within informal discussions.

Significance of the Study

Due to the overrepresentation of White female teachers in the United States, Eurocentric ideologies and values are perpetuated in American schools, even though the student body is becoming more and more diverse. In order for all students to participate in a democratic society, teacher candidates must acknowledge and respect the various perspectives that difference can afford. Critical literacy theory provides a space for critiquing societal prejudices, stereotypes, and oppression within a particular text. Freire & Macedo (1987) assert, “[t]he prime role of critical pedagogy is to lead students to recognize various tensions and enable them to deal effectively with them” (p. 49). There are many benefits for teacher candidates to understand “otherness” represented in texts as well as within their classrooms and the world. Some of these benefits include preparing for meaningful participation in a democratic society, learning to cooperate within local and global communities, and communicating with persons who hold varying perspectives.

This study, *Reading In-Between the Lines: Exploring the Experience of Cultivating Cultural Awareness with White Teacher Candidates in a Liberal Arts University in Georgia*, represented the effort to challenge teacher candidates to relinquish the status quo and become agents of social change through the identification of White privilege, the use of critical literacy, and the development of cultural awareness. Critical literacy theory encourages one to look beyond the explicit meaning and function of a text and to critique the social and cultural implications. Learning to be critical of texts, examining both the implicit and explicit messages, is critical for teacher candidates so they in turn encourage their own students to question rather than blindly accept the dominance perpetuated by society. From these experiences, I expected the participants to demonstrate the ability to be critical of readings, to be selective in book choices that represent their classroom populations, the ability to challenge children to think critically, and to emphasize the value of student backgrounds, perspectives, and experiences. In addition the results of this study have the potential to guide programmatic changes specifically for the Early Childhood Teacher Education Program at Georgia College & State University. The results of this study have the potential to identify experiences and opportunities that encourage culturally responsive teaching practices.

SUMMARY

This study has a solid foundation in the Curriculum Studies field. The work sought to utilize the method of *currere* to disclose “new structures in the process of naming old ones” (Pinar et al, 2000, p. 520) as teacher candidates reflected upon, analyzed, and synthesized the contexts of their educational and other life experiences and how these relate to society. My research was based on the premise of curriculum as

political text in which schools are inundated with forces by which students are taught dominant perspectives and social practices. Teacher education is not neutral; therefore, this study encouraged teacher candidates to challenge their ideologies and constructed beliefs. McDaniel (2006) concurs that unreflective teachers are not likely to recognize their lack of awareness of White privilege and other social issues without guidance. For this reason, addressing the hidden curriculum is a central component of this inquiry.

Opening up, engaging in, and continuing the complicated conversations brought together the reflections of teacher candidates and the current conformist educational environment to enlighten participants on the need for culturally relevant teaching. It is my hope that teacher candidates will appreciate, value, and act upon the differences they encounter rather than perpetuate their potentially monocultural perspectives. Utilizing critical literacy theory to develop critical and cultural consciousness, through interactions with a variety of texts, has the potential to move teacher candidates toward an awareness for the need for culturally relevant pedagogy. However, because critical reflection and a questioning stance are no longer enough, I envision this work to include “moral reflection followed by ethical action” (Ayers, 2004, p. 23). As a result, teacher candidates may feel more equipped to teach towards social justice.

Curriculum studies provided the space for research that pushes towards praxis. Research within curriculum studies support a relationship between theory and practice. I believe this study represents a potential bridge between critical literacy theory and the cultivation of cultural awareness within White teacher candidates. David Sholle and Stan Denski (1993) discuss the important relationship between theory and practice.

The notion of a loop or circuit in rotation is crucial in describing the relationship between theory and practice. In the loop, theory and practice are in a transductive relationship, circulating back upon each other without canceling each other out.

(p. 301)

This study connects the practical with the theoretical. William Pinar (2006) asserts that “[t]he point of such research is to strengthen the intellectual content of school curriculum while suggesting its subjective meaning and social significance” (p. 5). Through continuing the work of scholars within the field of curriculum studies, White privilege, critical literacy, and culturally relevant pedagogy, my study aspired to continue the conversation towards equity, equality, and social justice.

CHAPTER IV

REPRESENTING THE PARTICIPANTS AND THEIR RESPONSES

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of White teacher candidates in a small liberal arts university located in middle Georgia by utilizing critical literacy theory to promote critical consciousness and cultural awareness. The intent of this study was to inform the work of teacher educators who strive to cultivate cultural awareness. Through the use of personal~passionate~participatory inquiry (He & Phillion, 2008), a specific form of inquiry grounded in narrative inquiry, the personal values and experiences of the researcher and participants coincide well with the notion of culturally relevant teaching.

The participants for the study were chosen from students enrolled in the junior cohort of the Early Childhood Education Program at Georgia College & State University. The seven White female teacher candidates were born and reared in the state of Georgia. Their stories were collected through autobiographical explorations that reflected on the roots of their personal and cultural perspectives. These served a dual purpose: first, for me to glean a sense of the participants' backgrounds and lived experiences; and second, and more importantly for the participants to reflect on the origins of their racial, personal, and cultural beliefs. I, also, collected stories through their participation in literature circles where African American children's texts were utilized. I listened and responded to the participants' dialogue as they shared with each other about race. Stories also came from the participants' personal writings of critical reflection papers in response to dialogues and experiences to determine if they would share more openly in a private setting. Finally, I engaged each participant in a structured interview to garner a sense of

how the participants benefited, if at all, from the experiences within the study. I have also taken the opportunity to record my own stories as a researcher through the use of a field journal which contained informal notes and reflections of newly found perspectives.

In this chapter, I provide an overview of the junior year of the Early Childhood Education Program at Georgia College & State University, a short personal profile of each participant including their field placement experiences, as well as an autobiographical profile for each one, critical examinations of the discussions within each literature circle session, and responses found in the critical reflection papers are documented. In addition, I have included an explanation of the relationship I have with each participant, my insights regarding their autobiographical exploration, the implications derived from their literature circle conversations, and my interpretations and reflections on the experiences of the study from the standpoint of a participant and a researcher. In order to make these components more distinguishable, I represented the overviews and data in regular type while my reflections and analysis are presented in italics.

Program Description

The Early Childhood Education Program at Georgia College & State University is a field based program that is structured into a two year cohort program. Teacher candidates come to the program having completed a liberal arts core. Teacher candidates are assigned one mentor leader who advises, teaches, and supports the students for the two years they are in this program. I am a mentor leader and instructor within the program. Teacher candidates are selected for the program based on several criteria: grade point average, experiences with young children, and an interview completed with two

early childhood faculty members. In the last two years, approximately half of those who applied were accepted. Extensive field experiences in elementary schools located in local and surrounding counties are critical to the program, making it unique from other teacher education programs. At the time of graduation, teacher candidates will have logged nearly one thousand hours of field experience in pre-kindergarten through fifth grade classrooms. During the junior year of the program teacher candidates are placed in four different grade levels and at four different schools. Each placement is seven weeks, and the teacher candidates are expected to teach a variety of lessons and interact with students through whole group, small group and individual activities. At the time of the study, each of the participants had participated in four different field experiences in a variety of grade levels.

Relevant Coursework

Each of the participants also completed the coursework within the first year of the program. The courses in the fall semester of the first year of the program included: EDIS 3414 Integrating Language and Culture, EDEC 3212 Developmental Learning: Theory into Practice, EDRD 3214 Literacy Instruction I, MAED 3000 Foundations of Mathematics, EDIT 3221 Introductory Instructional Technology for Teachers, EDIS 3415 Investigating the Natural World, and EDEC 3001 Field Placement. Spring semester of the first year all students take the following: EDRD 3215 Teaching Reading through Children's Literature, EDIS 3223 Creative Expressions, MAED 3001 Number Systems I, EDIT Intermediate Instructional Technology for Teachers, and either, THEA 3500 Theatre, MUED 3500 Music, or ARTS 4950 Art. Each of these courses is designed to support the field experiences the students are involved in during the coursework. Many

of the courses have specific assignments that are implemented into the classroom in which the student is placed. The sequence of these courses is very purposeful and attempts to meet the teacher candidates' developmental needs as they become a part of the teaching profession.

As a part of the orientation activities of the Early Childhood program all entering teacher candidates were asked to read Gloria Ladson-Billings' book, *The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African American Children*. As a follow up activity, the teacher candidates were asked to reflect upon the aspects of the book that made a significant impact on them. They were also challenged to construct visual representations of an issue, concern, or topic that most resonated with them. Constructions and personal reflections were the catalyst for group conversations that were guided by focused questions in a literature circle format.

In addition to this response to Ladson-Billings work, this study drew on the experiences found in three particular classes, two of which I taught: Literacy Instruction I and Teaching Reading through Children's Literature. The third supporting course, Integrating Language and Culture, is taught by my colleague, Dr. Lyndall Muschell. In the fall of the first semester the students are introduced to the concepts of Critical Literacy in the course EDRD 3221 Literacy Instruction I. Particularly, the notion of critical literacy is introduced in the text, *Literacy for the 21st Century Classroom*, by Gail Tompkins (2006), and discussed in small groups and through class presentations. The teacher candidates, including the participants in this study, were required to write a theory to practice reflection on the topic of Critical Literacy. The assignment's purpose was to encourage teacher candidates to make thoughtful connections to what they were

seeing in their field experience and what they were learning theoretically through their coursework. Although, this particular assignment was not an activity conducted for this study, it is important to note that it provided an introduction to Paulo Freire's theory of critical literacy for the participants.

Another course, EDIS 3414 Integrating Language and Culture, has as its goal to support teacher candidates in developing an awareness and appreciation for diverse cultures and languages. In this course teacher candidates are introduced to White privilege and explore how they have come to understand the social constructions of race, class, gender, religion, and language. This course tends to challenge stereotypical perspectives held by the teacher candidates. As a part of this course teacher candidates are expected to demonstrate their understanding of course topics through critical reflections as they focus on critically analyzing arguments related to gender and language; evaluating children's language in terms of development, dialect, gender, and language systems, and debating issues related to language, race, religion, socioeconomic status, and ethnicity. The readings in this course include *Common Bonds: Anti-bias Teaching in a Diverse World*, *The Girl with the Brown Crayon: How Children Use Stories to Shape their Lives*, *The Acorn People* and a variety of children's texts written by Leo Lionni.

Teaching Reading through Children's Literature EDRD 3215 is a course in which the following concepts are discussed: history of children's literature, literary elements, reader response, narrative imagination, genres, traditional literature and multicultural children's literature. In addition, as a part of this course teacher candidates are asked to extend what they know about examining texts critically. They have opportunities to

explore a variety of texts and are challenged to confront stereotypes found within children's texts. They are also asked to identify who is not represented in the texts that they explore and to determine who benefits from the reading of these texts. Through this course participants are introduced to Paulo Freire through reading the chapter, *Rethinking Literacy: A Dialogue*, found in the book *Literacy: Reading the Word and the World* (Macedo & Freire, 1987); Maxine Greene through her chapter, *Towards Wide Awakeness: An Argument for the Arts and Humanities in Education* taken from her book, *Landscapes of Learning* (Greene, 1978), and Bill Ayers through his book *Teaching Toward Freedom: Moral Commitment and Ethical Action in the Classroom* (Ayers, 2004), specifically Chapter 2: *Turning toward the Student: Who in the World Am I?* These selected book chapters challenged the teacher candidates' notions of how to think about the power of literacy, the educational benefits of exploring aesthetic ways of thinking, and the power and lack of neutrality in schools today.

Participants' Profiles

Linda is a bubbly young lady who has a strong Southern accent. I am Linda's mentor leader in the Early Childhood Program and have taught Linda a course each semester she has been in the program. I have also supervised Linda in her field placements. Linda loves to talk and is one you would consider a "people person." She refers to her mother, who is a teacher, constantly. She also refers to growing up in her hometown of Jesup, Georgia. She is characterized by the Dixie Outfitters t-shirt which she frequently wears to class. Linda is well liked by her classmates and seems to be viewed as very popular within the cohort.

At the time of the study Linda had completed field placements in schools located in Bibb, Putnam, Jones, and Baldwin Counties. These seven week placements occurred in the following grade levels and schools: fourth grade at Alexander II a Math and Science Magnet School, in Bibb County; kindergarten at Putnam County Elementary School in Putnam County; first grade at Gray Elementary in Jones County; and second grade at Creekside Elementary in Baldwin County.

Michelle is not a member of my cohort, but I taught her in EDRD 3215 Teaching Reading Through Children's Literature. I also had the opportunity to supervise her in field placement. I remember she was depressed one day when I visited her, and when I asked her why, she confided that she felt a burden for some of her students and the situations in which they were living. She shared a sense of helplessness and wondered if she could be a teacher and walk away from the students each day without feeling overwhelmed with their circumstances. After that conversation, she and I established a relationship rather quickly. Milledgeville is her hometown, so we share many local connections. Michelle is a thinker. She ponders and wonders and expresses her thought verbally. She also is outgoing and even invited me to lunch one day after class. I enjoy talking to her and hearing her perspectives. You know Michelle is a Christian as soon as you get to know her. Her religion is a big part of her life.

Michelle had completed field placements in schools located in Jones, Baldwin, Bibb, and Putnam Counties. These seven week placements occurred in the following grade levels and schools: kindergarten at Wells Primary in Jones County; second grade at Creekside Elementary in Baldwin County; third grade at Vineville Academy an Arts

Magnet School in Bibb County; and fourth grade at Putnam County Elementary in Putnam County.

Kayleigh is also not in my cohort, but like Michelle, I taught her in the Children's Literature course as well. Kayleigh is an extreme extrovert. She is the spokesperson for the cohort on a variety of issues when needed. I have supervised Kayleigh in her field placements, and she has a great rapport with her host teachers. Kayleigh is a risk taker and will try out the things she learns in her coursework while in the field without hesitation. She is always smiling, and she loves to talk.

Kayleigh too, had completed field placements in schools located in Jones, Baldwin, Bibb, and Putnam Counties. These seven week placements occurred in the following grade levels and schools: second grade at Wells Primary in Jones County; pre-kindergarten at the Baldwin County Early Learning Center; first grade at Vineville Academy an Arts Magnet School in Bibb County; and fifth grade at Putnam County Elementary School in Putnam County.

Anna was in my Children's Literature course but not in my cohort. Right away I could see her enthusiasm for children's books. She is very serious and intelligent. She asks challenging questions and wants to know the rationale for everything. She is a thinker and is always challenging herself to discover more innovative ways to teach children. While supervising Anna in her field placements, I can tell she becomes bored with traditional schooling and seeks to teach her students in exciting and meaningful ways.

Anna, as well, had completed field placements in schools located in Bibb, Putnam, Jones, and Baldwin Counties. These seven week placements occurred in the

following grade levels and schools: kindergarten at Alexander II a Math and Science Magnet School in Bibb County; fifth grade in Putnam County Elementary School; second grade at Wells Primary School in Jones County; and third grade at Creekside Elementary in Baldwin County.

Sarah, who is not in my cohort, presents herself as a very intelligent and thoughtful young woman. She is well spoken and can verbally express herself in ways that set her apart from her peers. Sarah is not reluctant to challenge thoughts and ideas that I have shared in classes and keeps me on my toes. She does not accept information blindly or at face value; she always attempts to make meaning for herself. She is very practical in some ways; however, she is also looks for the big ideas in all she does.

Sarah had completed field placements in school located in Jones, Baldwin, Bibb, and Putnam Counties. These seven week placements occurred in the following grade levels and schools: kindergarten at Wells Primary in Jones County; Creekside Elementary School in Baldwin County; Vineville Academy an Arts Magnet School in Bibb County; and Putnam County Elementary School.

Rebekka is in my cohort, and I have taught her in several classes as well. On occasion Rebekka has come to me for advice and counseling. She continues to have personal troubles with her adoptive family and has asked me for guidance. She confided in me early in our relationship about her mother's death because she wanted me to know that her death profoundly impacts her today. Rebekka loves to travel, and I enjoy listening to the things she has learned on her many trips. She loves to Salsa dance and leads campus events for the Salsa Club. She is very dependent on her boyfriend as he is the only family she feels she has. I have a strong connection with Rebekka.

Rebekka had completed field placements in schools located in Baldwin, Bibb, Putnam, and Jones Counties. These seven week placements occurred in the following grade levels and schools: pre-kindergarten at the Baldwin County Early Learning Center; second grade at Vineville Academy an Arts Magnet School in Bibb County; fifth grade at Putnam County Elementary School; and first grade at Gray Elementary in Jones County.

Tiffany is also in my cohort, and I have taught her a class each semester while she has been in the cohort. She loves to talk and is either really excitable or very melancholy. Her moods are very dependent on how she feels she is being treated by others. She is always one who is willing to take on extra tasks and has become a leader in her cohort. She has a contagious laugh, and teachers in the schools with whom she has been placed always comment on her enthusiasm.

Tiffany had completed field placements in Putnam, Jones, Baldwin, and Bibb Counties. These seven week placements occurred in the following grade levels and schools: kindergarten at Putnam County Elementary School; third grade at Gray Elementary in Jones County; first grade at Midway Elementary in Baldwin County; and fifth grade at Alexander II, a Science and Math Magnet School, in Bibb County.

Participants' Autobiographical Profiles

Exploring one's autobiographical roots provides an opportunity to reflect on the origin of one's belief system. As a part of this study, each participant was asked to complete an autobiographical exploration of how their racial, cultural, and personal beliefs were developed and to examine the ways that these beliefs influence their perspectives of others today. In this section, I have presented a profile of each participant based on their writings of the autobiographical exploration paper as well as the

implications that this information had for me as the researcher as I designed the experiences of the study.

Linda (*Linda's Autobiographical Paper, 2009*)

Linda was born and raised in Jesup, a small town located in southeast Georgia. In her statement, "I think that being from the Deep South really skews my view on the outside world sometimes," Linda expresses her belief that place plays a part in her perspectives. She has two significantly older siblings, and her parents were thirty-nine and forty-four when she was born. Her mother is a teacher and her father is a retired police officer of thirty-three years; therefore, she describes herself as middle class. She confesses that by growing up in a middle class home that she has always been aware of social class but that "it was never a deciding factor for me as far as judging people or picking friends."

She describes her upbringing as "sheltered." She states, "It is safe to say that I have grown-up in a strict and sheltered environment, and I think that this alone affects the majority of my views on different situations." One such example is the role of women. Linda stated that she believes that women are capable of anything they would like to do, but as far as their "family and relationship roles," the male should be the "breadwinner and the head of the family."

In her narrative, Linda shared how she feels a sense of "in-betweenness" in her being twenty years old, caught between being a teenager and an adult. She describes how she has the tendency to "dismiss the thoughts of those younger than I am because I feel that they do not know the same things I do." However, she questions this action and

states, “[w]hen I think these things to myself, I am forgetting that some people have not led a life as comfortable and safe as mine.”

Linda moves on to reflecting on her perspectives concerning language. “Language is a sticky situation for me. I know for a fact that I have prejudices about people who speak other languages. I think the thing that bothers me the most is people who come into this country and do not even bother to try to learn our language.”

Linda claims that growing up in the South and a lack of exposure to other races has had an influence on the way she perceives race. She explains in the following excerpt from her narrative.

Race and ethnicity have always been a struggle for me. I think that growing up where I have has had a huge affect on my feelings on race and ethnicity. The town that I am from is very small and had a tendency to be a little backwards sometimes and very set in beliefs on race. To be completely honest, members of the other races often frighten me. I know how this sounds, and I am not proud of it in any way. I know that this feeling comes strictly from ignorance. I know that I do not know about their cultures or ways of life and simply just do not understand their ways of life. I do know that when I was in school, I was in honors and gifted classes, and there were only two African-American students in those classes and two Indian students. The rest of us were White. I also know that the majority of discipline problems and fights were caused by African American and Hispanic students. Rarely were White students mixed up in fights or found in the office for anything more than being excessively tardy or cell phone violations. Also, my school did not really focus on

educating that much on other cultures. Facts were thrown at us about history, and we were expected to pick it up and move on. We never had any cultural diversity days or international days either. I think that this severely affected my views. How am I to be accepting and appreciative of other cultures, races, and ethnicities if I do not know anything about them? (Roberts, 2009, *Linda's Autobiographical Paper*)

Linda goes on to mention, "Overall, I feel that my prejudices and views are naïve and ignorant. I have led a very sheltered life. I do not know much about the outside world, yet I have all these views and opinions. The only explanation for these views and opinions is stereotyping and believing what I have been told. I accept the opinions of others without taking the time to form my own."

Linda acknowledges the process of reflecting in this autobiographical exploration, the insights she gained, and the continual reflection needed as she ponders the implications of her perceptions and where they originated. She states that "[a]fter writing this paper, I am much more aware of just how impressionable I am and of how naïve I can sometimes be." She goes on to admit that "[a]fter writing this and reflecting on my views, I know that I have a lot of soul searching to do, to find out what I really think about these topics."

Linda strongly correlates her perspectives to the sheltered life that she has lived in the small town of Jesup, Georgia. Like Linda, I situate many of my perspectives and their origination in the experience of living in my small hometown of Milledgeville, Georgia. As a researcher, I ponder does place and perspective merge and how it can be interrupted, especially for White middle class females in the South who take up the

profession of teaching. I wonder how “sheltered” White teacher candidates can learn to appreciate and value every student in their classrooms while understanding the cultural experiences that make them different. As a researcher and participant in this dialogue, I look to this sense of naivety as described by Linda, and I attempt to deconstruct that notion. Is it a forced blindness of White privilege or a limitation prohibiting Linda to discover her own cultural awareness? What experience can encourage one to acknowledge the limiting-ness of place?

Michelle (*Michelle’s autobiographical paper, 2009*)

Michelle was born and reared in Milledgeville, Georgia and attended Baldwin County public schools. She states that her parents took her to church “from the time I was born.” Her father is a minister. She surmises that being a Christian plays a large part in how she perceives others. She also acknowledges the significant impact that one’s family and experiences play in developing one’s perspectives.

Life is full of cultural experiences, and I believe that these experiences are what shape us into the human beings that we grow to become. The things that we come to accept as normal thoughts about different cultures are not always the truth of the matter. We were all raised with different understandings of cultures. We more than likely will express the same biases as our parents and grandparents in most situations. We have been bred to believe whatever our parents or grandparents tell us, rarely asking questions and forming our own thoughts.

(Roberts, 2009, *Michelle’s Autobiographical Paper*)

Michelle recalls her mother teaching her that she should treat everyone with respect no matter what color he or she were. In support, she shares an incident from her childhood.

“I can remember using the “N” word once when I was little, my mother was so angry with me for using that word. I told her that the reason I said it was because I heard my grandmother say it, I did not know it was a racial slur.”

She also discusses being curious about her childhood African American friend, Codija. Michelle requested that her mother “fix” her hair like her Black friend. Her mother tried to explain that her hair was different from Codija’s and she was unable to style it that way. She also asked her parents to buy her an African American doll and they did. Michelle reflects on her school experiences and mentions that she has no recollection of “culturally diverse literature” or having the opportunity to study about different cultures. She makes note that she doesn’t recall seeing “a lot of differentiation in baby dolls or posters on the walls.” She clarifies to herself, “I can’t be sure that stuff was not there because it could have been; that I did not notice them, which is also an interesting point.” Although she is not sure of the implicit messages found through the lack of diversity concerning posters and multicultural toys, she is certain in the explicit curriculum and its absence of diverse historical figures. She states, “We never studied about successful Asians or Hispanics or African Americans, we always noted the White males in our history studies.”

Michelle reflects on a time when she began to explore language and found through experience how deeply rooted it is in culture. Also through this experience Michelle began to question the contradictions she is finding within her own family.

I went through a stage in my life where I wanted to use Ebonics, and I can remember my mama saying, ‘Talk like you are White.’ You have to understand that I know my mama did not mean this in any kind of racist way, but it’s just the

stereotypes that we place on “Black” people. My mama wanted me to use correct English, but she never worried about me saying things like “Ya’ll.” I find this extremely hypocritical, but it is not her fault because it is what her mother taught her. How can someone be judged for something they grew up being taught?

(Roberts, 2009, *Michelle’s Autobiographical Paper*)

Michelle questions the contradiction brought on by her mother’s reaction to her experiment with Ebonics but wonders how to hold someone accountable for their thoughts or actions. She goes on to question this notion. “It is astonishing to think that some of the people I grew up with are extremely prejudice, and it makes one wonder: Are they this way because of their parents? Or, did they form these opinions on their own?” It appears that if Michelle senses these opinions are occurring “on their own,” then she feels there should be a sense of accountability.

Michelle does indicate the ramifications of the exclusion of diverse people and experiences within our own lives. She states, “Living in a bubble, only including the people that are the closest to the way you are, never allows for change to occur.” She wonders if children can really buy in to the idea that the ability to see “cultural differences as opportunities to learn.”

Michelle closes her autobiographical exploration by wondering about the impact she has had on others. She seems to begin to understand that because of her status as a White middle class female that her actions and ideas may not have been representative of what she thought she portrayed.

As I reflect on my life, there are many incidences that I wish that I could change.

I wish that I had challenged my peers to involve all kinds of people in our

“groups.” I wish that we could have seen cultural differences and embraced them in order to grow. Though I know that I was not prejudiced, I wonder if others knew how I truly felt. Did I show them who I really was?” (Roberts, 2009, *Michelle’s Autobiographical Paper*)

Michelle approaches her personal, cultural, and racial perspectives through the framework of religion. Christian religious principles are a foundation for her and were instilled in her by her family and church. Much like what Michelle found as she wrote her autobiographical exploration, I, too, began to sense the contradictions within my belief system and my newly formed perspectives and felt the urgency to reconcile these contradictions. Michelle also demonstrates through her writing that she questions how others perceive her and her actions. She exhibits White guilt as she wishes she could change the past. I wonder how Michelle can continue to question the many contradictions she has identified, continually reflecting on her actions, yet understanding others without placing them in a deficit perspective.

Kayleigh (*Kayleigh’s Autobiographical Paper, 2009*)

Kayleigh characterizes herself as a “unique individual.” She gives great credit to the experiences she has encountered and how they have shaped her perspectives on ability, race, and sexual orientation. She readily admits that she harbors “hidden prejudices, that I am not proud of.” She also notes the influence that her family and friends have had on her perceptions of others. She notes that her father grew up in the Georgia mountains and “never saw a person of color until he was in high school. He lived in a sheltered area, and his parents had racist viewpoints concerning race and homosexuality.”

In her narrative, she shares an experience that happened in middle school that has changed her ideas of individuals with disabilities. She reflects on a time when she and her sister teased a girl at her school. Kayleigh describes this girl as “awkward” and “weird looking.” Later on when Kayleigh was in sixth grade, she was asked to allow a fifth grade student to “shadow” her for the day. To Kayleigh’s surprise the person she was paired with was the girl she and her sister had mocked. During the shadowing experience, she got to know the girl, whose name was Jennifer, and states, “[s]he was a very awkward person, and after an hour or so into the day, I figured out the reason for her behavior. She was a special needs child, and she could not help the way she acted.” Guilt soon consumed Kayleigh, and she began to use the experience as a call to action. She became active in the “Partners Club” and volunteering at Special Olympics. She credits this action to her experience, “I am not certain that I would have been a member of the Partners Club or as active as I had been if it had not been for my making fun of Jennifer in fifth grade. That realization of how I treated her totally changed how I was as a person by making me a much better person.”

Kayleigh states that while “growing up, the majority of my friends have been Caucasian.” Like in many lunchrooms in public schools, she claims that most all of the students sat with others of their own race, the Whites would sit together, the African Americans, and the Hispanic students would sit together. She states, “Of course there were always exceptions to this because there was not a rule amongst the students that said you had to sit with your own race, but everyone just did.” She goes on to say “I had several African American friends and would even have some of them spend the night with me during high school.”

In contrast, Kayleigh cites a negative racial experience which occurred at Middle Georgia College and claims that her “openness to people of color started to change.”

On a daily basis, the African American students at my junior college repeatedly made me question myself and how I felt about African Americans. The African Americans I would come in contact with were the students who would skip class or who would walk into class thirty minutes late. ...I lived right next door to an African American male who used to blast his rap music at 1:00 A.M. (Roberts, 2009, *Kayleigh's Autobiographical Paper*)

After a while Kayleigh began banging on the wall of the dorm room, and he would bang back. Eventually, he came to her front door and banged really hard. She said, “I became really scared and called my boyfriend and made him pick me up, and we went back to his apartment.” She claims that when she was young and at home she never “felt annoyed or scared by African Americans, but when I went off to college, I started to really resent African Americans.” She verbalized these feelings to her mother who she said was disappointed that Kayleigh felt that way. Kayleigh responds, “At first, I felt ashamed of my feelings, but after witnessing two years of African Americans standing out to me in a negative way, I stopped worrying about it. In all honesty, it does make me sad that I am a little racist towards African Americans.” As Kayleigh admits her prejudices and racist tendencies, she also questions her mom’s contradictory views. “Even though my mom said she was disappointed in me for not liking African Americans, both she and my father have verbally expressed that they would not be happy if I dated an African American boy.”

Kayleigh shares another racial experience with her mom while in Wal Mart. A cashier waved her to the Express Lane, and reluctantly Kayleigh and her mom agreed knowing they were purchasing more than the allotted number of items to be in that lane. An African American woman came up behind them in line and recognized they had too many items to be in the Express Lane. Kayleigh states that the woman “loudly said something to the effect that this was the express line and that we had too many items to be there. My mom replied back that the cashier had told us to come to her line, so it was okay for us to be there. Then the African American woman hatefully said, ‘You people make your own rules anyway.’” After the incident, Kayleigh and her mom discussed this. Kayleigh recalls her mom’s reaction.

My mom reminded me that there are some people who are very upset at certain groups of people, and they will say anything in order to make themselves feel better. It made me angry that a woman could be so naïve and say something to my mom when she had done nothing wrong. My mom was simply being punished for being White. (Roberts, 2009, *Kayleigh’s Autobiographical Paper*)

As Kayleigh explored the construction of homosexuality she cites that she does not agree with her parents’ perspective. She states that her dad once told her that “God made Adam and Eve not Adam and Steve.” She expresses her growing questions around homosexuality and does not believe that it is a sin or that it is disgusting, unlike her father. She shares a time when she unknowingly made friends with a gay male. She states, “I liked him before I knew he was homosexual, so why should we not be friends now that I know he is gay? It would be such a ridiculous thing to end a friendship over.”

Kayleigh celebrates her sensitivity to others that was brought about by partnering with a special needs student whom she had once teased and mocked. She notes that she is a better person because of the experience and because of it had begun to change the way she perceived others. As a researcher and White female, I wonder if we glorify White supremacy when sharing discriminatory or racist experiences. Are we applauding White supremacy when we share the experiences that demonstrate the prevalence of racism and prejudices that exist? How do we resist this arrogance while opening up the dialogue which might lead to understanding ourselves so we may appreciate others?

Anna (*Anna's Autobiographical Paper, 2009*)

Anna was born in Rabun County, Georgia to parents who had very different life experiences. Her father lived in Northeast Georgia his entire life, except for a short time during which he lived in California. Her mother was born in Manchester, England to an American mother and an Irish father. Unlike Anna's father, she had the opportunity to travel extensively.

Anna describes her community of Clayton as offering very little in racial diversity. She says that "[u]ntil ten years ago when the Hispanic population moved into Rabun County, it was solely a White community." She notes that her paternal grandparents "were a little racist because they grew up in a time period when that type of unacceptance of others was sadly acceptable."

As a part of her story, she shared an experience in which her mom, who constantly resisted stereotypical conversations by her father's family, had argued with a family member who made a racial slur concerning the Hispanic population within the community. This argument came about as a result of one of her aunts discussing the fact

that she would like to donate her old clothes to Habitat for Humanity. This comment was countered by another of Anna's aunts. "My aunt said that she did not want to take her old items to Habitat for Humanity because the Mexicans would get them." She stated shamelessly that she would drop her items off at the Victory Home for the drunks instead of taking it all to Habitat for Humanity.

Anna credits her sense of open-mindedness to her parents' differences.

However the combination of the two of them has allowed me to be more open minded to new cultures like my mom, but also be sympathetic to my dad's attitude since he was a product of a generation where travel was only made for those with money...I feel like I have an understanding of other cultures because of my mom, but I can also look at older generations and not judge them as being 'bad people' when they were brought up based on their parents' views....I love my Dad and his family and can not think of them as uncaring individuals even though I do not necessarily agree with all of their opinions. (Roberts, 2009, *Anna's Autobiographical Papers*)

Anna's experiences of attending an international boarding school in her community allowed her to learn more about other cultures. She was exposed to students from all over the United States, Korea, Turkey, and Caicos Islands, Kenya, and many other countries. She made close friends with an African American male, Kelvin, who "flew down from Princeton University to take me to my senior prom after we had been friends for more than a year." She mentions that while spending time with Kelvin around Clayton, she was concerned how others would view the relationship. "The last thing I wanted was for someone to look at us and assume we were a couple and judge us." She

also senses that place has an impact on race relations. “Even being friends with an African American guy was enough of a challenge for a White girl growing up in Rabun County.” She also mentions that not only was she friends with Kelvin, she also befriended an African American female, Krystle. She characterizes their group as a “team.” She states:

Kelvin, Krystle, and I were quite the team together, but it was even harder to enjoy taking them anywhere around where I lived because of all the racism in my community. I hated the feeling of wondering if people were looking at a ‘black guy, a black girl, and a white girl’ and not just looking at us as best friends. It was a challenge for me at times to know where to take them to hang out. (Roberts, 2009, *Anna’s Autobiographical Paper*)

She talked about visiting Kelvin and touring New York with him. She stated that his family was very welcoming, and “they did not see me as a White girl but as one of Kelvin’s best friends.” On the other hand, she states, “I never talked about the trip with my extended family on my dad’s side that much when I returned because I was paranoid of how they would react to it.” Anna goes on to describe that her experiences in college have helped her open up “more and more to those differences among my peers.” She recounts an experience where she learned that her roommate her freshman year at Georgia College & State University would be an African American female. She states that she was really nervous about it “because I figured she would be ‘ghetto,’ and we would not get along at all.” She goes on to say that “[e]ven after my friendship with Kelvin and Krystle, it was sad to know that I still had fears like this.” Anna mentions that her fears were in vain as she enjoyed living with her roommate. She states that “[l]iving

with her was a good experience for me. It opened me up to accept people and made me realize even more that it really takes getting to know someone first before you should ever make judgments about them.” Anna also had the opportunity to study abroad in Sweden. She states that they did many things “differently in the way they ate, worked, spent free time and so much more.” However, the commonality she encountered was “that there was love everywhere.” She credits love for having the ability to break barriers. She states, “Barriers will be able to be broken down and stereotypes, racism, classing systems, and so much more would not be important because the world was full of support and love.”

Anna’s autobiographical exploration made me question how seemingly positive experiences among different cultures, such as Anna’s friendship with Kelvin, could still not prevent Anna from making stereotypical assumptions about her African American roommate whom she had not met. I have often thought that my participants and I harbored these stereotypical notions because of a lack of exposure to those different from us; however, Anna’s reflection helps me to see, yet again, that stereotypical and racial essentializing is so prevalent that even wonderful personal experiences cannot combat such strong influences.

Sarah (*Sarah’s Autobiographical Paper, 2009*)

Sarah is a very thoughtful young woman and credits herself with frequently assessing her feelings about different topics and stereotypes. She comments, “Just like most people, I would like to be able to say that I have zero stereotypes and that I view all cultures and people as equally important to the makeup of our global society. However, I

must admit that a variety of experiences over my lifetime have shaped who I am today and how I view other ethnicities and cultures.”

As a part of her biography, Sarah discusses her perspective on homosexuality and how contradictory it is to her grandparents. “Like a true Southern Baptist, they are both strict Bible-followers and leave no room for interpretation.” She goes on to say, “I haven’t directly breached that subject with them, it is in the small comments they make that I have picked up on their views over the years.” Thanks to her mom Sarah says that her views are more open-minded. She explains that her mom “really never said anything degrading about a homosexual, and although I do not think she condones the behavior, she is never condescending or rude about the subject, and because of that I have grown up to be tolerant of that particular choice.” Sarah makes a point that the conservative views of her grandparents have not “negatively impacted” her opinions. She attributes time and place to the difference in perspectives between herself and her grandparents. “I understand that they grew up in a different time period and they are used to a different set of standards and acceptable behaviors; therefore, I take their views with a grain of salt and out of respect I do not argue with them.”

In her narrative, Sarah moves from the topic of homosexuality to race. She honestly shares that this topic is uncomfortable for her to discuss. “Now, this second aspect of culture is most uncomfortable for me to discuss. I will shamefully admit that in certain instances I have jumped to making overarching inferences about an entire culture from a simple encounter or two with members of that culture.” She provides an example of this. “[C]ountless times I have found myself blushing and embarrassed because a group of Hispanic men call out to me when I walk past them. These experiences have led

me to the conclusion that all Mexican men gawk at women and enjoy making them feel uneasy.” She goes on to share a similar experience.

I cannot tell you how many times I have gone for a jog around campus here in Milledgeville without receiving a few honks or catcalls from African American men driving by. Perhaps some women would feel flattered at this blatant and forward form of expressing attraction, but personally I feel like nothing more than a piece of meat that they’re just waiting to tear into! Because of these experiences, not only do I not even feel comfortable exercising outdoors, but I also have the perception that all African American men who drive old, beat up cars and ride with the windows down and rap music blaring are nothing but thugs or gang members who I should be extremely wary of (whether or not they yell out to me as they pass by.) (Roberts, 2009, *Sarah’s Autobiographical Paper*)

In the following excerpt, Sarah also discusses her mother’s perceptions of African American students.

My mom is a teacher, and for as long as I can remember I have heard numerous stories of African Americans misbehaving. I did mention earlier how my mom is open in certain aspects, but this is definitely not one of her strengths! I suppose she has just had such awful experiences working with African American children that she has come to stereotype all of them as “lowlifes” and “lazy.”(Roberts, 2009, *Sarah’s Autobiographical Paper*)

She goes on to say that her mother’s negative experiences have not impacted her thoughts and that they often have “heated arguments” over their disagreements concerning the stereotyping of individuals or groups. Sarah confesses, “I wouldn’t say

that my mom is racist but instead that she is prejudiced because of situations that she has experienced.” In contrast to this, Sarah also recognizes that it will be difficult for her to relate to her future students’ families that come from low-income situations.

I already know that I will have trouble connecting with some of the parents who live in government housing and receive consistent and prolonged welfare. This is my most challenging obstacle, to treat not necessarily the children the same but instead the parents with equity. It’s incredibly difficult for me to spend so much time and effort trying to teach a child the value of education and of a job and providing for oneself when they go home to a parent or parents who model the exact opposite. (Roberts, 2009, *Sarah’s Autobiographical Paper*)

Sarah closes her autobiographical exploration by wondering about the benefits of the exploration. She acknowledges the process of reflecting during this process, the insights she gained, and the continual purposeful reflection needed as she ponders the implications of her perceptions and where they originated.

I enjoyed writing this paper because I believe that recognizing what those stereotypes are and what roots they stem from is the first step to overcoming them. I am learning to think in an entirely different way, and to be non-judgmental is incredibly hard work! (Roberts, 2009, *Sarah’s Autobiographical Paper*)

Sarah’s autobiographical exploration provided much for me to think about as I prepared for the experiences of this study. How do we move toward the conversation of racism, when so early in this part of the experiences Sarah already argues the difference between being racist and being prejudiced? Sarah also exhibits an attempt to question

the perspectives around her and how they impact others. She admits that she essentializes the value of entire cultural groups based on the actions of a few. I wonder how the experiences of this study will impact, if at all, the deficit view that Sarah demonstrates concerning the families of her future students. Can there be a recognition that systematic racism exists?

Rebekka (*Rebekka's Autobiographical Paper, 2009*)

Rebekka has lived through great tragedy in her life and these experiences play a large part in how she views others and the world around her. She has lived through a divorce, the death of her mother, and abuse at the hands of her adoptive parents. She describes her life as “extremely extraordinary.”

Rebekka's parents divorced when she was four, and she never saw her father again. At the age of twelve, she found her mother unconscious in her bed one morning and a few days later her mother died of an aneurysm. Because her elderly grandmother was the only family she had left, Rebekka was adopted by another family, whom she did not know. Because of tension, which continued to build in the home with her new adoptive family, Rebekka was soon sent to boarding school, which she loved. After a year, she was made to return “home” where conditions failed to improve. Eventually, she enrolled in college through early enrollment. Again she left the abusive adoptive family. She now considers herself a “loner.” She states, “though I have struggled with it tremendously, for all I have ever wanted in life was to have a normal family.” She acknowledges that all of these experiences have “influenced me in my beliefs and my judgments.”

Rebekka states that her perspectives on race were taught to her by her mother who is now mother. She credits place with having an influence on her mother's perspective and conversely on the teaching she received. "Being from the north, New York to be exact, she did not hold any type of discrimination towards African Americans. She taught me that everyone was the same, it did not matter if their skin had extra melanin in it or not." She goes on to explain that her mother's best friend was an African American male who spent a lot of time with her mother. They had shared a common interest in architecture and carpentry. Rebekka recalls her feelings for her mother's friend, Andy. "I loved Mr. Andy and I never once questioned the color of people's skin growing up."

Rebekka claims that the perspective of her adoptive parents was much different than her mothers. She recalls meeting her new grandparents who lived in south Louisiana and states that they "were very discriminatory towards African Americans." She goes on to say that she remembers her "new grandfather" telling a story of meeting a 'nice nigger.' This was a new word for her, and she states, "this was the first time I had heard that word and it shocked me." She said the comment made by her grandfather caused her to wonder why he "thought African Americans were evil."

Rebekka has taken every opportunity she could to travel. She has been on several mission trips and other trips abroad. She describes her visit to Spain as being very influential. She learned to love Salsa as a dance and as a result helped start a Salsa Dancing Club on the Georgia College campus. She also has visited Nigeria where she worked with children. Rebekka's experiences of different cultures is not limited to international travel, she also mentions her time of living in the "projects" and how this helped her gain insights that she may not otherwise have.

As a part of her study, she reflects on her beliefs and perspectives stating, “I never would have thought I was a judgmental person before I considered this autobiography. But now I know I have many judgments.” She questions one of the major areas in which she cast judgment. “I am judgmental about people who judge other people.” Rebekka appears to be empathetic to others and mentions the idea that she would like for those who judge others “to try the shoes on just for one ride.” She mentions attempting to become accustomed to living in a small town, and she has very little tolerance for wealthy people who overindulge themselves rather than giving money to a variety of causes in our society.

In closing, she reflects on the benefits of thinking through how she developed her racial, cultural, and personal perspectives. She states:

Working through these judgments and how I came about them has helped [me] realize the areas in my life that I have to work on. I am someone who does not want to have judgments placed on me or place judgments on anyone else. I still have to rework my mind to accept things my mind would not normally accept.
(Roberts, 2009, *Rebekka's Autobiographical Paper*)

Rebekka's perspectives are interesting to consider. She has had a variety of experiences in her personal life as well as her many opportunities to travel to see life outside of the United States. Rebekka's story demonstrates the impact family plays on the development of racial, cultural, and personal perspectives. After the death of her mother, she was forced to live with an adoptive family whose ideas of race were contradictory to her previous home environment. As I have interacted with Rebekka, I do see a more open-minded person who is willing to see from a variety of perspectives. I appreciated

her recognition of her tendency to judge others and how it contradicts her own beliefs.

Continual reflection is important for us all. It leads me to ponder more about the impact of family, time, and place in establishing and confronting our beliefs.

Tiffany (*Tiffany's Autobiographical Paper, 2009*)

Tiffany's autobiographical exploration poses some differences from the other participants. Tiffany's childhood, adolescence, and now early adulthood have been impacted by divorce, poverty, homelessness, and abuse. She examines these situations and how they have influenced her perspectives of others.

Tiffany recalls that her first home was "jokingly called 'the dump.'" She lived there with her maternal grandparents and great-grandparents. In the course of her childhood, she moved many times and notes that her mother went to "a beauty school and worked for a chemical company." She thinks her father worked in construction but has little recollection of his occupation. Although she remembers that "money was tight," she makes note that her parents tried to spoil her as best they could. Tiffany's mom was focused on Tiffany's early academic development and spent time making flash cards for her. She states, "Her desire to make sure that I would be more successful than she was drove her to encourage my learning although she was so busy with other things." Tiffany refers to herself as her "momma's prodigy."

Tiffany recalls that her parents would fight and that she "had seen a lot of abuse put on my mom and heard lots of fights, but for some reason I was blinded by my love of my dad." She goes on to say that her parents divorced and her mother remarried a year later. Although this marriage brought about financial security, Tiffany states that she was not happy. She moved in with her dad and began to get "the blunt of what my mom

endured when he got angry.” She returned to live with her mom. Again, her mother divorced and was forced to start over again. This new beginning brought about three additional moves during Tiffany’s first two years of high school. Her mother began a relationship with another man and informed Tiffany that they were being “kicked out of our last home” and they would be moving into a camper outside of her mother’s boyfriend’s home. Tiffany states “That’s when I took my life into my own hands.” She moved in with a friend to complete her senior year in high school. While her friend Carol’s parents provided a home, Tiffany was financially on her own and worked to purchase a car, insurance, and gas. When Tiffany graduated from high school, another friend’s mother helped her get ready for college. At this point, Tiffany also began to reconnect with her mother. She states, “I’m the first member of my family to attend college on both sides.” She goes on to say, “I feel like if I fail or give up then I would dishonor everything I’ve built myself up to be and bring my family’s hope down.”

In addition, Tiffany reflects on her relationships with friends and boyfriends. She was considered a “tom boy” as a youngster and was more comfortable with male friends. Gradually, as she matured, she became more comfortable with female friends. As a part of her story, she shared a scenario concerning the break up of a boyfriend and how a certain group of friends supported her.

When our relationship ended, it was what one of my friends jokingly called a ‘massacre’ although no one was killed. However from this, what I now call a battle, I discovered something very interesting about girls – specifically the Black girls who had become friends of mine along the way, but not very close ones.

When my “ex” started spreading rumors and devastating my life no one stood up

to him at first. One day, after it had been going on for a while, this girl named Tikki intercepted a letter, which had one of the rumors on it. She'd seen how upset I'd become after reading the letter that she flat out verbally jumped on the boy who believed it and then on my "ex" who sat beside her. The other Black girls, Nica and Nikki, joined in accusing my "ex" of lying and standing up for me. I was so surprised and honored by these girls because all of my White friends who I'd spent more time with didn't seem to have the courage to even though they knew what was going on, except for two other surprising entrances into the conversation. (Roberts, 2009, *Tiffany's Autobiographical Paper*)

This interaction really helped Tiffany become more trusting of female friends, and she began to establish relationships with these young women.

Tiffany's recollection of another story pushed her to call her mom to clarify the experience. She states that her great-grandfather was called "PawPaw Nig." She goes on to say how she contacted her mom to find out why her great-grandpa was called by that name. Her mother related to her how her grandfather, "PawPaw Nig," would "hang out with black folks when it wasn't proper for a White man to do so." She goes on to say that he chose these friends because "back then when he thought Black people were more honest people." She contrasts her maternal great-grandpa to her paternal grandpa who was "extremely racist."

In addition to her grandparents influence, Tiffany recalls her parents sharing their own perspectives about race.

My mom and dad both have talked to me about race at different points in my life. They both have respect for other races, although they sometimes make off-hand

seemingly racist comments. They explained that when they say things like that they really aren't judging the entire race. However, I grew up under the impression that it wasn't acceptable for me to like a Black boy. (Roberts, 2009, *Tiffany's Autobiographical Paper*)

Because of this, even though Tiffany became good friends with an African American boy, she stated that she never thought about them being in a dating relationship until she was confronted by another person who implied that they may have a relationship. She states that "the idea of liking him never had crossed my mind until that day because I didn't view the African American race in a romantic way." Tiffany claims that she doesn't see race before she sees personality and acknowledges the importance of resisting the notion of being "color blind." She states that it is good to see culture.

Another strong perspective that comes from Tiffany through her autobiographical exploration is the idea that her experiences such as homelessness, poverty, and abuse have given her the understanding that "no matter how pressing the environment is upon a person, it's their choice to back down or go forward." She concludes with the following recognition.

I've come to accept that all things are circumstantial – applying to the individual rather than the whole group. Although I know this, I am not free from being biased at times. I feel like I've overcome a lot of my tendencies to judge people thanks to my experiences, and I can honestly say that I try to be open-minded and approach things logically. (Roberts, 2009, *Tiffany's Autobiographical Paper*)

Tiffany acknowledges the unsaid or silent racial beliefs that come from many of our families as well as the implicit racial comments to which some are exposed. Tiffany's

financial struggles, especially, tend to have a very strong impact on the way she views others who are considered “less than” in our Eurocentric capitalistic world. Tiffany makes me confront my own assumptions about those enrolled in our Early Childhood Education Program at Georgia College & State University. Not all of our students equal middle class just because they possess White skin. I also wonder if growing up and surviving in poverty helps Tiffany understand the struggles of those who are not White. I also question how other social ills such as poverty and homelessness coincide with race.

Literature Circles: Conversations and Critical Reflections

Literature circles were chosen by the researcher as an activity to be included in the methods of the research. The purpose of the literature circles was to glean a sense of how the participants interpreted the texts they had chosen and how these same texts would begin the discussions concerning race within the group. In this section, the procedures and materials used within the literature circles have been described. In addition, I have provided a discussion of the themes that emerged from the conversations within the literature circles and the personal critical reflections which followed each group conversation. I have also addressed the implications these themes have on me, my participants, and my dissertation inquiry.

Procedures and Materials

As the researcher, I decided that the participants would engage in four literature circle discussions which would be conducted once a week for one month. As the researcher, I chose the readings. First, the participants were asked to read two articles to support the theoretical stance of critical literacy. Next, they were asked to read selections of African American children’s literature. The participants had previous experience with

the structure of literature circles and the benefits of participation from their course, Teaching Reading through Children's Literature, which they had completed in the spring semester of their first year of the Early Childhood Education Program at Georgia College & State University. I scheduled each of the literature circles in advance confirming times and dates with the participants. The first three literature circles were held in a small room at a local community center; the fourth and final one was held in my home at the requests of the participants. For each meeting, I provided refreshments, and the participants were seated in an arrangement where everyone's faces were visible to everyone. The literature circles were both audio and video taped due to the nature of the conversations, I wanted to pay close attention to the body language and nonverbal expressions of the participants as well as the conversations. Each literature circle had a designated theme: theoretical background, historical significance, race, and other social issues which are considered in conjunction with race, such as class, poverty, homelessness, language, and incarceration. At the conclusion of each literature circle, the participants were asked to write a critical reflection focusing on their personal responses to the conversations.

Literature Circle #1

For the first literature circle which was held at a local community center, the participants were asked to read the following articles: Beware of "Black" the Ripper! Racism, Representation, and Building Antiracist Pedagogy (DeLeon, 2006) and Critically Reading Texts: What Students Do and How Teachers Can Help (Hall, L. & Piazza, S. , 2008).

DeLeon's article, Beware of Black the Ripper! Racism, Representation, and Building Antiracist Pedagogy is one article in which the author critiques the cover of the

June 15, 2006 edition of the *New York Post*. The issue contained a cover as well as an article reporting the apprehension of Kenny Alexis, a black male, accused of attacking several people on the subway. The article challenges the representation of the Other in popular culture and was written to suggest ways for teachers to build an antiracist pedagogy. The second article, *Critically Reading Texts: What Students Do and How Teachers Can Help* introduces ways teachers can utilize literature in the classroom to challenge issues of power, race, and gender. The authors encourage the need for teachers to learn to acquire a critical literacy lens themselves prior to challenging their students to do the same. Practical applications of the theory are included while informing teachers how one might move beyond “cultural snippets” (Hall & Piazza, 2008, p. 38) to evaluating issues of power that become a central focus in the classroom.

The focus of this first literature circle was for the participants to begin to discuss the theoretical process and practical applications of critical literacy. In previous courses, the participants had participated in lectures and group projects concerning critical literacy but had not had the opportunity to reflect on their personal responses to how this theory impacts them or their teaching. I chose these articles to open the conversation on critically evaluating texts for implicit and explicit forms of oppression.

At the first meeting and prior to beginning the first literature circle conversation, I led the participants in an activity to establish the norms of engagement in the group. Due to the sensitive nature of the conversations that were likely to come from the literature circles, I believed it to be very important to establish an environment that would support honesty and openness. The group norms which were established by the group were as follows:

Be respectful
 No eye rolling or scoffing
 No raising hands or interruptions
 Opportunities for all to speak
 No sleeping – be present mentally
 Vegas Rule (What is said here stays here)
 No phones in use
 No apologies necessary

These group norms would be the guiding framework for the conversations. The norms happened organically as several participants made a suggestion, and then the rest of the group offered their consensus or disagreement with it. These group norms were posted each week in a prominent location in the meeting place. In accordance with the desires of the group it was made clear that new norms could be added as we continued to meet. This is supported by Sarah's suggestion, "Can you bring this every week, and we can always add but honor the ones that we already have?" The group agreed; however, no new norms were added throughout the duration of the meetings.

Literature Circle #2

The second literature circle was held one week later at the same community center as the first. At the conclusion of literature circle one, participants had selected a book to be discussed at the second literature circle. Their choice was made from the following African American children's books: *Smoky Night* (Bunting, 1994), *White Socks Only* (Coleman, 1996), *Goin' Someplace Special* (Pinkney, 2001), *Dinner at Aunt Connie's House* (Ringold, 1997), *The Well: David's Story* (Taylor, 1998), *The Mississippi Bridge* (Taylor, 1990), and *Freedom Summer* (Wiles, 2001). To accommodate for their decisions, multiple copies were provided of each book.

A common theme found among the book choices was that each text represented a specific historical component. The guiding questions I proposed for this literature circle

session were based on the historical aspect represented in each text and how it has impacted society today. Because of their life experiences and the age of the participants, I felt that it was important to establish a historical foundation for the participants.

Literature Circle #3

The third literature circle was held at the community center one week after literature circle two. At the end of literature circle two, the participants were asked to select a book that they would read and be able to discuss during literature circle three. The participants chose from the following African American children's books: *Nappy Hair* (Herron, 1997), *Skin Again* (Hooks, 2004), *Happy to be Nappy* (Hooks, 1999), *Let's Talk about Race* (Lester, 2005), *Sister Anne's Hands* (Lorbeiki, 1998), *The Other Side* (Woodson, 2001). Again, multiple copies were provided of each book to support the decisions of the participants.

Each of the books I chose for this particular literature circle was focused specifically on the context of race. Most of the books examined the physical traits of the African American race such as Black hair and skin tone. *The Other Side* dealt with the dichotomy between the Black and White race. Although each text contained race as a main focus, other issues like segregation and hate were also evident in some of the texts.

Literature Circle #4

The fourth and final literature circle was held in my home at the request of the participants. For this meeting we first had dinner together, then gathered in my living room to begin our circle conversation. As a result, I felt that the environment was more relaxed than the previous literature circle gatherings.

At the conclusion of literature circle three the participants were asked to choose an African American children's text to read and to discuss during literature circle four. The participants chose from the following books: *Your Move* (Bunting, 1998), *Getting through Thursday* (Cooper, 1998), *A Shelter in our Car* (Gunning, 2004), *Homemade Love* (Hooks, 2003), *Goggles* (Keats, 1998), *Fishing Day* (Pinkney, 2003), *Don't Say Ain't* (Smalls, 2003), *Visiting Day* (Woodson, 2002), *Something Beautiful* (Wyeth, 1998). As before multiple copies were provided of each book.

The focus of the fourth and final literature circle was on the potential relation between race and other societal issues. Specifically, the texts delved into issues such as homelessness, poverty, language, incarceration, and gang violence. My intent in choosing these texts was for the participants to be confronted with the issues that effect society as a whole but which are often found predominately in the African American community. Another motivation for including these texts was to hopefully convey that many of these ills within the African American community have become institutionalized and perpetuated by Eurocentric America.

Themes Emerge from Literature Circles

As I read and transcribed the conversations that took place in the literature circles, I found that several themes emerged. The common threads which emerged from the participants conversations included: White victimhood, evidence of racial stereotyping and essentializing with connections to the historical treatment of African Americans, White guilt, making meaning through personal experiences, recognition of racism, and connections to culturally relevant pedagogy through multicultural literature. These threads emerged as the participants engaged with the text of the articles and books

provided. Structured and probing questions provided a catalyst for intense conversations. These themes were also evident in the critical reflections which the participants completed following the literature circles.

In this section, a description is given for each of the themes, supporting evidence from both the dialogue of the literature circles as well as responses given through personal critical reflection, and a description of my understandings of the contributions of the participants.

White as Victim

In several exchanges within the first literature circle it was very obvious that the notion of White victimhood would emerge rather quickly. I equated this to a sense of denial or a disassociation to racist practices that are held by many White Americans and invade our schools and society as a whole. Tim Wise (2008) in his book, *White Like Me*, addresses this phenomenon. “Whites, in order to maintain a sense of ourselves as good and decent people, living in a good and decent society, have been compelled to deny, deny, deny when it comes to racism” (p. 64). This sense of denial to the responsibility of Whiteness and what the ownership of that term involves is obvious in the following excerpts from our conversations.

Sarah: I thought, would this kind of article be written if a White man had done the same thing, like if a White man had gone in the subway and killed those people. Would there have been an article saying he was psychotic or whatever? The thing I had a problem with was how can the two policemen that were there help it that they were White? That to me it was the luck of the draw definitely how this person looked at this picture, but I think it is a little too harsh. Just because they were white and he was black.

Holley: You are talking about the article, Beware of Black the Ripper, and the picture in the paper, of the Black male that committed the crime and the White police.

Sarah: If it would have been a White guy and Black police would anyone have written this article?

Holley: Why do you think?

Kayleigh: I think people are sometimes quick to judge like that is racist, and when I read the Black the Ripper article the part where it says “the example of the mental model is when someone sees an African American man approaching at night on the street.” Basically saying that that person fears them. When Anna and I were driving over here tonight I was thinking you know what, it kind of depends on how a person is dressed at night. Yea, if I see a Black man with pants down to his ankles wearing a huge shirt and big jewelry just like a gang member, I would be afraid, but if a White man wore the same thing, I would be afraid, but if the Black man was dressed in a tie and shirt and looks presentable, I would not be afraid, so I don’t know if its his skin color that makes me afraid, I think it is more of his attitude and how he comes across. Like hey this is how I present myself to the world. I know I have to think about that when I put on clothes. If I put on something that shows off all parts of my body, people are going to label me as something that I might not be. That upsets me a little bit.

Sarah: Like when they were saying how that we are incarcerating African American men at an alarmingly high rate, I am thinking, hopefully our justice system is not incarcerating them for no reason. They did something and these police in this story were doing their job. They were arresting someone that killed or hurt people. It was not because he was Black was why they were arresting him, it was because of his actions. (Roberts, 2009, Literature Circle 1)

In the very beginning of this discussion a definite attempt to justify the actions presented in the photograph found in the newspaper is quite evident. Although these participants have been exposed to the theory of critical literacy and have even assessed examples within the community such as billboards, newspapers, and websites, they still are reading the article and reacting to the newspaper article through the eyes of Whiteness.

Considering the reactions, I tried to direct the thoughts of the participants toward the historical underpinnings of resistance among African Americans.

Sarah: It is just really hard for me, personally, because I wanna teach all students, but I have a hard time with students and families that feel like they are owed something, and I am thinking that you have no idea what your ancestors went

through. Yes you hear about it and you learn about it through history and stuff but you have no idea the struggles, and then you are taking advantage of what they went through and I realize I am laying a blanket over African Americans, a lot of them feel like my ancestors worked for your ancestors and I am like Hello. As long as you are willing to work hard and do better for yourself, I do not care what you look like. (Roberts, 2009, Literature Circle 1)

Sarah's comments which describe the concept of the victimization of all Whites because of acts of the past are supported by Linda's comments as well.

Linda: With what Sarah was talking about and Anna, I think people, there's this idea like "you owe me", and there's a we versus you, I think people forget the number of actual slaveholders in that category was the minority. It wasn't like all White people owned slaves. We traced it back in my family, and we didn't own slaves. My grandma talks about her great grandma out in the field picking cotton too. Its not like all Black people were slaves and all White people owned slaves, and I think that is what we forget a lot of the time. For us, we don't necessarily teach this, but I wonder, like sometimes, if it is not stressed enough in middle grades and at the high school level that is wasn't all White people and not every single African American was a slave, I think that a lot of times that is overlooked. (Roberts, 2009, Literature Circle 1)

Sarah and Linda show a complete disassociation from the actions of the past and imply that African Americans exploit their past to gain advantages in today's society.

Alice McIntyre (1997) speaks of this in her work with White pre-service teachers.

"Rather than explore the deeper dimensions of white racism and take seriously the historical dominations of whites in this country and the underpinnings of power in the continuation of that domination, the participants constructed a version of whiteness that blamed Blacks and identified whites as victims" (p. 110).

Sarah: I think some people, relating it to the article about critically reading a text, I think that something that we need to be aware of, and I definitely think that teaching about culture and appreciating cultures, I think that is a big deal and I hope to do that, but at the same time we can't over do it to the point where White people look like such a bad race. I was not born in that time, I did nothing to any African American that they are blaming me for, if you are going to get sensitive about your race I am going to back up and say whoa. There is no history like that between us. I feel like you can't overdo the culture, it's important, and when you talk about culture, it can't be Black vs. White, it needs to be culture. Because I

think that is what comes to mind first, like we need to culturally talk about black people, that does not include all cultures. (Roberts, 2009, Literature Circle 1)

In the statement above, Sarah continues to argue that culture needs to be inclusive while protecting Whites from becoming victims and being made to look “bad.” The article represented the White police officers and the Black male who was arrested; therefore, that may have an impact on the origin of her comment. However, Sarah completely denies any responsibility in the historical treatment of African Americans. There also is a sense of fear in that highlighting cultures in our schools will somehow paint an unfavorable picture of the White race.

Michelle takes the concept of white victimization in another direction as she describes hiring practices and decisions. She explains that she would not make decisions based on color but on codes of dress and respect for oneself.

Michelle: There is still some of that left. I really believe that eventually that is going to die out. I hope it does for everyone. But my thing about that with the guy with the pants, I mean if I was hiring, if I was looking to hire someone, it would not matter if he was Black or White but if he came in there with his pants and his behind showing he would not have gotten hired. Take some pride in who you are and pull your pants up. It would not have made any difference to me if I was hiring. (Roberts, 2009, Literature Circle 1)

Michelle implies that racism will eventually “die out.” As a part of this, she finds herself considering the discriminatory hiring practices of African Americans that were brought up by another participant. She assesses her reaction from the perspective of the person hiring. She bases the decision on how an applicant presents himself. I wonder if a race and the culture of that race is represented in part by the presentation of oneself?

Following literature circle one, the participants were asked to complete a personal critical reflection of their reactions to the conversations within the circles. The theme of

“White victim” was evident in these first reflection papers as well. One example is found in Sarah’s comment.

Discussions such as these are extremely enjoyable yet difficult for me to participate in. It’s not that I have trouble contributing or feel uncomfortable voicing my opinions, but topics like these just make my blood pressure rise! We are asking the kinds of questions you could discuss all day long and still not find an answer. I generally become personally offended when discussing racial issues, because the experiences I’ve had in my life have made me feel like I was born racist and should automatically walk around ashamed and guilty. I feel that because I am white I have to tread thin ice around black people – be extra polite, flash extra large smiles, and do everything in my power not to offend them. I think this is ridiculous! (Roberts, 2009, *Sarah’s Critical Reflection Paper*)

In the statement, which was made privately as she reflected upon the prior conversations, Sarah shares very intimately that she gets really upset when discussing racial issues. She explains that she feels victimized in that she was born of privilege and for this reason she should feel guilty. She feels she must put up a façade to avoid offending Black people that she meets.

In the second literature circle, the conversations turned toward making associations with the children’s books that each participant had read prior to the meeting. White victimization was not as prevalent in this dialogue as it was in the first literature circle; however, the feeling eventually surfaced when a few participants voiced that they felt that White people were portrayed in a negative light in one of the African American children’s books, *White Socks Only*. This is seen clearly in Michelle’s description of the text.

Michelle: I read the same book that Kayleigh did and I saw it a little differently than maybe what she did. There were parts in it that were assaultive to me as a White person if you relate it to today’s time. Then maybe not so much but if you relate back to now there is a portion where after Black little girl steps up and takes her shoes off and is about to get a drink of water the white man comes in the story and like he initially beats her, he abuses her, and at the end on the very last page all of the Black people came around her, and I was just like if this is really taking place

was there not a single White person that would brush her off either? You know they would have picked her up and said get up, stand up like the Black people did. I think about it that way. Because it just made it so much black/white in this book. It is like all the Black people are the ones that are being abused, they're the one's that are being victimized, and that is what this was like. If I related it to today there are still, I believe, some Black people that feel like they are being, that the same thing is happening to them that the White man is always beating them down. That is the way I look at it and, did you see that at all?

Later in the conversation Michelle voiced further concern for how the presentation of this text to students could lead to the victimization of Whites.

I would not read this book to my class. I don't feel like it this is addressing anything that they deal directly with that they would be able to say, that they would be able to coincide it with. You know like, I think they would see so much of oh that White man just threw that Black girl on the ground. I think they would see the same thing I saw, I mean look at the pictures. They are scary.

As the dialogue among participants continued; however, Michelle begins to question how a child would interpret the book and if it could be different from her own interpretation.

But what is wrong, I feel like, I feel like the child, like would the child see it the same way we thought, the same way I thought, when they look at that? When they look at that White man throwing that Black girl down, I know I said that a while ago, I said a child will look at this, and when I started thinking about it, would they really? Or is that the way I look at it so I say that is the way others will look at it?

*This excerpt is one example of how as the conversation evolved that Michelle had the opportunities to hear other perspectives. In this particular one, Michelle obviously began to reevaluate her initial assessment of the text, *White Socks Only*. She began to open up to other ways of interpreting the text as well as giving others the opportunity to make their own decisions.*

Linda's critical reflection paper following the literature circle, she also responds to the text, *White Socks Only*. Her comments support Michelle on the idea that the White

characters were stereotyped in a negative light in that particular text. Linda takes issue with the way the only White character is portrayed and questions the sensitivity to her own race.

Linda: During tonight's discussion, the point that really seemed to stick out in my mind and bother me was the discussion about stereotyping White characters in multicultural children's literature. I think that it is important for us, as teachers to remember that stereotyping is not one sided. I think that sometimes we focus on it being aimed just at African Americans, but in one of the books we discussed tonight, it was obvious that the White characters were being stereotyped and not in an OK way. I was kind of offended. I think that the whole education world is so careful to not step in the toes of African Americans or Hispanics or other minority readers, but we overlook the White community. (Roberts, 2009, *Linda's Critical Reflection Papers*)

Linda communicates that she feels that White people are negatively portrayed or could be potentially stereotyped based on the actions of the man who threw the small African American girl to the ground when she drank from a "White's Only" water fountain. Linda obviously feels as if very little sensitivity is given to the White community.

This theme of White victim continued into the third literature circle. Again Sarah questions the impact of multicultural literature and how it might affect the dominant perspective. She was speaking to the conversation that involved the books, *Happy to Be Nappy* and *Nappy Hair*.

Sarah: Like yea, you're starting something. That is what we talked about last week; about how you bring in books that you think will go along with what you're doing in your classroom. And I am not saying don't ever teach cultural stuff, but if you have a class that's appreciating each other for who they are why put something in their heads to potentially call someone nappy headed?

Here, Sarah refers back to a conversation from literature circle two where she had questioned the motivation and purpose of sharing multicultural texts with students.

Her comments cause me to wonder if sharing multicultural literature such as Happy to be Nappy and Nappy Hair do indeed perpetuate a stereotype.

Later in the conversation which developed as a part of literature circle 3, Sarah responds to the group after Linda had shared a personal story about her being from a working class family. She had explained to the group that her parents and grandparents had worked for everything they had. Linda had gone on to share how her parents had taken extra jobs to get Linda and her two older siblings through college. In connection to this, Sarah questions the American dream.

Sarah: And that is the American dream, should we change that because some people don't follow the American dream? You do everything equal?

Rebekka: What if you grew up in a family...

Holley: Are you hot Sarah or are you just thinking?

Sarah: (fanning) My blood gets really hot when we talk about these things.

Rebekka: What if you grow up in a family that doesn't value education? No body around you values education, where do you find that incentive to go on to higher education to actually have that determination to do that. Where does that come from? Especially if all your life your teachers have written you off, like nothing is going to come out of you. That's just how it is. It is how you begin to view education. I don't know. I think that is the difference between like your family, and your family and some of the other families that we are talking about, you know what I am saying?

Sarah's response to Linda argues the value of the "American Dream." She actually has a physical response to this controversy, and she becomes angry as she verbalizes her feelings. As the facilitator and researcher during this conversation, it was most exciting to see another participant, Rebekka, question Sarah's conception of the American Dream. Values and beliefs were being openly challenged.

Finally, by the fourth literature circle, there was little conversation that surrounded the theme of Whites as victims. Sarah, however, continues to struggle with her feelings as they relate to this theme. This is evidence as she describes herself and acquaintances.

Sarah: I think that it has to do with the fact that people, I feel like us, we are all pretty accepting so we don't really realize how many people aren't accepting. Our voices don't get heard. We like Black people, you know. I think it's the squeaky wheel again.

Sarah continues to argue this point in her critical reflection.

Sarah: Not to say that there aren't any people out there who are racist, but I really feel that my generation is so open to all kinds of human differences, and often we are left wondering why so many people not of our generation continue to hold those historic grudges. Color is just a result of how light reflects off our skin; perhaps anyone who sees that as a determining factor of success or rank should do a little reflecting of his or her own.

In these statement, Sarah implies that "liking Black people" is enough. She contends that eventually racism will die out with the "older" generation. She feels that her generation is much more accepting of all types of differences.

Evidence of Stereotyping and Historical Significance

Within the conversation of the first literature circle, there was evidence that some of the participants made generalizations based on race. Some of the other participants counteracted that notion with the explanation that the actions of people speak louder than the color of one's skin. This essentializing was most prominent and telling within some participants' speech. It has become my understanding that these spoken generalizations represent the subconscious or unrecognized discriminatory thoughts within the participants who made them.

Historical implications were also evident in the conversation. It was interesting and informative to see where and when some participants referred to history for a frame of reference and when they did not. As James Baldwin (1998) remarks in his chapter in the book, *Black on White: Black Writers on What it Means to be White*, history has everything to do with today.

On the contrary, the great force of history comes from the fact that we carry it within us, are unconsciously controlled by it in many ways, and history is literally *present* in all that we do. It could scarcely be otherwise, since it is to history that we owe our frames of reference, our identities, and our aspirations. (p. 321)

Evidence of this is seen in the following dialogue which focuses on violence in the Black culture

Holley: Where do think this violence or notion of violence comes from in Black culture? (a prompting question based on a comment made by a participant)

Kayleigh: You grow up with it, like you said you get spanked and that's fine so you kind of do the same thing. People scream at their kids, so that is how they learn to deal with their problems is screaming it out and stuff. That is what you know so that is what you do. If everyone around you is yelling and fighting and stuff like when you're angry that is what you are going to do too. On the playground, when someone gets mad, they are just going to yell. Black kids are just gonna go in their pack, and there's two packs at each other just fighting and stuff because that is what they see at home, that is what I think.

Sarah: This is like a really weird, but I am just wondering. Back when slavery was happening think about the fact that slaves were not really educated; therefore when they did something wrong they were punished violently in a physical way, where if the master's son smoked a cigarette, they would get a verbal warning or some kind of a restriction, a more educated punishment per se. So I'm thinking that maybe that that type of punishment has manifested into the culture?

Kayleigh: OK then, I am prejudiced. But I was at Wal-Mart again because I go just about every day, and with my boyfriend, and we split up to do our shopping. I was in the school supplies and looking at pens to give my students a going away present because I like to do that for them. So I am looking at the pens and I heard "excuse me" and I did not look because I don't work at Wal-Mart, but I heard it again,

“excuse me.” So I look, and there was this African American man standing there, who was probably about my same age, and he comes up to me and goes, Hey, what’s your name, and he tells me his name, and I said I don’t want to talk to you, because I just got that feeling and that can be called being prejudice or women’s intuition call it what you want. So, I told him I did not want to talk to him I just wanted to shop, and he said well I’m going to be on the radio Sunday, and I just wanted to meet you. I just wanted to make friends. You don’t go to Wal Mart to make friends. So he keeps at it, and he says, “OK, I will see you later,” and I didn’t answer him, and he said, “I’ll see you later [with emphasis],” and I said, “OK, bye.” So I called my boyfriend and told him he needed to come over NOW; and I started to cry. It was just you know what if Michael had not been there. I would have been afraid that when I would have gone out to my car, I would have gotten raped. I’m so sorry, and I don’t think that I might have thought that if a White guy would have said that. I do have a prejudice towards Black people. I remember in high school one day I was in 9th grade I was walking down the hallway after lunch and somebody smacked my butt. I don’t know who it was but when I turned around there was a bunch of Black guys, and I went to the principal and there was nothing they could do; and I thought you have to walk through the halls at school wondering if somebody is going to smack your butt or not. That is not the way to live. I was not afraid of 5 to 10 year old Black kids, but when you start getting up there where they can do something to you, I am afraid. So, it would be hard for me to be a high school teacher because I would be afraid. It seems like still I am older and more mature, and I have that fear, but for older people it is still there. I don’t know if that is just the experiences that I had or if it just someone who is bigger than me or stronger than me, I don’t know.

Kayleigh describes Black children congregating in “packs” on the playground and equates this to a conversation with an African American male at Wal Mart which she perceives will lead to an eventual rape in the parking lot. She questions where the fear of older African American males comes from and reflects on a negative experience she had in high school. She seems to judge all African American teenage and adult males based on the actions of one student who had touched her inappropriately. In contrast, Sarah seeks to explain violence within the African American culture by giving it historical significance. However, when Sarah speaks of historical actions by White slave owners, she sees no connection with herself. It is as if one part of history could impact something today, but not the part of history that holds her accountable for being White.

In the second literature circle, a conversation about invisible lines of segregation in the community stemmed from the book, *White Socks Only*. Kayleigh and Sarah discuss an incident that happened at Magnolia Park, a new apartment complex in Milledgeville that houses predominately college students.

Kayleigh: But at Magnolia Park I know some Black people started to move in and everybody started complaining and people started getting their cars broken into and people started blaming the Black people.

Sarah: Ok, but are you blaming them because they are Black people or are you blaming them because they are messing up the property?

Kayleigh: Both.

Sarah: It just happened to be Black people, but if a White person had done that to the property I would be upset too.

Kayleigh: Yes, but we just assume. Hey, it's the Black people, and it was them, but.

Sarah: We associate the color with the action, I think.

Kayleigh: And, even though they did do it; that is who I thought it was first. It was them but.

Kayleigh is very honest about her stereotypical thoughts concerning who she suspected to be responsible for breaking into the cars at Magnolia Park. She also notes that other students began to complain when Black people began to move into the apartment complex. These comments demonstrate evidence of existing stereotypes and how they affect one's judgment and perceptions of others.

In literature circle three, the group discussed the books, *Happy to be Nappy* and *Nappy Hair*, two books which address physical characteristics of African Americans. These two books prompted discussions related directly to the perpetuation of stereotypes. Linda, chose *Happy to be Nappy* as her text for the week. She continually questioned the purpose of the text and the ramifications it could have on students. She believes that the

book could belittle Black students who feel that their hair is nappy. I challenged her, however, to think about why the book was written.

Holley: Are they confronting a stereotype?

Linda: Maybe, I guess, because at the same time I thought it was belittling it a little bit like making it I don't know. But I just thought it was um because, I don't know, kids are curious about other hair types and stuff. So, I thought it was good for that, but stereotypically you think of African-American's hair being big and all over the place, and I thought that it was interesting that she chose the title, *Happy To Be Nappy*, which is a stereotype in itself, and I guess it was like embracing it, and like saying, "Oh we like our hair like this." It was really, really strange.

Kayleigh: This reminds me of when that guy on the radio called the Black basketball players "Nappy-headed hoes," and he got fired for it. Kind of like when people say the word nigger, if I say that word it is bad, but if a Black person says the word it is OK. To me it is kind of like that word, and nappy takes the context of it.

Michelle: Did you pick up on that he was sort of like preaching a sermon. All the people were like "Yes, Lawd!" I loved it, and I don't know why. I read it the first time, and a friend was at my house, and I was like read this book with me, and you read just the "Yes Lords," and my Mama was dying laughing. She said, "I don't know what you are doing." We had fun with that book. There is like Ebonics that is what I picked up on mainly. That's a stereotype, right? When you go and look at a Black person, you're like they are probably not going to speak proper English. I mean before they even open their mouths. Don't you do that? I mean I do it. I'm just saying you look at them, and you think their probably not going to do it.

Once the stereotype of nappy hair was addressed other participants began to make connections to slang terms and language. This exchange grew to illustrate a misconception and stereotype which is held concerning Ebonics. The questions arose as well as about "who" is allowed to use certain words and who is not. What makes the use of some words acceptable or unacceptable, offensive or not?

The discussion of stereotypes continued into literature circle four. This began when Tiffany shared a story about how she typically shops in what she called a "Black store" (*Literature Circle 4*, Roberts, 2009). She claimed that her body shape is much

like that of many Black girls. For this reason, I began to wonder what the group would consider a White store. Therefore, I asked the group. The group responded, “The Gap.” To extend this and probe further I asked.

Holley: How do you think an African American male or female might feel when visiting a “White” store.

Kayleigh: I think that they’d be afraid that the sales people would be thinking they are stealing something or following them.

The group named a store, the same store, a store viewed by many as carrying with it a status of social standing. It was interesting to hear Kayleigh’s response to the first part of the question. Her response cast a negative stereotype on African American males and females. I wonder how stereotypes divide? I also wonder if the people in the “Black store” thought that Tiffany may shoplift?

Later in this conversation, Rebekka shared a personal experience about a Black young man she once worked with at Golden Corral. She went through a lengthy discussion about how intelligent the man was and how his aspirations to attend college were discouraged by other Black people claiming that he was “acting White.”

Rebekka’s story described above reminded me that there are stereotypes of Whites that carry a negative connotation to other races.

White Guilt and Fear

James Baldwin (1998) writes that “no curtain under heaven is heavier than that curtain of guilt and lies behind which white Americans hide” (p. 323). This “curtain” and its existence are evident in the conversations within the first literature circle. Here several participants express feelings of guilt when confronted with issues of race. They struggle with their own attachment to the racial injustices within society. Robert Jenson

(2005) in his book, *The Heart of Whiteness: Confronting Race, Racism, and White Privilege* discusses how deeply rooted the guilt of Whiteness can be.

Somewhere down deep in our guts we understand that in an oppressive system such as white supremacy, the unearned privileges with which we live are based on the suffering of others. We know we have things because others don't. We may not give voice to that feeling, but it is impossible to ignore completely. (p. xx)

The following conversation depicts the presence of guilt and attempts by the participants to understand the ramifications of these feelings.

Sarah: I think our generation is more open about it. No offense to you (Holley Roberts), but it is almost like our teachers now and the teachers that I have had in the past are just like, don't be prejudiced, and I am like wait. Why are you telling me not to be? I'm not. Like, why are you telling me? You're the one that's prejudiced. I am standing here feeling so guilty and heart broken over something I didn't do in the first place.

Anna: I want to go off of what Sarah said I was in a very uncomfortable place, which I had never been before, when I was placed with an African American teacher in one of my placements this year, and I was excited about it because I wanted see that perspective, it is not very common to have that, and so I was very excited about it. It was at the time of the election, and a comment that she said to me that has stuck with me, and the majority of that class was African American, and we were watching the election on TV, and she had another African American teacher come in. I was watching the TV, and she turned to her, and right in front of me and said WE [with emphasis] have been waiting so long for this, and really, really stated the WE, and I could not help but feel like Ouch! I felt like I couldn't clap, I felt like I shouldn't comment on it because I felt that I was not worthy enough to be happy. Like they had claimed this day as theirs not mine, not anyone else in the United States unless they were African American. I couldn't help but feel that way, because she really enunciated that we. It just changed my opinion about, it made me feel, I felt horrible, I was like I have not done anything to make me feel bad.

Sarah resents the feeling of being "made" to feel guilty. She obviously has been challenged by teachers to confront White supremacy, and she resists the idea that someone might think of her as prejudiced. She reiterates the fact that racism is

generational and will soon go away, just because time passes. In addition, Anna shares a recent personal experience from her field placement as she was “made” to feel like an outsider during the airing of the latest presidential election results. She claims that she felt excluded from the “we” in the conversation between two African American women. As the researcher, I wonder for Sarah what the point of entry will be for real discussions on White supremacy and dominance. For Anna, I question how the feeling of exclusion can inform her of the perspectives of those who have been traditionally excluded.

In critical reflection papers as well as the conversations, participants commented on having the opportunity to talk about race in a safe environment. The appreciation for this experience is connected to their fear of such risky topics.

Michelle: I think we are often afraid of what we think and believe. We fear that we do not have enough experience to be able to host a valid opinion and we often shy away from discussing topics of this sensitive nature. Being within this controlled environment and being able to share with our peers openly was very beneficial for me and allowed me to see other perspectives and to realize why I believe multicultural literature is so important.

Linda: I was very relieved about how our first session went. I was relieved to find out that my peers and classmates had some of the same opinions that I have about race and prejudices. I think that it is considered very taboo for us to talk about these things because we’re teachers. We’re supposed to love all and treat all of our students equally no matter their race or background. It’s a struggle.

Tiffany: As far as the issue of prejudice versus racism, I’m glad that we were able to discuss that because I have felt guilty in the past for some of my own reactions considering my background.

The participants are able to share their feelings of fear of discussing race and praise the experience of being able to open up and share their perspectives. They were able to see this as an opportunity to evaluate their own values by considering the perspectives of others. Is it because they were in an all White environment that they felt they could communicate so openly?

In literature circle two, the comments turned toward the fear of introducing African American multicultural texts to students that depict negative actions by Whites in history.

Sarah: Ok, if you are writing a book now days, and you're going to write about African American history or whatever, what are you really accomplishing? Are you helping kids today get over that and have that appreciation for all colors? Or, are you teaching everyone to either be a victim or feel guilty because of something that happened previously? What are you getting at when you write a book?

Sarah seems to be looking at this point through conceptualizing who benefits from sharing this history. Clearly, it cast a negative shadow on White people, so she proposes that maybe it would be best to not share African American historical informational texts or historical fiction texts.

In literature circle three, one of the children's books, *Sister Anne's Hands*, dealt with the concept of guilt on the part of the students in her class. One student was hateful toward Sister Anne because she was Black, and other students in the class felt guilty even though they did not participate in the hateful actions. I purposefully referred to this part of the story, to see if the participants could empathize with the students in the story.

Holley: There is one thing that was mentioned when Tiffany was talking I would like to elaborate on if you will let me, the book mentions that students felt guilty about the actions of one student. Have you ever felt guilty about actions of someone of your race group and that maybe you felt you did something wrong as a race or a group and you felt guilty personally even though you didn't have a position in it at that time? Were you ever made to feel that way? One thing that comes up a lot is slavery, and I know that we have talked about that at some point. You know like, "I didn't own slaves, you weren't a slave why should I worry about it," but did any of you feel a sense of guilt because of your race?

Sarah: All the time, all the time.

Holley: So you feel guilty all the time?

Sarah: Maybe not all the time, but I don't know.

Holley: Why is that?

Sarah: You know we talked about this before in our other thing (previous literature circle), but like you owe me because of what you did to my ancestors.

Kayleigh: Do you get mad when they say that or do you feel guilty? Do you feel bad or do you just get kinda pissed?

Sarah: Both.

Kayleigh: I get pissed. I don't feel guilty.

Sarah: It's not like, "Oh," I'm sorry kind of guilty. It's kind of like I wish I could have told my ancestors not to do that, but I'm sorry. That happened a long time ago can you forgive me? I didn't do anything.

Anna: I feel guilty depending on the situation that I am in. Like I have the hardest time. I don't know if anyone else does, but for me when I started my student teaching placements, I really had this really bad sense of guilt whenever I would see like a Black janitor like the ladies who work in the school. Its all White teachers and all the janitors are Black, and I did everything in the world to talk to them and be so friendly because I just have this fear in me that like I need to work on it. I guess because I feel like they are looking at me like look at you like you are so lucky you're the teacher and here I am cleaning up after everyone. That bugs me. I just feel really guilty about that. I mean who knows how, I don't know. I am really privileged and in situations like that. Yea, I do feel guilty.

Later, in her critical reflection, which was completed privately following literature circle three, Linda shared her feelings of White guilt.

Linda: The thing that stood out most to me about this discussion/session was the question about whether or not we feel guilty about being White. I just honestly don't feel like I should feel guilty about the color of my skin, how I was born, of no choice of my own.

Building on literature circle one, when Sarah exhibited a disconnect between her link to history as a White female, she recognizes that she represents a remnant of that history. She demonstrates guilt and mentions that she would like to be forgiven. Anna believes that there must be something to be guilty about when the majority of the faculty in schools are White females, yet all of the janitors are Black. Her recognition of this

imbalance reminds me of my own “awakening” at a conference in Callaway Gardens. At the conference, all of the White professors were being served by an all Black wait staff. These insights, recognition of a racial imbalance and of White privilege, are encouraging to me.

In literature circle four, the conversation turned to “silent fences” within our own families. Our group began to identify implicit examples of racism within our society, our families, and ourselves referring to them as “silent fences.” We borrowed this idea from the children’s book, *The Other Side*, where an actual fence separates a young White girl and a young Black girl who long to play together, but have been told by their parents not to cross the fence. In the story, the girls meet, talk, and become friends on top of the fence. An example of one of the silent fences that was mentioned was interracial dating. The participants discussed how parents would react if their White daughters dated African American men. Anna explains why she sees this as a “silent fence.”

Anna: Yea, just because, not because I’m saying that that’s bad, I have no problem with it. I mean I might if I meet someone. It’s just that silent thing of maybe not I just don’t think about that at all. If I meet like a group of people I am probably going to gear towards the White guys. Not because I have anything wrong, I feel so bad talking about it.

Holley: That’s what we need to talk about.

Anna: It’s simply the thing of how I know that in the back of my mind I know it’s like hey mom hey dad, hey all my dad’s family, oh! It’s that type thing so.

Sarah: Is that society or is that human nature?

Anna: I don’t really know.

Anna seems to have guilt even talking about the conflicting ideas of having an African American boyfriend and how she has been reared. She seems to be torn between how she really feels about interracial dating and how her parents, especially her dad’s

side, would react to that reality. Anna stated in her autobiographical exploration that her dad's side of the family was racist and were not exposed to any other race in the northeast part of Georgia. Anna really does not know how to resolve the guilt she feels.

Recognition of Racism

The recognition by some participants that racism exists began to emerge within the first literature circle. At each subsequent literature circle, the conversation concerning the acknowledgement of racism increased. In several conversations, the idea of institutionalized racism was evident. With all White participants, this acknowledgement was critical. Once recognized, then one must choose whether or not to react to the injustice that racism affords. Paul Kivel (2002) in his book, *Uprooting Racism: How White People Can Work for Social Justice*, illustrates the importance of White people recognizing that racism exists.

The only way to treat people with dignity and justice is to recognize that racism has a profound negative effect upon our lives. Noticing color helps to counteract that effect. Instead of being color neutral we need to notice much more acutely and insightfully exactly the difference that color makes in the way people are treated. (p. 13)

During literature circle one, Tiffany faces the reality of racism as she acknowledges that from her personal experience that discriminatory hiring practices do indeed exist.

Tiffany: When you asked if it was still hard, or if it was really that hard, for a Black man or Black woman to achieve anything. It is a little bit, cause you have to think about the fact about the biases in hiring them. I was at work the other day, and I was just doing whatever, preparing something and one of the people that worked there came by and said, "Oh, this Black guy came by and applied and he was dressed nice and looked pretty nice. He didn't have his pants hanging down below his waist. He was actually kind of clean cut." And then a little later another Black guy came in and he was like, "Oh, that guy isn't getting hired, because he

was wearing like baggy jeans.” They weren’t hanging down or anything. He didn’t shave. His hair was a little messed up. It’s summer. You have to think about it, I didn’t even think about it before a couple of my classes. Somewhere, you have to think about who is hiring and the biases they have. If I was hiring, I would not consider skin color, but the people who are hiring are a higher generation.

Tiffany shares with the group that while many people like to think that all Americans have an equal opportunity to succeed, it is not the truth that she knows. The story Tiffany shares demonstrates biases in the work place. How might this story counter the notion that all have equal access to the American Dream?

In literature circle two, much of the conversation centered on the reaction to the text, *White Socks Only*, a book which clearly describes acts of racism. Earlier, I noted that Michelle claimed that she would not feel comfortable sharing this text with her students. Kayleigh responds in a way that addresses that not sharing this text would be unacceptable. She seems to believe that children need to know about past acts of racism in order to make informed decisions.

Kayleigh: I don’t think it would be fair if you didn’t introduce this book because White people were mean to Black people in certain times and like they need to know that. I mean I think its not fair if you just show White people being nice during slavery because they will wonder why did so in so say it was a big deal, oh well they got fed for free, you know got clothes. So, if they only see the sweet things about slavery or the Jim Crow time. I think they do need to see, but I agree with you Sarah about books that are just like all like this.

Rebekka expands this notion by questioning the recorders of history. She recognizes the one-sidedness of history and that it is most times presented from the White male perspective.

Rebekka: A lot of times, I was a geek back in high school, so I was looking through my history book and a lot of times the writers of history books are white males. Maybe one African American female and a white female, but most of them are white males. So like history is being retold and retold because only one side is being done.

Holley: Do you think this is purposeful?

Michelle: I mean maybe there is some reason that these contexts are being taught in the classroom because no one wants to upset the apple cart. Nobody wants the children to ask those questions, nobody wants them to think differently than they have always thought before. Nobody wants them to form their own rationalization because if they do then that might make me uncomfortable, and we don't want to be uncomfortable. I think, I wanted to say this, I was talking about how I feel when I read think. Think about how blind some of the children in our classroom may feel when we read some of the things that we read to them think about when they look through the pages and all they see are White people, and that is all they see. Think about how they don't connect and how blind they feel. Just as I told you when I was reading this I want to see it differently and I can't, and it upsets me, because I can't see it different. Think about that child when they are sitting there reading it and they can't see what they are supposed to see. It is almost like having a disability, like that is the way I see it. Like, they would say what is wrong with me? I mean turn it around the other way and think about how the other child, that is the way I feel about it, you know. Think about how that child is feeling if I am reading something and they can't connect with it, the way I felt with that (*White Socks Only*).

In her critical reflection paper, Rebekka provides more of her insights into her feelings regarding the dominant view of American history in social studies textbooks.

Rebekka: I think it is unfair to limit the children's perspective because as they grow older, and perhaps learn the truth, they might feel betrayed. I know I did. It is like we are lying to the children, and saying that only one race lives in America: The Anglo Saxon Race.

Kayleigh acknowledges that hateful acts happened at the hands of White people.

She sees the importance of accurately depicting all facets of history. In addition, she acknowledges the value of sharing this information with students.

Rebekka acknowledges that children are educated through the dominant perspective. Deconstructing the positionality of the history textbook writers is a beginning step to critically assessing the information within the text. Michelle refers to institutional racism, in my opinion, by referring to "nobody" in her comments. Although Michelle refers to "nobody", she is very aware of the power that they possess.

In literature circle three, Rebekka shares from her experience of living in the housing projects. This experience not only counters the idea of the American dream but also provides evidence of the impact of environmental racism.

Rebekka: Yea, it is a lot harder to move up, like I have managed to work in the projects and actually lived in the projects in Milledgeville and its like definitely possible to work yourself up the social ladder, but there are so many societal and cultural opinions in your way that it is really hard. You say you live in the projects and this is what is supposed to happen because we can't get away from this. That's a common thought that's spread out among housing projects. You grow up with that and what encourages you to do that unless there is something different going on, a different thought process. So I think it's really hard, really, really hard you know.

Building on the individual racism mentioned in Literature circle one and the power of the White male exhibited in society, Rebekka helps us consider the prevalent racism found in the mindset and housing of many. Rebekka really challenged the group to think about the false idea that if one is determined enough and will work hard enough then they WILL succeed.

Concerns about the concept of racism continued as Sarah pondered a question that appeared in her critical reflection paper but which was not discussed within the literature circle.

Sarah: The thought struck me – how would our discussions differ if a Black person was in the room? Would I feel as free to express myself? Or would I be hesitant and weary of offending that person?

In addition in literature circle four, Anna discusses the danger of remaining silent within society. She refers to the text she read as well as a previous discussion and the assumptions she and others have made about racism being more evident in older generations.

Anna: The book I read was *The Other Side*. I remember we were discussing that book about the little African American girl whose mother told her she shouldn't go play

on the other side of the fence where a white family lives. I feel like that book made me start thinking, cause we were discussing about how maybe both parents really wanted their children to play but there's that thing of societal rules, you know like you don't play together. But I've started thinking about that a lot, about how we always think of it as being a generation thing of anyone who is older has always thought, oh yea, the Black child shouldn't play with the White children, or my White child shouldn't play with a Black child. We always think of that when we think of how it used to be, but I bet there were a lot of people during that time that actually were OK with it, but they just never spoke up because of the society thing and so that's just made me start thinking a lot about older people in the community and how they were probably advocates of that all along because I always used to think small minded of it. They didn't want their children playing with other children and vice versa, but maybe all along, it's just that, not trying to relate it back to Hitler, but it only took one person to brain-wash all these people, Maybe it was the whole society got brain-washed by a few people. Seriously, this has really been in my mind because not everyone felt that way. It was good for me to read that book and see it from that perspective I think.

At the conclusion of literature circle four, Rebekka's reflection refers to a certain "awakening" that she feels she has had.

Rebekka: Before I would not have even thought about the whole issue of race, consciously of course, because I just figured everyone was the same and everyone believed that. Even though I knew that was not true, my head was programmed to be blind. One good thing that has come out of this is that now I see it. I see.

Sarah's question is significant and has many implications. To me it was interesting that because Sarah claims that her generation is no longer racist, then I wonder why she would feel as if she would offend someone? Anna, too, is grappling with the idea of race. She is beginning to realize that racism could be something purposeful created to suit the needs of a few people. She acknowledges the power of a few and the influence of societal expectations. Jensen (2005) explains this realization.

Before one even gets to the questions of how white teachers and administrators sometimes build cultural and/or linguistic chauvinism into curriculum and classroom practices, we can see that the system is structured in many ways that disadvantage many non-white students. (p. 19)

Making Meaning from Personal Experiences

As we have learned through the autobiographical exploration papers, personal experience informs our perspectives concerning our personal, cultural, and racial beliefs. In the first literature circle, the participants began to make personal connections in conversations that centered on stereotyping and white privilege. The participants attempted to make meaning of the conversations by connecting these issues to their lived experience.

Michelle: It is definitely their environment but I don't believe that it has anything to do with them being African American because I have known several kids that I went to school with, Black people too, the environment at home was messed up, and at school they fought all the time. I don't necessarily think that you can generalize and say oh well they're Black and they are beating up people at school so their must be something going on at home. I just don't think you can make that generalization just because they are African American.

Kayleigh: I have two stories to tell about Wal-Mart (laughter). You see all kinds of people, and this was a few years ago and will stick with me forever. My Mom and I were shopping at Wal Mart, and you know those 20 or less check outs. Well we had a little more than 20 items, and the lady said, "OK come on." Mom said, "I have more than 20 items," but the cashier told us that was ok to come on. Another African American lady gets behind us in line and makes a rude comment and said, "You all get to make your own rules and you all just get to do whatever you want," and I said, "Excuse me, but the cashier told me I could go." She just went off on us because we were White, and supposedly, we are making our own rules because we decided that we were allowed to go in the 20 items or less line because we were White but this was not the case at all. I was probably 14 or 15 years old. I still remember it and it still makes me mad. Then another race story, it wasn't, no it was, I am a little racist, but I guess you can't say you are a little bit racist, you either are racist or not, so I am a racist.

Sarah: Prejudiced.

Kayleigh: Prejudiced, Racist?

Sarah: I think prejudiced would be..racist would be not allowing someone an opportunity because of their color, prejudice is the way you personally feel because of the experiences that you've gone through. I would not consider you a racist.

Each story is part of Michelle's and Kayleigh's way of viewing the world around them. Michelle's story denotes her experiences in a mostly African American high school which gives her the personal experience to challenge another participants' tendency to generalize all Black people based on the actions of a few. Kayleigh's story reminds me so much of my own reaction to my visit to the Country Buffet that I explored in my autobiographical exploration. Neither, Kayleigh nor I, at the time, realized the skin we are in speaks volumes to the Other. Kayleigh's experience of being challenged by an African American woman becomes woven into her perspectives, based on the absence of the recognition of White privilege. Most intriguing to me in this exchange is Sarah's challenge to Kayleigh that she is prejudiced rather than racist. Yancy (2004) discusses this exact reaction and terms the person who interprets racism in this way as a "goodwill white" (Yancy, 2004, p. 69). He states the following:

In short, goodwill whites define racism simply as racial prejudice. By not understanding racism as a system of advantage based on race, the goodwill white avoids the considerable pain, guilt, and shame that might be elicited by a definition of racism that clarifies how she benefits from racism and perhaps serves as an active, intentional, though unconscious, participant in it. (Yancy, 2004, p. 69)

It was very interesting to me that Kayleigh was attempting to take responsibility for her racist thoughts, but Sarah rejected that for her by calling her prejudiced. Like many others, it leads me to the conclusion Whiteness and its privileges are very protected, therefore limiting the opportunity for one to challenge it.

Towards the end of the second literature circle, Michelle began to realize the importance of “seeing” the books that we were discussing from a different perspective. She becomes very aware of the impact her lived experience and background play on her perspectives.

Michelle: I really wish I was able to put on a different set of eyes, you know read it as a child and see what they saw, because I am an adult so I see it differently. I am also a female and also white, I also grew up in Milledgeville, Georgia. You know all those things that make up who we are. As I read it I wished I could be somebody else or be able to get what they get out of it. There’s a song called *Give Me Your Eyes*, and it’s a Christian song. I really wish that I could have another person’s eyes to see if I could get something different out of it. It is really hard being who I am to get out of it what I wish I could.

I was so excited to hear Michelle’s longing to see and interpret the text from another perspective. Her realization that her Whiteness as well as place affects her ability to see in a certain way is monumental. Michelle makes a connection to her strong religious upbringing in her response.

In the third literature circle, the subject of Black hair monopolized the conversation. It was interesting to hear the concern the participants had on a White teacher reading such a book entitled, *Nappy Hair*, to their students and the implications this could have on the students and them as White teachers. Their major concern was whether or not would African American families and children would be offended?

Michelle: How do you say that to somebody? I might say to Sarah, like Sarah your hair is frizzy but I would never go to my Black friend and be like man your hair is nappy today. I would just never say that. What is that? What is that? Why? Why would I say Sarah your hair is frizzy today? I can’t say that to my Black friends. Why can’t I?

This statement makes me wonder where the line is between sharing a text with students in which they can see themselves, such as young African American girls, and

coming across as disrespectful. Can White teachers engage in these conversations? Do they have the credibility?

In the last literature circle, it appeared that the participants were more comfortable sharing personal connections. Tiffany, in particular, made several connections to the texts she had read for the discussions. She shares that many in her family have been incarcerated, and she can closely relate to the girl in the text, *Visiting Day*.

Tiffany: I think since it is an African American family that maybe it was trying to say maybe sometimes they can't go and see their family members in prison. But at the same time I know in my own personal family, we can't afford to go see my uncle in prison sometimes, or as much as we want to. I really connected with the book cause my uncle, which the author originally, she had the situation with her uncle, so I read like the authors' note and I was like oh cool. I have a connection with the author. That was the race and poverty, or socioeconomic thing that I saw, I mean it could be seen that way.

She also goes on to share how she lacks many experiences because of her family living in poverty. She tells the group a story of her recent travels with Sasha, her friend from Trinidad, and another friend who is an African American male.

Tiffany: Well in a way like I think about all the things that I haven't been able to do. Yea, my family is poor, and my family just doesn't travel because we don't have the means to, but a lot of times there are, like Sasha who was with us, she's from Trinidad, and she telling me about all these things she has never done, and it's a lot more than I have never done. She has done a lot of stuff that I have never done, but at the same time, she has done a lot more that I have done. When I was talking to her she would ask like these really random questions, and I would know the answers to them, and she would say how do you know this? You are so smart, and I would say no not really it is just stuff people told me and I remembered or I thought it was cool so I guess like that whole drive to Florida was a big interesting discussion because I had a girl from Trinidad and my African American friend who I had never talked about race with. I guessed talking about it with both of them really opened my eyes in a lot of ways, but with that book comparing it with Sasha and I, I can really see that connection.

Tiffany shares her story of growing up in poverty and visiting her family members in prison. She makes strong personal connections to the text and is able to empathize

with the characters. Not only can she empathize, but because of her conversation, other participants and I can glean a new meaning to the circumstances shared within the text. She also mentions how she and her friends talked about race, which they had never done, because Tiffany chose to share what we had been talking about in our literature circles. This story makes me wonder, what aspects of the activities included in the research helped Tiffany feel more comfortable talking about race to her African American friend and her friend from Trinidad?

Connections to Culturally Relevant Teaching through Multicultural Literature

In the conversation of the literature circles, it was interesting to hear the evolution of the perspectives as time dialogues continued over time. As ideas of racism and prejudice emerged, and the ways in which race is represented in the media were explored, as well as personal experiences were deconstructed and questioned, it became apparent that thoughts were turning towards how these ideas impact the participants' abilities to teach diverse students. It was also interesting that as we continued to meet in the literature circles that the participants increased their abilities to read the texts with more critical eyes.

Michelle: I think that this goes along with what we are talking about. I think the prejudices that we form are for a reason, I think that things that happen to us in our lives form those prejudices, and that does not make you a racist. Just because you have a prejudice against a Black male saying something to you in a sexual way or saying anything to you period, coming up to you in Wal Mart or anywhere that you are, just because they come up to you and you form that prejudice, right off, I feel uncomfortable and there is a reason that you are uncomfortable. Just because you feel uncomfortable doesn't make you racist. I cannot sit here and tell you that I am racist. But do I have prejudices? Yes. There are people I don't like to be around because I feel uncomfortable, and I don't feel like that makes me a wrong person. I don't feel like that makes me any smaller than not having those prejudices. I think the goal is, the thing that we have to do is, is we have those prejudices those opinions, but we can't put them off on our students. We cannot go into our classroom with the mindset that of you know every Black student in

here is one day going to be a Black male that is going to harass white females in some way or another. We can't do that. We can't educate with that mindset. I think we have to find that line, and I think it is a fine line, and I have not necessarily found it yet, but I am still looking. I think when we are picking out our literature, and we are picking out all the things we choose to integrate into our classrooms, we have to put our prejudices on the back burner. We have to say just because one person treated me this way, or just because this is the way I felt at one time, does not mean that I cannot educate with a different perspective.

Sarah: I think that as long as you are distantly reflecting on yourself, and you don't ever get out of that pattern of doing that, even if you are a twenty year teacher, and you're saying I am so experienced, I don't have to reflect anymore, its OK that you have prejudices, don't feel guilty. It is just human nature. It's gonna happen, and you either choose to act on the prejudice or you choose not to. Also it is important to show your students that you're not perfect. The kids will appreciate you more, and they will be able to connect to you more. It's like hey I can relate to her because I have that same prejudice or I have a different prejudice, it happens but what can we learn from that.

Michelle: And maybe being able to talk about those within the classroom, that's taboo. We don't talk about racism or prejudice in the classroom and my question is what is so wrong with it. It exists. Why can't we talk about it? People are killed everyday for who they are, what they are, what color they are, what orientation they are. There are people who are killed everyday for it. So why aren't we talking about it? I was watching, it was on Oprah yesterday. I was watching those moms of those boys that killed themselves, and that was some of the things they were saying, why aren't we talking about these things in school? Why is it such a taboo? Why can't it be addressed and that's part of my thing, I want to be able to talk to my class about it, if it is a problem or even if it is not a problem, let's talk about it. Let's make it real.

Holley: I think the article mentions that we try to make school neutral and...

Sarah: That's not what it is. That's being fake that's not being true. That's not human nature.

Tiffany: Their ignoring the actual problem instead of trying to fix it or work towards it, and that's a big problem that we have in a lot of aspects not just this one, but a lot of the time we would much rather ignore it than try to fix it, or get the ball rolling to try to fix it.

Sarah: I think that it is not about taking this verbatim and incorporating it into your classroom but it just starts your real thinking about what you think and what you do, and I think that is the important part is that you be more reflective.

Anna: I think books can open discussions.

Michelle shares the realization that while she harbors prejudices, they must not be cast upon her students. She talks in terms of “finding that line” which reiterates to me, as the researcher, movement in her perspectives. Michelle also challenges the idea that discussing issues of race in schools is considered taboo. She sees the importance of dialogue about difficult and complicated social issues. The conversation concerning neutrality in schools and how that is a façade allowed the participants to consider how everything we do in schools is benefiting some and marginalizing Others. The importance of multicultural literature is discussed as well as how books can open conversations with students. It is interesting to hear the dialogue of these participants as they talk about their own life experiences and how these inform their stereotypical perspectives of others; then to hear them speak of how to value the students in their classrooms. I wonder what impact the experiences of this study have had in rectifying this disconnect and helping to bridge the personal with the theoretical perspective for them?

Anna builds on the concepts of making classroom connections as she explains that while she may not feel a personal connection to the text, *Smoky Night*, her students might, and that should be her focus. This notion moves the group past initial conversations where most of the comments were based on how the participants felt, rather than thinking about the impact on the students in their classes.

Anna: I get frustrated when I read this book because I don't enjoy it and I am like is it me, but there is no way that I can relate to this. I mean I have lost a cat before, but that does not really relate. I have never lived in the city where anything like that, and I definitely if I did live in the city I would not live in this area and I guess you think it was during the LA riots, so I have never been in an apartment complex that caught on fire, but one of my students might. And that is the thing, just because I don't enjoy this book and don't get anything out of it, that is a

really hard thing to judge is if whether your kids will. That is what you have to think of.

Rebekka is very keen on the idea of learning from multiple perspectives. She believes that presenting only the dominant view limits us in our perspectives and ability to think critically.

Rebekka: I think that if you were not to use multicultural literature, not use different perspectives, we would all be teaching our children one perspective and that doesn't encourage them to think for themselves, and think critically about different situations. It's like laying out directions and saying the only way you can get to this certain place, you can't make a right or left turn, or you will be lost. That is what happens when you read the dominant view. All the other different views then you can say hey there are different ways we can go and you make your own opinion and go from there. I don't think we should be telling children what they should necessarily believe, I think they can discover that themselves. I think they can discover moral and ethics themselves.

In support of Rebekka's comments, Linda shares a story of how the students in her kindergarten field experience were being taught from the Eurocentric perspective.

Linda: I totally agree and my kindergarteners learned that this year, that Christopher Columbus discovered the world. I came in one day, and she was like look what they can do. Tell Miss Linda who discovered the New World. They all blurted out without missing a beat, and said Dick Chaney. And then she had to guide them, and she was like Christopher..and then they were like Columbus. We are teaching that. I just learned last year too in my World Civ class that he didn't, and I was like, OH! And I kind of wanted to say something, but at the same time I was like, I didn't know what to say. We are still leading them down the primrose path.

Many insights were shared by each of these participants. Gaining an understanding of valuing the students in your classroom, recognizing the benefits of teaching students to view society from multiple perspectives through multicultural literature, and being confronted with the inaccurate teachings of history were all shared and discussed. I can now see that the conversations had been building during each

meeting. I had no idea the books would lead our conversations in so many different directions.

In her critical reflection following literature circle two Michelle thinks more deeply about what she understands about the use of multicultural literature.

Michelle: I have always known that including multicultural literature into the classroom is important but I have never really known why or to what extent. When I was able to make the self discovery last week that I had read a text that I could not relate with and understand how that made me feel, I began to understand how important it is for me to realize the relevance of including multicultural texts into my classroom. I am beginning to understand that just as some of the texts that we are reading don't relate to me directly, many of the common "feel good" books that we share on a yearly basis within our classrooms don't meet our students where they are.

Michelle's statement is evidence that while coursework in the program has supported the benefits of multicultural literature in the classroom, it wasn't until Michelle was placed in the situation of exclusion did she truly empathize with students who are continuously marginalized by traditional literature.

In the last literature circle, I continued to hear the conversations becoming more and more related to moving beyond a single personal view to more open minded perspectives. The participants' potential students, and their gifts and needs, maintained the focus in the conversations. Evidence of this is found in Michelle's statement.

Michelle: I really want to talk about the book, too. It really made me just THINK [with emphasis]. I read *White Socks Only*, and it wasn't because I liked the book because I really didn't like the book, but it was just the place that it put me in. You know that point that I can't find myself in here. Where am I? And that helped me as a teacher because then I can say what if I read to my students and they can't see themselves, they can't find themselves anywhere and they are just like why are you reading this to me? This makes no sense, so that helped me grow as a teacher and from now on when I look at a book, I won't just say, "um can I find myself in this book", but I will say, "can I find myself, can I find you, can I find you, can I find you, can I find you?" I won't just look at it from one perspective. I'll try to see it as best I can from everyone's perspective. So even

though I really didn't like the book but I would read it to my classroom, because I know that there are some children that can see themselves in there.

Michelle's conversation has evolved from her saying that she would not share this text with her students to learning a wonderful lesson from it. Even though she could not see herself in the text, she was able to understand how many children who are not White feel left out in many classrooms all over the country. Michelle was able to empathize with those that are traditionally excluded because she herself had been excluded. Her attitude changed dramatically over the course of the literature circles.

As the literature circles ended and final reflections were completed, I was able to see that the participants had indeed begun to use a "critical lens" to examine text. This is evidenced in the following quote from Linda's critical reflection of literature circle four.

Linda: During tonight's discussion, what struck out the most to me was the discussion on illustrations. I found it very interesting that the actual words could tell one story and that the illustrations could tell a completely different one. I think that it is important that when we pick out literature for our classrooms, that we study both parts very carefully. I think that neglecting to see a whole book puts us at risk for being culturally assaultive and/or stereotyping our students' culture or completely neglecting it all together.

Linda was engaging in critical literacy practices as she assessed the impact the illustrations play on the "meaning" of the text. She realizes that when we as teachers do not engage in these practices that it could have a profound effect on our students.

Implications for the Researcher

Having completed this portion of the research study, I have identified several implications for me as the researcher. First, the autobiographical profiles of the participants have provided insights for me as I cultivated relationships with each of the participants. Because of this reflective experience, the participants and I have a deeper understanding of the origin of our personal, cultural, and racial beliefs. In addition,

because of this knowledge, I can better place into context the comments and reactions of the participants within the literature circle conversations. The literature circle conversations increased in complexity and intensity at each meeting, causing the original questions I had posed my to become more multifaceted. I began to question how can we discuss African American literature and give voice to the Other with all White participants, and how can we share our lived experiences concerning racial discrimination without glorifying the discriminatory occurrences. The results of the conversations were more far reaching than I ever imagined. In addition, the critical reflection papers added increased meaning to the dialogue from the literature circles. The participants' papers provided a written expression of the impact that the dialogue as well as the questions had on each one of them. As I listened to these young women attempt to make meaning of their White world, I made many connections to their thoughts, fears, and prejudices.

CHAPTER V

INTERVIEWS WITH THE PARTICIPANTS

This study represents my efforts to challenge White teacher candidates to relinquish the status quo and become agents of social change through exploring the experiences provided by the study and their implications in cultivating cultural awareness. Several bodies of literature provide the foundation for the study; White privilege (Kunjufu, 2002; McIntyre 1997; McLaren, 1999; Tatum, 1999; Wise 2008; Yancy, 2004), critical literacy theory (Comber 2001, Dozier, Johnston, & Rogers, 2006; Freire, 1974, Freire & Macedo, 1987; Macedo & Steinberg, 2007; Vasquez, 2003, 2004) and culturally relevant pedagogy (Ayers, 2004; Delpit, 1995; Freire, 1998; Gay, 2000; hooks, 1994; Ladson-Billings, 1994, Palmer, 1998; West, 2004). Two strands of inquiry were utilized to support the study, narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) and personal~passionate~participatory inquiry (He & Phillion, 2008).

The participants of the study were seven White teacher candidates who were born and reared in Georgia. At the time of the study, they had completed one year in the Early Childhood Education Program at Georgia College & State University. Each participant wrote an autobiographical exploration to examine the roots of their personal, cultural, and racial beliefs and participated in a series of literature circles for which each participant was asked to read and discuss African American children's literature. The participants also responded in a more personal way to each of the literature circle discussions by writing critical reflection papers following each meeting.

As I continued to collect stories from the participants through their autobiographical explorations, conversations in all of the literature circles, and through

their written critical reflection papers, I began to feel that I had more questions than ever before. I decided it was important to conduct a structured interview with each participant to gain further insight into their perspectives of the study. These interviews were held individually with each participant in my office at Georgia College & State University. The structured interviews consisted of four questions which supported two main goals: first, to establish whether or not the activities within the study had challenged the participants' personal, cultural, and racial beliefs; second to determine how participation in the study has or will impact their interactions with students as well as the creation of their classroom environments. The underlying focus, however, of the questions was to determine if the participants had gained or increased their awareness and/or understanding of White privilege and dominance.

In this chapter, I provide the participants' responses to each of the interview questions. In addition, a rationale is included following each question. As in Chapter 4, a narrative interpretation, which is presented in italics, follows each of the responses demonstrating how these responses connect to other activities within the study. I should also mention that as the opportunity presented itself within each interview, I asked several follow up questions in an attempt to clarify or challenge the participants to contemplate their responses.

Question 1: In what ways do you think the experiences of this study have influenced your personal, cultural, and racial beliefs?

The purpose of the first question was to determine whether or not the activities within the study had any effect on the participants' personal, cultural, and racial beliefs. The intent of this question was to provide the researcher and participant with an

opportunity to reflect on the activities in general and to connect them to personal beliefs and values. The experiences that I was referring to in the question were the autobiographical exploration papers, participation in the readings and literature circles, and the critical reflection papers. In this section, I include crucial excerpts from the participants' responses to the interview question as they explain the impact or lack thereof of the experiences of the study.

Interview with Linda (Roberts, 2009)

Linda came to my office for the interview early one summer evening one week after the final literature circle. She was running late from her summer babysitting job and called to let me know. She was a little distracted and before we began the interview she wanted to ask me several questions about a grade she had received in her art class at the conclusion of spring semester. I answered her questions and advised her on how to approach her situation. Once she felt that she had received the necessary advice she was looking for, she said, "Ok, I'm ready." At that point, I explained the procedure of the structured interview, that I had four structured questions that I would ask, and that her responses would be recorded. She was "more than ready" to begin, so we started the interview. Linda was very talkative and expressed herself openly within the interview.

Holley (Researcher): In what ways do you think the experiences of this study have influenced your personal, cultural and racial beliefs?

Linda: I definitely think and I wrote about it in several of my reflections, I really noticed that what came to play for me was how the illustrations and wording went hand in hand on a cultural level because I know how I talked about how they played off each other in Literature class, but I never really thought in a racial, cultural and ethical way. We talked last week about if you read the book and did not show the pictures, it would say one thing, but if you showed the pictures the pictures, it would tell a different story. This is one thing I will look at from now on. I think we get hung up on the story line, and the pictures are so precious - like in

childhood everything is cute and our natural tendency is that we kind of gravitate towards cute things. But I noticed in the *White Socks Only* book, there was a picture of a White man which is so stereotypical hillbilly, redneck, beer gut, and I was like, really, is that necessary. I noticed in some of the books that they talked about the police officers were White or the good guy was White. I think a lot of times we are on our tip-toes about minorities, we don't want to offend Hispanics or African Americans or Asians. It is not so much that we get offended. It is just like we are stereotyped to be all one way. I think that is one thing I will look at that I never noticed. I think that now, doing all the discussions, and listening to other girls that I have a stronger sense of looking at something and wondering how it affects students in my room. I started thinking about all the books I read to my students this semester, and I read *Cloudy with a Chance of Meatballs*, and it is all White people, *The Giving Tree* which is all White people, but then I read a lot of animal things like, *The Grouchy Ladybug* and *The Little Critter* stuff. The other book that I did with my social justice lesson was about White kids, too, you know. So, we don't mean to, but the idea of portraying the students could be completely different. I've never thought about it. I have never thought well, "What if I could find a book about this happening within another culture or another race." That is something that I will look at from now on.

Although Linda had participated in activities that involved critiquing the illustrations and the written text of children's books in her Children's Literature class the previous semester, it wasn't until she saw her own race portrayed in a way that was disturbing to her, did she realize the enormous impact illustrations play in a text. This realization took place as the group within the literature circles discussed the crucial role of illustrations on the meaning of children's books. Through her response I believe it is also evident that she is evaluating the book choices which she has made thus far in her field placements and potentially considering choosing children's books that represent more of the population of her students in the future.

Interview with Michelle (Roberts, 2009)

Michelle arrived at my office for the structured interview directly from her job at Georgia College's Kid's University where she was teaching elementary students each day of the week. She was tired from her day but was in a good mood and seemed ready

to share. Michelle was very enthusiastic about participating in the study, and the structured interview was no exception. After we talked a little about her job, we began the structured interview.

Holley (Researcher): In what ways do you think the experiences of this study have influenced your personal, cultural, and racial beliefs?

Michelle: I definitely think this study has helped me see things in a different way, not that I could not see it before, it was that I had never put myself in a position to see it differently. I do think that I understand that multi-cultural texts are very important, and I think before things become an issue in a classroom that I see that problem and solve that problem. Maybe do some pre-planning to put some texts in there. The book, *White Socks Only*, made me see that I could not relate with anybody in that book. I could not see myself anywhere and that is why I did not like it. I automatically said, "I don't like this book," because I could not find me, and I think it is important that we as teachers allow our students to have a broad spectrum to where they can look at a book and say, "Oh I see in that book" and they can put it in perspective with their own lives.

Michelle explained that this study helped her see things in a different way. I think she has understood on the surface that all students have value and should be represented and appreciated, but like Linda, it was not until she was placed in the situation of exclusion did she truly have empathy toward populations who are underrepresented or absent in many of the children's books read in schools today. Putting Michelle in this place of disequilibrium seemed to push her perspectives beyond what she thought was possible.

Interview with Kayleigh (Roberts, 2009)

Kayleigh came to my office for the structured interview the day after the meeting of the last literature circle. It was late in the afternoon, and she jokingly said she was leaving the interview to go make her daily trip to Wal Mart. Her visits to Wal Mart became a joke among the participants because all of the stories she shared within the literature circles revolved around her being at Wal Mart. She was smiling, as usual, and

was anxious to begin. Kayleigh is always open and honest, and she had no hesitations about participating in the structured interview.

Holley: In what ways do you think the experiences of this study have influenced your personal, cultural, and racial beliefs?

Kayleigh: This study has made me examine my own personal beliefs, opening up with other people, and not only opening up with other people but listening too; because I am pretty open, but it is interesting to hear people who normally don't open up to open up and hear what they have to say even if I don't agree. I heard other points of view and formulated my own personal opinion a little better. I know I am not a racist, but we all have prejudices and I am open to a lot more things than I thought I was after reading books and hearing the other girls' discussions.

Holley: So do you think it influenced your racial, cultural and personal beliefs?

Kayleigh: Racial and personal definitely, I don't know about cultural. I guess I think a person's environment has a lot to do with how they think and how they act and hearing other perspectives about where they grew up in smaller towns and how Black people are treated was different. I am from a military base and everybody is in the military, and it is weird to see how other people think about other people. I remember what Michelle said the other day about saying, "Don't think bad about my daddy, but he would never let me have a Black boyfriend." One of my best friends was a Black guy, and they did not have a problem with it at all. I have actually asked them what if I had a Black boyfriend would it be hard for them, but they said they would not care. It is just that other people would talk about me, but they would not. The cultural has not changed but has been eye opening to say the least.

Holley: Your background and experiences inform the way you look at things?

Kayleigh: What my parents have taught me I have always listened to what they say. For the most part my beliefs are their beliefs. Our community, the church we attend has mostly White people but a few Black people come sometimes and it is not weird seeing them there. There were always Black people around.

Kayleigh mentioned that her perspectives were challenged and reconsidered as she attended to the discussions within the literature circles. She even provided a specific example of another participant's response and places the situation in her own context. She specifically mentioned that she feels she is not racist, but acknowledged that she has prejudices. She acknowledges the impact of her family on her perspectives. She also

noted that learning about the other participants' experiences, especially those different from her own, challenged her to look at circumstances from a different point of view.

Interview with Anna (Roberts, 2009)

Anna came to my office directly from her job at Georgia College's Kid's University. She was tired from her day, so I gave her a few minutes to wind down. Anna talked a little bit about her students in the summer program and how she enjoyed getting the experience of teaching and planning on her own. After a few minutes, we started the interview. As usual, Anna was somewhat serious in her demeanor.

Holley (Researcher): In what ways do you think the experiences of this study have influenced your personal, cultural, and racial beliefs?

Anna: I know it [the study] has allowed me to do the autobiographical paper, and the reflections allowed me to think about my personal beliefs because I think it is important for us to understand how to teach certain subjects you have to understand what your own personal beliefs are and you have to get past them sometimes and you have to really understand what you know in order to teach that. That is basically it. It covers the personal, cultural and racial. I feel by doing the autobiographical paper, by doing the reflections and talking about everything concerning race has allowed me to think about my strengths. I grew up in Northeast Georgia, and it was predominantly White, and I never had to deal with this issue, and the students I am teaching are predominantly African Americans. So I think that allowing myself to write the paper and the reflections has really opened my eyes a lot and got me to thinking about how these experiences are really good for me and how they are important to me now that I am student teaching. I am dealing with different races. As a child I grew up thinking this was how it was going to be for me, all White, but now I am learning about all different cultures. I have to learn that every text is not set for every student, but I want to reach out to all my students.

Anna explained that it was not until she came to Georgia College & State University from her hometown in Clayton, Georgia was it necessary to think about issues such as race because it seemingly did not impact her until she was placed in her field experiences where the students were predominately African American. She admitted that it was critical to know your own personal beliefs and to challenge them, and several of

the activities within the study encouraged her to explore those beliefs. She made the connection that a teacher's personal beliefs can have an impact on how she would teach a certain topic or subject. She also briefly noted that her intentions are to choose texts that represent the diversity of her students.

Interview with Sarah (Roberts, 2009)

Sarah came to my office for the structured interview one evening after she finished her work day at a local day care center. She was wearing nursing scrubs, and we discussed briefly how she is expected to supervise the children and clean the room and bathroom at the same time. She was a little frustrated from her day, so we talked for a little while before I prompted her to begin the interview. It had been a week since our last literature circle. As in common for Sarah, she made direct eye contact and was serious and thoughtful in her demeanor.

Holley (Researcher): In what ways do you think the experiences of this study have influenced your personal, cultural and racial beliefs?

Sarah: I don't know if you got my reflection today or not.

Holley: I did.

Sarah: I talked about in it that I have really come to think that throughout these discussions that I think a lot of people base their stereotypes more on class rather than on race. It's really got me thinking like is that a bad thing or is it a good thing or is it in between because the American dream is based on class and the American dream can be a wonderful thing if you are the one that is achieving it, but if you not, then it is not a wonderful thing. So it's really got me thinking not so much about race but more on class. Because everybody in the discussion group was talking about well I saw a person walking down the street dressed in such and such and everyone was like it does not matter what they look like as long as they are dressed nice. And I am like oh well that is more like class. That's not race. I would definitely think for our generation race is pretty much out the window.

Holley: Do you think that as time moves on that race will no longer be an issue?

Sarah: There are always going to be exceptions to the rule, but like I said in my reflection, it would be really interesting to see as each generation goes. Like I feel like we become a little more accepting, and a little more accepting. So you know, it's going to be, a couple of generations from now they will be learning about slavery like we were learning about Romans, it's just going to be history. I think it depends on how parents raise their children, and I think if our generation is more open to that, then when we have kids, maybe our kids will be more open.

Holley: And more teachers, too.

Sarah: Yea. Yea.

Holley: Our last literature circle was really about looking at other issues, other societal issues and to see if they coincided with race. Do you find that the socio-economic status and race, generally, we are making a generalization here, do you see a correlation at all between the two?

Sarah: Like, homelessness maybe?

Holley: I would say just socioeconomic and race. Are there more African Americans living in poverty?

Sarah: I think that those are all statistics. I think that the squeaky wheel gets the grease. If we want to think that more African Americans are living in poverty, we are going to look at the African Americans living in poverty, but you know just as many are successful. I live in a nice neighborhood and there are just as many Black people as they are White people. I do have an issue with the projects, like I've noticed that government housing, that's my only thing that I haven't gotten over yet. That every time I passed them, I am like, wow, you know. I mean maybe there are White people in there, but the ones I see playing outside are all Black. That would be my only thing. Homelessness, I have seen equal amounts. Rich people equal amounts.

Sarah has consistently held to the notion that the issue of race is decreasing because generation after generation people are becoming more accepting of Others. She contended that her generation does not see race as an issue, as if it was a thing of the past. However, the conversations regarding race have made her think more deeply about the issue of social class and those who are not achieving the "American dream." She did question her beliefs but was unable to reconcile why she sees only Black children playing outside of the housing projects in Milledgeville. Her responses indicated that her life

experiences play the most influential. role in how she perceives the world around her. Her lived experience override what she is seeing and is reading as statistical data.

Interview with Rebekka (Roberts, 2009)

Because my colleague, who is also my office mate, needed to be in the office to work, Rebekka and I went to a meeting room right outside of my office to complete the structured interview. Rebekka also came directly from her job at Georgia College's Kid's University. The interview took place about three weeks after the final literature circle. Rebekka was ready to begin immediately upon arrival, so after explaining the procedure of the structured interview, we got started. Rebekka would occasionally look down while she was talking but would again gain eye contact. She often does this in conversations. It seems as if this is her way of organizing her thoughts and formulating her answers. She is very pleasant during the interview.

Holley (Researcher): In what ways do you think the experiences of this study, autobiographical exploration, critical reflections papers, literature circles or readings, have influenced your personal, cultural and racial beliefs?

Rebekka: I would have to say all of them somewhat, obviously the autobiographical exploration had influenced it the most because I actually had to spend time looking at my own personal life. The one that made me think more about racial issues would be the literature circles because not only I am looking at what I believe in and what I hear and how to process them and then decide do I believe them. Hearing other people talk about what they think about has also sparked me to think about things that were a fleeting thought to me, and it helped me to see racial differences and even some things that I would have never thought about, I did think about during this time. I think the literature circles also helped me to see that I am not the only one thinking about certain things, and so if I am not the only one thinking this then this must be a common perception or misconception. This needs to be discussed. People need to hear all opinions and then make their opinions. An example is my 4th grade class the teacher drilled into us that we call Indians, Native Americans and we call Blacks, African Americans, you don't call them anything else because that is politically correct. So as I child, I thought OK. Is it OK to call Asians Orientals because that is what my teacher taught me. And, I will always remember her.

Rebecca has had the opportunity to travel in the United States and overseas. She tended to think about the perspectives of others and attempted to understand these perspectives. Listening to others share their beliefs and opinions led her to think about things that she has not ever considered or thought about recently. She also explained how having the opportunity to reflect on a personal level was very helpful for her. I believe the example she gave was an attempt to think about the reason behind the efforts to be politically correct as well as making a point to demonstrate the impressionable power of teachers.

Interview with Tiffany (Roberts, 2009)

Tiffany came to my office one evening a couple of weeks after the last literature circle to participate in the structured interview. Tiffany had to reschedule her interview due to a schedule change at her job at a local Quizno's restaurant. Tiffany was excited about the interview and was ready to get started rather quickly. She is very talkative and outgoing.

Holley (Researcher): In what ways do you think the experiences of this study, autobiographical exploration, the critical reflections papers, the literature circles and readings have influenced your personal, cultural, and racial beliefs?

Tiffany: When I was actually writing my reflections earlier and I was thinking about the stuff we talked about and everything in our circle groups with the books and just in general, I feel like our program itself helped a lot, and I mentioned that in my reflections I feel like even I was not actively thinking about it until I wrote it down, but this program and everything that we have been doing has really helped me to see that I am not only treating everyone the same but I was thinking about how I you can use their culture to make classroom better to improve and to get them active and learning. Instead of ignoring it or being color blind. Because I do see race, and I see a lot of things about different children, but I never thought to use it to my advantage [in teaching] the way we have been talking about it and everything.

Holley: Do you think that on a personal level that any aspects of the study influenced the way you look at your cultural and racial beliefs?

Tiffany: I know everyone says this but I have always been really open to a lot of stuff, and it is hard to get me to be hard-core opinionated about anything. Like talking about race in general, I realized that I talked about my friend John in the last session about how that conversation really helped to break that barrier, and the conversation with my Mom had broken the whole inter-racial thing and what her views on race were. I feel like I am pretty much still the same, but the only thing I was really unclear about and I used to get upset about was being fearful and then being prejudiced and racist against different people. And I think that since we talked about that it really helped me to figure out what I really was feeling, and you know you have to be protective of yourself over just being rude to someone because of their skin color or trying to get away from them.

Holley: And you were referring to when we talked about if you saw an African American male walking down the street, remind me of what you said.

Tiffany: I said that I was walking in front of Parks Hall, and this guy started saying this really nasty free verse to me, and I was not sure if it was a song or something he was just saying, but from his dialect I could tell that he might have been Black. I did not turn around and look at him until I was gone, and I mean I was scared because it was really like very vulgar and provocative.

Holley: The conversation we had was that it was about being fearful not necessarily who it came from.

Tiffany's responses to the first interview question indicated that while she had always felt that she was very open to new ideas, she had not thought about the positive nature of including diversity in practical ways in her teaching. She also mentioned that the conversations within the literature circles gave her the ability to break the barriers of discussing race with her African American friend and her mother. She also challenges herself to think about the origin of the fear she felt when she was verbally assaulted by the young man. Her struggle to determine what caused the fear, the color of the person or the actions, led me to believe that she was truly reflecting on the impact race plays in our perspectives and emotions.

Question 2: Which activity/activities (autobiographical exploration, readings, participation in literature circles, critical reflection papers, etc.) within the study was/were most effective in challenging your personal, cultural, and racial beliefs?

The purpose of the second question was to glean a sense of which particular activity within the study seemed most challenging to the participants' personal, cultural, and racial beliefs. The intent of the question from the my point of view as the researcher was to attempt to pinpoint if a particular activity seemed to have the most impact on the participants' personal, cultural, and racial views, and if one did have such an impact, which activity or activities would these have been.

Interview with Linda (Roberts, 2009)

Holley (Researcher): Which activity/activities (autobiographical exploration, readings, participation in literature circles, critical reflection papers, etc.) within the study was/were most effective in challenging your personal, cultural, and racial beliefs?

Linda: Just because what other people thought and experienced things I never experienced before. I definitely, remember writing my autobiographical paper, it took so long and I worked on it forever and I did not really think about it. I felt the discussions really challenged the way I thought.

Holley: The literature circle discussions?

Linda: I loved the literature circles.

Linda is very conversational in her nature. I was not surprised that she "loved" the literature circles, but am intrigued with the idea that she felt the discussions along with the writing of the autobiographical paper challenged her thinking.

Interview with Michelle (Roberts, 2009)

Holley: Which activity/activities (autobiographical exploration, readings, participation in literature circles, critical reflection papers, etc.) within the study was/were most effective in challenging your personal, cultural, and racial beliefs?

Michelle: Probably the discussion time because when you are just reading something and doing it by yourself you just have your opinion; but when you start talking about it with other people you have so many other different perspectives. Even though

we are all females and were all raised in Georgia and all White, we are all different. When you hear all the different perspectives, you can place yourself to be able to see. You want to understand people, why they think the way they do, and by understanding their perspectives I become more able to understand my perspective and able to defend it. I really know for myself why I feel it or why it is important.

Holley: Can you give me an example during the discussions that challenged your racial, personal or cultural beliefs? Can you remember a specific conversation, a question someone brought up?

Michelle: There was a lot said about our prejudices and our biases and why we feel about people the way we feel about them. For so long it has been about ‘that is what my mama taught me or that is what my daddy says’. Even for me, it has always been that is what my daddy said and that makes it right. Sitting there hearing the other things, I thought what makes my parents right and their parents wrong, what makes their parents wrong for raising them and making them go to school where all the kids were all White. And, I was here, and I went to school with many different kinds of people. Does that make it wrong or does it make it different? That was a real moment where I could see the lines although we were a group of White females from Georgia, that each of us were from different places, and we each brought different views to the room.

Holley: We talked about challenging children. So as an adult you felt the same way, maybe what you were taught is not what you really feel now?

Michelle: That comes across in a lot of ways in my life now, and it may have been made more extreme with the way I have been thinking and trying to figure out if this is my belief or is this just the way my parents taught me and this is their belief. It probably was made more intense because I am looking at other areas of my life.

Holley: When did you start to examine your world?

Michelle: Probably about three to four months ago.

Holley: How does that make you feel?

Michelle: It makes me feel good right now. My parents have not been judgmental of me or tried to push me away; if I have a question they answer it. After our last meeting, I actually talked to my daddy and asked him why is it OK for somebody in our church to have an inter-racial relationship, but it would not be OK if I did it, and he did not have a good answer, he just said don’t do it. There was no logical explanation as to why. Yes, there is some difficult scriptures and I don’t have a good explanation. It does not separate us at all. He is my daddy, and I still love him. I am comfortable with the fact that I don’t know.

Holley: I know in the last literature circle when you made the statement that my dad is not a bad person, like you had to say that so nobody would think he was. I appreciate the honesty as that is not always easy with the ramifications and all.

Michelle mentions that she also was most challenged by the literature circle discussions. I was very interested in her acknowledgement of how she is thinking critically in all parts of her life. I could really relate to Michelle's statement concerning her family and the beliefs she has held on to for so long. She realized that these contradictions may not be reconciled, and she was content with that. She claimed that hearing the perspective of others has a profound impact on how she now forms her own. In addition, I believed it to be significant that Michelle has become comfortable in questioning her parents. This represents not only a big step for her but may also have an impact on her family as her questions may cause them to think about and question their own beliefs.

Interview with Kayleigh (Roberts, 2009)

Holley: Which activity/activities (autobiographical exploration, readings, participation in literature circles, critical reflection papers, etc.) within the study was/were most effective in challenging your personal, cultural, and racial beliefs?

Kayleigh: The discussion in the literature circles. Things I would not have thought about when I read the stories. The first book I read I thought it was a good story, and the girls were like oh, Black people were portrayed this way and that way in that book, and I would just sit and listen to them. Especially their stories and the things they have done and their parents being in jail, their friends, that was the most influential thing I got from this. I also loved the books you had available for us to choose from, and I put them all on my Amazon wish list so I could remember the titles. The top two were the literature circles and the books.

Holley: Do you think it was both, the conversations and the books, not just one or the other.

Kayleigh: Yes, the books sparked the conversation, and then the books might have a different point than we intended it to. For starters we would talk about our books and that made us think about something else, and we would talk about that. None

of our books talked about inter-racial marriages or dating, but that is where the conversation went last night, so the books started the conversations.

Kayleigh also agrees that the literature circle conversations were most challenging. She does mention the books that were provided and hopes to acquire some of them. Kayleigh recognizes the books as an important part of “sparking the conversation.” This confirms that children’s can provide a safe space for opening up difficult conversations.

Interview with Anna (Roberts, 2009)

Holley: Which activity/activities (autobiographical exploration, readings, participation in literature circles, critical reflection papers, etc.) within the study was/were most effective in challenging your personal, cultural, and racial beliefs?

Anna: Most definitely the literature circle discussions were what challenged me because we all have different cultural experiences because of the way we have grown up and the areas we have grown up in. Not everyone has grown up like me in a predominantly White area. Like Michelle for example, she grew up here in Milledgeville, and she went to school with African Americans [students] her whole life. I definitely felt challenged and sometimes I thought, wait a minute they don’t agree with me. One situation was when we were discussing about having an African American janitor in the school. I remember I said I felt sorry for them and others said they did not have sympathy for them. So I thought OK with their experiences they had they had to work really hard, and for me I had to work hard academically, but financially it has not been a problem for me. But I can step back and say what if my family did not have the money we do. Not that we are that well off. I would probably feel differently and maybe have more sympathy for the janitors.

Holley: Hearing other people’s perspectives?

Anna: Hearing their perspective on race, it challenged me in a good way because it allowed me to see that everyone is going to have different opinions because everyone has grown up differently. How you have been raised, what you have seen, what you have done, it is good that you see other people’s perspectives.

Holley: What benefit do you think the books served in the literature circles?

Anna: For me, I have grown up where all the books had White characters in them but these books had no White characters. It was really good for me to see. I want to use books that represent everyone. There are so many books that represent all

White characters that sometimes I think it would be OK to pull out a book with no White characters in it at all. The books opened my eyes. The literature is out there. You just have to dig through it a while to find what you are looking for.

Anna also stated that the literature circle conversations were most challenging.

Like the others, she was challenged by the differences in opinions that were expressed within the literature circle conversations. She also mentioned that through her schooling experiences she had never been exposed to literature that represented Other groups. She seemed to be open to possibilities, to exploring new titles different from the literature that she has been accustomed.

Interview with Sarah (Roberts, 2009)

Holley (Researcher): Which activity/activities (autobiographical exploration, readings, participation in literature circles, critical reflection papers, etc.) within the study was/were most effective in challenging your personal, cultural, and racial beliefs?

Sarah: I thought that for me the articles were. It wasn't because the books weren't helpful, but I think it's because everyone read the same articles. I think that if we could have all read the same book, then I think there would have been more depth. I understand that it was the time or whatever. Probably for me it would be the articles.

Holley: What about that, the articles?

Sarah: Well just I could take from it what I wanted to and then contribute to the group and they could. They knew what I had read. They had read the same thing. So it was easy for them to discuss it with me. I feel like with the books it was like oh, I did not read that so I will take your word for it kind of thing. So, the articles probably.

Holley: Was it the article and the discussions?

Sarah: Yea [with emphasis], yea, yea, yea. Definitely.

Holley: You did mention that in one of your reflections that you did like reading just one text and everybody talking about it. What do you think it was about the readings that challenged you?

Sarah: What do you mean?

Holley: What did you learn in the text that maybe challenged your personal, racial, or cultural beliefs? Or even challenged you just to think about things?

Sarah: I guess what is like interesting to me is like cultural books seemed to be like African American people or people that are not White. But Caucasian people have a culture, too, so you can just say that if you read a Caucasian book that's not being cultural. I mean you need to have a mix. I think it is funny that when we say that we need to be culturally diverse that we assume that the White, the books with the White characters in it are not diverse as well, you have to be a different color, or a different look in the culturally diverse category I think, is what it means to me.

Sarah mentions in several forums that she felt as if the participants should have all read the same book for each literature circle. While traditionally literature circles are designed for groups to read the same book, I felt that it was important to introduce as many texts as I could. My intention for setting the literature circles in that way was also to allow a variety of issues to be introduced to the group through the texts. Sarah continues to make the point that White culture needs to be considered. I am not sure where her feeling that White culture is not considered a culture comes from. I also wonder if part of Sarah's criticism comes from her feelings that she was being threatened by that fact that the readings and discussions challenged her own beliefs and values.

Interview with Rebekka (Roberts, 2009)

Holley (Researcher): Which activity/activities (autobiographical exploration, readings, participation in literature circles, critical reflection papers, etc.) within the study was/were most effective in challenging your personal, cultural, and racial beliefs?

Rebekka: I think the books and literature circles challenged my racial beliefs. A lot of time I would read a book that was given to me, and I would read it and did not truly understand what it was for, but I could pick out things that were multi-cultural and a lot of times I would come to the study a little confused and what we were going to talk about. I had seen the book and the picture on the cover and I have seen the pages, and I can tell what it is about and what they were trying to achieve in the book, but something was going on where I was just not connecting with this book. A lot of times, it was because I could not relate to the characters in the book, because I was not their specific color, and I felt really bad. But, I think once I got to the literature circles and more people were connecting to the

book, and then they helped me to connect to the book. They were relating it to their own personal lives which I was trying to do, but I kind of thought well this is their culture because they are Black or they are Asian, and I saw it as a matter of culture and not like how would I feel if I was actually in their shoes. It did not really happen for me until we all got together and started talking about it. They all related stories. Once I came to the literature circles it helped me relate more to the characters, and I think that if you were to read one of the books, I think there could definitely be a disconnect there unless you have a discussion where you can help them relate to any characters in any story, and that is important. Some stories I related to like princesses because I felt like I was a little princess in my mom's house, but then you go into stories about gangs, and I have never been in a gang, but I have been with a group of friends who made me do things I did not necessarily want to do. So, I think having discussions made it a more real experience and you could understand the characters better, and we could relate more and grow more.

Holley: What do you think that means for the majority of the books we read and the population of the students we have? Most of the books we read we had never heard of. I don't think any of you had ever heard of many of the books. If I said do you know who Emily Elizabeth is in *Clifford the Big Red Dog*, you would know who she is. You know *Where the Wild things Are*, and you would know *Ferdinand*. You would know those texts and the children would know them. Think about the texts we read in class and the population of students of Baldwin County is predominantly Black, probably 67% and how you think about how you had a difficult time connecting to the African American texts. Then think about the student population connecting to the books we read daily.

Rebekka: When you think about it, unless you are in greater Gwinnett County, the rest of Georgia is basically African American. If you are going to college and learning about these great books and none of them relate to your students who are African American. They relate to schools of education in Georgia which are mostly White, but the national average is 90% White. If I could not understand what is happening with these African Americans how can the African American children what is happening with these White people, like Emily Elizabeth. I think I can relate to her because I have grown up in Gwinnett County and from a privileged family. These kids usually don't have a privileged family. They don't have a dog they groom every day, I think it is important for them to hear other stories and they should not dominate any classroom even if it is predominantly White, they need to hear another point of view. I really feel like that the educational system is getting more global. We are sending more people abroad. I think that you can't read one set of texts and expect them to grow up and have the point of view, OK, let me learn about you and your culture. They need to think about other cultures. My culture, I grew up, I had a dog, had a mom, dad, brother and sister and I am sorry, that is too bad for you because I am going to read this story and you are going to listen, and I am not going to read anything that relates to you. I think we say that subconsciously, and we need to change, and that does not need to be the

attitude in the classroom. There is a large percentage of students not going to college and going on to get their Ph.D., but anybody can, no matter what color they are. We need a nurturing classroom.

Rebekka chose the literature circles experience as the most challenging to her personal, racial, and cultural beliefs. She stated that hearing the perspectives of others really made an impact on her. She admitted a feeling of disconnect as she read the books at home but claims that it did not “happen” for her until we engaged in the conversations. She recognized the importance of providing stories that the children in her classroom can relate to. She voiced a need for change.

Interview with Tiffany (Roberts, 2009)

Holley (Researcher): Which activity/activities (autobiographical exploration, readings, participation in literature circles, critical reflection papers, etc.) within the study was/were most effective in challenging your personal, cultural, and racial beliefs?

Tiffany: I think anything where I had to think through something was beneficial. The reflections I actually wrote it out and got clarification because everything in my head felt jumbled until I wrote it down. Then hearing what other people had to say, I love discussion. I love the way you can have opinions on things. I do have opinions, but they may not be as strong until you hear other people express their opinions. Then if I like the way they think, I will consider it, and I have always been that way.

Holley: Then the literature circle discussions?

Tiffany: Yes

Holley: What do you think about the books?

Tiffany: I liked every book that I read. I read a couple of books by bell hooks, and I was really thrown off on them, and I found them amusing because of the art class. I really enjoyed the books. When I was growing up, I had Disney books, fables and fairy tales, and it was the princesses and Jasmine. If the kids you are teaching are Black, then you have to think about them seeing it from their perspectives. Even when I did Scholastics there were a lot of books I never heard of, and I enjoyed a lot of the books you brought.

*Tiffany agreed with the majority of the participants that the literature circle discussions challenged her beliefs. Several of the participants had a negative opinion of bell hooks, who authored some of the children's books read within the circles. I believe that this stemmed from the fact that they were asked to read bell hooks book, *Teaching to Transgress*, in their Art class the semester before. The students had little support while reading the text and few opportunities to discuss the book. They walked away with a very negative view of the text and bell hooks. I think they felt threatened by her writings; therefore, they anticipated the same reaction from her children's books. Tiffany also commented about the value and importance of having the opportunity to reflect in writing. This gave her the space to sort through and organize her thoughts.*

Question 3: Describe how your participation in the study has influenced your perspectives about White privilege, power, and dominance.

The purpose of the third question was to determine if the participants felt that the activities of the study had an influence on their beliefs concerning White privilege, power, and dominance. This question was very important to me, as the researcher, due to the importance of the recognition and understanding of White privilege and supremacy and its impact on the ability to become culturally aware of Others.

Interview with Linda (Roberts, 2009)

Holley (Researcher): Describe how your participation in the study has influenced your perspectives about White privilege, power and dominance?

Linda: I grew up just plain ole people, plain people that were just trying to get by. I never really heard you are getting this because you are White or you are female or anything like that. So, I definitely, talking to other girls and listening I can see where it would come into play, but its hard to see where it would affect my opinion because I really never had an opinion on it. I never experienced it; I never really saw it take place in my own world. I admit that I am in my own little world

sometimes and don't notice a whole lot of things going on. Everything I have is because I worked for it. In high school every position I got and all my grades were because I worked for them. I feel like my eyes are definitely open as to how it played out, but I don't think my opinions would change.

Holley: So are you more aware of White dominance and privilege and power. Do you see it out in society more so than in your own life, or do you not see it that way either.

Linda: In my opinion White privilege, White power is a thing in the past in the cultural and racial thing. It is hard for me to put it in play now because I feel like the world is becoming so balanced. We have a bi-racial President, and we have Condoleezza Rice who is 3rd in line for the Presidency and Colin Powell was way up there. So, I feel like I grew up in a time where the world is balanced, and I could see an unequal balance in high school where I did not have any African American principals, but they were on the board, and the Commissioners. My Mom taught with them, and my Dad worked with them. I feel like when I see I can look past it. I guess I could see it. I see it in Milledgeville because of how separated things are. In my town the railroad tracks separated the town and it used to be a White side and a Black side, but now it is blended. We still have the project. I did have friends that were very well off, but in Milledgeville the lines are very defined. Like Black people live over here. Over here is where all the college students live, and White people live over there. I have talked to my students about it, and it seems all the Black students live in the same general area, the Asians here, and things are definitely split between upper class and lower class. I do see it here a little bit but not on a grand scale.

Holley: I am thinking about your class with a large group of Hispanic students, think back to the literature, did any of the literature you had represent any of those students?

Linda: It did. The very first week I was there we read *Jalapeno Bagels*. It was the cutest book ever, and the boy's mom was Hispanic, and his dad was Jewish, and he talked about how they incorporated things from both cultures. They read it at John Milledge Academy [local private school], too. It was really neat. They need to see people interact and talk about it. The teacher let the Hispanic kids talk about things, and then they talked about things at their house.

Linda communicates that she feels that White privilege is a thing of the past.

However, she does admit that Milledgeville is segregated in many ways and gives many examples of the division..

Interview with Michelle (Roberts, 2009)

Holley (Researcher): Describe how your participation in the study has influenced your perspective of White privilege, power and dominance?

Michelle: I really don't know that it really changed my perspective that much from what I previously thought. I still think America is the land of opportunity, and I thank God everyday that I do live here. I think that if you are willing to work really hard you can achieve what you want to, no matter what color you are. I know with socio-economic, yes, the people with more money are more likely to go to school and people without money are more likely not to continue their education, but if they have the drive, they will do it. I feel sorry for people less fortunate than me, and I want them to have more, but in order to have more you have to go after it. Neither of my parents graduated from college and neither one of them have high paying jobs, and they haven't been able to give me everything I asked for, but they gave me everything I needed, and in a way I have risen above and plan to continue going to school. I do understand when people say that if someone came to a job interview with their pants down around their knees they probably wouldn't get that job, but like I told her if a White person came in dressed like that why would they get the job any quicker than a Black person dressed like that. I don't think it is in the color they are but in how they presented themselves.

Holley: Do you feel like there is White privilege, power and dominance in our society or you don't think there is?

Michelle: At this time there are still hints of it, and there are still very racist people in the world. It is going to be that way. In small town dealings with that mind set. I don't necessarily think that it means that White people are privileged. There are some Black corporate heads, and they may say they are not hiring any White people for their company.

Holley: In thinking about that, what do you think about our book discussions? You talked about being represented in books, like when you read *White Socks Only* and you weren't represented. How does it make you think about the text when we read *Clifford the Big Red Dog*? How do you see the text we read fitting in with the idea there is White dominance or White privilege?

Michelle: I know there are many more books that I do connect with any day of the week. I see that. I see what you are saying, and I know that it is important to me to be able to read to my classroom. If there is not a story, I can create one.

Michelle continued to believe that there is equal access and opportunity for all. She has seen successful African Americans and that helped her rationalize that African Americans CAN be successful if they work hard enough.

Interview with Kayleigh (Roberts, 2009)

Holley: Describe how your participation in the study has influenced your perspectives about White privilege, power and dominance?

Kayleigh: I guess the participation has shown me that Whites are privileged people. The things they want to do comes easier than for African Americans, and I guess I came to that conclusion from what people said in the literature circles and the books. There is just a lot of bad stuff that happens to African Americans, and I think, dang, I did not have to go through all that. I know today none of them are slaves, but their ancestors were, and that was hard stuff, and we did not have to go through that. Some people say that their ancestors did not have slaves, but if their ancestors were White they most certainly did have slaves. So, I guess it has opened my eyes as to how privileged I am. I never had to worry about how I was going to get food or if my mom's paycheck was going to last until Friday. I just never had to worry about going to college, what neighborhood I had to live in. But I know the color of my skin has helped me be successful, and I know it certainly has not hurt me.

Holley: What do you think brought about that realization for you? You used a lot of examples that were in the books like waiting for the paycheck to come, neighborhoods with the gangs, is that what brought about the realizations?

Kayleigh: Yes, I never really read a book about White people being so poor. There is one book and so many other books about lower, socio-economic Black people. It is like the volume of African American literature that shows how not privileged they are. Then when one does something great they make a big deal out about it. They don't do that for White people. I guess I have always known I was privileged because of my family and friends. We lived in a big house, and I would be afraid to tell my friends where I lived because I did not want them to think I was a snob. I guess the White part of the privilege did not come until probably when I started college, and then you see all the African American kids who got all these things in order to be able to go to school and could not have gone to school without all the financial help, and I think, dang, my parents just wrote a check, and it was no big deal. So, I guess that was when I noticed that my skin color made me privileged.

Kayleigh is beginning to understand White privilege. She cited several examples from the books that were read within the literature circles. She claims that the books and the conversations helped her to come to this realization for herself. Kayleigh was very open about her sense making of White privilege and its impact on society. Kayleigh still

tends to be assessing her beliefs through the deficit view. I wonder if the books that I chose reinforced her deficit perspective?

Interview with Anna (Roberts, 2009)

Holley: Describe how your participation in the study has influenced your perspective about White privilege, power and dominance?

Anna: It has made me think more about it because I really did not think about it much. I keep going back to the discussion about the janitor. I think there are still biases out there, and some people say there aren't, and some people say there are, but they are still there. It kind of frustrates me when people say they aren't there and being ridiculous, but it does exist. There still is White privilege and I feel like we are headed in the right direction, but we still have a ways to go with jobs, etc. Look around the community i.e. GCSU and look at how many White students are here and then look at Baldwin County. I know that students have to work their way up and not everyone's family is as supportive and that has been hard for me to realize. I had a supportive family and one with money. There are other situations where they can go from being dirt poor. The money thing, look at the poor areas and it is really sad. You have to have money to get a name, and it is sad, if you don't have the money, you don't have the nicest clothes or what requires you to look good in a job interview. It is a cycle.

Holley: You are looking at it from a societal perspective. Did you think about that before the study?

Anna: Probably not, the study has really allowed me to step back and say, WOW! There are differences out there. It starts back in slavery times and never equaled up. We have come a long way but still a long way to go.

Holley: The last circle was focused on books that were predominantly concerning the African American race and socio-economic status. We talked about separating the two, and it is interesting that we pair the two together, race and socio-economic level, and what came first and what caused what. It is really interesting to think about the cycle.

Anna: Money speaks so much for people. They look at how well kept you are too, nice clothes, good hygiene, your language, your education.

Anna admits that she has not thought about issues such as White privilege, but the study has really made her think more about it. She strongly correlates socioeconomic status with race. She affirms the connection between money and opportunity.

Interview with Sarah (Roberts, 2009)

Holley: Describe how your participation in the study has influenced your perspective about White privilege, power and dominance?

Sarah: I don't think my views have really changed. It is interesting to talk to different people about it. A lot of our generation is about race but because I am White I don't feel dominant over the next person. Maybe because I am White, I don't know.

Holley: Do you think the participation in the study made you think about it any more than before?

Sarah: Definitely, just like I just said as far as do I feel this way because I am White, I am not Black so I have not been discriminated against. I could put myself in their shoes and imagine how it would be. I have not been in a lot of those situations so you just take what you have seen, and I have not really seen racial discrimination first hand. Is that what I really think or is it because I am White, I really don't know?

Sarah's response is very intriguing to me. I was a little disappointed in her initial answer to the question, but as I have studied it further, I think she is assessing her White privilege through noting that is the lens from which she looks. Her honesty about not being discriminated against is also an acknowledgement that others have. Therefore, I have to wonder, has her participation in the study had an effect on her perspective of White privilege, power, and dominance? I do know that I had seen evidence of her beginning to question, evidence of her being somewhat uncertain.

Interview with Rebekka (Roberts, 2009)

Holley (Researcher): Describe how your participation in the study has influenced your perspectives about White privilege, power and dominance?

Rebekka: I was thinking about this the whole summer. Before I became so conscious about racial prejudices and racial norms, but I never thought about that at all. What made me blind to what was happening in the world and classroom. I thought everyone was the same, and if they were racist, you could definitely tell. Even if it is not being said out loud, it is still being consciously thought. I think this whole study has helped me realize that my subconscious thoughts are now my

conscious thoughts. I even review them, check and balance them to see if they will work out for me. I should not think, “Look at those Mexicans piled in the van.” They don’t have enough money to buy a lot of cars, but Caucasians have enough money to buy cars for the family. They work hard, but they are in that social ladder but can only afford one car. A lot of their family values are important which is probably more important than climbing the social ladder. That has helped me realize that even though social prejudices still exist I know I can work through them, why are they there, find the real truth about them. I think if we help our children know how to work through things like that, they will learn to work with the racial prejudices they learned from their parents. As children, we can cut things out of our lives quicker than when we get older, and we can produce a stronger society within our educational system.

Rebekka notes that the unconscious has become the conscious because of the study. Rebekka’s insights are inspiring to me as a researcher, teacher educator, and citizen.

Interview with Tiffany (Roberts, 2009)

Holley (Researcher): Describe how your participation in the study has influenced your perspective about White privilege, power and dominance?

Tiffany: Before this when we talked about it in the cohort or before we all talked about it in the study?

Holley: Both

Tiffany: I felt like everyone had a lot of equal opportunity to do things, but the more we talked about it, I think I was the one that mentioned that there are older people giving these positions out and they are about privilege and they are not going to be equal. If you have a resume for a Black person and one for a White person, the resumes could be equal but the ethnicity factors make the difference. It is taking time, but I feel we are getting more privileges out there, but I feel like I have benefited a lot in those views I had, and I understand that people who have had these experiences before. Like children who have never gone to the beach and that was one of the big examples we talked about. [White]Race, right now, is still a privilege. As a child, I was under privileged and people still make fun of me now for a lot of the things I never got to do as a child, but at the same time there are children who have not had the opportunities I had. My parents had the opportunities they just did not go after it and still my dad has a hard time getting jobs because he does not have a car, and that is his history.

Holley: Would you have thought about that situation prior to the study. What made you think about that because I know from your experiences that you have worked very hard because your family was not privileged financially? I have heard you say if you work hard you can do things and you have done that. What is that makes you think that two men that are the same, the White man would probably get the job over the African American man?

Tiffany: It depends on who is doing the hiring. I guess if it was a Southern White male whose family had the opinion that Whites are better, then that would influence the decision. They may want to hire Mexicans because they work cheaper, and we talk about that at work. At my job, at Subway, there was a lot of Mexicans that come through, and I didn't mind serving them. Race is big. You can see a lot when you work different jobs.

Holley: So, we are not as color blind as we think we are? Our society isn't?

Tiffany: To answer your question, what got me to really thinking about it was the book I read called *Freedom Summer*, where the little boy said he had not been able to swim in the community pool. When I read it, I really liked it but during our discussions I thought more about it. Kayleigh and I had a discussion, and she said the books did not really matter that they were just books. I know if I read books, I can start crying. Like when I went to Disney World, I was excited about riding the Ferry, the Monorail and Trolley cart, they laughed at me, and I was like, well, I finally got to do it. It was a simple thing, but I got to do it. Having these experiences made me think about it. I was reading another book that is complicated, *The Games of Thrones*. There was a boy who went to training camp, and he was the bastard son of a Lord, and the mother did not want him around once family split up. He decided he wanted to go to a place where kids were brought up to steal, etc. He was so much better than them but they were putting him down and when he would beat them up, he would leave them on the ground. Those boys finally beat him up. I was thinking about race then, and I don't think I would have thought about it as much if we had not had our discussions.

Holley: You have mentioned that book several times and I think, particularly with your experiences, that those boys no matter how much money they had or the experiences they had had, the White boys could swim in that water but the Black boys could not. It is interesting that you made all those other connections just from that book.

I have wondered if Tiffany would recognize that while she could strongly relate to living in poverty and having family that was incarcerated that she still held a certain amount of cultural capital or privilege because of her White skin color. I am interested in the very personal connections she made to the book, Freedom Summer.

Question 4: Describe how your participation in the study has influenced or will influence your overall teaching practice.

The purpose of the fourth and final question was to discover if the participation in the activities of the study (i.e. autobiographical exploration, readings, literature circles, and critical reflection papers) had influenced or would potentially influence the participants' overall teaching practice. The intent of this question was to determine if the participants would make connections with the activities involved within the study to practical implications in their field placements and their first years of teaching. Because classroom observations were not a part of this particular study, this question provided a glimpse into the intent of the participants following the study.

Interview with Linda (Roberts, 2009)

Holley (Researcher): The last question - describe how your participation in the study has influenced or will influence your overall teaching practice.

Linda: I started thinking about my little library that I have in my room, and it is like me, kind of scattered everywhere, a lot of ocean books and a lot of random stuff. Some my Mom has bought for me and other people, but when I think about the books I picked out and brought home then I think, why did I buy this book? Some of them were because they were so sweet. I definitely think it has influenced my choices in literature and how I pick out books. I want my students to feel comfortable in my classroom. I definitely feel like a classroom should be a safe haven, a place where you can be yourself, to get away from everything, your own place for every student. I do feel really strongly about that. School is such a solid thing, a stabilizer for students, a steady factor in their life; somewhere they want to go and want to feel safe. It happened for me so I want the same thing for my students. When I have my own library, I want my students to be able to see themselves in the books. There is definitely a lot I will take a lot with me from this.

Holley: From your current selections, what will you have to add?

Linda: I don't know. I don't have any books on Asian culture and Hispanic culture. I tend to be kind of scatter brained about the books I buy. I know the people in the library hate to see us coming. I know it will be hard to incorporate everything, but I will add some Asian, Hispanic and more African American culture. I have like a lot of other books, just here and there and a lot of Little Golden Books. They

have all White kids. There are no Black kids in those books. I definitely have to work on it.

Holley: One thing I do want to talk to you about, I remember your conversation about this because I think you read *Happy To Be Nappy*, and just something that made me think about that because we talk about book selections, choosing books, and I got to thinking that a lot of the books that I shared, that you had a choice to read, were not ones that you had read before. It made me think about the ones that ya'll choose to read or one's ya'll have seen before, and a lot of those are very monocultural in a White sense. Like you said very White. So, I got to thinking about our conversations about *Happy To Be Nappy*, about why we don't see books about White people's hair. You asked, "What book have ya'll seen about White people's hair?" So, I got to thinking, and I wanted to ask you this. Why do you think there would need to be a book that says I am happy to be nappy? What is the purpose behind this book?

Linda: I definitely think there is a purpose for the book. I was not fond of that author, that whole class (the Art class) has tainted me on that author. I think in today's culture African American girls can say to each other, "Oh your hair is so nappy", not condescending. It is an insult, kind of. I think there needs to be a book about I am happy to be this way. I am happy that my hair is natural and free. It sends a strong message to students, to kids, that it is OK to be how you are. I remember, a long time ago in 3rd grade, I read *Hannah Is A Palindrome*. It was a girl being proud of her name. Last night we ran into some friends, and I said, "Hi, my name is Linda," and he said, "What are your forty or something," and I said, "Whoa!" I think that books like that encourage kids to be OK in their own skin whether or not they have funny names or nappy hair. There is a strong need for there to be books that say hey I'm different and that is OK. In today's world everything is carbon copy. It serves its purpose. I think there should be books about White people's hair. When I was in placement the kids wanted to touch my hair and run their fingers through it because it is long, and I had it down that day. At first it unnerved me but then I realized this was something new for them. It was OK with me and there needs to be literature out there that says this is who I am, and I am OK. Is there a book called *Black is Beautiful*?

Holley: I don't know, we did read *Skin Again*.

Linda: I did like that book. I liked that book. I did not get to read it, but I flipped through it, and I like it.

Holley: It was kind of like the book you read about the little handicapped girl, where you did not know she was handicapped until the end of the book.

Linda: Someone in the book says they run fast, and she runs slowly, and her fingers are little. To me that is the sweetest book, and I cried the first time I read it. I love stuff like that, this is how it is, and it's OK.

Holley: So, excluding the author of the book, *Happy To Be Nappy* could be very much like that or the book, *Nappy Hair*, were both confronting a stereotype.

Linda: It was a good book, it was kind of random. I like the concept of it in that this is how my hair is, and it is OK. I don't know that I would read *Happy To Be Nappy* to my students because I feel that is pushing the envelope too much. I don't know if I was African American and my kid came home from school and told me, "oh yeah, we read *Happy To Be Nappy* today in school." Especially if the teacher was White! I do think it has a purpose.

Holley: So it makes a difference as to who is reading the book?

Linda: I think so.

Holley: A White teacher reading that book could be dangerous, you would be fearful?

Linda: I would because of the reactions; I don't want to upset anybody's apple cart.

Holley: What if you had it on your book shelf and a child could have a choice of picking it up or not?

Linda: I think I would, I don't have a problem having it in my classroom but I would not draw attention to it. That is something that makes me nervous. Am I going to step on anyone's toes? I am a very non-confrontational person.

Holley: It is a fine line to walk, to make sure you have awareness and value others but not offending anyone.

Holley: Is there anything about the study we have not talked about that you would like to share?

Linda: OK, the subject is White teachers in the South. I think everybody I talked to wanted to know if I was in school. I was babysitting and somebody asked my how we do it now. People were completely blown away about how we have it set up, going to 4 schools. I never even thought about teaching in Jesup, it is very political there. I was teaching in Macon, and I had a pretty good mix of Black/White and a smaller student teacher ratio. I moved to Putnam County Elementary and had one Black student, then moved to Creekside, and it was majority Black and it has helped me a lot. I think it is crucial, and I feel like if I had gone to Georgia Southern or Armstrong State like everybody else did I would not have gotten the experiences I have had and gotten to see the things I have seen. But coming out of it and talking to friends at Georgia Southern or Armstrong State I think, WOW, look at what I have done. I came from a majority White county and from the time I was in 8th grade, I was in honors classes, and they were all White. There was one Indian student that went through with us. I

think that I am grateful for our program, and I feel like I could teach in a multicultural classroom. I feel like I could relate to them better, and I have seen parents come in during parent-teacher conferences and explain their home life. My eyes have been opened so much as to how these people live and how they struggle to get by day to day. Moving around to different classrooms has really helped me.

Holley: So the experiences in the classes, discussions, and seeing everything first hand has been helpful.

Linda: Yes.

Linda immediately addressed that the study would influence the book choices she makes for her classroom. She commented that she wants books that represent her classroom population and that currently her collection would not do that. I wanted to push Linda's thinking on the book, Happy to be Nappy. She had a very negative view of bell hooks because of her experience in her Art class spring semester, but after talking about the book a little more, she made a great connection to her own life. She sees value in the book, but honestly shares that reading a book called Happy to be Nappy may be construed as disrespectful if read by a White teacher. This line is something that I must consider as I continue to challenge other teacher candidates.

Interview with Michelle (Roberts, 2009)

Holley (Researcher): Describe how your participation in the study has influenced or will influence you overall teaching practice?

Michelle: I will read books differently from how I read them before and look at which students will be able to relate to the book and which ones of them won't. Is it something that just one race will have to adjust or will it have an overall effect and hope as time goes on I can look at it through different perspectives. I can't see things like an atheist sees things and I may never be able to see things that way, but hopefully I can see the things they will be OK with.

Holley: You said in your book choices it would influence your choice of text.

Michelle: I will think back about how I felt when I read that book [*White Socks Only*]. I don't ever want my students to feel that way, and I can't identify with them and the text you choose tells them that you know where they come from, not that I have necessarily been there, but I know where you come from. I will see it. You look at it through their eyes and you may never be able to say you have been there. You will be able to understand and let them know you understand.

Holley: I think you are saying that through your choice of text you are valuing what your students bring to the classroom.

Michelle: You put a lot of thought into what they bring. You consider what you teach them before you teach it, don't just throw something out there. I don't think that helps anybody. Through a lot of texts I have read before, I start to understand it better when they start talking about things and they start letting things inside of them come out, and I really know who they are more so than before. There are going to be times when I am completely off target and I can deal with that. I will read something, and they will all look at me like did you really just read that?

Holley: I am thinking you are teaching kids all day long 5 days a week. Has anything we did in the study impacted anything you do at Kids University [summer program at GCSU]? You are with children all day.

Michelle: Watching their interactions with each other and they are predominantly White. Right now my class has 15 White children and 5 Black children. The other day I walked into the bathroom, and there was a White girl, a Black girl, and a girl from another class who was White in the bathroom, and I heard my White student tell the other White girl, "you are just acting Black, stop acting Black". I stopped for a minute and thought what do I do, what do I say, I don't want to make the situation any worse than it already is, so I pulled her aside and told her to wait. She knew she should not have done that, and it was an angry type thing, she was mad when she said it, and when I came back I asked her why "would you get angry with someone and tell them they are acting Black and what does that mean?" She was like I don't know. So, I told her if she does not know what something means then she did not need to be saying it because it could be a bad thing and it could hurt someone, and she said my mama says that. She says I am acting Black if I act Black. So what do I do, where do I go? I did not want that mama coming in there telling me what is right and wrong, but through text I could address that situation. I hope through the years I teach, I hope I learn exactly what books to use for certain situations, but right now I don't know the books that well. You know I could have given her a book and told her to go read the book and then come talk to me about it. She was going into 4th grade, and I could easily have given her a book. I did not say anything, but everything inside of me wanted to, but I knew I could not say that to her and I didn't. There have been several situations because most of those children come from JMA [local private school], and they are not used to being with children of different races, and I completely understand that. I don't have a problem with it, but there are things, because of the

mix, that I don't know how to handle. There was a little boy that came running into the classroom and said I can't change in there with all those Black boys, and he was out of control. The other person handled the situation, and it was really bad. She jumped all over him and told him off, and I was just sitting there like you can't take it out on him. You don't know what he has learned at home or what his parents have told him. It is not his fault. She was in his face, and my heart broke. Those are things I have seen and thought about how can I address this with texts or even through things we have talked about. Before, I may have handled it, but not to that extreme.

Holley: Since the study, things like that stick out more than before? You don't want the child on defensive like that.

Michelle: I hope I handled it right, there is no way of really knowing. I can tell you the situation and you can tell me I handled it right, but you don't know because you weren't there.

Holley: It kind of brings back the point of when we talk about racism and if it is going to die out or not, but it doesn't sound like it when you have young children making comments like that. Is there anything else you would like to share about the study that I have not asked you about?

Michelle: There will be probably something later, and I will jot it down.

Holley: You said before that you have taken a lot from this study. What do you mean?

Michelle: Just like the situation that I was just talking about. I definitely thought if this was my classroom and these were my kids for the rest of the year what text would I have put here. What could I have gotten and told them to read this or said let's read this, and we will talk about it. Sometimes knowing what questions to ask and I think I have learned that and I know I won't ever stop thinking about this. I will always go back to it. Everything I do has a purpose and may make me think and may even make me change my mind about some things.

Holley: When you talk about looking critically at things, do you look differently at texts or the world in general, what do you see now that you did not see before?

Michelle: I can definitely see the important stuff. Like before I had heard about introducing multi-racial texts, but now I know it is important. Through these four weeks I can see what the different perspectives are, and I can see why it is important.

Holley: You think that happened during the discussions.

Michelle: Yes, if we had time in class to discuss it then I would have seen it sooner. Let's just talk about it.

Holley: One thing I am curious about, we have been meeting for four weeks. What was it that made you comfortable enough to share the story about your dad? I think that might have been hard for you to share out loud. What made you comfortable enough to do that?

Michelle: It might have been the smaller group. I could see most definitely see myself sharing that with my cohort, but I could never come into your cohort and do that because I don't know those people. We just said what needed to be said, and I knew we were in a situation where if I wanted to say it, it would be OK. I thought other people had said things that were very uncomfortable for them to discuss. So, I just said it, and I hoped it would help somebody else say what they felt.

Holley: You shared a lot throughout the process. I know it was painful for you.

Michelle: I know a lot of people know my father in this town, and I don't want them to think he is a racist.

Holley: I am glad you felt comfortable enough to share. I think our group, overall, really meshed well. Anything else?

Michelle: No.

Michelle also mentioned that she will look at the texts she chooses for her students from their perspectives as much as she can. She realized that by not "seeing herself" in White Socks Only, she was able to understand how the majority of her students would feel if she chose books that only demonstrated the dominant perspective. I questioned Michelle further to determine if anything she had learned in the study had helped her in a practical way in her job at GCSU's Kid's University. She cites an example. In addition, Michelle shared very personal information in the last literature circle, so I was curious what allowed her to feel safe enough to share. She mentioned that the group became very close and that others had trusted the group to share very personally.

Interview with Kayleigh (Roberts, 2009)

Holley: Describe how your participation in the study will or has influenced your overall teaching practice.

Kayleigh: The literature circles has obviously given me a huge selection of reading material for my classroom and made me realize that not all kids, going back to that book, *Getting Through Thursday*, or something about how the mom does not get paid until Friday, and some of my kids might feel like that. They might not get enough to eat or they might not have a nice place to sleep at night, and I need to take that into consideration when I design my classroom or the things I send home, not necessarily my expectations of my students, but how you go about them. I would have to make it a point to remember what Rebekka said about making the classroom a warm, nurturing place and to have my classroom like that, and even though my students don't have a lot of money at home, I don't want them to feel like they are a lesser person at school. I don't want to have some of them [White students] thinking they are better than the other kids that are Black. I don't want the kids to think I feel sorry for them though. So, I am going to have to really try hard to make it so that the kids don't think I am pitying them or making it way too hard on them at the same time.

Holley: So, maybe your book choices, the way you set up your classroom, and your procedures with homework?

Kayleigh: Something I learned about earlier in one of my classes was that if you have kids from the lower socio-economic class you would not want to make them complete an Internet assignment and expect it to be turned in the next day. You could allow class time to do it, give them a week or send home a book from the library. You would make modifications to the assignments.

Holley: How would you approach your students in what they have to share - all students? You talked about how your experiences shaped who you are. So, how might you use your students' experiences? Would you think about all students or how would you approach your students?

Kayleigh: I might try to find a book that would parallel the students. Then if they wanted to talk about it, they could. I really don't know how to go about that. If the parents had been in prison, I could read a story about jail, but I don't know if the students would even want to talk about that, and even if they did, I would not know how I would go about talking about that or talking about how so-in-so's mom could not afford to buy something for them and that does not mean they are a bad kid or she is a bad mom. I really don't know how I would go about teaching that lesson. Or maybe, I would just read a book and ask questions like does that make her a bad mom because she could not give them a party or ask them if they had friend who did not have cool sneakers, what would you do.

Holley: So you are thinking about using a text to open up conversations with your students?

Kayleigh: Yes.

Holley: Any other questions or anything you would like to share?

Kayleigh: I don't think so. I think that you can have prejudices, but you can still be a good teacher to African American kids. I am afraid of Black males, but I think I will be great with the younger Black kids.

Holley: Like we talked about last night about the silent fences and how do we break them down, we have to figure it out. Remember when you said in a literature circle, "well I guess I am racist if I think that," and Sarah said, "no, you are prejudiced." What did you think about that?

Kayleigh: I think Sara was trying to be nice and say no you are not racist. She is my best friend in the cohort, so she has my back. I Google everything so I Googled the difference in being prejudiced and being a racist, and I really could not find anything good. She says being a racist is saying you hate Black people. I just figure you are a racist or you're not.

Holley: Would you agree and say I am prejudiced or would you say you are a racist? Can you be both?

Kayleigh: I am definitely prejudiced, possibly racist, I don't know.

Holley: She jumped in really quickly, but she was trying to make you feel better. Now that you have had time to think about that what do you think?

Kayleigh: I went to school in Cochran, and there were a lot of Black people and they would come to class late. They would sleep and they did not care if they flunked classes, and they all had low incomes. I'd get so mad, and at my boyfriend's apartment I would hear gunshots, and a bunch of Black people were shooting guns into the air. In high school I loved Black people. Then my freshman year in college, I just hated them. I was busting my butt trying to make good grades, and they were running up and down the hallways in the dorms at 4:00 a.m. It was ridiculous. I would go home and tell my parents that I hated Black people, and they would tell me not to talk or think like that, and I would tell them that they just did not know. One time my mom had a Black student that tried to sue her, so she got to see how they were. I know not all Blacks are like that, but those few give them all bad names. That is when I thought maybe I was racist. When I see kids I don't think I hate them because they are Black.

Holley: When you make a generalization about a group's actions, when we associate a whole group with one incident it is hard not to separate. We don't want to generalize, but we do, and it becomes very complicated.

Kayleigh: I do like Black people, but I don't. I really can't define myself.

Holley: It is like we have to box ourselves into something, but it is great to ponder those things and think about them. Anything else?

Kayleigh: I don't think so.

When I think about Kayleigh's responses, I wonder if the choices I made in the books for the literature circles have perpetuated Kayleigh's deficit view of the Other. I attempt to push her to think of the valuable things students bring to the classroom, and she gives a negative example. I still see a lot of language that represents how Kayleigh makes degrading assumptions about the entire African American race.

Interview with Anna (Roberts, 2009)

Holley: Describe how your participation in the study has or will influence your overall teaching practice?

Anna: I definitely learned that you are going to have to dig for that text. I learned you are going to have to find what your students need to learn. It is not what you want to teach your students but what you need to teach your students, and you can make it a fun and great opportunity for both you and your students. It is about listening, being an important listener in the classroom, interacting with your students, picking up on their problems. Why some child does not have the nice clothes or shoes and pay attention to this. There are some teachers that don't understand you can't come out with the same lesson plans year after year because each year you get a different group of students with different needs and who interact differently. You are going to have to learn your students each year; it will take a lot of effort, a lot of researching. You need to make your students feel like they are a part of the classroom. It will take a lot of extra work to make your lesson plans really good, but it will be worth it. During the literature circles, I talked about a lot of things I never thought I would talk about to other people, but sometimes you just need to talk. I definitely want to plan my teaching around student's conversations, their opinions, because a lot of children are not given the opportunity to speak because they are children. Listening to children is very important.

Holley: All of the participants in the study you have been with for a year, some closer to you than others. Did you find out new things about them?

Anna: Yes. You have to open your mind and listen and don't make judgments.

Holley: You said you discussed things you never thought you would discuss. Can you tell me what it was?

Anna: Probably the fact that it mattered to me what I had to say. I felt safe around these girls or if there had been a male or an African American, I probably would not have felt as comfortable opening up. We are all White girls going to be teachers. When I brought up the fact about the African American janitor, if there had been an African American in the circle, I would have felt like I offended someone. I did not feel like I was going to offend anyone in the group because we were not talking about the White race. We have all talked about it from the perspective of the White college student being a teacher, but we have never heard the other side.

Holley: Did the norms matter to you?

Anna: Not really. I felt pretty comfortable over all, but if the diversity of the group been a little more mixed, I probably would not have felt as comfortable talking about the things we talked about.

Holley: Is there anything else about the study or the experiences you would like to comment on?

Anna: I am really glad I did it. I have learned a lot from it. In order to teach well you are going to have to dig through the information and have to learn how to carefully handle teaching subjects. You can't learn if you can't talk about it.

Holley: Thank you Anna.

Anna's response indicated that the study helped her to understand that you have to listen to the students in your classroom, to value their voices which are often silenced, and make appropriate decisions about book choices as well as the planning of lessons. Anna mentioned that she talked about many things she would normally not talk about within the literature circles. When I prompted her with why she felt like she could share so openly, she mentioned the commonalities each of the participants shared; they were all White and were going to be teachers. She admitted that she would not have been as

honest if an African American person would have been in the literature circles. I wonder, how I can give voice to both races, White and Black, when we have been trained not to talk about race because it can only end in a fight. In further studies, I would like to explore how might I include Other voices.

Interview with Sarah (Roberts, 2009)

Holley: Describe how your participation in the study has or will influence your overall teaching practice.

Sarah: I think it made me think about not having, all the books we read had African American characters in them, culturally diverse is not just Black and White. It is every shade in between. It is interesting when I go pick out books, I will think my mom read that to me or I remembered that as a childhood book, but I really need to think about if the kids could relate to this, would it evoke emotion?

Holley: I think what is interesting for me is that a lot of books in the study, I had never read before or they had not been read to me so as I thought about making choices then it made me question why haven't I seen any of these books. Where are these books? Who buys these books? I was not familiar with these titles, and it made me think about what I had seen throughout my 15 years of teaching, and I was a student for many years before that, and I thought about why had I not seen these books? But I can recall all the classics and none of these existed there. I have been teaching for a long time, and I have taught a lot of African American students.

Sarah: It also made me think about me reading a book really well before I read it to them because you want to evoke emotions, but if you offend them, they can get defensive because that happens to me. I get offended by books that make White people look bad, so I am sure Black people would not agree with all the cultural books we read with Black homeless people in them. You really have to make sure it is a positive book, that it is not oh, poor Black race and oh, bad White race. I think I want to focus more on bringing everyone together rather than books that focus on being a team, being a group, not a Black and White thing but a group because that is how America is.

Holley: Is there anything else about the study that I have not asked you about? Is there anything that made you think about something you had not thought about before, or had an impact on you that maybe you did not expect or was it more of the same? Anything about the study you have not shared? Do you think it was helpful to you?

Sarah: Sure, I am up for good discussion any time.

Holley: So you really like the discussions?

Sarah: Yea, yea. I think that with the books it was more telling about the books where as I wanted to hear people's opinion. What was your question again?

Holley: The study was using critical literacy to encourage or promote cultural awareness.

Sarah: Among anyone?

Holley: You mentioned critical literacy a while ago when you were talking about you needed to look at what the pictures represent when I am reading to my kids. I think you are doing this. We talked a lot about illustrations.

Sarah: There is a lot of hidden stuff, even with the one I read the police officer was White and the homeless person was Black, and even though it did not say, that subtly it is very powerful.

Holley: I think it is important that we discussed how stereotypes are played into. You have to be more careful about what you choose. To me, through my growth and development as a student and a teacher I never thought about challenging what does that look like and why. How did it benefit you being a part of the group, and why?

Sarah: I think it is interesting to bring people together and get their opinions or their dynamics. We all have commonalities and each of us has different opinions, but we can find a common ground and bond during these discussions. You can think about it later and somebody will say something that really hits you.

Sarah responded that she would be making more conscious choices in her book selections with her students. She stated that she had traditionally chosen texts based on her emotional connections with the book, rather than considering her students. Sarah challenged me to think about the experiences I provided as a part of this study and the books I chose for the literature circles. She made a great point that the only African American books teachers share with students should not be grounded in negative social issues such as homelessness. Sarah was very conscientious about not offending someone based on conversations about race, and commented that she too gets offended when she

feels that White people are cast in a negative light. Her view of America was somewhat ideological.

Interview with Rebekka (Roberts, 2009)

Holley (Researcher): Describe how your participation in the study has influenced or will influence you overall teaching practice.

Rebekka: I have already been interested in multicultural literature and texts in the classroom but I think it will help me to not just do the “explore the world” type of things. I have been to Nigeria, and I have lived the culture. I have learned the culture and I became the culture in a way that only foreigners can. My kids are in the classroom, and although we cannot go to Nigeria, they won’t see the culture first hand, tasting the food, seeing the social norms and not living the culture. So, I think the whole fact that the realization of making everything real for them and seeing even more culture in the U.S. than anywhere else in the world will help develop stronger individually-minded children and look at their society and see what is normal in their little haven in their house and then step out their front door and see what is going on at someone’s house and say, hey I like that, its cool. Do whatever other people do. If they will look at every single part of their society and not just their own, this will help them and keeping literature circles in classrooms and talking about things people don’t necessarily talk about and making them comfortable talking about these things. We all think it anyway might as well blurt it out. They will become people who will become leaders in our society and know how to give rights and equality to people who don’t necessarily have them now.

Holley: You would implement multi-cultural texts in your class with literature circles?

Rebekka: Yes. Multicultural texts, multicultural videos, multicultural field trips, even if it is to the neighborhood around the corner. It would be different from most students in my class because they are from the other neighborhood. See what other neighborhoods do. Open discussions. Do they want opinions from other people - something like what have you ever been afraid to say or ask in your whole life. If it is nurturing enough - they will tell you. If they feel safe enough in the classroom they will tell.

Holley: Do you have anything else to share about your participation in the study or the impact it had on you?

Rebekka: Yes. I think it has impacted me a lot to actually understand what it means to teach multicultural literature and to teach learning about other people. The literature circles we had I feel closer to all of them because we discussed things we would never have discussed with anybody in our life because it was not safe and it was not accepted and it is just not what you do. Yet, I feel like there was a

bond formed, and it was OK to talk about all the things and how to get children to talk about them and they should not be afraid to talk about these things because it is OK. I think if we were actually trying to be an understanding nation and understand all the immigrants. I think we need the opportunity to understand others, and I think it is important and to have the kids in our class to understand others in their class and play out the stereotypes. Kids believe anything you tell them, so they need to explore for themselves.

Holley: What do think it was about the literature circles that made all of us talk like we did?

Rebekka: We knew we were all there for a purpose, and we all knew that some of it was going to be scary, and the first day we were all like what are they going to let me say, are they going to judge me if I say what I feel. Having rules and everybody agreed to it, say what you want to say and no judging. That allowed a more comforting air to come into the circle because we all agreed on everything and obviously we're going to tell each other things we would not tell other people. If one person said something then we would all say, yea, we agree and then everybody would open up and think they could speak their mind and not be judged. One of us would say something then somebody else would think that is what I was thinking so I guess now I can talk about it, too. I think it helped us to relate to each other, especially with the multi-cultural texts. It only takes one person to speak honestly then everybody else would do it. We are told at a very young age that we don't talk about religion and politics but we see other people talking about that all the time, so we know that it is a said rule, but there is always the unsaid rule. The unsaid rule is don't talk to people about race, kids pick it up. The said rule is no racists. The truth is that everybody does have these thoughts so we should talk about it. We don't know who is a racist and who is not, but we probably all have equal thoughts, but it does not mean we are all racist or not racist. We are just human, our brain is naturally curious. That is why we go to school. We are taught how to write and say "A". We can see it but we have to be taught what it is but also how to process through it.

Rebekka shared that her interests in multicultural literature has grown as a result of this study. She mentioned that she wants to move beyond the token multiculturalism teaching that she has seen in schools and truly attempt to immerse her students in a variety of cultures. Rebekka has attempted to do that in her own life. Rebekka discussed at length how the openness of the conversations was very beneficial. The atmosphere and the purpose of the literature circles contradicted her lived experience in that race became the center of discussion rather than the taboo topic that is not safe to discuss.

Interview with Tiffany (Roberts, 2009)

Holley: Describe how your participation in the study has influenced or will influence your overall teaching practice?

Tiffany: It would really, when it comes to children books, for instance when the girl went to visit her uncle/father, it was written, how we talk about books being written authentically. I thought that would be a good book. I think I mentioned it in my reflection too but a book where it did not seem either race was being looked negatively on. Like when Michelle read the book, *White Socks Only*, we talked about making the White people look really ignorant, I want a few of those to show that not everybody was accepting the ideas where in *Freedom Summer* there were White people who did try to be nice and work with Black people and progress towards that. I really consider literature a big thing. I almost bought a book the other day that talked about different holidays, and as I was flipping through it, there was a part about Halloween and the witch on a broom, and I thought I can't get this book so I put it back.

Holley: Do you think the study has made you look at things more critically?

Tiffany: Yes I do. If I was Asian, for instance, and I was a little kid in the classroom, I would not want to go find books that didn't show my race. I think Sarah mentioned adapting your library each year to your class, and I feel that is really important. No matter what grade I teach I would like a lot of books where all the children could relate to them.

Holley: Are there any other ways the study will influence your teaching practice other than book selections, choice of books?

Tiffany: I think I will be more considerate of culture. I would want all students to feel they are equal and a part of the classroom community and really not focus on race. Getting them to see they are important in the classroom and their culture is valuable. For instance, when I was with my first graders and the girl sitting next to me, she always gets in trouble but I love her because she is so nice to me, but she was sitting there asking me if I knew her brother who went to that school, and I told her, "no, I don't think so" and she says, "Oh" Then it went from her brother to her dad who is in prison somewhere. Then the girl across the table started talking about her uncle who is in prison. Then all the girls started talking about how their family members were in prison, and they were OK with that and the only time they got upset was when someone would say I got this many people prison. I would have talked about it a little more, but I did not know if it was appropriate or not. I did not know where the line was drawn to discuss your home life, etc. Like in my family everybody had been in prison except for me, my mom and my cousin. I don't understand why it should not be talked about if it is important to the students. Even if it is something sad or negative, you would not have to talk about why they are there, but it would be OK to talk about it.

Holley: Would you have thought about it before you read *The Visiting Day* book?

Tiffany: I would have been OK with it. If I had known it was OK to talk about it when they started the conversation at the lunch table, I probably would have talked about it with them.

Holley: I liked that you talked about their values. Most of the time we only talk about students needs, but you mentioned what they bring is valuable and that is moving beyond that deficit view of children, in general, as human. I am glad you made the connection. Is there anything else about the study or your experiences that you would like to share that I have not asked about?

Tiffany: I feel like the whole study was really open and nobody judged anybody. There was no anger that I saw, but if they felt strongly about something they would use a little different tone, but that was ok. I did write in my reflections that I wondered if it would have been different if there had been men in the group. I always thought that guys, when they do have an opinion, they are so strong about it they don't want to hear yours. I wondered how it would have been if there had been guys in the group.

Holley: We also talked about if it would have been different if there had been an African American female or male in the group how would that have influenced it? I was very impressed with our conversations and how open we have been. It is interesting to me about what made us feel that open. What was it that made you comfortable to share?

Tiffany: I am always comfortable expressing my opinions. I did not feel threatened by anybody there. We all understood that all opinions mattered, and we are not all going to have the same opinions. All of our opinions are important because we are all going to be doing the same thing, teaching, but how we teach is not going to be the same, but will hold the same values. I think it has a lot to do with being comfortable enough to talk about it. Honestly, if Sarah, Linda and Rebekka [members of her own cohort] had not been there I don't know if I would have been as comfortable but I probably would have said pretty much the same thing. I don't mind expressing my opinions but if there had not been anybody there I knew I might have felt a little more intimidated.

Holley: It was interesting to me how we really shared and had authentic conversations. Is there anything else?

Tiffany: I can't think of anything else?

Tiffany again referred to the book, Freedom Summer, to make meaning of her thoughts concerning how texts can impact the reader. She did make a point that all of the

books a teacher shares should not cast different races in a negative light. She also shared an experience from her field placement where her students were talking about the people they knew who were incarcerated. Tiffany commented that she did not talk to these students about her personal experiences with family members in prison because she said she did not know she was “allowed.” Tiffany also shared how open the conversations felt in the literature circles. She wonders if it would have been as open with male participants.

Reflections of the Researcher

During the structured interview process, I found myself to be more in the role of facilitator than at any other time during the study. During the literature circles, I acted as the facilitator only when I would ask guiding or probing questions related to the books and the background experiences of all the participants. Beyond asking these questions, my role in the conversations was quite similar to any of the other participants. The structured interviews became a place for me to clarify with each of the participants any questions I had about a particular response they shared during the literature circles, as well as a place to challenge their thinking on a topic we previously had discussed. I was also able to draw upon any information the participants presented in their autobiographical exploration papers that could be relevant to their responses in the structured interview.

I recognized several key themes within the structured interviews. First, it was interesting to hear the participants make connections to discussions that occurred during the literature circles and how they used this information to form their own answers to the structured interview questions. Not only would they draw on the conversations and the

perspectives of other participants, but many would also cite the name of a specific text that was read for that particular literature circle. It is my hope that as these teacher candidates relate to other people, situations, curriculum, and society that the connections they made will inform their perspectives and practices.

Secondly, the structured interviews revealed that the participants had spent time reflecting on the impact of the experiences which were provided by the study. Several of the participants mentioned that since the conclusion of the study, they had spent time reflecting or thinking about something that happened as a result of the experiences of the study. These ranged from book selections to having conversations about race with their families. It was inspiring to me, as the researcher to realize that the experiences stimulated further thought and contemplation about race as the participants considered their roles in society and as White teachers.

Another theme that emerged through the interview process is that as the researcher, I now have more questions than ever. The responses from the participants have challenged my intentions for this research study. Can short-term experiences truly cultivate cultural awareness? I have been continually reminded that the process of cultivating cultural awareness and sensitivity is much more complex than I anticipated. How can one push beyond cultural awareness to praxis? How might one tell the story of participants who are grounded in the White Eurocentric lifestyle yet challenged by experiences within the study? It is obvious to me that the complicated-ness of this study is precisely what motivates me to continue this journey as a White teacher educator, researcher, and one who finds my own struggles reflected in the faces of the participants.

CHAPTER VI

REFLECTIONS ON THE INQUIRY

In this final chapter, I share my reflections on this research inquiry that explored a variety of experiences and their potential to cultivate cultural awareness in White teacher candidates in a liberal arts university in Georgia. Seven White female teacher candidates, who were born and reared in Georgia, participated in the study. They examined their personal, racial, and cultural roots by completing a personal autobiographical exploration, engaged in literature circles which utilized readings from African American children's books, completed writings of critical reflection papers, and participated in a formal interview with the researcher. Each of these experiences, building one upon the other, has provided evidence that these participants are moving beyond the "curtain" (Baldwin, 1998) of Whiteness and are becoming in their journey towards cultural awareness.

In this chapter, I discuss six findings that emerged from my dissertation inquiry:

- (1) This study has awakened me intellectually as I continue to live my life as a member of a racist society and a teacher educator in a predominately White College of Education.
- (2) Education in the South and beyond still perpetuates White privilege.
- (3) Challenging Whiteness, White supremacy, and the status quo is the prelude to cultivating cultural awareness in White teacher candidates.
- (4) Literature circles have the potential to create a space for teacher candidates to open their hearts and minds towards developing critical consciousness and cultural awareness, to transgress White supremacy, and to embrace multitudes of differences, contradictions, and complexities in schools, neighborhoods, and communities.
- (5) Cultivating cultural awareness in White teacher candidates is a complicated process which engenders positive personal, educational, and societal change

for a better more equitable human condition for all. (6) Teacher educators must work with learners, teachers, parents, community workers, administrators, and policy makers to support and encourage a culturally relevant pedagogy and to create culturally responsive, humane, and inspiring learning environments to engage all learners in active learning in an increasingly diversified world.

Where do I begin to describe my own personal intellectual awakening (**Finding 1**) as a White middle class woman born and reared in the South? I approached the Curriculum Studies Program at Georgia Southern University just as I had any other degree I had completed. The plan was that I would be a high achiever, answer all the questions in a fashion that any professor would love to hear, and would work really hard and graduate, just like I had done two other times before. I quickly realized this program was not schooling as usual. I was immediately interrupted and disrupted. I was thrown off course. From the very beginning, I was challenged to contemplate what I wondered about. I had not wondered in such a long time, so long in fact I could not answer the question. My initial thoughts were, “What do you want me to wonder about?” My schooling, as so many children experience today, consisted of the teacher telling me what to think. So much so, that I had forgotten HOW to think. I learned quickly that the rose colored glasses that I had been looking through were now hazy and clouded, and I was thrown into a space of extreme discomfort. I wanted to resist, I wanted to quit.

Under the guidance of professors who challenged us, the required readings for my classes and the conversations that would come from these readings allowed me to hear the perspectives and thoughts of others who were much like me. While reading some of these required texts, I would put them down, so angry that I could no longer stand to read

the content before me. This frustration continued until a turning point in my thinking occurred during the reading of Takaki's *A Different Mirror*. The notion that the only history that I had learned was from one perspective, the Eurocentric White history, made me realize that I should consider another way, another "school" of thought. This realization was painful, but enlightening. I realized that if White American history could be one-sided, then other concepts that had a strong hold on my thinking could be seen from a more critical perspective as well.

As a part of the program, I also explored my autobiographical roots and reflected on the origin of my personal, cultural, and racial perspectives. I focused my reflection on Southern themes such as family, schooling, place, and religion. Writing the autobiographical exploration brought to light many emotions that I had not anticipated. When sharing my experience of having a Black nanny, I realized how disposable she seemed to our family. She was someone who had played a large part in raising me, and one day she was gone, never to be talked to again. This experience and many others helped me to understand that I was raised in a paternally racist family and that I represent Whiteness to those around me. This exploration was very meaningful and allowed me to attempt to explore my positionality prior to beginning my research.

Consequently, after immersing myself in books and dialogue, I began to "soak up" what I was learning. Many times what I learned did not "set well" with me and often made me feel that I was dumb, misinformed, and guilty. I felt that I was walking around "asleep" in my White middle class world. I would hear critical comments that directly addressed my own thoughts or those of my family, and I began to think that maybe I was wrong or my family was wrong, or everything I was being exposed to was wrong. This

contradiction was very hard to understand, much less attempt to reconcile. However, I vividly remember one Sunday afternoon when I was merging onto Highway 16 East, headed back to Milledgeville after a long weekend of class time, a feeling of anxiety overcame me. I realized that I would never be the same person I was when I entered the program, and I was anxious about how others would respond to me. I wondered if my husband, my parents, my family, my friends would understand me anymore.

This “awakening” became visible to others around me. My colleagues at work would make comments that almost seemed like insults, saying that I seemed to have a new ability to think about things, to view a variety of perspectives, unlike before when my views were very efficiency and practicality driven. My husband commented to me that I had always been a rational thinker, but since I began the program, my thinking had changed and that I was much more articulate in my thoughts. Thankfully, I began to take these comments as compliments because I, too, realized that I had been challenged to think. I, myself, noticed a new depth to my conversations with my students. My essence was different.

One critical point in my program and in writing this dissertation that caused my new ways of thinking to be questioned and reconsidered was the Institutional Review Board process. I knew because of my response to the experiences within this program, the challenging readings, complicated dialogues, and building relationships with others, that I wanted my research study to mirror much of that same format. I wondered, if I could change my way of thinking, would it be possible for the White teacher candidates who continually come to me with blank stares unprepared to respond to the diversity they are encountering in their field placements, to also change. I prepared my IRB proposal

and submitted it to the university for consideration. In my mind, I believed, naively, that this would be one thing I could easily check off the list as being done. I quickly received notice that my request had been denied and that I would need to attend a full board review to resolve the “risks” that I was posing to the participants in my study. After gathering my thoughts and courage, I asked for a meeting with the IRB chair, who graciously accepted. As a result, he instructed me on some much needed pointers that would allow me to “clean up” my proposal. I did as I was advised, even to the point of compromising my title. I, then, resubmitted my proposal. Again, the proposal was rejected, and again it was sent to Full Board Review.

On the appointed day, I arrived in Statesboro to meet with the Full Board, Dr. He and Dr. Muschell joined me for support. The board met, discussing my proposal for over an hour before inviting us into the conference room. When I entered the room, it was filled with professors from all disciplines across the university. Needless to say, it was a very intimidating environment. They placed me in what they termed “the hot seat” and began to question my intentions for the study. The questions reached far beyond the scope of evaluating the risks to the participants and ensuring the safety of human subjects, which is the expressed purpose of the Institutional Review Board. The members of the board went so far to ask that I change the language and tone within my writing. One member even ventured to say that my study was not a study at all but merely a “workshop.” Another advised that I had incorrectly used the term “In-Between” in my title “since you never are to combine two prepositions.” There were many other trivial discrepancies which were pointed out about my proposal. Not only were their comments damaging to my enthusiasm for my study and my new ways of thinking, but the tone of

the meeting was personally threatening and dehumanizing. My palms are literally sweating as I retell this story. I was traumatized by this meeting.

Soon after the meeting, however, I became quite angry and even more determined. I made all the changes that were finally suggested which would clarify the methodology for the study; then again, I resubmitted my IRB proposal. Finally, after much frustration, the proposal was approved, and this study was allowed to proceed. I believe that there is always something that can be learned from any experience, and this particular one helped me to realize that this type of study is absolutely vital. This study challenged White privilege and power and recognized that it does indeed exist. If it did not exist, then this study would not have been necessary. It could be that all the White faces on the Institutional Review Board were afraid of just this. I am fearful to even make such a statement, but I have come to believe and embrace that it is my responsibility as a researcher and advocate for social justice that I name the oppressor and confront the “official” story. When answering the question, does your research push back social boundaries? I can say with confidence that it does indeed. I know this by the reaction of the IRB committee.

Through this study and my work in the doctoral program, I have challenged my Whiteness and the privilege that it holds. I understand that I have prejudices and biases that must continually be reflected upon. I also have discovered that much of what I was taught in my own schooling was purposeful and silent; therefore, it is harder to confront. As a mother and wife, I continually challenge my family to rethink assumptions they make about others and to resist stereotypical constructs of people. An excellent example

of this is found in a story told to me by my ten year old son, Ford, one afternoon after fishing with his father at our family's pond.

Ford and my husband, Cliff, went to buy some fishing supplies in a local tackle shop. Both Ford and Cliff approached the counter and paid for their supplies. After signing the receipt, my husband noticed a container on the counter which held lures which cost fifty cents each. He mentioned to the owner and clerk that he wished he had included one in the supplies he purchased. The White owner graciously told Cliff to just take one. As Cliff and Ford were leaving the store with their free lure, Ford heard a man who had been behind them in line ask if the lures were free. The man, who was Black, was told "no, they cost fifty cents." Ford shared this with me explaining that it made him feel bad. He felt that the owner should not have given him and his dad one if he was not going to give the other man one, too. This experience and Ford's expression of his feelings gave me the opportunity to share with him realizations about White privilege and its effects on society.

Stories such as the one Ford shared with me reminds me, as a teacher educator, that I must remember, that my students have much to bring into the classroom because of the richness of their own life experiences. However, the implications of the experience of growing up White in the South, specifically the state of Georgia, must be deconstructed. Most importantly, as I encounter the many White teacher candidates that are enrolled in my classes, cohort, and field experiences, I must continually challenge them to recognize their own White privilege, as I will mine, and encourage them to resist the status quo and move beyond "naïve consciousness" (Freire, 1974, p. 39).

Another important insight that was gained from the study was that education in the South and beyond perpetuates White privilege (**Finding 2**). Just as I was, all seven of the participants were born, reared, and educated in Georgia schools. Whether through the literature circles, the structured interviews, or critical reflection papers, it was evident that for many of the participants that talking about race, therefore, learning more about it, was something to be considered taboo. Morris and Monroe (2009) reiterate the influence of place. “Place, therefore, has important consequences for individuals’ social and educational opportunities” (p. 24). This is seen in her first critical reflection paper as Linda commented, “I think it is considered very taboo for us to talk about these things because we’re teachers, and we are supposed to love all and treat all of our students equally, no matter their race or background” (Roberts, 2009, *Linda’s Critical Reflection Papers*). In addition to being teachers, many women born in the South, including myself, were taught to never discuss race, religion, or politics in public and even rarely at home. The reason for avoiding such conversations was due to the fact that the conversations could become controversial and evoke emotion in some way which could be interpreted as offensive to others. Therefore, it is taught that Southern women should remember their manners and their place and avoid such topics. As a White woman and as a teacher, it is safer to engage in what Alice McIntyre (1997) terms “white talk” (p. 45).

[T]alk that serves to insulate white people from examining their/our individual and collective role(s) in the perpetuation of racism. It is a result of whites talking uncritically with/to other whites, all the while, resisting critique and massaging each others racist attitudes, beliefs, and actions. (pp. 45-46)

The methods of this study attempted to remove “white talk” which had been perpetuated in the homes and schools of the participants and to expose what the participants were taught and how they made sense of their experiences. Linda commented, “I’m really glad we can open up about these things and support one another” (Roberts, 2009, *Linda’s Critical Reflection Papers*). Exposing “white talk” and having dialogue about race is critical in preparing teachers to be culturally responsive. According to Howard (2006), if we do not acknowledge dominance, then we may perpetuate it.

It was important to have the participants deconstruct their own learning in order to attempt to understand how Whiteness is perpetuated systematically. In *Monocultures of the Mind*, Shiva (1993) states that “[m]odern western knowledge is a particular cultural system with a particular relationship to power” (p. 60); therefore, it is most important for teachers to examine power relationships and to confront them individually and systematically. In her final critical reflection paper, Michelle, a participant in the study, shared her desire to offer the opportunity for multiple perspectives to her students, unlike her own educational experience. She states that “I want to educate my students in ways that I was not fortunate enough, until now, to be aware of” (Roberts, 2009, *Michelle’s Critical Reflection Papers*).

Several of the participants commented on the realizations that the history they had been taught was misrepresented and one-sided. Rebekka commented that she felt betrayed because of her inaccurate teachings. She asserts, “How can I be proud of a country if they only want me to view them with their partial truths. It is like we are lying to the children, and saying only one race lives in America: the Anglo Saxon race”

(Roberts, 2009, *Rebekka's Critical Reflection Papers*). Not only was it evident in the education of the participants, but several participants also reported that they had witnessed the same inaccurate teachings occurring today in their field placements. Linda shared an example from her field experience with a kindergarten class. She states that the students were learning about the discovery of the "New World."

My kindergarteners learned this year, that Christopher Columbus discovered the world. Actually they told me they had changed it to who discovered the new world, but they meant Christopher Columbus, and she (their classroom teacher) was teaching them Christopher Columbus. I came in one day, and she (the classroom teacher) was, like, look what they can do. Tell Miss Linda who discovered the new world. They all blurted out without missing a beat, and said, "Dick Chaney." And then she had to guide them, and she was like Christopher...and then they were like "Columbus." We are teaching that. I just learned last year, too, in my World Civilization class that he didn't, and I was like, "OH!" (Roberts, 2009, *Literature Circle 2*).

This is one example that supports the notion that Eurocentric accomplishments and dominance continue to be perpetuated in classrooms today. Although the reaction of some of the participants was the feeling they had been taught a lie, the Other is completely absent. Kendall (2006) explains the effects of White students being taught such an undeveloped perspective of history.

While we are deprived of critical thinking by being given such a rudimentary view of our heritage, our ignorance is not held against us. We are taught little

complicated history to have to think about and question, and so we have few opportunities to learn to grapple with complexities. (p. 75)

Consequently, the challenging experiences of the study, which asked participants to confront the complexities of their Whiteness and issues of diversity in texts, caused the participants to show resistance and to demonstrate a range of emotions.

Another way that White privilege could be perpetuated in Southern schools is the overwhelming number of White teachers. For this reason, we must consider the question posed by Kunjufu (2002), “How could a teacher who grew up in a White rural community and was educated in a White environment be effective in the inner cities of America?” (p. 18). In the first literature circle, a participant recalls a conversation she had at the lunch table with her class of predominately African American students. While sitting with the children at lunch, she was questioned by a young student about the number of White teacher candidates he sees with college identification tags in his elementary school.

When I was in a Kindergarten placement, I was sitting at lunch with the kids. The class was all boys except for three girls, and they all were African American except for the three white boys. I was sitting there at lunch and another (White) student teacher walked by, and I waved to her, and he (African American boy) said, “Ms. (deleted for anonymity) is all the student teachers like you?” I was like what do you mean? He said you know like you? I was like Oh! You mean White, and he said yes. And, I said, “Why do you ask? He said because all the ones I see here that wear the same thing (nametag), they are all White. I said, “So do you think that only White people can be teachers?” He had an African American

teacher, and he said, “No because my teacher is not.” I said, “does it matter?”, and he said, “I guess not.” He was just very curious, and he really thought about things and I really enjoyed that conversation. (Roberts, 2009, *Literature Circle 1*)

Not only does this young man’s comment directly correlate with the purpose of the study, but it also caused me to wonder what the message of only White women with teacher badges sends to African American students. Tiffany attempts to bring out the idea that African American children can one day become teachers, but the student connects that there can be Black teachers because he has one. What about the African American children who never have a Black teacher, what will they think? For that reason, it is vital for White teachers to acknowledge their White privilege and become focused on seeing the value difference can bring to the classroom.

Due to the perpetuation of Whiteness in the educational and lived experiences of the participants, challenging Whiteness, White supremacy, and the status quo is the prelude to cultivating cultural awareness in White teacher candidates (**Finding 3**). In the experiences of the study, such as the autobiographical explorations, literature circles, and critical reflection papers, the resistance to challenge Whiteness was very visible. Many of the participants would deny that White privilege still exists today and that it could not be possible because we live in the land of equality grounded in the American Dream. Several participants stated that they had worked for everything they had received such as grades and admission to college; therefore, it was a matter of laziness or lack of determination for those who did not succeed. Many statements were given that supported the idea that racism and White dominance are a part of the past and that as generations continue to die out, then, too, will the issues of race. Another reaction was to declare

White people as victims, to claim that “the issue of racism is over taught, almost to the point of creating an adverse effect” (Roberts, 2009, *Sarah’s critical reflection papers*). This resistance to accepting Whiteness as a privilege was expected; however, the way in which the study addressed this resistance was very much unexpected.

Knowing that the participants had received “formal” teachings surrounding White privilege and diversity and held the attitude that it was “over taught” to the point of creating racist people, I was not exactly sure how I would address these comments when made by the participants. I knew that the IRB committee had asked that I include in my methodology that I should “self-monitor” my reactions to participants’ input or comments that emerged within the literature circles that might cast a negative light on the participants. Although, I believe that being willing to open yourself up for complicated conversations is extremely positive, I was not sure how to “self monitor” and push the participants to critically look at their own resistance. However, due to the structure of the literature circles other participants began to question these perspectives and push others to critically assess what they were saying. Emerging among the participants came a dialogue that questioned equal opportunity and access, historical implications on Whiteness and what it means in the South, and the idea that it is not only important to reflect on lived experiences but also to continually push beyond them.

The participants, as they shared among themselves, using African American children’s literature as their inspiration, challenged themselves personally as well as each other during these intense conversations. Some would attempt to make connections based on the “otherness” they felt when reading the selected texts which had served as a catalyst for the conversations. This meaning making of White privilege looked much like

what Kendall (2006) describes in *Understanding White Privilege: Creating Pathways to Authentic Relationships across Race*.

The process of looking at what racism and white privilege cost us- those of us who are white and have skin color privilege – is a difficult one for several reasons. First, many of us don't feel particularly powerful or as if we have privilege. Second, even if we know we have privilege, we are usually only clear about what we gain from being white, not about what it costs us. Third, understanding how we are both beneficiaries and losers because of this system requires that we face the fact that this system didn't just magically appear, it was intentionally constructed and put into place, ostensibly for us, by people who look like us. (p. 23)

As the facilitator during the literature circles, I would continually challenge the participants to think about the prevalence of racism and how it transcends beyond one hate crime, but that it infests itself in our homes, schools, and society. Several participants began to gain an understanding that the Eurocentric history they had learned was not accurate; therefore, recognizing the intentionality of White textbook writers helped them connect to institutional forms of racism. One participant described that “[n]obody wants the children to ask those questions, nobody wants them to think differently than they have always thought before” (Roberts, 2009, *Literature Circle 2*). These few examples provide confirmation that the participants were beginning to recognize the institutionalism of racism and were beginning to grapple with it. I, also, began to question the magnitude of Whiteness. What does it mean for White teachers of diverse students? How does the color and culture of the teacher affect the achievement of

students? How does a White teacher build relationships with diverse parents? The implications for acknowledging institutional racism and being a part of the systematic processes that exist because of it require much thought and reflection.

Therefore, as a teacher educator, I must be diligent to support White teacher candidates as they react to the realities of Whiteness through resistance. This resistance can be important in one way for it shows a movement of some sort, evidence that the individual has allowed the concept into their consciousness for thought; however, remaining at the point of resistance can have negative effects on the students and the teacher's effectiveness. McIntyre (1997) explains the impact of resistance from her study with White pre-service teachers. "This resistance to critiquing whiteness distances white teachers from thinking that we are implicated in the kind of educational system that continues to privilege white students" (McIntyre, 1997, p. 120). It is important to move beyond resistance and claim one's Whiteness in order to move towards cultural awareness.

Part of the challenge for this study was to confront the resistance by White teacher candidates to the recognition of Whiteness and White privilege that is necessary before one can progress towards cultural awareness. Literature circles have the potential to create a space for teacher candidates to open their hearts and minds to develop critical consciousness and cultural awareness, to transgress White supremacy, and to embrace multitudes of differences, contradictions, and complexities in schools, neighborhoods, and communities (**Finding 4**). Literature circles were chosen as part of the methodology for the purpose of providing a safe space in which the White participants could engage openly in dialogue using critical literacy as a lens for discussing the issues of race, White

privilege, and other related issues. According to Chia-Hui (2004) literature circles encourage students to “learn to work cooperatively with each other, to be responsible for their own learning, and to respect multiple perspectives on topics and issues, they also learn to be better listeners and more honest with peers” (p. 26). Listening to and learning about other perspectives through the dialogue within the literature circles helped the participants evaluate their own perspectives and make changes to these views as they felt led. Every participant reported that their personal, cultural, and racial beliefs were challenged the most through their participation in the literature circles.

Several participants shared that the conversations within the literature circles changed their individual perspectives rather than just reading the texts alone. The texts, which were articles that focused on critical literacy and African American children’s literature, were readings that were unfamiliar to most of the participants. It was the dialogue that helped provide the participants with opportunities to make connections between issues related to the texts and their own lives. Linda stated, “I felt the discussions really challenged the way I thought” (Roberts, 2009, *Linda’s Structured Interview*). Many times the issues in the book would initiate a conversation among the participants, and then someone would share a life experience that helped them make sense of the issue which the group was discussing. Many times the issue at hand would be in direct contradiction to the lived experience, which would then challenge the participants to reconsider their own perspectives. This complex process of interaction played a crucial part in the recognition of Whiteness, racism, and institutional racism. Teresa Strong-Wilson (2006) confirms the benefits of this type of interaction. “When teachers connect stories that have been important to them with counter-stories that they

have implicitly excluded, they ‘waken’ to their landscapes of learning” (p. 110). This sense of awakening or consciousness, inherent to the theory of critical literacy, was personal to me as a researcher and teacher educator and visible within some of the participants within the study (McDaniel, 2006).

Another sort of awakening occurred during the reading of primarily African American children’s literature by the White participants in the study. Suddenly, texts that are considered multicultural became culturally irrelevant for the participants. Unable to “see” themselves in the literature some of the participants became uninterested and threatened. Many also expressed concern with the way the White race was portrayed in the predominately African American texts. The experience of being excluded from the literature encouraged some participants to empathize with those who are traditionally excluded from traditional book selections. Michelle commented in a literature circle about the book, *White Socks Only*.

Think about how blind some of the children in our classroom may feel when we read some of the things that we read to them. Think about when they look through the pages and all they see are white people, and that is all they see. Think about how they don’t connect and how blind they feel. Just as I told you when I was reading this, I want to see it differently, and I can’t, and it upsets me, because I can’t see it different. Think about that child when they are sitting there reading it, and they can’t see what they are supposed to see. It is almost like having a disability, like that is the way I see it, like they would say what is wrong with me? I mean turn it around the other way and think about how the other child, that is the way I feel about it, you know. Think about how that child is feeling if I am

reading something and they can't connect with it, the way I felt with that (book).

(Roberts, 2009, *Literature Circle 2*)

Michelle's recognition that it is critical to have books that represent all of her students was not something that happened without a lot of thought. Throughout the second literature circle conversations, Michelle changed her perspective from being concerned that the text may be inappropriate due to the portrayal of the White man to helping her make sense of how others feel when they do not "see" themselves in books read by and provided by the teacher. Botelho and Rudman (2009) explain the importance of how all teachers need to provide texts in which all children should see themselves.

Children need to see themselves reflected so as to affirm who they and their communities are. They also require windows through which they may view a variety of differences. Books are one way they learn about the world. Once these foundations of story and society are internalized, literature can become a conduit – a door – to engage children in social practices that function for social justice. (p. 1)

This study utilized the "conduit" of African American children's literature to engage the participants in conversations focused on equity and social justice.

Although "[t]here is no talking cure for racism" (McIntyre, 1997, p. 139), the conversations within the literature circles gave some of the participants the courage to have conversations outside of the circle concerning race. Conversations such as these are a step towards breaking down the Southern social boundary of silence and moving towards open dialogue. Tiffany shared with the group that she had a conversation with

an African American male friend she had had for years and had never discussed race until now.

My friend John and I, he is African American, on the way down to Florida, no it was on the way back, we talked about the whole--what we have been talking about here. Not everyone's opinion, nothing like that, but just saying like, I was telling him that we have been talking about race and everything and he's like, he pretty much said a lot of the stuff that we said, so I thought it was really interesting. (Roberts, 2009, *Literature Circle 4*)

She goes on to share how her friend was taught by his parents to be careful in what he did so that he did not offend anyone. Tiffany's friend also revealed the frustration he feels when he is accused of "acting White" by his Black friends.

The literature circles provided an amazing experience to truly converse about and attempt to contemplate and challenge the issue of race in schools, life, and texts and to disrupt the dysconsciousness of the participants. The power to change one's perspective due to the non-threatening environment the literature circles provided gives me hope as a researcher and teacher educator. Moving beyond recognition of racism to truly talking about its effects on all facets of society is vital for White teachers to be prepared to teach diverse populations of students. I believe that there is hope among the participants that has come from learning to become empathetic to others, breaking the silence of confronting racism, and expanding the dialogue about race outside of the circle conversations.

Cultivating cultural awareness in White teacher candidates is a complicated process which engenders positive personal, educational, and societal change for a better

more equitable human condition for all (**Finding 5**). Because of the complexities, contradictions, and challenges of cultivating cultural awareness it is important to realize that cultivating cultural awareness does not have a cause effect relationship with the experiences of the study. The participants' reactions and responses to all of the experiences within the study such as the autobiographical explorations, literature circles, critical reflection papers, and structured interviews do not show a pattern of moving among a continuum. Rather, as I ponder how the participants responded, it is much more cyclical and recursive. In one experience, the participants may make a theoretical statement about the value of all children, and then in another experience make harsh generalizations of a whole group of people based on their race. As the researcher, I found this somewhat frustrating and it created more questions for me when I was fully anticipating gaining "answers." At several points I felt very hopeless, but I, too, must not categorize or standardize the process of developing awareness of oneself and valuing the differences among us.

Understanding that race is politicized and socially constructed is important when developing cultural awareness. It is my belief that one cannot cultivate or harvest culturally responsive understandings and behaviors until one knows how race, in particular, is constructed and how one personally came to form their opinions and perspectives. Although this study narrowly focuses on the issues of race between White teachers and their perspectives about the African American culture, due to the demographics of the study, the ability to respond to difference in ways that value others and does not project one's beliefs on the other is very complicated. Moving beyond the self is critical as well, which I think some of my participants were beginning to do.

Jensen (2005) discusses the importance of looking beyond oneself to the larger societal issues of race.

It's relatively easy for white people to focus on the struggle to change racist behaviors and attitudes at the personal level but ignore questions at more systematic levels. But, of course, changing oneself in a society that remains unchanged can be only part of a progressive racial project. (pp. 17-18)

Although I do not completely agree with Jensen's explanation concerning the simplicity of changing one's own behavior and attitudes, I do agree that when we ignore the systematic implications of inequality and discrimination, we have significantly reduced the influence one, who is culturally responsive, can have on society. Therefore, this study sought to identify the racism in the White self and begin the conversations concerning how race is played out in society.

Although the focus of the study was to explore experiences of cultivating cultural awareness, I believe this is not enough. Teacher educators need to work with learners, teachers, parents, community workers, administrators, and policy makers to support and encourage a culturally relevant pedagogy and to create culturally responsive, humane, and inspiring learning environments to engage all learners in active learning in an increasingly diversified world (**Finding 6**). It is critical for White teacher candidates to move beyond culturally awareness within one's self. While it is crucial for the participants and me to continually challenge self awareness and systematic constructions of race, the next steps are to support students through culturally relevant pedagogy by becoming what Kunjufu (2002) terms "coaches" (p. 46). "Coaches care, respect, and appreciate the culture of their students. They fully understand that there can be no

significant learning until there is a significant relationship.” (Kunjufu, 2002, pp 46-47). To become a teacher who does this, it is necessary to apply these understandings to one’s constructions of curriculum. Kunjufu (2002) goes on to say that it “requires applying your understanding of another culture to your curriculum and pedagogy. It necessitates respect, tolerance, and a willingness to learn from your students” (p. 19). Moving to a student-centered focus that respects and appreciates the differences among students should extend beyond the classroom. Ayers (2004) confers. “Being student centered, we can learn to become family centered and community centered. In fact, we can’t really become student centered until we are family centered, community centered, person centered” (p. 63). It is my hope that this study provided the first steps to helping White teacher candidates in becoming advocates for social change through the pedagogical decisions they make within their classrooms. Constantly reflecting on their attitudes, resources, and pedagogy are significant as they attempt to challenge the status quo.

For this reason, I think it is important to ask if the development of cultural awareness is only important to White female teachers in the South? This type of research is lacking in the South, as Morris and Monroe (2009) explain.

Furthermore, despite being geographically positioned to lead in this neglected area of scholarly inquiry, colleges and universities based in the U.S. South have not taken full advantage of opportunities to understand how the intersection of race and place continues to shape the contemporary experiences of African American people in a range of areas. (p. 22)

Due to the historical implications of race relations in the South, I feel my study is relevant and critical in the state of Georgia and within our College of Education.

However, having completed this study, I have begun to question how the cultivation of cultural awareness may be beneficial to all teachers in any part of the world. Because of the prevalence of White teachers across the country, now at 90% according to Howard (2006), I believe this study is significant beyond the South. White teachers are not the only teachers who need to become culturally aware. It is important to value what all teachers, including White teachers, bring to the classroom.

This study represents the beginning of a personal and professional journey for me as a researcher and teacher educator. My work has programmatic implications for the College of Education, in which I work, as well as admission and recruiting implications for the university as a whole. How can we increase the diversity within our students and faculty? How can we as teacher educators across the nation work together to make curricular changes that support the cultivation of cultural awareness? Although my own work concerns experiences with White teacher candidates to cultivate cultural awareness, similar work could be carried out in the future: (a) How will these participants plan for their students in their first years of teaching? How will they form relationships with students, make children's book choices in their lesson planning and implementation, select books for their classroom shelves, value all students in their classroom activities, and become involved in their local communities?(b) How can we give voice to the students who are impacted by being educated by predominately White teachers? What do the children have to say? (c) How can we empower teachers to move beyond cultural awareness to praxis through culturally relevant pedagogy? (d) How can I use this experience to expand the research on White Identity development? (e) How can I utilize

the stories of the participants to explore the intersectionality of sexuality with race, class, and gender?

Because this study emerged from a *personal* transformation and awakening, it has become something that I am very *passionate* about as I work daily with White teacher candidates who grapple with the realities of race within their field experiences. I choose to *participate* in this journey for social justice because of my roles as a mother, wife, teacher educator, and researcher. However, I continually question what part will my work play in this society to make the world a better place for all of us?

A recent email has provided me with a clue towards addressing this question. Without any solicitation, one of the participants, Michelle, implemented a lesson with her students recently in her fall field experience. Her email was full of enthusiasm as she discussed the gratification she felt as she shared the book, *The Other Side*, with her class of second grade students.

Michelle: Within my pre-service teaching I decided to implement the text, *The Other Side* by Jacqueline Woodson. I was not sure if my second graders would grasp the fullest meaning of the text, or if they were ready for it, but I had time to experiment and that is exactly what I did. The students were very inquisitive about the text from the moment that they saw the cover. They begin to ask questions throughout the book that gave me a lot of insight into the things that they take note of. One student asked if I knew that the “White” girl was wearing the same shoes as one of the “Black” girls in our classroom. I found that question very interesting and wondered what that really meant to him. I wished that I had had enough time to really sort through his reasoning for pointing that out. When

we finished the text, I prompted the students to talk with me about the text and ask questions about things they did not understand and many of them submitted their thoughts and feelings.

Student: “Why didn’t her Mama get mad at her after she told her not to sit on that fence?” (That question opened a huge door for me to walk through in saying, I don’t know, let’s see if your classmates have any ideas, and of course some of them did.)

Student: “I think her Mama didn’t get mad because she really wanted them all to be friends, but she was just afraid.” (I thought that was profound for a second grader, it rocked my world. This led into the question of “Why would she be scared?”)

Student: “She was scared because a long time ago, black people and white people couldn’t sit together on buses.” (This student brought in her knowledge of history; she began to talk about Rosa Parks which led to some discussion of Martin Luther King, which finally led to me asking the students how all of this made them feel.)

Student: “Sad, because some of my friends are white and I am black and if I lived back then I couldn’t play with my friends”

This was the defining moment for me, when these students internalized what segregation actually meant and related it to their own world. I was thrilled. When they began to think of the real meaning behind this book and be able to see and feel things for themselves was the moment that I felt the happiest to be their teacher. When I read books of this nature, I always try to be really careful with

my responses so that I never take away or force anything on the children, because in essence I want to know what they are thinking and feeling because they can easily do what I tell them to do, but I'd much rather them internalize things for themselves. I went on to direct them to write or draw for me in response to this literature, and I began to see what they were thinking. One of my students that barely commented throughout the lesson came up with some really good questions about the story. He asked, "who will come and knock the fence down?" And, "why is the fence there?" I am thinking of doing a follow up with this text because the students have since asked me to read it to them again, and I think it would be great to see what they pull out of it a second time around, and it will also give me some time to help them discover the answers to their questions.

While this study was focused on experiences that can potentially support White teacher candidates to cultivate cultural awareness, it was always my hope that the experiences would stretch beyond the scope of the individual participants. As evidenced in many of the responses from the participants as well as my own personal transformation, the study has proved itself to be far reaching into friendships, families, and now, as Michelle recollects, into classrooms with young students. This act of sharing through a wonderful children's text, from a teacher candidate who now sees the value of this experience, reveals a glimmer of hope for possibilities in promoting social justice through culturally relevant pedagogy.

It is also important to draw from this study that cultivating cultural awareness is challenging, complex, and time consuming for teacher educators. Therefore, as this inquiry comes to an end, I am more perplexed than ever. On one hand I am hopeful, but

on the other hand I have a new sense of understanding concerning the contradictions facing White teacher candidates who were born, reared, and educated in the South and the increasingly diversified world in which they live and teach. I also understand that while this is a significant dilemma in the South, the absence of cultural awareness has broader implications across the United States. My work towards the completion of this inquiry causes me to question how we move past conversations and dialogue to building and maintaining authentic relationships with those other than ourselves. The study provides evidence that there can be a change in perspectives – but for how long? There is still much to learn.

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