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Cover Page Footnote

Arlette Ingram Willis is an assistant professor with the language and literacy faculty in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Shuaib J. Meacham is a doctoral candidate at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign where he has won Holmes and Spencer scholarships.

Break Point: The Challenges of Teaching Multicultural Education Courses

Arlette Ingram Willis and Shuaib J. Meacham

In work on multiculturalism and teacher education, much has been made of the ironic growth in the heterogeneity of America's public school students and the homogeneity of America's public school teachers (Fuller, 1992). Educators have thus been alerted to the dire consequences to follow, should they continue to engage the complexity of culturally diverse student populations in their present state of "multicultural illiteracy" (Ladson-Billings, 1991). Along with this alert, lip service seems to be paid to what preservice teachers don't know, and what they should know and do in order to meet the educational needs of children of color and of linguistic difference (Gore, 1993; hooks, 1992). Like our colleagues, we believe that the most effective way to reform education begins in our colleges and universities in teacher education. A review of the related research suggests that many multicultural education courses are taught with the intent of changing the attitudes and beliefs of white preservice teachers. We suggest that all preservice teachers need to improve their understanding of the role of linguistic and cultural diversity in children's lives, to improve their understanding of its history, and change their beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors so that a more just multicultural school climate is realized. It is imperative therefore that teacher education courses not merely *teach* about multicultural education, but that they *become* multicultural environments. In this article we describe accounts of our experience as two African American instructors teaching multicultural education courses and the experiences of students who have taken them.

Among a plethora of publications on multicultural education, little has been written on the constraints facing teacher educators who attempt to convey attitudinal change. Consequently, there is a tacit, yet prevalent tension between ideas about the learning that must take place and the practical limitations under which many multicultural education courses are conducted (Gore, 1993). In fact, theoretical admonitions tend to underestimate the subtle dynamics within the practical setting and altogether fail to account for the ways in which multicultural learning takes place. We believe it is important to articulate clearly and explicitly the emotional nature of these discussions. Students have expressed responses that range from self-pity to racial hatred. We've included their words for, as Nieto (1992) has pointed out, their voices must become part of our examination of the teaching process.

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We have organized our experiences and the responses of our students around three questions: 1) What conflicting influences are implicated in multicultural preservice teacher education courses? 2) What resistances develop between white preservice teachers and a curriculum that focuses on the experiences of people of color? 3) What pattern occurs as a result of this conflict and resistance? And how can it best be managed?

The Context

We began teaching multicultural education courses for preservice teachers in response to a survey indicating that more than any other area except classroom management, teacher educators wished they had a stronger background in multiculturalism (Holste & Matthews, 1992). Our response to this wish, however, differed greatly from that of national trends. As education researcher Fuller (1992) notes, nationwide, 94% of teacher educators are predominantly white and middle-class (p. 88). Further, Fuller reports that the national demographic patterns of preservice teacher educators indicate that students in teacher education courses are also more often white (92%), female (75%), and middle class (80%). The demographic patterns at our university were similar. Their college experiences are often the first and most diverse settings they encounter.

In contrast, we were in a unique position as African American teacher educators. While we understand that, generally, it is not polite to mention faculty race as a factor in education (hooks, 1992), we understand that race and positions of power influence students. For example, our EuroAmerican, Latino American, and male and female colleagues share similar problems with conflict and resistance when they conduct courses that deal with multiculturalism. Several EuroAmerican instructors disclosed that they must contend with students who feel that they have somehow "sold out" their whiteness in order to adopt a multicultural perspective. They also revealed that when their classes are composed of only EuroAmerican students, the students are open in their resentment of such a curriculum. In contrast, our colleagues noted that when at least one minority person is in the class, the openly hostile attitudes become considerably tempered.

We made a conscious effort to develop courses reflecting a critical multicultural pedagogy. First, the work of Sleeter and Grant (1988/1993) and McCarthy (1993) helped us to frame our courses along established lines of multicultural theory. Second, we went beyond issues raised in multicultural efforts that focused on the canon, the curriculum, and instructional strategies. Most often, the response to the call for increased multiculturalism has been to add a few "minority items to the curriculum." Yet, simply adding materials to the curriculum without reforming it or training teachers only perpetuates the dominant cultural paradigms. As Apple (1992) states, "[I]t is naive to think of the school curriculum as neutral knowledge. Rather, what counts as legitimate knowledge is the result of complex power relations and struggles among identifiable class, race, gender, and religious groups" (p. 4). Moving beyond the canon, curriculum, and materials takes considerable effort. Barrera (1992) suggests that teachers need improved understanding of cultural knowledge, cross-cultural knowledge, and

multicultural knowledge. She describes meaning making and literacy teaching as culturally mediated and involving control issues. Further, she notes that "literacy and literature are cultural phenomena and are practiced differently across cultures" (p. 232). An ideal place to instill awareness of this cultural mediation were preservice teacher education courses.

Third, most empirical research has emphasized the curricular innovations designed to increase the receptivity of white preservice teachers to the task of teaching children of color (Ladson-Billings, 1991). Its primary goal has been to assess the attitudes of preservice teachers toward race, culture, and inequality by emphasizing cultural difference and diversity (Ginsburg & Newman, 1985; King, 1991). When the topic of race is discussed, it has usually focused on people of color. Yet this willful interpretation conceals the concept of white identity or "whiteness" from critical coverage of multiculturalism (hooks, 1992; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Sleeter, 1994). Consequently, white preservice teachers are not provided with the opportunity to examine their own ethnic identities and investigate the influences of such identities on teaching diverse students. McIntosh (1990) asserts that "the absence of a racial discourse on whiteness reinforces the widely accepted myth that whiteness is morally neutral, normal, and average, and also ideal" (p. 2). To suggest otherwise in public conversations in mixed racial settings raises levels of discomfort for many students. Demystifying the privileges associated with whiteness is a difficult position for many preservice teachers to assume.

Finally, Helm's (1992) theory of the acquisition of racial identity as applied to preservice education courses by Tatum (1992) helped us to understand our students' developmental progression vis à vis their own racial identity. Their findings suggest that students undergo a range of emotions from feelings of guilt and shame to feelings of anger and despair. Tatum outlines three sources of student resistance: 1) discussing race is considered taboo, especially in racially mixed settings; 2) many students, regardless of racial group membership, have been socialized to think of the United States as a just society; and 3) in particular, white students initially deny personal prejudice, recognizing the impact of racism on other peoples' lives but failing to acknowledge its impact on their own (p. 5).

Three questions are at the heart of this issue. Number One: What are the various conflicts implicit in teaching multicultural preservice teacher courses?

The multicultural education course is a genuinely peculiar phenomenon. The expanding diversity in society has introduced into the educational enterprise elements incompatible with traditional notions of teaching and learning. Multicultural education courses have emerged as an attempt to address these discrepancies. Instead of being called on to teach generic educational theory, instructional techniques, and skills, these courses are charged with turning fearful attitudes into positive sensibilities.

Within the larger framework of teacher education, this very difference leaves many students feeling confused about what they are supposed to be getting from such a course. This confusion is compounded by the insecurity involved in their future roles as classroom teachers. A student's journal entry illustrates this tension:

It seems that the main focus of the discussion about diversity issues deals with identifying that there is a problem which needs a solution. (Euri, an African American female)

In addition to the often unsettling and controversial nature of the course topics, teacher educators must contend with competing pedagogical orientations. Students have expressed resistance to incorporating multicultural notions into their educational philosophy. Some have even suggested that multicultural education is offensive, serving only to divide the country further.

Another factor which feeds the tension is that of time (Tatum, 1992). Research by Sleeter (1993), among others, has indicated that changes in attitudes are not lasting. As in any developmental process, time must be allowed for certain processes to unfold. However, this exigency is often circumvented by the add-on quality of content in many education courses. Marginalized in teacher education, the multicultural component is frequently allotted less time in which to provide effective learning. Faced with one and a half hours a week, teacher educators must strike a balance to avoid watering down the course to the extent that it becomes meaningless, or to avoid overwhelming students with highly charged material to the point of frustration.

In addition, such conflict causes resistance with which the teacher educator must contend. Generally two types of responses occur. First, students may call into question the instructor's expertise or inquire about his or her knowledge base. Neither gender nor racially specific, the questions seek validation in terms most familiar to students (academic degrees, teaching experience, expertise). Second, students may complain about the imposition of a course on multicultural education. An example illustrates this point:

I have talked with several in-service teachers who believe that multicultural education is another trend. They said they too learned innovative ideas and practices during their undergraduate studies and training. Right now, they are not investing too much of their time with multicultural education because they do not believe that it will last long. (Evelyn, white female)

One of the most pervasive conflicts appears from white students who express difficulty identifying themselves as white and having European roots. Sleeter (1994) maintains that "to open up a discussion of white racism challenges the legitimacy of white peoples' very lives" (p. 7). For most of our students this is the first time their whiteness has been challenged. Examples of the most frequent type of responses follow:

My family does not usually define itself in ethnic or racial terms. I have become increasingly aware of this as of late, and I don't know how to think about it. (Dave, white male)

I don't really have any need to identify with a cultural past. My past, and present is American. I like to think that I meet people as

individuals and treat them as such, not as belonging to any racial group. (Alice, white female)

Students of color, however, do not tend, on average, to share concerns about identifying with their ethnicity. For example, two students wrote:

I stress African American because I cannot accurately trace my descent beyond the era of American slavery. That, I regret, I have been successfully denied. (Sherman, African American male)

It is often asked what we second generation "Korean Americans" consider ourselves as Korean or American. It's a difficult question to answer because our "Korean-ness" and "American-ness" are in conflict. We can not consider ourselves as fully Korean because we were born and raised in America. At the same time, however, it is also difficult to say we are fully "American" for a number of reasons. First, the families, culture, customs, traditions and lifestyles are not typically "American." They are, in fact, very different from some of the traditional American customs people have held since the beginning of American history. Secondly, our outward appearance can confuse people into thinking that we are foreigners to the American way of life. Lastly, it is just plain difficult to define what "American" really is, especially now, in the X-generation and the politically correct wave of thought. (Lily, Asian American female)

In much of the critical writing on contemporary education (Giroux & McLaren, 1988; McCarthy, 1993) classrooms have consistently been portrayed as sites of cultural contest. The crucial social, political, and economic issues of race, resentment, and identity are played out in emotional terms. Today's college campuses have become veritable cauldrons of friction wherein perceived threats to academic traditions, economic decline, and the more publicly expressed perspectives of people of color promote intercultural hostility, insecurity, and fear. Attention to the histories and perspectives of people of color has made the school one in which there is direct examination of the harmful and traumatic aspects of American history. In turn, white students have felt victimized by the recurring accounts of physical, economic, and political oppression by white people of people of color. McCarthy (1993) calls these competing forms of victimization, the politics of "resentment." The following student comment illustrates this point:

Today, I hear constant put-downs of whites. It seems that the study of diversity includes pointing out how terrible whites have been. I do not feel I deserve the label "racist." I know racists and many of them are white but this does not provide anyone the right to generalize that all white people carry racist views. I am not saying that this class perpetuates this but I think that this is something the "white Americans" feel in general. (Julie, white female)

In the same discussion Charles expresses a similar view from a male perspective:

It is not easy being a white male, especially of my age in this country right now. You are constantly under the microscope. The thing is true I am white, I am a male, and I am 21, but other than that you know nothing about me. . . . Things are not coming to me free or any easier than they are to others because I am white. I guess I am tired of being made to feel as though I am to blame for Columbus, slavery, rape, or everything else. When the fact of the matter is I have nothing to do with any of these activities.

At the very moment of pronounced social and professional insecurity regarding their futures, white middle class preservice teachers are being asked to exile themselves from white privilege which many feel they don't own and to embrace the educational prospects of people of color.

Question Number Two: What resistances occur between white preservice teachers and a curriculum that focuses on the educational experiences of people of color?

As African Americans teaching classes on multicultural education to predominantly white middle class students, we enter a hostile world. This world is laced with fear of the unexpected. Suddenly the conventional, unspoken, and assumed frameworks of power have been overturned and students' privileged racial, cultural, and educational experiences are no longer the standard. Hesitancy may be fueled by a racially divided campus and national socio-political context in which multiculturalism is debated in terms of consequences for them as white students (Schlesinger, 1992). Buzzwords and euphemisms abound and red herrings swim silently in the classroom: "economic decline," "quota," "affirmative action," "reverse discrimination," "balkanization," "political correctness" and, "speech codes" from those able to intellectualize the ideas of race, class, gender, and power. At the core of this confusion is the issue of racial identity. Encouraged never to think about what it means to be white, these students live with ideas of themselves as culturally generic people who are merely people without culture. We encounter white students who protest, "I don't really have a culture"; "I consider myself American. My culture is the American culture." For these students a new language of identity has been provided "European American," "EuroAmerican," "Anglo," "Anglo American," "White male/female." They inquire, "What's the matter with being American?" They wish to dismiss or silence the issue of race as unimportant to "American-ness." The two following responses to the question, "What does it mean to be white?" provide instances of the cultural tug-of-war these students are trying to process:

No matter if one sees it as good or bad, I must realize that because of my appearance, I have been given the opportunity to have "no ethnicity." I am in a privileged position in this society, I am white, and if I did not look this way it would be more difficult, if not impossible, to claim the status that I have. (Jeff, white male student)

Objectively speaking, my cultural background includes those who are white, upper-middle class, Catholic women of German-Polish descent, who believe in God and America, the Land of Opportunity.

This answer is problematic for two reasons. First, I do not really have a working definition of culture that satisfies me, making it difficult to discuss. Secondly, I have a problem being placed into a group that I do not feel particularly attached to. (Ann, white female)

An additional source of opposition arises from the fact that the preservice teachers whom we have taught contend that there is no significant problem regarding race in this country. The nation has become aware of a considerable difference in how race is understood, for example, in the racially divided reactions to the acquittal of O. J. Simpson. While African Americans and other minority groups continue to perceive race as a significant social issue, many EuroAmericans maintain that racial hostility is a thing of the past. Our students, too, think that acknowledging racial difference contributes to racial discord, implying that if we simply ignore racial difference, the problems will resolve themselves on their own. This perspective is reflected in a preservice teacher's remarks:

Why do we have to keep defining things according to color? The fact is people are people. We all have similarities, we all have differences. Is it fair to "define" a race? I don't think so. . . . How far do we have to take this political correctness? Why can't we be Americans? I understand that some people want to stress their heritage, but I think it ends up separating people even more. (Tiffany, white female)

These attitudes are not representative of all preservice teachers, or of all white preservice teachers, but they demonstrate the enduring challenges for teacher education instructors.

Question Number Three: What pattern may occur as a result of this internal turmoil? And how can it best be managed?

Depending on factors such as time, class size, type of class (required or elective), and the political disposition of the course, teacher educators can expect a myriad of possible outcomes. However, in our experience, the collective stress from denial, fear, hostility, confusion, discomfort, and unwelcome shifts in perspective seem to build over time. When students are forced to read, reflect, re-think, and discuss issues which they have been taught and silently agreed never to discuss in public, they need an outlet. This silent resentment when given room to vent, may result in an individual or collective *break point*. Pent up emotions may come out in some awkward display of authentic feelings, as in the student comments that follow:

When are we going to stop this farce? Don't we know that as white people we are really only fooling ourselves? We know we see and recognize color, but we don't want to admit it. We always see color as a difference. (Stacy, white female student)

Whenever I read something, whether it is written by a minority

author or not, I always see the people as white. I just do. For some reason I don't think of the characters as different. (Karen, white female)

The following scenario offers a more specific example. During a student led small group discussion of a novel written by a Latino American, a student had a very disconcerting experience. She was allowed to share her reaction and reflection with the class:

I proposed that the cultural richness of my original "homeland" has helped me to understand my interest in literature and the arts. My classmate responded that she was surprised with my identification on this level, because she always thought of Irish people as "scrappy." From that point on, a severe nausea set in and I felt sick the whole day. . . . For example, in my discussion group today, another group member (EuroAmerican) agreed that his nationality was not an issue, and we could not figure out the reason why it means so much to other people and so little, for the most part, to EuroAmericans. I am wondering if you would encourage an intellectual debate centering around these issues so that we all might understand. (Kelli, white female)

This student's response to what she perceived as an insult created for the class an emotional break point or transition in how they responded to the issue. As a result of this student's consciousness raising, a thoughtful, emotional discussion followed, in which class members dealt with these subjects honestly and directly. We believe that an open, heartfelt dialogue is a catalyst for students to engage a deeper understanding of multiculturalism. And it is important that a substantive discussion arise from within the students themselves. The break point welcomes the unvoiced and obvious discomfort we observe in the classroom. We anticipate its occurrence, await its arrival, and look forward to life after it occurs.

The students are astounded to learn that we have been waiting for them to reach this level of understanding. Some wondered aloud, "You knew we would have a class like this one day? I can't believe that you would allow this to happen? I am really impressed that you have waited for us to reach this point." And, as bell hooks (1992) suggests, "[M]utual recognition of racism, its impact both on those who are dominated and those who dominate is only the standpoint that makes possible an encounter between races that is not based on denial and fantasy" (p. 28). We liken the experience to the scene from the Wizard of Oz when Dorothy finally realizes that she has had the power within herself to return to Kansas all along and doesn't need outside help. Students begin to realize that they are empowered as a group and as individuals to discuss multiculturalism and move to social action.

Having established an atmosphere of comfort, truth, and respect, students then forego silences and converse in more meaningful ways. We believe that a break point is a natural part of the multicultural education class. The dynamic

underlying the break point appears to be power. The struggle of many EuroAmerican preservice teachers appears to lie with their place in the multicultural picture: In our courses, familiar perspectives, images, values, and interests that have traditionally privileged white middle-class experiences and understandings, do not dominate the material. Nor do they dominate theory, curriculum, or instructional practices. White preservice teachers now find themselves as targets of historical, social, and literary critiquing, particularly within the intellectual work of people of color whose writings they had formerly avoided. Having, in some cases, never considered their own identities, white students seem to be thrust into a discourse about the histories of discrimination, resentment, economic and political oppression, which has, to some extent, fueled the cultural identities of those they study. The following preservice teacher responses offer a sample of the reactions following a break point:

I have been very emotional every time I have left your classroom. I think that you bring up some very important and tough issues. I am really glad that we are exploring these topics. They are really making me think about how I need to approach inequalities, parents, etc. This class has really made me evaluate my own thinking. (Christy, white female)

I think the issues we are discussing are extremely important and of a critical nature for us as we make our way into the teaching world. However, I believe that it is only natural that there are going to be some “tough times” during the course, when people are coming to terms with their prejudices, ignorance, and their short-comings. . . . I’m glad I’m of the mindset that I know I have prejudices and ignorances, and that the only way to deal with them in a healthy way is to address them head on. (Debbie, white female)

After a break point the problem of culture, race, gender, and power are no longer remote. The class becomes the emancipatory society we have been attempting to construct. Prior to a break point there was a kind of dance, a pretense of tolerance, a cerebral exchange of opinions. Now students are free and ready to speak more openly, honestly, and realistically. Students no longer pretend that they don’t have these problems. It has hit home. Some will continue denial, but others will genuinely awaken. Those who struggle admit to feeling overwhelmed. Still others begin to notice discrimination in their classes, dorm life, family gatherings, and private conversations. A few may see the need to change but stop short of advocacy when considering the social costs. They wonder: “What will my friends, family, sorority/fraternity think if I publicly advocate multiculturalism?”; “What will happen to my life?”; “What will happen to the privileges I enjoy?” Sleeter (1994) refers to this state of discomfort and choice as one facet of “white racial bonding.” Although their in-class personas may have been challenged, some white students choose to liberate themselves from racism. Some may also begin to realize the importance of retelling the history of people of color. At the very least, most students begin to question and challenge the status quo.

We are not naive about the general ignorance of other ethnicities. However, we want our students to become active participants in facing that challenge and making lasting changes. The Japanese word, *kaisan*, conveys a greater sense of what we are trying to achieve than the terms “change or transformation.” *Kaisan* means continuous change for the better, not just change during a course or until the first student-teaching assignment. It is the transformation of an attitude for a lifetime. ☺

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