

# Self-Study and Diversity

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MICHAEL VAVRUS

## TEACHER IDENTITY FORMATION IN A MULTICULTURAL WORLD: INTERSECTIONS OF AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL RESEARCH AND CRITICAL PEDAGOGY

I have never met a teacher who wanted to be publicly identified as biased against certain social categories of students or, more specifically, as a racist, despite words or actions. Indeed, I find that teachers generally presume a politically neutral identity that is underscored by a belief that they treat all students equally. Consequently, I often discover that I am one of their first professors they encounter to let them know that current schooling conditions are far from neutral and, furthermore, that teachers can unwittingly be implicated in the perpetuation of inequities inherent in mainstream schooling. At the point of incorporating issues of race into this analysis, teacher education students, especially Whites, can become resistant to the realities of normalized customs of teaching and the inequities they can produce. This resistance often manifests itself in emotional defensiveness or shame for fear of being considered a flawed individual who might have actually engaged in racist practices or be suspected of such complicity.

When education students emotionally and then intellectually shut down, this is clearly not a productive pedagogy. In this chapter I discuss my experiences in designing a non-confrontational methodology that helps teachers gain a solid understanding of the causes and potential solutions to schooling inequities that include institutional racism. This approach has required me to take into account the socially constructed life histories of my teacher candidates. I describe how structured autobiographical research into multicultural dimensions of a teacher's identity formation has nearly eliminated emotional resistance to becoming a transformative teacher who can empower students. In taking this approach, I have not abandoned critical pedagogical foundations that have guided my research and teaching from my graduate studies (e.g., Vavrus, 1979a, 1979b) to the present (e.g., Vavrus, 2002, 2003). Instead, I have combined autobiographical research with critical pedagogy into what I call *deep critical pedagogy*.

Later in the chapter I critically reflect on my own learning during this process. My hope is to address a point raised by Bell, Washington, Weinstein and Love (2003): "More often than not, people who write about multicultural education say very little about their own struggles in the classroom" (p. 477). Finally, I offer the reader a way to get started in autobiographical research into teacher identity

formation. First, though, an overview of critical pedagogy and the place of transformation is necessary background information to frame the place of the type of autobiographical research that I have developed for teacher education students.

### THE CHALLENGE OF TRANSFORMATION

Critical theory and its offspring, critical pedagogy, offer ways of looking at teaching and learning that can bring to the forefront such concepts as ideology, hegemony, resistance, power, knowledge construction, class, cultural politics, and emancipatory actions (see Darder, Baltodano, & Torres, 2003b). Critical theory and critical pedagogy continue to offer me a lens to analyze and interpret the world, an orientation I bring to this chapter. I find both hopeful and challenging the potential agency of transformation that is embedded within critical theory and critical pedagogy. Transformation is not conceived as a fixed point but rather as a continuous process that explores relationships between thinking and acting as part of a broader process of working for social justice and equity. In critical theory, transformation "problematizes the structures of history that embody who we are and have become" (Popkewitz, 1999, p. 3). My own work has regularly felt an urgency for a critically based transformative concept of multicultural education within teacher education specifically, and higher education curricula in general. This urgency has been underscored by the thousands of teachers who are exposed to teacher education and "profess to understand [multicultural education], even if they know little or nothing about it, because policy mandates require the inclusion of multicultural content in their courses" (Sleeter & Grant, 1999, p. 152).

Transformative multicultural education that is situated in critical theory and pedagogy (see Vavrus, 2002) contrasts with my experiences with many elementary and secondary teachers and numerous teacher educators who focus on a negative kind of *transformation* that assumes a primary purpose of schooling is to assimilate children of color, immigrants, and the poor to political, social, and economic norms determined by those in positions of privilege. Such educators act on notions of perceived deficits among marginalized student populations, their families, and respective communities. In teacher education programs located within both higher education and school districts, I find that this deficit practice is widespread. In his extensive study of teacher education programs, John Goodlad (1990) found the perpetuation of programs that enabled "countless incidents of indifference and neglect on the part of individuals who have it in their power to make a difference" (p. 67). Goodlad's observations were reinforced by the Holmes Group (1995) who also encountered teacher education programs marked by "shoddy preparation that angers and embarrasses those who care deeply about the minds and welfare of America's young" (p. 1). Wisniewski's (1999) critique of a random sample of institutional reports of nationally accredited teacher education schools revealed a "tenuous" link at best to any kind of mainstream or multicultural education reform (p. 17). Apparently there is a "lack of persuasive evidence that institutions perceive themselves to be part of a reform movement beyond doing what is required by the accreditation process" (p. 32).

I find myself in a profession where teachers have historically been expected to reinforce dominant cultural perspectives that help sustain the status quo (see Spring, 2005). In turn, schools of education institutionally have also been called upon to do the same by socializing teachers away from being moral stewards whose advocacy can result in public conflicts. This is particularly the case in contemporary United States where well-financed political and religious neo-conservatives construct public relations campaigns to discredit curricular programs that are perceived as challenging their political hegemony of “official knowledge” (Apple, 1993, 2001; Boyer, 2005). Although in this political climate we can find many instances of teacher educators who employ critical perspectives, rarely can we identify schools of education that do the same (see Goodlad, 1999; Vavrus & Archibald, 1998; Vavrus, 2002). Despite the potential of transformative agency, to actively apply critical theory and engage in critical pedagogy within a teacher education program can be a daunting and somewhat isolating experience. This is particularly the case with efforts to incorporate a multicultural perspective into preservice and inservice teacher education (Vavrus, 2003).

Throughout my professional career this realization of the conservative nature of K-12 teaching and teacher education has at times offended and angered my social justice sensibilities. This has especially been the case when teacher education practices in effect blame marginalized youth for their perceived shortcomings when these young people actually need adult advocates for equity within the institutions that students are required by law to attend. Nevertheless, this understanding of the socio-political world and profession in which I live and work also propels my thinking and actions to seek effective approaches that can challenge the hegemony of mainstream teacher education and its individualistic and somewhat socially vacuous stance. Yet, my dependence on critical theory and critical pedagogy has not always translated into practices that have actually contributed to transforming status quo practices. It is to this point I now turn.

#### DEEP CRITICAL PEDAGOGY

Unraveling an unquestioned and internalized political status quo of dominance and oppression is a task that critical pedagogy is well positioned to undertake. Such work necessitates a knowledge base that analyzes how and why a dominant ideology supports a particular kind of political and economic arrangement that directly affects public school goals, policies, and practices. This is not an easy undertaking pedagogically. Part of the difficulty rests in the use of a counter-hegemonic language to explain the normalized condition of dominance that actively seeks to exclude such discourse by labeling it illegitimate or “biased.” Indeed, a complaint by practitioners against critical pedagogy has been a perceived inaccessibility of its language (Darder, Baltodano & Torres, 2003a). This is a challenge that I and other critical educators face in our attempts to deconstruct status quo knowledge and to offer a counter-vocabulary relevant to transformative thinking and actions. At the same time critical pedagogy calls on educators to espouse the Deweyian notion of starting with the learner’s prior experiences and

understandings (e.g., Dewey, 1938/1974). Yet, the critical pedagogy literature has tended to be silent on how to actually make these connections in practice. This is not to say that guiding pedagogical principles are not provided by critical theorists (e.g., Bartolomé, 2003) or that methodologies do not exist that can support critical pedagogy (e.g., Cohen, 1994; Daniels & Bizar, 2004; Gay, 2000; Landau, 2004).

For example, in critical pedagogy the concept of praxis – a bridging of theory into practice – is a necessary quality (see McLaren, 1989, 1995, 1997). Progressive-minded teachers who philosophically support praxis, however, can become confused and overwhelmed, especially when a critical orientation goes against the traditional grain of schooling practices. The criteria for praxis is not a simple matter. Paulo Freire (1970) explains that the discovery of oppressive conditions “cannot be purely intellectual but must involve *action* [emphasis added]; nor can it be limited to mere activism, but must include *serious reflection* [emphasis added]: only then will it be a praxis” (p. 52). When applied to teaching, praxis requires teachers to alter traditional norms of teaching and learning. Freire (Shor & Freire, 1987) calls this the “teacher-student contradiction” where it is necessary to “reconcil[e] the poles of contradiction so that both are simultaneously teachers *and* students” (p. 59).

Praxis was a challenge for Kehily (2002), who was unable to reconcile this contradiction Freire describes. In her beginning years of K-12 teaching in England, Kehily discovered that her philosophical adherence to critical pedagogy was at odds with not only her students, but other teachers and the curriculum as well. She admits to have not learned in her teacher preparation program how to negotiate through these apparent barriers to successfully implement critical pedagogy. A key point that apparently was missing for Kehily in her teacher preparation were opportunities to explore her own understandings of her lived experience in relation to critical pedagogical concepts. Perhaps if Kehily had been given opportunities to critically reflect on how her own teacher identity in combination with a critical pedagogical orientation can affect her attitude and approaches to her students and subsequent curriculum development, she may have been more effective.

Possibly, like the professors that Kehily encountered in her teacher preparation program that was apparently informed by critical pedagogical concepts, I had long assumed that student exposure to workshops, lectures, and readings would be sufficient to create a critical consciousness toward teaching and learning for social justice. Although I have students use critical reflection on what they observe and experience in K-12 settings (see Vavrus, 2002, pp. 38-43), it has not always occurred to me that reflection can have a deeper aim through a more personal exploration and interrogation. And like the predominantly White males that have been most active in critical pedagogy (see Darder, Baltodano, & Torres, 2003b), I have not always fully grasped the pedagogical significance of both feminist perspectives on “voice” and an African American legal lens on critical race theory, both of which in their own ways place positive value on personal narratives to explain social phenomena.

Through my own research and experiences I finally had to face that a focus only on deepening social justice knowledge did not necessarily create the dispositional changes that I believed were necessary to address schooling equity issues through praxis. My research into anti-racist teacher education pedagogies, however, did bring to my attention the value of autobiographical research, a type of analytical personal narrative, as a means to help teachers deepen their awareness of their own socially constructed positionalities and identities. Banks (1993) explains that "important aspects of our identity...are markers of relational positions rather than essential qualities" (p. 5). Thus, I was finding strong indicators that because teacher identity is dependent on shifts of positionalities according to varying social contexts, these understandings of identity formation and shifts held pedagogical potential for exploration through autobiographical research (Vavrus, 2002).

As a result of my own critique of critical pedagogy in relation to the potential of self-study, I now prefer to add the signifier "deep" to my use of critical pedagogy. In coining the phrase *deep critical pedagogy*, I mean the purposeful incorporation into critical pedagogy social-psychological forces that interact with individual subjectivities in the formation of their identities and subsequent behaviors. Leaving unacknowledged the depths of the human psyche's interaction with critical theoretical positions is no longer acceptable to my multicultural education work. Whereas I still find it necessary to engage teacher education students at a cognitive/data-driven level along with critical reflections on pedagogical practices, I now see how I can help fill a gaping hole in critical pedagogy by providing students opportunities to pursue issues at an emotional level where memories are recalled and consolidated and then related to their formation of teacher identities. Next, I turn to research literature that further explains theoretical underpinnings for studying multicultural education in conjunction with studying the self.

#### MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION AND SELF-STUDY RESEARCH

A self-study does not require asking questions about social justice, but moral and political issues are swimming just below the surface if one cares, or dares, to look.... Issues related to diversity, difference, equity, discrimination, and injustice have no easy answers and often implicate us personally, at least partially, in the injustices we uncover. (emphasis in the original) (Griffiths, Bass, Johnson, & Perselli, 2004, p. 656)

For multicultural education scholars and practitioners, social justice is central to their work and, as the above quote suggests, issues are myriad and thorny. From a social justice perspective multicultural education goals are multidimensional. Dimensions include content integration for an inclusive elementary and secondary school curriculum, multicultural knowledge construction processes, prejudicial discrimination reduction, an equity pedagogy, and an empowering school culture and social structure for all children and youth (Banks, 2001). The social justice issues that arise from these dimensions of multicultural education can create tensions with status quo forces. Banks (2004) identifies how oppositional transformative knowledge operates as a countervailing force against the

institutional production of inequities by providing “unique ways to conceptualize the world and an epistemology that differs in significant ways from mainstream assumptions, conceptions, values, and epistemology” (p. 230).

Self-study research lends itself to explorations into personal and professional implications of transformative knowledge for teaching practice. Loughran (2004) explains

that learning through self-study is dramatically influenced by the dilemmas, issues, concerns, problems or tensions that draw practitioners to see their practice with new eyes and to begin to question the degree of alignment between beliefs and practice and/or student needs and program goals. (p. 163)

Multicultural issues of race, class, gender, and sexuality, for example, are often avoided because teachers and teacher educators realize the social tensions inherent in these topics as well as their own unexamined discomfort. This avoidance leads to a cursory and potentially status quo survey of diversity issues (Vavrus, 1998; also see Brown, 2004). The “moral dilemmas and living contradictions” that are often a focus of self-study research (Kelchtermans & Hamilton, 2004, p. 796), however, can contribute to a transformative multicultural praxis.

Schulte (2004) affirms the importance of transformation as a continuous process within multicultural teacher education. Very few data exist, she notes,

about how teacher educators make sense of their own identities, dispositions, and assumptions in the context of teaching for diversity....Therefore, the field is ripe for studies that feature teacher educators negotiating the process of transformation both for themselves and their students. (p. 720)

In order to fit the criteria for a self-study, Schulte explains that researchers must describe how this process of critical self-exploration “ultimately changed their practice” (p. 722). Loughran (2004) elaborates that simply knowing oneself more clearly remains insufficient for self-study research unless it also serves as “a foundation for change” (p. 156). Wilcox, Watson, and Paterson (2004) summarize that the processes of transformation can ultimately move individuals “towards more inclusive understandings of the world, expanding one’s sense of the ideal,...and acting upon that” (p. 291). A broader sense of the material world in relation to our subjectivities becomes a necessary element to create dispositions that can lead to multicultural actions.

#### AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL RESEARCH

Brown (2004) emphasizes that a self-study focus on material conditions must depend upon “local questions, issues, perspectives, and insights of those who reside at the educational site of inquiry” (p. 542). Such research is generally qualitative and interpretative of events that can be inaccessible, overlooked, or dismissed by an outside observer. As a pedagogical strategy, “topic-focused autobiography” (Lighthall, 2004, p. 210) can serve as a self-study means to engage subjectivities with challenging societal issues that constitute the dimensions of



multicultural education. If, as LaBoskey (2004) contends, the subject matter of teacher education is a legitimate focus of self-study, then multicultural issues inherent to teaching and learning are indeed legitimate topics for autobiographical research. In this context Clark and O'Donnell (1999) suggest that criteria to analyze autobiographical research ought to acknowledge that

each and every autobiography has to be contested with critical and reflective analysis in order for learners to realize that their point of entry into the debate is not the only one, that the way they view and perceive the world is not the only way. (p. 6)

Lighthall adds the caveat that “this method also has produced unanticipated side effects for the teacher educator” (p. 210).

Ideally, self-study can more completely and deeply assist teachers to conceptualize their own professional identity by attending to their social psychological state (Lighthall, 2004). Topic-focused autobiographies in multicultural education as self-study research can create its own set of challenges. Autobiographical writers of this particular sub-genre are called on to integrate their emotional reactions from their lived histories into moral, political, technical investigations of their teacher identity formation. To grasp and articulate the social formation of self as a teacher at this level of exploration can be a daunting task.

Because a teacher's identity is influenced by ideological values of dominant social institutions (Althusser, 1971; Fendler, 1999), engagement of subjectivities through social-psychological processes, such as autobiographical research, provides a means for individuals to better grasp how dominant political factors interact and contribute to socially constructed identities. Dyson (1994) bridges this dichotomy between the individual and society in a recognition of the shifting social nature of identity development. He explains, “Identity is socially and culturally constructed from the raw materials of the individual and the social, the private and the public, and the domestic and the civic” (p. 223). Hence, a teacher's agency and subjective identity are not necessarily assumed to be transcendent of dominant power relations. Nevertheless, historical arrangements of teaching, learning, and schooling are never fixed and inevitable, which leaves open transformative possibilities. These complex social and political forces that are so often unacknowledged among teachers, however, can be taken into account through topic-focused autobiographies.

Lighthall (2004) finds that when a topic-focused autobiography is used, the purpose is “to induce students to confront their preconceptions and hidden fears” (p. 210) about a particular topic, preferably with a goal of enabling a change for these students. For teachers challenging dominant ideologies in an effort to teach critically, a sense of fear should be expected. In contrasting teaching that supports the status quo compared to approaches that unveil unequal and unjust conditions perpetuated by the political dominant through state institutions, Freire (Shor & Freire, 1987) explains,

If your dream was to preserve the status quo, what should you fear then?...[Y]ou don't have to deny your fear, because you have the power of

the elite behind you in protecting the status quo. If your dream is one of transformation, then you fear the reaction of the powers that are now in power. (p. 56)

Confronting “hidden fears” that Lighthall describes through autobiographical research correlates well with real fears that teachers engaged in critical pedagogy and transformative multicultural education legitimately have, especially the kind of retaliation that Freire has described and the backlash that Kehily (2002) experienced as described earlier.

Sleeter (1995) encourages recognizing and eliciting emotions from teacher candidates early in a teacher education program. She explains that course materials “should provide an emotional jolt, clearly illustrate unequal conditions, and provide a range of concrete examples of structural inequalities that can be used for analysis later” (p. 424). Schoem (1993) also assumes that strong emotional reactions ought to be recognized as a normal and accepted aspect of any course attending to transformative multiculturalism. Autobiographical research can provide a methodology to systematically take into account emotional reactions to multicultural topics.

By providing opportunities for personal narrative inquiries that have a longitudinal dimension for a teacher, fragmented personal and professional histories can be brought together to help give meaning to a teacher’s current experiences (see Kelchtermans & Hamilton, 2004). More specifically, Samaras, Hicks and Garvey Berger (2004) theorize that *personal histories* as autobiographical research can be seen “as those formative, contextualized experiences that have influenced teachers’ thinking about teaching and their own practice” (p. 909). As formative, lived experiences, teachers can come to see how their identities have been shaped and are subject to contextual changes. When applied to a teacher’s pedagogy, the process of excavating personal history in order to articulate a teacher’s identity becomes “a way to put that identity on the line and risk needing to reform and recreate the self while also attempting to transform curricula” (p. 915). In the following section I describe how I have applied this knowledge to autobiographical research assignments.

#### MULTICULTURAL AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL RESEARCH WITH PRESERVICE TEACHERS

During the academic years 2001-03, I developed a series of “autobiographical” curriculum interventions with a cohort that began with 44 predominately White, graduate-level teacher candidates. The purpose of these interventions was to heighten teacher candidate consciousness in relation to our program’s theme, “Teaching for Social Justice.” Danielewicz (2001) explains that teacher “identities are produced through participation in discourse” (p. 11) and that teachers can “choose between competing discourses” (p. 11). This insight on the relation between identity construction and discourse led me to a working hypothesis about discourse practices that incorporate critical reflection on multicultural texts, lectures, and workshops in combination with autobiographical research about one’s

own teacher identity formation. I ventured to hypothesize that this approach – what I have been calling deep critical pedagogy – can both (a) positively affect a teacher candidate’s realization of the importance of transformative multicultural education in teaching and learning and (b) help move a candidate toward an anti-racist teacher identity.

### *Curriculum Interventions with Teacher Candidates*

A brief overview is provided here of the curriculum interventions that were related to autobiographical research by teacher candidates, forming their respective teacher identities.

*Family and schooling histories.* During the first week of the program teacher candidates began reading, writing, and participating in a seminar on a text (see Mitchell & Weber, 1999) to help them write about themselves and their early family and schooling histories. This introductory stage included preservice teachers accessing childhood school and family photographs.

*Ethnic identities.* Teacher candidates followed a similar procedure after reading a text about ethnic histories (see Takaki, 1993) and were prompted “to relate your family history, your personal experiences with K-12 schooling/learning, and Takaki’s [text] to your emerging identity as a teacher.” This process was supplemented by a workshop that focused on common stereotypes that can undermine the development of an anti-racist teacher identity.

*Racial identity formation.* Toward the end of that first quarter the students read and responded in writing and a seminar to a text on the social psychology of racism in schools (see Tatum, 1999b). At the same time teacher candidates were exposed to lectures and exercises that incorporated issues of racism with a particular emphasis on definitions and analyses of the concepts of White privilege and colorblindness.

Next, racial identity “statuses” were examined in detail (see Helms & Cook, 1999). Preservice teachers further interrogated their racial identities through a workshop that incorporated Howard’s (1999) work on what it can mean for an individual to be a *transformationist*, a disposition he equates with an anti-racist identity. Students were also exposed to an identity of a “White ally” as an “actively antiracist White person who is intentional in ongoing efforts to interrupt the cycle of racism” (Tatum, 1999a, p. 61). This element of their autobiographies asked teacher education students to incorporate “specific information about your racial and ethnic identity formation” into their developing teacher identities.

*Social justice and identity.* At the beginning of the second academic quarter students read texts by bell hooks (1994) and Dewey (1938/1974). Teacher candidates also received additional background presentations on gender, race, and classrooms as social communities. Students received the following rationale for this aspect of their autobiographical research: “The purpose of this version is to consider your perspective on social justice issues and to incorporate this information into a description of your emerging identity as a teacher for social justice.”

*Longitudinal comparisons on identity shifts.* By the end of the third quarter students had received a variety of curricular interventions designed to further emphasize the importance of having a social justice framework for entering teaching. For this version of their autobiographical research, preservice teachers compared and contrasted how and if they perceived any changes in the formation of their teacher identity since beginning their teacher education program. To facilitate this assignment, students were given copies of their original application essays that were used as part of the admissions decision-making process. One of the short admissions essays had asked applicants to respond to a social justice and classroom teaching prompt.

*Globalization effects on teacher identity.* During the second year of this project teacher candidates spent the fall quarter in a full-time student teaching internship. In the winter quarter teacher candidates were introduced to the effects of corporate globalization on national economies and the privatizing of public services. The results of neoliberal public spending and taxation priorities were examined. Students were exposed to a perspective of global solidarity for emancipation as evidenced by social movements to free politically dominated groups from parochially and internationally sanctioned acts of oppression. Students also read about globalization and education (e.g., Bigelow & Peterson, 2002; Vavrus, 2002). Workshops were provided to help teacher candidates grapple with the complexities underlying these topics. Prompts that were used included the following:

- a. What does it mean for you to be a teacher in this current era of corporate globalization?
- b. In what ways could teachers embrace the human rights statements in [United Nations] documents as an expression of global solidarity for emancipation?
- c. How can your teacher identity that embraces social justice be extended to include issues of globalization?
- d. As a culturally responsive teacher, what kind of teacher reflection and actions might you need to engage in to help form and demonstrate a global identity that strives to encompass local-global cultural & political interactions?

### *Results of Curriculum Interventions*

This project generated a substantial quantity of qualitative data, the results of which can only be briefly summarized here. Reported percentages represent patterns discovered through content analyses of the data (see Sherman & Webb, 1988).

The first set of findings was based on cumulative data through the second academic quarter that included student responses to their racial identity formation, reflections on their autobiographical research, and faculty interviews with students. Eighty percent of the teacher candidates ( $n = 35$ ) made positive comments in regards to growth in their awareness of racialized perspectives that they had not previously held and acknowledged that the process was beneficial to their

previously held and acknowledged that the process was beneficial to their becoming teachers. All of these students noted that they were striving to develop identities that would be analogous to an anti-racist transformationist.

Six percent, all White women, expressed abstract colorblind concepts that helped them to avoid questioning their own social positions. The other 14% of the sample did not address issues about their racial identity as related to their teacher identity formation. The primary reason was an overt denial of the relevancy of the relationship between one's identity formation as a teacher and one's racial identity. Two of those students, both White males, eventually left the program by the end of the second quarter.

A second data source for analysis was written reflections at the conclusion of the first year of their two-year teacher preparation program that compared the current perspectives of students to their application essays for program admissions. Forty students completed the first year and 100% were positively impacted by their autobiographical research in making connections to being culturally responsive teachers. Significant changes in their perceptions of what it means to be a teacher in a culturally diverse society were observed by 77.5%. A common realization was captured by a male elementary education teacher candidate as he reflected upon his identity formation journey:

*I failed to realize that individuals have to look inside themselves to find their own racial identity and where they are positioned in society before they can take the responsibility of nurturing another human being.  
...[He now] cringe[s] at the dominant Anglo practices that I embraced as normal, just, and accepted throughout the years.*

According to 22.5% of the teacher education students, their current understanding of their teacher identity status remained congruent with their perspectives prior to entering the program. These were students who had previously internalized a commitment to social justice. A secondary school preservice teacher in this group reflected upon the "multicultural and anti-bias ideals" with which she entered the program:

What is different about my perspective in all of these areas is that I have vocabulary, in-depth understanding, and the ability to tap into professional research on each topic....However, I have become convinced that problems in the public school system run much deeper than I previously believed.

Most of the students in this category and in the entire sample could point to specific pedagogical skills that they had gained that supported their evolving teacher identities, like the teacher candidate who stated that she had "been provided with tools for dealing with 'isms' in the classroom."

The third data point related to data on globalization and identity formation. To varying degrees all students, regardless of their subject matter teaching area or grade level emphasis, came to make emerging but meaningful connections between globalization and the work of teachers in a broadened context of how teaching and learning can be globally framed, a point I address further in the next section.

## CRITICAL REFLECTIONS

For myself and my teacher education students family histories and early schooling experiences were a good starting point. These two variables help to foreground the fact that we bring identities already informed by lived histories into our classrooms that are unique and to remind us that K-12 students, too, have their own individual histories. Investigation into ethnic identities also helped us to begin peeling back identity layers of our own socially constructed ethnic and cultural histories. Nevertheless, autobiographical inquiry completed after these two steps of analysis overall generated insufficient depth for the realization of transformative multicultural dispositions and behaviors.

Extending ethnic identity formation from a historical, family-based legacy to racial identity formation in its contemporary institutional manifestations proved to be a critical turning point. Racial identity formation allowed teacher candidates and me to examine ourselves in light of what we had already considered for our family, early schooling, and ethnic experiences in relation to our teacher identities. Investigations into teacher identity formation through a race-tinted lens appears to be a volatile level of personal research for those who are beginning (a) to acknowledge racist political and economic foundations of their own nation and (b) to look critically at their own previously unquestioned racialized identities and the social webs in which we are all implicated.

When teacher candidates were displaying a roller-coaster range of cognitive and emotional responses to the realizations and implications of their socially constructed racial identities and what this meant as purportedly committed individuals to teaching all children fairly, I found that I had to remind myself of the long haul I have traveled to come to the understandings and clarity I have gained of my own teacher identity in a racialized, multicultural world. It is at this stage of my pedagogical work where I have found that, in order to be effective, I had to change my usual teaching approach. Although over the years I have often prefaced my position with preservice and inservice teachers with "I'm neither a psychologist nor a counselor," I have in fact had to develop a knowledge base in social psychology in order to understand why people have difficulty reconciling new and sometimes troubling information into their identities. In particular, through individual conferences with teacher candidates I have discerned common threads of anxiety that can be barriers to individuals envisioning how they can embrace an anti-racist identity in their daily lives. I now try to anticipate these social psychological blockages in both individual conversations with teacher education students and in my pedagogy for group instruction. Nevertheless, I am always aware that each set of students presents unanticipated reactions and interactions from which I can continue to learn.

In future autobiographical research I plan to reconsider an autobiographical entry on "social justice." Because the concept is quite complex within its myriad interpretations and historical usage, social justice can be indeterminate in general usage (see Griffiths et al., 2004). Given the relatively flat responses to this prompt that I received from teacher candidates in this study (i.e., narratives did not significantly differ from what they had written through the previous stage of their



exploration), I realize I would need to be deliberate in providing a pedagogy that is more explicit about theories of social justice in addition to what social justice might look like in practice, the latter of which were emphasized.

Having a program admissions process that includes short essays related to teaching as a career choice and to teaching in a socially inequitable world made it possible to have teacher candidates make longitudinal comparisons of their respective identity shifts after one year. This was a wonderful stage in the autobiographical research project as it took on the characteristic of being both critical in analysis and celebratory in teacher candidate growth. My only longitudinally articulated benchmark goes back many years to my first published journal article when I was finishing my graduate studies (Vavrus, 1979a). The title is telling upon hindsight: "The Lingering Inequality Issue." Twenty-seven years ago I was naively surprised that despite the collective knowledge U.S. society held in and out of schools, the U.S. was still experiencing widespread examples of racist institutional practices. Now I understand and am mindful that racism in its historically mutable forms is woven into the fabric of U.S. culture and politics. I therefore find it necessary to remind both my students and myself of my own articulated observation that "a dominant ideology of color-blindness encourages teachers and teacher educators to act as though race is non-recognizable when it is nearly impossible in the United States to do so" (Vavrus, 2002, p. 55). This fact alone helps those of us who are consciously involved in the maintenance of anti-racist identities to accept that our identities are not fixed but rather unstable and subject daily to social situations in ways we cannot always anticipate.

The final element of the autobiographical research project involved an exploration of global identity formation in an era of expanding corporate globalization. This curriculum stage was valuable in helping future teachers make critical political and economic connections about the impact of nation-state policies on the working conditions of teachers and the parameters that are constructed around what is legitimate and meaningful knowledge to teach and assess. My work was organic in that I had not found higher education models in the context of autobiographical research into teacher identity formation that approach topics of corporate globalization and global solidarity for emancipation from oppression. My challenge was distilling the complexities around these topics and making them relevant and accessible while simultaneously creating a pedagogy to engage teacher candidates in broadening their autobiographical research to include global identity formation.

Through a combination of discourse practices that included readings, small group workshops, and autobiographical research, teacher candidates were able to explore topics that normally appear remote from the daily work of teachers. Teacher education students began to see how global events are often tied to local conditions. In turn, preservice teachers came to realize how their teacher identity formation is affected by globalization. For example, education students made connections (a) between foreign textile sweat shops that use child labor and school logo-bearing clothing sold in U.S. schools; (b) between the erosion of governmental funding for social service, including public education, and federal

governmental policies internationally that support corporations in the privatization of health and education and the subsequent hardship this puts on low- and middle-income families; (c) between global educational practices that limit the opportunities of politically oppressed populations and the on-going colonial practices of the U.S. government toward Native American Indian education; and (d) between global economic practices that encourage outsourcing of jobs abroad to cheap labor market and the effect on U.S. students from families of low socioeconomic status when their parents' jobs have disappeared.

In the previous section I shared autobiographical writing prompts related to the topic of globalization. Without background readings and interactive workshops, students would not have been able to grasp the significance of the prompts they were expected to address. Overall, the prompts were generally successful in helping respondents understand the interconnectivity of their classroom lives to the political economy of contemporary globalization. I realize now that I may have only touched on the tip of this issue in my pedagogy and am now considering means to incorporate global concepts more purposefully throughout the curriculum I design for teachers, a point I return to in the following section.

Missing from this project was an overt inclusion of socioeconomic class. To a limited degree this happened for teacher candidates during the earliest phase of their research when they wrote about their family histories. I now plan to make more explicit connections between class and capital and not wait for that understanding to be explored just in the context of globalization.

Another missing element that one of my lesbian students noted to me was sexual orientation and identity formation. Although our curriculum attended to how homophobia is expressed in schools and how teachers and communities can interrupt these negative practices, I must admit that through my normalized heterosexual lens such an autobiographical inclusion had not occurred to me until this now beginning teacher spoke to me about this exclusion in her identity formation research. Unlike the issue of socioeconomic class, which I mistakenly thought would be directly incorporated into the family histories and globalization curriculum stages, I had not previously considered what it might mean to include gender identification and sexuality within teacher identity formation. Reflecting on this, it now seems quite obvious, given that our social and biological bodies and sexual selves are not separate from our personal and professional identities, no matter how much this perspective is muted in public school discourse. Different than a career that has centered on racial and economic equity and justice, I could not pretend to this student to know how I could incorporate sexual orientation into my next attempts at engaging teacher candidates in multicultural autobiographical research. I realized, however, that I would need to collaborate with colleagues knowledgeable about issues of sexuality in order to develop an approach to this stage of writing about identity formation. Finally, religious and spiritual personal histories and attitudes was another category I was perplexed as to how to engage. I find this absence glaring in light of political realities of evangelical Christian inroads into public schools in the U.S.



## CRITICAL REVISIONS

As I write, I am in the midst of a substantial revision of the autobiographical research project into teacher identity formation with a new, two-year (2004-06) cohort of graduate teacher candidates. As I have gained more confidence in the pedagogical power of multiculturally focused autobiographical research, multicultural topics of exploration have expanded and resulted in an increased number of assignments. After students have written a series of autobiographical entries, they regularly report on how they find it difficult to imagine how teachers can be effective in their work if they have not taken time to analyze their attitudes through personal history narratives. This affirmation that I continue to receive from students through these assignments reinforces critical reflection of this type and propels me to delve more deeply into specific multicultural issues, especially those to which teacher education programs may give limited attention. The experience of my initial research project has also led me to collaborate with faculty colleagues in the planning stage of my current study and to revise multicultural topics for investigation.

*Collaboration with Colleagues as "Critical Friends"*

Missing from my original research described in this chapter, which I now see as a pilot study, was my collaboration with colleagues. Although I work in teaching teams, in the original study other faculty did not feel ownership nor see the ultimate value to include autobiographical research in the curriculum. As the project came to a conclusion in 2003, my two colleagues then recognized the merit of this type of focused critical reflection correlated with program topics. Hence, late in the project these two faculty members came to understand the purpose of this work. Using this experience, I brought my new faculty teaching members (four have been involved) into the planning of this project prior to the start of studies with the present cohort of students. My collaborative planning experience appears to support research that found faculty "negotiated very differently within each team" (Clift, 2004, p. 1359). The collaborative differences between teams is also likely a function of my increased clarity and belief in the power of autobiographical research. I have been more receptive, therefore, to listening to current faculty team members' ideas about potential topics to explore autobiographically and to having them critique proposed research prompts.

Collaboration with my current faculty team resembles the research process Watson (Wilcox, Watson, & Patterson, 2004) describes through her use of "critical friends" (p. 286). Like Watson's situation, my colleagues as critical friends served "to aid in checking of alternative perspectives; some sort of 'validity' check, or reframing" (p. 286) of autobiographical research prompts I now presented to faculty as drafts open to revision rather than finished products. At the macro-level faculty now help me to confirm the validity of a particular multicultural topic-focused autobiography assignment as well as contribute to microanalyses of specific writing prompts. In one case, for example, the team strongly suggested

that “language” be set aside as a separate autobiographical research topic, a recommendation I subsequently added to the project I am currently conducting.

To this contribution of collaboration must be added the importance of consulting with critical friends in regards to the reliability of individual prompts. Particularly helpful from a reliability perspective has been colleague feedback on their interpretations of proposed writing prompts. If in our dialogue a faculty member is unclear about what is implied in a prompt or we have conflicting interpretations, I collaboratively initiate a rewriting process for immediate feedback based on a discussion of what my initial intentions were for a particular prompt. In some cases faculty politely apologize for suggesting revisions, whereas I find myself reassuring them that collaborative feedback of this type strengthens the depth of autobiographical responses we receive from our teacher candidates. Clarity and preciseness of writing prompts are necessary for critical responses. Otherwise, for example, the result of an autobiographical assignment that attempts to elicit personal histories and critical reflections on the topic of racial identity formation but is unfocused on “diversity” can result in color-blind drivel (Subrahmanyam, Hornstein, & Heine, 2000). A next important self-study stage for me is to include these same faculty in an examination of the findings I will produce as this current project concludes (see Schulte, 2004), a process I had not considered in my original study.

### *Critical Multicultural Content Changes*

Early family and schooling histories, racial identity formation, and identity in an era of corporate globalization are three autobiographical assignments into teacher identity formation that I have retained and refined. These three categories yielded the most robust valid and reliable data. The early family and schooling histories were helpful to initiate teacher candidates into autobiographical explorations of their socially constructed identities. Because every individual has a different set of family and schooling experiences, education students began to see how their identities may be different from other education students simply by the circumstances of their early histories. This helped to create a non-threatening environment for deeper identity exploration that I strive for in my teaching. For nearly all teacher education students, the outcome of the racial identity formation assignment was a disposition that was receptive to and desirous for multicultural curriculum development expertise. Studies around globalization topics were generally successful in making seemingly disconnected events relevant to their own lives as teachers. To deepen students understanding of these topics, I have added works by McLaren and Farahmandpur (2005) and Foster (2005). Other multicultural topics I initially attempted were less successful for eliciting critically reflective responses. This was a function of prompts that proved unreliable in interpretation or were too disconnected from their program readings and related activities.

I will continue to have teacher candidates make a longitudinal comparison between their two program admissions essays described earlier and their current

formation of their teacher identities. The primary difference is that this assignment will now be completed after teacher candidates complete a full-time student teaching internship. Because students previously had done this compare-and-contrast assignment at the conclusion of their first year in the program and prior to their full-time internship, I found that in a few instances teacher candidates had held idealized versions of their teacher identity that did not hold up under the pressures of the daily routines of full-time teaching. Additionally, in their second year of the program teacher candidates will now compile their individual autobiographical assignments into one coherent autobiography that will allow them to make further revisions into what they would then see as their teacher identity at the end of their program of study. It is anticipated that following this step, these teacher education students will then be capable of crafting authentic professional philosophies of education for themselves.

As mentioned above, an additional assignment was created around the topic of *language*. This assignment was designed to help teacher candidates whose first language is English and language registers are middle-class “school” discourse. In light of the language diversity found in U.S. public schools, a purpose was to have students investigate how their language experiences have been validated for them historically as the norm with the hope that they could see how this unquestioned assumption can bias their own teaching with immigrant students who are second-language learners and with students who come from families and communities that use non-standardized forms of English.

Also added was an assignment on *cultural identity* formation. How odd, I came to realize, that in this autobiographical research nowhere had I directly attended to the contested concept of “culture,” the root word of multicultural education. Students reported that after reading, writing, and engaging in dialogue on their readings on culture they had thought they understood their own cultural location and positionality. Once they began working with autobiographical prompts, however, they realized that they had not clearly understood the meanings and implications of culture in relation to their own lives, let alone in the development of their teacher identities. Thus far, this is the one assignment that faculty had to return to the majority of the program’s students for revisions because they had selectively skipped challenging prompts. As happened with this particular assignment, revised personal narratives that eventually include responses to all expected autobiographical prompts appear at this tentative stage of analysis to yield much richer products than when accepting partially completed assignments and then negatively reflecting this faculty assessment of their work.

As I noted under my critical reflections above, I had not previously attended to *gender and sexuality identification*. That has changed with the current cohort. As I have moved beyond my male, heterosexual lens, the current group of students has been involved in extensive readings, films, workshops, and seminars around gender identification, normative heterosexuality and homophobia, sexual orientations and preferences, and sex and sexuality education. I found that my experience of anticipating emotional responses to teacher candidate investigations into race and racial identity has helped in planning for similar affective effects that were

generated around an assignment focused on sex and sexuality and related to teacher identity formation. A major difference, however, is that students now are less apprehensive and more trusting of their faculty when engaging in this kind of personal history investigation because they have observed growth in their learning about themselves as future teachers and have not suffered any negative consequences for what they have revealed about themselves in previous assignments. As might be assumed, confidentiality is regularly emphasized.

In the process of development are assignments that are intended to aid teacher education students in their autobiographical research into *religious and spiritual identity* and *socioeconomic class status*. The way in which a singular world view of evangelical Protestant religion politically asserts itself in the public school curriculum and can inhibit the exploration of multicultural perspectives gives validity to autobiographical research into teacher identity formation that is connected to religious and spiritual identity. The working hypothesis for this assignment is that the more that teachers come to understand how their views on religion and spirituality influence their curricular decisions, teachers can more clearly express themselves professionally and justify their practices when confronted with political pressures from the religious right.

Socioeconomic class is another dimension that is also multiculturally valid for teacher candidates to investigate autobiographically. Unlike Europe that tends to have a social and cultural history that has not shied away from explicit public discourse on class, in the U.S. the tendency is to perpetuate myths of a somewhat classless society where most people are assumed to belong to an amorphous middle class. The intersections of class and race in the U.S. affect public school students, especially as evident around an academic achievement gap generally between (a) White economically advantaged students, and (b) students of color, immigrant children, and students from lower socioeconomic families. Thus, personal historical narratives into socioeconomic class and then related to teacher identity is an important topic for research.

Inevitably in multicultural education, classroom climate issues arise when discussions turn to the necessity of a learning environment that is welcoming, inclusive, and respectful of multiple views and voices in texts and instructional materials and toward diverse student perspectives. This has led me to incorporate the teacher education topic "classroom management" in a broader, multicultural context (Vavrus, 2002; also see Landau, 2004). As I have painfully learned in conducting inservice workshops for teachers, classroom management and student discipline are strongly held realms of asserted expertise by classroom teachers. To question the multicultural validity of a traditional teacher's classroom management system is often interpreted as nearly synonymous with questioning a teacher's professional integrity. Thus, I have found that this is a topic that inservice teachers are unfortunately reluctant to critically examine. *Classroom management and democratic practices*, therefore, became another new category for autobiographical research. The underlying ideologies of traditional classroom management are rarely deconstructed by teacher education programs in a way that can advance K-12 student experiences with multicultural democracy and participatory citizenship

in their schools and classrooms (Vavrus, 2002, 2003). With limited literature and models to directly access, I found the creation of these prompts extremely challenging, especially as I sought to find reliable and valid ways to elicit personal histories about classroom management experiences as well as their level of comfort in pursuing democratic concepts in schools that are generally authoritarian and conservative in approaches to controlling student behaviors and managing multicultural expressions.

Dropped were separate assignments on *social justice* and *ethnic identity*. As alluded to earlier, social justice conceptually guides transformative multicultural education but does not appear to lend itself to a direct investigation because it is indeterminate until grounded in specific multicultural topics. Because ethnicity is often constructed in racial and cultural terms, I found that the racial identity and cultural identity prompts elicit responses that include what can be described as ethnic identities. The experience of providing direct prompts on ethnic identity in my original study, however, yielded results that were unreliable in their vagueness.

#### CONCLUSION

In no way do I consider that I have cornered *the* approach to multicultural autobiographical research into teacher identity formation. I realize that through my collaboration with faculty as critical friends, much is still to be learned from this process. Nevertheless, the depth and range of autobiographical assignments suggests that teacher candidates can become more astute observers of schooling practices in general and their own teaching practices in particular. An additional effect of this work I found for myself and my present teaching team is that in order for teacher educators to enhance their effectiveness, they cannot avoid the process of self-study into their own pedagogy and identities when their own students are involved in the deep work of personal history excavations. For transformative multicultural education to be effective with teacher candidates, the value of intersecting critical pedagogy with autobiographical research should not be underestimated.

The process of engaging students in autobiographical research into the formation of their teacher identities initiated my own self-study process whether I was seeking it or not. The internalized process of memory recollection and consolidation spurred my initial awakenings into applying self-study research to this curricular project. Crafting critically reflective autobiographical writing prompts inevitably raised my own recollections of pieces of my personal history, some vague and others more sharply defined. The interactions of my subjectivity with my attempt to step back “objectively” from my pedagogy was vividly amplified on each occasion when I would once again develop an autobiographical research assignment, collaborate with my colleagues, revise the assignment, distribute and discuss the assignment with students, present a curriculum designed to complement the assignment, grapple with emotions that would arise among students as well as myself and other faculty, and receive and read assignments at the conclusion of a specific multicultural topic.

For purposes of research objectivity, I would initially have preferred to stay with my imagined stable and coherent identity and understanding of self rather than venture into the generally uncharted terrain of my own self-study. I had to develop a willingness to make myself vulnerable by acknowledging that I, in the privileged position of professor, am also susceptible to the variability and fluidity of my own socially constructed identity. Like so many, I, too, can be found clinging to what I might try to believe is “a unified, autonomous self” (Archibald, 1998, p. 60) that is but merely a desire in a search for an absolute center of identity which belies the relational positions of socially constructed identities (Archibald, 1998).

This project has helped me to further study my own assumptions and practices in how I perceive and act in teaching and learning situations. Like an identity that is never fixed, a teacher education pedagogy that enables students to investigate their own socially informed identities is unlikely to be fixed for me. It is important for me to recall how we now understand the concept of pedagogy as an approach that envisions effective teaching not as a technique but “as a process ...[that]...prioritizes the constitution of learning over the execution of teaching” (Hamilton & McWilliam, 2001, p. 18). Through this autobiographical project I clearly see how the importance of multicultural learning and personal exploration processes must take priority over any limited conceptions I have had about teaching from a multicultural perspective.

#### TRY THIS PRACTICE

For teacher educators who wish to experiment with multicultural autobiographical research into teacher identity formation, I encourage them to consider a focus on race. First, education students need to have read and analyzed Beverly Tatum’s (1999b) *“Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?”* and *Other Conversations About Race*. Although a number of texts exist on race, this book is very accessible and addresses race and racism in a non-confrontational format while introducing the reader to various scales of identity statuses. Only reading this text, as my chapter has attempted to emphasize, is insufficient for education students to interrogate their own racial identities and the subsequent effects on their teacher identity and teaching practices. If time is available, Takaki’s (1993) *A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America* can be used in order to provide a historical context on race.

After reading and discussing Tatum’s engaging text, students can be given writing prompts to formally write as a personal narrative as an out-of-class autobiographical research assignment. Figure 1, *Constructions of Race Writing Prompts*, provides a way to present this assignment.



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In this assignment you are expected to examine your early and adult *race* encounters, understandings, and behaviors. Questions/prompts that you must incorporate into your paper:

- When was my first recollection of being aware of my race and the race of others? In what context did this awareness take place?
- What were my feelings in regards to my first awareness of race? Did I discuss my feelings with an adult? If yes, who? What happened? If no, why?
- How did my K-12 schooling experiences affect the construction of (a) my understandings of “race” and (b) my own racial identification?
- What omissions in my K-16 education may have contributed to any racial stereotypes or distortions that I may have acquired?
- When I compare myself to Helm’s racial identity formation scale and/or Cross’s model (see Tatum, 199b), where do I seem to generally fit? Why? How does my status on Helm’s scale and/or in Cross’s model vary according to social context? What might explain this variance?
- What have been my experiences of *privilege* that appears related to my racial identification? In what ways do I find myself, to use Allan Johnson’s (2001) phrase, in a “paradox of being privileged and unprivileged at the same time” (p. 52) in relation to my racial identification?
- When I have observed a racist act(s), what has been my response/reaction? If I did not interrupt a racist act, what seemed to hold me back? If I did interrupt a racist act, what happened?

Now, based on your written response to these questions/prompts, consider specifically the following:

How have my racialized experiences affected my identity formation as a teacher?

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*Figure 1: Construction of Race Writing Prompts*

Once this assignment is completed, it is important for a faculty reader to determine whether or not all the prompts have been addressed. For students who have skipped certain prompts or only made a superficial attempt at autobiographically investigating a prompt, it is necessary to return such papers to students with explicit instructions to address skipped or cursorily addressed prompts. Without this step, education students can avoid the hard work of investigating their own histories and, therefore, be unprepared to address the question as to how their racialized experiences affect their teacher identity formation. Papers need only be graded as pass/fail (i.e., were all the prompts addressed or not). I find it inappropriate for me to place a grade that ranks students on this kind of assignment because the purpose is to engage them in a personal exploration for which they eventually take responsibility. As faculty, we need to remind ourselves that the purpose of this work is to help open education students to

engaging positively and transformatively in multicultural topics as they arise in a teacher education curriculum and eventually in their own K-12 classrooms. In the process of doing this work, faculty also may find, as I have, that new transformative multicultural possibilities may open up for them.

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