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# Interview of Christine Sleeter on Multicultural Education: Past, Present, and Key Future Directions

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# Interview of Christine Sleeter on Multicultural Education: Past, Present, and Key Future Directions

## **Abstract**

This is an interview of Christine Sleeter on her work in multicultural education over four decades. Links to videos of this interview are available in the Appendix after the references. Transcriptions and videos of Dr. Sleeter's interview provide plain-spoken content for teacher educators, school administrators, and teachers interested in advancing multicultural education and its critical and practical translation into public school classrooms. The main topics covered in this interview are: (a) the "origins" of multicultural education, (b) the basics of multicultural teaching in student and community relationships, (c) advice for new teachers coming into the profession, (d) discussions of White racism and what White teachers can do, and (e) the new social movement on ethnic studies curriculum. Broadly speaking, this interview provides a plain-spoken account of multicultural education's past, present, and key future directions from Christine Sleeter, one of the field's founding and most committed members.

## **Keywords**

Christine Sleeter, multicultural education, White teachers, ethnic studies curriculum

## **Cover Page Footnote**

Thanks to Daniel Rivera, Coordinator of the Instructional Resources Center at Georgia Southern University, for support of the video and sound recordings of this interview.

## Interview of Christine Sleeter on Multicultural Education: Past, Present, and Key Future Directions

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This is an interview of Christine Sleeter on her commitments to and work on multicultural education over four decades. Links to video clips from this interview are available in the Appendix after the references. Transcriptions and videos of Dr. Sleeter's interview provide plain-spoken content for teacher educators and professional development leaders interested in advancing multicultural education and its critical and practical translation into public school classrooms in the present moment.

Especially important in the present, multicultural education is an approach to education that emphasizes teaching and learning through and across race, class, gender, language, exceptionality, and other differences in public schools (e.g., Banks, 1981, 1987, 2004; Grant & Sleeter, 1986, 1999, 2009). Currently in the areas of teacher education, multicultural education provides the broadly accepted foundational knowledge for standards on diversity (e.g., Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation [CAEP], 2013; Darling-Hammond, 2010; Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005; National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education [NCATE], 2008). Despite these notable advancements, the translation of multicultural education into practical teaching and learning in public school

classrooms remains an on-going concern (e.g., Gay, 1995; Jupp, 2013; Sleeter, 2000), especially given competing priorities in federally funded state-level accountability initiatives of the recent past (e.g., U.S. Department of Education, 2009a, 2009b). Nonetheless, given increased diversity in public schools (National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES], 2009b, 2011) combined with the continued predominance of White teachers in the teaching workforce (NCES, 2009a), the need for renewed commitments to multicultural education—and even more specifically commitments to its critical and practical translation into classroom teaching—remain concerns for teachers and administrators charged with the education of students placed at-risk in the present moment. It is

with this rationale for renewed commitments to multicultural education and its translation into classroom practice that Jim Jupp, Associate Editor of the *NYAR Journal*, interviewed Christine Sleeter on December 17, 2015.

### **BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH**

Before starting, it is important to situate the interview within Sleeter's on-going contributions to multicultural education. Given the trajectory of Sleeter's life and intellectual contributions over the last four decades, it is impossible to provide



a complete overview of her contributions, so what follows is a brief sketch of Sleeter's life and intellectual production in multicultural education.

Sleeter's work on multicultural education began in diverse classrooms in Seattle Public Schools in the early 1970s. While taking a course at Seattle University with Mako Nakagawa, a Japanese internment camp survivor and Director of Seattle Public Schools Rainbow Program, Sleeter began to study the fundamentals of human relations education, one precursor to multicultural education (Banks, 2004, 2013). Studying with Dr. Nakagawa, Sleeter read "No One Model American: A Statement on Multicultural Education" (American Association of Colleges of Teacher Education [AACTE], 1973) which led her into a conversation with Dr. Carl Grant at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. Studying with Dr. Grant at the University of Wisconsin, Sleeter earned her PhD in 1982 and began working as a university professor at Ripon College in Wisconsin (1982-1985) and at the University of Wisconsin-Parkside (1985-1994). In 1995, she became the founding member of California State University (CSU). Sleeter continued to work at CSU Monterey Bay where she retired with Emeritus honors in 2003.

Sleeter's intellectual production over her career provided valuable contributions to multicultural education, multicultural curriculum development, White teacher identity studies, social justice education, critical family history, and the ethnic studies movement. Early in her career, Sleeter theorized multicultural education (Grant & Sleeter, 1986; Sleeter & Grant, 1985; Sleeter & Grant, 1987/2008) and provided foundational research in White teacher identity studies (Sleeter, 1992, 1993, 1995). In the 2000s, Sleeter critiqued the narrowing and whitening effects of standardized curriculum accountability (2002, 2004) and provided comprehensive literature reviews on multicultural education as it supported teacher education (2001, 2007, 2008b). More recently, Sleeter emphasizes

social justice education (2009, 2010), reviews of ethnic studies literatures (2011b, 2013), and understandings of White teacher identity through critical family history (2008a, 2011a, 2014, 2015). In addition to the above mentioned contributions, Sleeter has published 20 books that expand multicultural education, and her textbook *Turning on Learning* (Grant & Sleeter, 2009) has gone through five editions in the last 15 years. The interview that follows traces the broad topics in Sleeter's intellectual production laid out above.

*Tell us about multicultural education, and as a White person, how did you get involved?*

I'll start with how I got involved in multicultural education. I grew up in southern Oregon, and I wasn't somebody that you would have thought would be going into multicultural education through probably the first 20 years of my life. I fell into the beginnings of multicultural education when I signed up for a teacher preparation program that was based in inner-city Seattle. This was after I graduated from college with a major in political science and really didn't know what I was going to do. The program was forward looking in that it was a community field-based program and in that we had a community service learning experience. But that was early in the program and probably not well developed, so I'm not sure how much I got out of it.

Important for me, though, is that I was placed in a racially, ethnically diverse working class high school in Seattle, in a world history class, because that was what would be close to my political science major. It was in the context of being in that school for about eight months, and really getting to know the kids, that my interest in multicultural education first started growing. Actually, at the time, there wasn't such a thing as "multicultural education." The term didn't start appearing in the literature until about the mid-1970s, and I first went into

education in 1972. But as I got to know the kids, I was curious and found that if I showed interest in them, and just listened and asked them questions, a lot of them were really willing to talk. So there was an initial impulse toward dialogue that got me moving in the direction of multicultural education.

I also probably did some things that garnered some goodwill and relationships with students. For example, a bunch of the kids, boys mainly, wanted to be able to continue playing basketball in the gym during lunch, but the administration said well, if there's not a teacher in there to supervise, we can't let them because what if somebody gets hurt? And so they asked for teacher volunteers, and everybody kind of looked at their, you know, their fingernails or something, and I raised my hand and said "I'll do it." Now, I'd never played basketball, and I'm not a guy. But I recognized that I needed to work with the kids toward something they wanted, and that helped me be in a relationship with them. And so for perhaps a month or so during my placement, I spent my lunch hours in the gym supervising basketball. It was the kind of thing that enabled the development of relationships with the kids. There are two pieces of culturally relevant teaching or equity pedagogy, *dialogue* and *relationships*. Both are very, very important for White teachers who want to teach and learn across cultural differences and make a difference with students of color in classrooms.

Overall, my initial teaching of them probably wasn't all that great, except that I really did have in my bones the inclination to want to co-construct teaching with them. By co-construct teaching, I mean that I played the lead role toward academic teaching and learning but did so very much in a conversation with my students' cultural backgrounds, interests, academic levels, learning styles, and other considerations. It's important that I'm learning from the students at the same time I'm teaching them. That interaction, where I'm teaching

them but they are also teaching me, that's co-constructed teaching. So, the nutshell for co-constructing teaching is teaching and learning in conversation with students. It's very different from transmissive teaching in which the teacher has all the knowledge and answers and is supposed to just "get knowledge" in students' heads.

In the social studies classes that I was student teaching in, teachers didn't co-construct teaching and learning. My Cooperating Teacher very much wanted me to do transmissive, not co-constructed teaching. Transmissive teaching is what he did. So after letting me try out a unit that I co-constructed with the kids, it was like, okay, let's get back to actually teaching regular curriculum. I knew right then and there that my impulses toward co-constructed teaching were not usually taken up, which brought me toward multicultural education.

*That sounds like, even before culturally relevant teaching (Irizarry & Raible, 2011; Ladson-Billings, 1995, 1994/2009; Milner, 2008, 2011), in your own teaching you were beginning to actually do some of its principles, which are easy to say and hard to do. That's an important topic to me, too (Jupp, 2013; Jupp & Slattery, 2012) as you know. I'm also interested, since you were there, about how multicultural education started?*

Yeah, sure, that's the direction I'm headed. Seattle Public Schools at the time were undergoing voluntary desegregation. And there was a group that had gotten some money from the federal government funds under the Ethnic Cultural Heritage Act to develop curriculum to help teachers in elementary schools that were being desegregated. The curriculum being developed there was what you would classify as the human relations approach to multicultural education, kind of learning how to get along. The woman who was in charge of that, who'd been in the Japanese internment camps, Mako Nakagawa, taught a course at Seattle University

where I was getting my master's degree. Even though multicultural education was mostly about human relations at the time, that course did have a focus on multicultural education.

In that course, one of the things that we read was something Carl Grant had been involved with while working with the AACTE (1973) Commission on Multicultural Education when they put out their statement on "No One Model American." At the end of the article was his address. Carl Grant, along with a few others like James Banks and Geneva Gay, are considered originators of multicultural education as it emerged in the 1970s. I was at the time trying to figure out if I wanted to get my doctoral degree in learning disabilities or whatever this multicultural stuff was, since by this time I was a special education teacher. I was probably going in the learning disabilities direction because that's where they were hiring people.

So I wrote Carl a letter because his words had spoken to me, and told him I was looking for a PhD program. I told him I was White teacher in Seattle, and I didn't know if there was a place for White people in multicultural education, because my perception had been that White people tended to take over and often didn't listen or co-construct ideas and work well with people of color. I had engaged with this ethnic cultural heritage program led by Mako Nakagawa, and it had some White people in it, but they were in the minority. From that program, I could see that things could be different. And so Carl called me and said, come to Madison. So I did. So that's what got me into multicultural education.

*So I wanted to ask, as we're on that topic, what relationship did multicultural education have with the Civil Rights Movements of the time? And how was the history of multicultural education really tied into the Civil Rights Movements?*

Well, it was very much an outgrowth of the Civil Rights Movement. Before I started teaching,

I was, having grown up in southern Oregon, truthfully not paying attention to the Civil Rights Movement. Growing up in a White enclave, there was a whole lot that I just didn't see. But educators who had been involved in the Civil Rights Movement or who at least whose consciousness came out of the work of the Movement, as the schools were desegregating, began asking, what should be going on in the schools so that they'll serve African American students better? It was initially African Americans asking questions, like why are our kids getting put in special education? Why are they getting put in lower tracks? Why do schools fail to engage African American students and, seemingly, channel them downwards?

African American scholars started to take a close look at schools where they hoped students would get a good education and found an all-White curriculum and low teacher expectations for Black kids. So what became multicultural education came out of that work to try to make schools work for kids in the context of desegregation. Also as part of the Civil Rights Movement, African Americans and then Mexican Americans and Puerto Ricans were challenging the negative images of themselves and remaking their identities.

I remember the slogan in the 1960s and 1970s "Black is Beautiful," where Black had been almost pejorative. If you're Black, that's terrible from the perspective of the White dominant society. "Black is Beautiful" represented an attempt to throw off negative perceptions of, not only Blacks, but also many people of color. And so as a way of reconstituting identity and the whole way of seeing the world, African Americans, in researching history, drawing on cultural roots and drawing on identity, were completely reframing how you think about being African American, how you think about being Mexican American. The American Indian Movement was doing something similar regarding how you think about being Indian, as well as how you think about White people in



the dominant society that's been oppressing for so long. It was this consciousness that came from the Civil Rights movement in the United States that really made a difference in the development of multicultural education. This is the consciousness that fuels and continues to fuel (or *should* fuel) multicultural education in the present.

*And trying create a springboard into the present, how in our teaching do we go beyond notions of overt and covert prejudices, or just appreciation of diversity, which is how most of my students understand race and diversity?*

As a teacher educator, for me as a White person, I think that a lot of this deeper work has to become a personal project. I write about this in my new novel *White Bread* (Sleeter, 2015). To become really adept at multicultural curriculum and teaching, we need as people to really dialogue and live in relation to our students, their families, and the communities that they come from, which is what the novel articulates.

I think a lot of what I learned that was central to me rethinking things that I had taken for granted growing up are things that I learned through engagement with African American adults in the community, who at the time when I was in Seattle were personal friends. Over a period of years I underwent a re-education that alternated between being around people and talking with people, and then going off and doing some reading to try to find out more about the stuff that they were talking about that I didn't understand.

So in working with preservice teachers, well, for one thing I think it's problematic having the majority of people who are teaching continue to be White. I think that continues to produce a teaching force that brings White ways of looking at the world, institutionalizing that as the dominant perspective within the teaching force. And I think that's a problem. But in working with teacher education students, one

of the things that I did for several years was to work with community agencies and set up community-based field experiences because I believe that everybody needed to learn how to learn in somebody else's community.

I wanted preservice teachers at least to have one field experience in which they would work with community members directly. Now, you can only do as much as is possible in one semester of learning to learn in the community. But this is crucial, White preservice teachers really need to learn to interact with adults who are from a different racial ethnic background, and this includes the parents of the children they teach. And wherever possible, even talk with them about race, which for a lot of White people is scary, and often White people deny the salience of race, just remain quiet about it, or avoid the topic all together around people of color. But this social interaction, even minimally over one semester though ideally over many years, really helps.

However, I never did the research to find out to what extent that community-based learning actually launched people on a trajectory of ongoing learning, because it can't be a one-time experience. You can't do it one semester, check it off, and you're done. The project of getting good at being a multicultural teacher is really a lifelong vocation very much tied to being a "good teacher" in this moment. As evidence of this lifelong project, I occasionally get notes back from people who have been my former students saying that they learned a whole lot in my teaching and that my teaching was a life changer. But that kind of work, referring back now to field placements in diverse communities, learning about multicultural curriculum, and finally developing multicultural curriculum and teaching for students, needs to all become part of a personal project that educators take on. That is, for White preservice and professional teachers there is not a simple bag of tricks or techniques but rather a lifelong project of engaging students, trying to make teaching

relevant to communities, studying from different traditions and perspectives, and continually changing yourself and your teaching.

*Following that direction, what advice would you give a White preservice teacher or a teacher just starting out who will most likely be teaching in a diverse setting?*

Well, one of the first things that I try to get teachers to do is to get to know their students. Because if you don't have relationships with your students, it almost doesn't matter what you do in the classroom. You can have great lesson plans, you can have read all the material in the world, but if you can't form relationships with your students then you won't be successful in teaching and learning. And if possible, also try to get to know something of the communities that kids come from. Teachers can learn how to plan and assess and the more technical side of teaching and learning. But to me relationships and knowing the community, they are just absolutely key first steps in multicultural curriculum and teaching.

When I'm teaching a multicultural curriculum design class, which I taught a number of times, I have teachers, and it's usually beginning teachers, I have them work through a process that will culminate in them developing a unit they can teach. In some cases I've gone into their classes to observe them teaching the unit. But we start by taking a concept in the curriculum and figuring out what that means, sometimes it takes a while, because people are sort of used to picking up the textbook and following it.

Students then have to interview their students to find out what the kids know or don't know or want to know related to that concept, find out something about the community based knowledge, the life experiences kids bring in related to that concept. And they need to read the intellectual work of one historically marginalized group related to that concept. So

the approach is what is called interdisciplinary teaching and learning. I want them to read in some depth on that concept as it relates to the teaching of the unit. A problem when people try to create multicultural curriculum is that a whole lot of it ends up being really superficial, and this is an on-going problem. In this superficial version, some teachers just "stir in" a little bit of information about a marginalized group but don't really rethink what they're teaching or provide any different or critical perspectives. So I'll have them read in some depth on a particular concept and how this concept relates to their students, a community, and a historically marginalized group. And sometimes that actually does make preservice and professional teachers start rethinking the curriculum in ways that I think are useful.

One teacher, for example, who was a new teacher in my multicultural development class, I've written an article about this (Sleeter, 2000), decided "I'm going to be teaching about the 13 colonies. I don't know anything really about indigenous people, so what if I take the concept of colonization and try to think about that from the perspective of indigenous people?" And then, I can literally picture it when she came up to me after class asking, gee, what do indigenous people think about colonization? And I'm like, oh my God, because there's so much that's written. It's like, you know you're a well-educated person as far as the dominant White culture is concerned, and you don't know how controversial and important this topic is? Over the semester, she did come to realize that her whole education and curriculum had been so horribly skewed toward White dominant understandings, because she didn't know anything yet about indigenous perspectives on colonization.

So I had to direct her regarding what to read as part of her learning process and capacitating her to actually do this unit, which was a big step for her. Then she got really confused, in a good way, I think, about what she should teach, because



she couldn't just add stuff to the curriculum that was basically a story about the disappearance of indigenous people, their planned genocide, and removal. So, from this example, we can see that multicultural curriculum and teaching is in fact very intellectually rigorous for those who decide to take up the personal project. So she designed this unit that ended up being designed around two perspectives: a trial where the Wampanoag of Massachusetts were bringing the colonists to trial for misusing the resources.

In order to get this short three-day unit right, she had to do a lot of research. But having to do the in-depth reading from the perspective of one group, that doesn't make the curriculum necessarily multicultural, but it starts broadening teachers' understanding of who creates knowledge and what difference that makes. And what might the stuff I'm teaching actually look like from the perspective of other groups?

On the note of who creates knowledge and how important it is to ask that question, I continually run into the problem that teachers are so used to thinking that children's stories are where they're going to get their information for curriculum. I have to work with them about recognizing knowledge that adults hold, adults in the community, as well as adults in academia. Teachers need to know, before they start teaching about indigenous peoples, for example, what indigenous academics or indigenous theorists, or elders know. Because that's where you'll get more of the depth of work that's going to help you really understand and frame what you are teaching, including the children's stories. So I have to continually work with preservice and professional teachers to read at more than one level. That is, they need to understand intellectual work on a topic at one level, and the other level, then, is the instructional level that is the materials they use with the children. Both of these levels are key for teachers to become really good at what they are doing, and both of these levels of knowledge work together and

not against each other when teachers really get good.

*As I know you've written about, it's also important to drive at the concept of White preservice and professional teachers' White privilege as part of their intellectual work and development. Regarding White privilege, how would you drive at and teach that topic to preservice and professional teachers just coming to understand White privilege and White racism?*

Yeah. When I first started, I made the mistake that I think a lot of beginning professors make. And that is to bombard preservice and professional teachers with information about White racism in a transmissive way. I used to just blast White preservice and professional teachers with this critical body of knowledge on White racism. But I found my students getting turned off, a lot of them, or just not seeing the implications for curriculum and teaching. As part of a transmissive approach, I over-emphasized just "getting this in your heads," and that is not enough. In this case, White preservice and professional teachers either resisted its content as oversimplified, became angry at me, or didn't know what to do with it in the classroom. Either way, either through resistance or lack of connection, many White preservice and professional teachers just checked out.

I remember having a sabbatical, I think, or at least not teaching the classes I was teaching for a semester, and backing off and looking at my pedagogy. I began to realize that in order to teach and reach White preservice and professional teachers, I had to develop a whiteness pedagogy, or a critical pedagogy to get White students engaged. I also knew that I was embarking on new and complex territory in making this leap, and I understood that this leap was problematic and messy, not theoretically perfect.

Nonetheless, I realized that I was going to get farther if I engaged my White preservice and professional teachers in some kind of experiential learning processes like what I went through. This whiteness pedagogy had to address White historical identity but had to go beyond simply casting White people as historical villains, because nobody wants to be cast simply as a villain or understood as purely evil. But even so, histories of ethical and non-ethical actions of White people are historically complex. So, the problematic whiteness pedagogy I started to work on focused on students becoming constructors of knowledge, and this whiteness pedagogy emphasized that White teachers must broaden their understanding of how race works. So I began to connect knowledge of race, White racism, and White privilege with some of the community-based learning, and I had students develop and carry out mini-community investigations, do media analyses. I would present information about how racism works and some of the statistical stuff in class. Frequently, also being White, I'll draw from my experience to talk to preservice and professional teachers about myself as a learner and myself as a White person. In these discussions, I'd try to explain the whiteness pedagogy I had undergone because I both got the benefits of White privilege, yet I was determined to try to figure out how to hold myself accountable and do things differently in my curriculum and teaching. So, for me, this focus on whiteness pedagogy, which came out of not being so effective with White preservice and professional teachers, insisted on having teachers co-construct the knowledge and putting myself out there.

Whiteness pedagogy is never perfect. I mean, there were a lot of White students that, honestly, in retrospect I felt like I still wasn't getting very far with. Even so, using these insights I just mentioned, I felt like I was getting farther by having them do part of the difficult identity work. I mean, when I would just present about racism, White privilege, and White racism,

then their defenses would go up, and if they were not allowed to express what they were thinking or work through their reactions, it was worse. I remember several class sessions when they were bringing in the data from their community investigations and presenting it, and I was sitting in the back of the room, thinking, wow. They're presenting the same stuff I would have presented, and it's coming from them. And when it's coming from them, they own it. But again, in modesty, this doesn't happen every time, and the workings of whiteness pedagogy are complex. For the preservice and professional teachers that I know who have really accepted the knowledge and tried to do something in their curriculum and teaching, it becomes a self-project as I mentioned above.

*Can you elaborate more on White racism of White teachers, more specifically on the problematics of "colorblind" White identities and White race evasive identities?*

Yeah. I've heard one of my colleague friends, Renee Martin, give the analogy of—okay, if you say you're colorblind, do you say you're genderblind? Does that mean you don't see me as a woman? If not, what do you see me as? Most people want other people to recognize their gender identity, so we do things with clothing and hair and things to express however we understand our gender identity and project the gender identity we want people to recognize. And so I think the same thing holds true with a student's race and ethnicity. For us to say we don't see it, that's denying somebody's identity, and a lot of rich, good stuff that comes with that identity. In addition, as I talk with White teachers who will say I'm colorblind, and I think that's a good thing, what I've come to realize that for a lot of White teachers is that the only way they understand people of color is through negative stereotypes. Being colorblind seems to be their way of trying to not see those stereotypes, seeing the kid but not the stereotypes. But if

the only thing you have to work with is negative stereotypes, or fear, and you try to hide that somewhere in order to be fair with kids, that's starting at a really low level. That's one of the things that puts kids at risk. Because then it's like you don't really see me, and you don't recognize my experience, you don't recognize my family, except in fairly negative terms, and your best way of being fair with me is to not see me. Color-blind White identities, not seeing race and ethnicity, really take away even though some White people who take those positions are in an early stage of trying to handle negative prejudices. It's just not enough, though, to say you don't see students' backgrounds, identities, families, and histories.

*I'm already thinking about how to use this with some of my students. At the risk of being a bit redundant, what are the things that White teachers can do that actually advance the learning of students of color?*

Well, there are some basic things, like have high academic expectations of kids. Don't make assumptions about what they can and can't do. But then those expectations need to be followed up with, this is the part that gets tricky, genuinely believing in the kids and being able to form constructive working relationships with them so that you're actually teaching them. And hopefully, at least through dialogue, getting to know the kids.

This makes me think about a project I worked with in New Zealand, that involved working with teachers who are mostly non-indigenous, non-Maori teachers, in schools that had a lot of Maori students. Maori students in New Zealand, their school experience is a whole lot like the school experience of African American, Latino, and Native American kids in the U.S. You hear about it, read about it, listen to kids talk about it, you could just substitute names and groups and a few particulars and it would be very much the same.

And so this project, they interviewed Maori students to find out what they wanted from teachers, and to find out why they thought Maori students weren't doing well in school. And then they interviewed teachers, parents, and administrators. What was interesting from those interviews was that the kids were saying things like, well, the teachers don't really want to teach us. They don't believe in us, they harp on us for the wrong things. If we don't understand things they just assume we're not trying. They don't get to know us, they don't really want us to be in the classroom. And then the teachers were saying things like, well, these kids don't care about education, their parents don't support education, and that's why they're not doing very well. So the project was based on having the teachers get to know the kids, and co-construct with the kids how to support them academically in school. Now this doesn't get at curriculum transformation and engagement with communities, which I think are also extremely important. But it does get at the basic work teachers do, and that is, at least academically, helping to challenge and support the kids, but working with them rather than against them, and not punishing them along the way. The project had in-class support for the teachers because I don't know that you can just figure this out all by yourself.

*Could you tell us a little bit more about what transforms White teachers' practice—like the sorts of things they should be doing in classrooms?*

Well, in addition to engaging with kids, I don't think there's any one formula, because with different groups of children things are going to hit them differently. But as I said, I don't think there's a substitute for getting to know the kids at the center, and then other things from there. Getting to know the parents is also very important.

In Seattle, I lived in a working class neighborhood from which African American kids were sent to the school where I was teaching as part of the desegregation program. In that context, I was getting to know families and some of the community setting that African American kids in the high school where I was teaching were coming from, including some of my own students. And that was also really helpful, not getting to know as a drive-through, because drive-throughs don't necessarily dislodge stereotypes. But getting to know parents as people was really helpful.

A lot of White people have never been in the position of actually being in a minority on somebody else's turf. And I think it's really helpful to experience being in a minority in somebody else's turf, especially when you're in, it could be a community setting or a school setting or a church setting, where you're the one who doesn't actually know everything going on. Other adults are in charge, leading whatever the enterprise is, as competently as White people would be where they are. This makes total sense, but most White people don't experience that very often. And that's one of those things that sometimes for White people is kind of destabilizing when assumptions that you had don't hold up. I had a conversation with somebody who had gone to an African American church who, I don't know what they were expecting, but he was surprised when he was welcomed. As a White person he didn't know the hymns very well, but one of the biggest surprise takeaways was that people seemed happy to see him there, but also the White person wasn't the center of attention.

*Tell me about your use of critical family history and your new novel, White Bread: Weaving Cultural Past into the Present (Sleeter, 2015). Tell us more about what the potentials of that project are.*

Okay. This was something I started working on after I retired. I've only been able to try it out once with a class of students. But it was something that I started working on beginning with my own family history. I mentioned earlier that as a teacher, I would frequently draw on my experience as a White person in order to try to help make points in a way White people would follow. On various occasions I would have students do family history types of work in class, because I think that all teachers need to get to know themselves. Over the years I've tried a bunch of different things that involved getting to know yourself as a cultural being and as a historically located being. And I realized that what the White students would do by way of family history was usually a superficial version of the "pulled myself up by the bootstraps" idea. The students of color would actually engage more in the larger issues than the White students.

But I also realized that I didn't know my own history. So I couldn't do much with myself as an example. So I just got curious, I asked, what is my history? I started off also wondering, if there have been anti-racist activists in my family tree? Well, it turned out I really didn't find any. But I just started doing the research. I started the way people usually do, constructing the family tree. But then I started bringing the sensibilities that I have from the work I've done in multicultural education and ethnic studies. I started looking at the family tree within a larger socio, cultural, historical context. One of the key questions I've asked is, for any given family unit, at a particular time and in a particular location, who else was around? What other socio-cultural groups were around? Or could have been around, except for laws and processes that were keeping them away? And what were the relationships across groups? And that is a really important question because you look historically in the U.S., and we are a much more multicultural, multi-racial society, and always have been, than a lot of people think. This type of work, in which

White people think of themselves in historical relation with other groups, is very important to teachers' knowing themselves and developing multicultural curriculum (Sleeter, 2008, 2011a).

So something that I'm working on right now is looking at the question of White people taking indigenous peoples' land, because I realized in looking through land records in my own family history, several instances where land was acquired directly from either the federal government or state government. I realized that the acquisition of land was because the indigenous people had just been expelled. This is a really important historical set of facts to know. So my ancestors were there, like standing in line, practically, waiting to get the land. And what does that mean for me today? What were the relationships between White people and indigenous people in my own past? What were the relationships between White people and Black people? Those are historically powerful relationships to look at. They need to be understood, and they can help teachers get at authentic discussions of what happened and why things are as they are.

The one time when I've been able to use this in a class, it was a couple of years ago. I was teaching a two-week summer school class in Colorado, combining multicultural curriculum and critical family history. There were 38 teachers, it was a very racially, ethnically diverse group. What was really fascinating to me was how much they got into it. Maybe three or four of the White ones and one non-White had a real hard time dealing with the questions of power and privilege and didn't want to go there. Another one may have experienced physical abuse growing up, and she didn't like the assignment. I realized that she was really uncomfortable with it. But the rest of them got into it way more than I thought they would.

*What advantages does teaching, analyzing, and discussing the novel *White Bread* (Sleeter, 2015) have over transmissive teaching?*

If what we want to see teachers do in the classroom is something active, hands-on, co-constructed, social learning, then that's what we need to be doing with our preservice and professional teachers. Our teacher education students will probably learn more from us from how we teach them than from what we teach them. When I taught in Colorado, I hadn't finished writing the novel yet. But what I did do was try to connect the critical family history with curriculum construction. So we went back and forth between things related to multicultural curriculum, culturally responsive pedagogy, and critical family history. And I wanted not just to see it as a separate activity, but to see the research they were doing and the unearthing of diverse narratives about the U.S. as a part of what would then become the social studies curriculum, what could become the literature curriculum. So, in that setting, we took a research approach to family histories and then tried to tie it into the other subject area teaching that the teachers had to do. We tried to figure out how to situate subject area teaching within the research project so as to make the constructivist part of this an important tie into the other types of subject area learning that were required. It may inform the science curriculum, and I did want them to share their stories so the stories would in some ways reflect what the multicultural curriculum can be.

*I think you're right about constructivist learning aspect of it. I'm wanting to shift gears because we are approaching the end of our time. I've been fascinated by your (Sleeter, 2011b, 2013) and others' writing (Tintiango-Cubales et al., 2015) on ethnic studies curriculum and the ethnic studies movement. I ended up reading some of the articles you reviewed like Altschul, Oyserman, and Bybee (2006) and Carter (2008) who empirically demonstrate minority students' understandings of their own racial identities and its strong relationship with academic achievement. This research seems like a great*



*argument for teaching about race in professional development and teacher education, and I think that administrators and teachers should know it. I'm wondering, tell me about ethnic studies and the work you are doing there in schools and communities. How did you get involved? What potentials does that have for us as we go forward?*

Yeah, I think it has great potentials, too. Ethnic studies in some ways claimed me before I claimed ethnic studies. I mentioned that multicultural education initially came out of ethnic studies in the 1970s. And I think throughout my whole career, I was doing reading in ethnic studies as I realized how much I didn't know. So as a beginning teacher, one year I concentrated on reading African American studies, and then the next year Chicano studies, and didn't always pick good things because I didn't know what I was doing. But that was my way of trying to reeducate myself.

When I was a faculty member at the University of Wisconsin Parkside, somebody who we hired to direct the Center for Cultural Advancement, an African American guy named Dr. Selase Williams, said "Hmm, there's no ethnic studies program here." And I said, "Yeah, there isn't. And there probably should be, because it would make the curriculum a lot more relevant to African Americans and Chicanos and other groups." He also understood teachers need content knowledge in ethnic studies in order to be good multicultural educators. So he and I constructed an ethnic studies minor. And then he left and I took over as Director of the Ethnic Studies program for a year. And then somebody else took it over. I didn't actually want to be in charge of it. But I did want to get it off the ground and try to make it as healthy as possible.

In that context, I hired somebody who I knew in Wisconsin to teach the first African American history class that was taught at UW Parkside because our history department was all White. As I keep emphasizing, teachers, White

teachers especially but even teachers of color, if they don't know about ethnic histories or critical histories, how are they going to be able to really teach and understand a multicultural curriculum? How will they be able to teach students from diverse communities well? And so we hired somebody from Milwaukee, and I was on sabbatical that year, so I decided to sit in the class, because I'd never actually taken an African American history class. There were about 25 or 30 African American students and me, and Dr. Michael Smith who was teaching the class. It was great for me, because I learned a whole lot, and I also was able to experience the African American history class vicariously through the students who were taking the class, and how tremendously important and excited, just wonderful the class was and how relevant it is for students to be studying their own histories. I think that in many ways influenced me, because even though I had taken women's studies, it was being in the African American history class that made a difference with me.

I was contacted in maybe 2006 or so by the folks in Tucson to see if I might want to come and be a speaker at their summer institute on education transformation. I agreed to do that, and when I got there, I saw the wonderfully rich work they were doing in Mexican American studies in public schools. I was kind of blown away by it. I was a guest speaker there twice. When the anti-ethnic studies media backlash was going on, I was contacted by the NEA asking if I would review the research in ethnic studies. And the woman who sent me the email was somebody I didn't know. The way she framed ethnic studies, it was obvious she didn't know very much of what it was; she said something about curriculum that would help students of color feel better about themselves. So I replied, well, if you're referring to curriculum that directly addresses racism and oppression from the perspectives of people of color, then yeah, I'd be interested in doing that. If you have something else in mind, then I'm not really



interested. And she's oh yes, yes, yes, that's what we want.

I realized then that because of all the reading that I'd been doing, I actually had a reasonably good grasp already on what the literature was. But I looked at the articles I have and things that I have in the computer, and then I really scoured the landscape to try to find any other studies that reported data on ethnic studies. I found other useful things that I didn't already know about. I also drew on Geneva Gay's (2000) work because her book on culturally responsive teaching does a really good job of bringing together a lot of literature, and that turned out to be very, very helpful to me. And then I put together the report on the academic and social value of ethnic studies.

I didn't really know where the request came from. I thought it came from the people in Tucson, but it turns out, I found out just a few months ago, that the idea for the NEA doing this review was actually put on the table by a guy from Southern California, José Lara, who has been heading up the *Ethnic Studies Now Coalition* (see the website of this organization and a record of its activities at <http://www.ethnicstudiesnow.com>). This movement has had a lot of success in getting ethnic studies, just over the last year, adopted as a graduation requirement in California, and I think we're up to about nine school districts, something like that. So José Lara and the *Ethnic Studies Now Coalition* have been very, very successful at articulating to school districts, boards, and state legislatures that students of color should and need to learn about the histories of their groups. But he was, I think, on the board of the NEA, and had asked the NEA if they could do a study on the impact of ethnic studies. And they said, that's going to cost way more money than we've got. And he said well, what about a research review? And they said okay, we can afford that. I still don't know exactly who it was that said they should contact me, except that I turned out to be probably a pretty good choice.

*What do you know, have you been following the movement and its significance for students?*

Yeah. Well, the movement in California I know really well, because I'm involved with it. I know that in Texas there's also a movement. I'm still working with the people in Tucson. I don't know particulars of what's going on in other states. But do you want to know more about the movement in California?

*Yes, yes. Please tell us about that, because I would like people to know that there's a mass movement in education beyond the conservative standards and accountability movement, which predominates teachers work, especially, in Georgia and the South.*

Yeah, okay. Well, in California, for a number of years there have been people, particularly in Southern California, but also in the San Francisco area, mainly people of color who understand the forms of racism in the schools that marginalize and put kids of color at risk and then focus on the whiteness of the curriculum and how the standards still don't address core concerns about educating kids of color. So there have been those discussions for quite a while. And there's an organization of Raza studies educators that's particularly strong in Southern California that's been working on trying to change things about schools for a while. The *Ethnic Studies Now Coalition* formed I think about a year and a half ago, maybe two years ago, when José Lara said to one of his friends, this is how he tells the story, we need to make ethnic studies a graduation requirement. And it is because of what you were mentioning about the standards and accountability movement.

He knew from life experience what the research confirms about teaching, learning, and identity. If you have a strong ethnic identity, a sense of ethnic self and a grounding in the intellectual traditions from your ethnic perspective, you tend to take school more

seriously. And that's certainly what we could see in the Tucson case. So he said, so I'm going to run for the school board, and when I get on the school board, we're going to work on making ethnic studies a graduation requirement. Now this is a small school district, El Rancho Unified School District south of Los Angeles. So he got on the school board over a year ago, then got the board to make it a graduation requirement. It was around then that he was having me start helping out by emailing school board members when a similar proposal came before the next school district, L.A. Unified. I emailed each board member there, telling them what the research said. And they passed a graduation requirement. And then it's gone on to Sacramento, San Francisco, several school districts.

*You can see here where the research on academically successful minority students—the research that shows that these students understand themselves, their histories, and their families as racialized—is important, important work, because it's empirically related to academic achievement (e.g., Altschul et al., 2006; Carter, 2008).*

What's been interesting to me is that with the organization José has talked about, he'll work with people on the ground, and it is a coalition. It isn't just José. In his own district, by working with the teachers' unions, working with other groups, other unions, organizations and the district who were concerned about the education of kids, recognizing that most of the kids were kids of color, and then helping them understand what the research says about racialized identity and the academic achievement is very important. It helps with the kids' education, academic achievement, engagement in school, and self-understanding. So as it has come to various school boards, it's been a combination of efforts that include me

giving the research side, although I'm not the only one who does, but my report is a tool.

*Yeah, it sounds like doing the work becomes a form of political activism in that sense.*

Yeah. And they'll also get students to rally, teachers to rally, and organize rallies and work with the local teacher education programs to do that, so that there's this coordinated effort. So that's what's happening in California. And I'm concerned that I want to see it done well, I do get to worrying a little bit. Augustine Romero in Tucson has said the same thing, that if you try to launch too much too fast and you don't have the people to do it well, then if you end up falling on your face, then you'll have the conservatives saying, "See? I told you so."

*Right, right. I like the fact that that's part of a public discourse, that it's part of a movement. How does the ethnic studies movement reflect back on multicultural education in the present moment?*

Well, I don't see it actually as being a competition with multicultural education. Rather, I understand the two as working together. And people whom I've talked with and whom I know who are working with this don't just see like building ethnic silos. That is, the movement has not focused on teaching only African American kids African American studies or only teaching Mexican American kids Chicano studies. Rather, the Coalition has focused on kids needing to know themselves and needing to know where they fit in in the world starting from yourself and your own history, but moving out beyond that.

Geneva Gay was one of the people who clued me into this years and years ago, when she talked about herself being a student in school. She was so worried about being Black and trying to figure out what that meant, that concentrating on academics, you know, she thought "I got to take care of myself first." And so people in the

ethnic studies movement, I think, recognize that kids need to take care of themselves first. Kids of color are increasingly interacting with other kids of color, although we're more and more segregated, but it's Whites that are more and more segregated from everybody else (Kozol, 2005; NCES, 2009, 2011). And so kids do need to be able to know something of the Black kid or the Brown kid or the Asian kid who may be living on my same block, and what that all means. And doing that well is hard, and it has some significant risks in trying to do it.

*It does seem to be like the challenge of it, trying to be institutionalized or putting it in graduation plan, presents some risks, but I think that at the same time we have to be available to take some of those risks. Conservative movements certainly don't mind "trying out" their policy ideas as "experiments," and no one cares that that's not authentic, or that experiments involved everyone falling on their faces. In Georgia there are years when test results have been invalidated, not counted, or contaminated. It's known, and you don't have leaders saying, "Repeal that reform." We need to take the risks to get these things out there. But that sort of concludes my formal set of topics. Is there anything that you would like to add to our session?*

No, this has been fun.

## CONCLUSION

This is an interview of Christine Sleeter on her work in multicultural education over four decades. The interview recalls the history of multicultural education, discusses the present and on-going work of multicultural education in schools and teacher education, advances critical life history work for conscientizing teachers, and emphasizes Sleeter's recent work with *the Ethnic Studies Now Coalition* in California. The main topics covered were the "origins" of multicultural education, the basics of multicultural teaching in student and community relationships, advice

for new teachers coming into the profession, discussions of White racism and what White teachers can do to reach students of color, and Sleeter's work with the new movement advancing ethnic studies curriculum. Broadly speaking, this interview provides a plain-spoken account of multicultural education's past, present, and key future directions from Christine Sleeter, one of the field's founding and most committed members.

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*Christine E. Sleeter, founding member of California State University Monterey Bay and Professor Emerita in that university’s College of Professional Studies, has committed herself to critical multicultural education over the last four decades. She has published over 130 articles and 20 books, including Power, Teaching, and Teacher Education (Peter Lang). Her recent novel, White Bread (Sense Publishers), explores the profound impact of critical family history on a teacher.*

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## Appendix

### Video Clips from Interview of Christine Sleeter

Christine Sleeter's Involvement in Multicultural Education (6:06)

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tndfr2b\\_hk8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tndfr2b_hk8)

Multicultural Education and the Civil Rights Movement (3:05)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1ZM-QkQFXgo>

The Pernicious Effects of White Teachers' Colorblind Identities (2:41)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=55q8tp7aEBo>

White Teachers, White Privilege, and White Racism (3:15)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g5pWk9FJI-I>

On White Teachers Entering the Profession/Multicultural Curriculum Development (5:53)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4GshrWmKFeE>

Beyond White-Centric Understandings of "Prejudice" and "Appreciating Diversity" (3:30)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i5NUOaQ8cew>

White Teachers Who Co-construct Relationships and Teaching with Students of Color (7:01)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qyqFSRoLJeg>

Critical Family History and Sleeter's novel *White Bread*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UaDsT0VPijo>

Work on the Ethnic Studies Movement (Part 1)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LwoD6fGhsds>

Work on Ethnic Studies Movement (Part 2)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gebhZ0IVZPI>